

MEETING REPORT - **Arts and Crafts Gardens.**

This month we had a truly excellent speaker in Steven Harmer, who was witty, entertaining and highly informative. The Arts and Crafts movement tried to link English gardens to Islamic and Italian gardens, and to tie them to the countryside. Steven did not hold back in his contempt for Capability Brown, who removed a beautiful formal garden at Petworth. The Victorians love of carpet bedding and formal terracing was about to undergo a radical change, as the 1870's mini Ice Age wreaked havoc with farming, causing landowners to lose profits. This led to them selling off parcels of land to the new Middle Classes, and this transformed into the Arts and Crafts movement.

John Ruskin and William Morris railed against the mass production of plants, which they felt should be at one with the natural landscape. Morris founded the Art Workers Guild and embraced ideals of simplicity and craftsmanship, taken up by William Robinson, who was the best exponent of the movement. He said gardens should look as though they have always been there, and strictly excluded any plants that could not over-winter. Gardens should be laid out in geometric symmetry, with planting to soften the outlines. He hated the idea of digging up gardens twice a year and without him we would not have the wildflower meadow. Viewpoints were placed to look into the country, and colours should take the eye gently from one to another. Upton Grey is a lovely example of everything the Arts and Crafts garden should have: the garden should surround the house, with the house presented from a formal terrace, with strong hedges to create mystery. There should be a sports lawn, garden "rooms" for intimacy, pergolas, loggias and gazebos. Pools, streams and rills were essential to draw the eye, as was the use of local materials, timber and oak, and a nuttery. Old-fashioned fruit and vegetables, sundials, sculpture, pots and urns, and a Magnolia Grandiflora was a must. Gertrude Jekyll and Lutyens popularised the gardens and added bulls-eye windows for glimpses into the landscape. Architecture was vital to the design, with complex steps and doorways, and links between the house and outbuildings in materials. Hidcote is a prime example, and was the blueprint for Sissinghurst, but Steven insisted the The Long Barn garden is better. Sadly the movement ended in 1914, when men went to war and never returned to upkeep the gardens. Steven felt there had been no major garden designs since the war, with the huge cost of Chelsea winning gardens meaning that no-one is willing to take risks. Steven dislikes flowers in gardens, and we wondered how his florist wife coped with his viewpoint! We all learnt a great deal and he recommended Rousham, just north of Bicester, as the best garden in England, remaining much the same as it was in 1742.