



What Smith did
at Compton:
Landscape Gardening,
Humphrey Repton,
and *Mansfield Park*

STEPHEN CLARKE

Stephen Clarke, a London lawyer and architectural historian, is co-author of a bibliography of the biographer R. W. Ketton-Cremer and has written on Walpole, Sterne, and the antiquarian John Britton. His article on the Gothic Revival appeared in *Persuasions* No. 20.

"Smith's place is the admiration of all the country; and it was a mere nothing before Repton took it in hand. I think I shall have Repton."

(*Mansfield Park* 55)

SMITH'S ACHIEVEMENT AT COMPTON is an eloquent example of the influence of landscape gardening. He only appears in the text of *Mansfield Park* as referred to in the conversation of Henry[†] Rushworth, but he has a very real effect on the plot—for it is his impact on Rushworth's fevered if limited imagination that is the catalyst for that central episode in the novel, the day at Sotherton. There and elsewhere the contrast between the improved and unimproved estate is a fertile ground both in revealing attitudes to landscape and in the purposive use made of landscape gardening by Jane Austen.

The theme of Compton is introduced by Rushworth in chapter six:

"I wish you could see Compton," said he, "it is the most complete thing! I never saw a place so altered in my

life. I told Smith I did not know where I was. The approach *now* is one of the finest things in the country. You see the house in the most surprising manner. I declare when I got back to Sotherton yesterday, it looked like a prison—quite a dismal old prison.” (53)

Apart from the contrast with Sotherton, the two things that stand out here are the novelty of the transformation (“I never saw a place so altered in my life”) and the attention paid to the approach. Both of these are themes that we find elsewhere in accounts of landscape gardening in general, and in the works of Humphrey Repton (1752-1818) in particular.¹ Repton was the leading landscape gardener of the generation after Capability Brown, and charmed his clients with his Red Books, showing enticing watercolour views of their estates, with overlays to contrast their appearance before and after improvement. His presumption was subjected to an extended satire in Peacock’s *Headlong Hall*, where he appears as Marmeduke Milestone.² On inspecting the grounds of Headlong Hall he observes that “there were great capabilities in the scenery, but it wanted shaving and polishing. If he could but have it under his care for a single twelvemonth, he assured them no one would be able to know it again” (Peacock 27-28). The imposition of a system is seen as challenging rather than enhancing the character of a place, so that it becomes unrecognisable; its own character is lost. Mr. Milestone proceeds, “accord me your permission to wave the wand of enchantment over your grounds. The rocks shall be blown up, the trees shall be cut down, the wilderness and all its goats shall vanish like mist. Pagodas and Chinese bridges, gravel walks and shrubberies, bowling-greens, canals, and clumps of larch, shall rise upon its ruins” (35). A formulaic and stylistically eclectic solution is being imposed on the landscape, at the risk of undermining its own character: Pope’s famous call to “Consult the Genius of the Place in all” is being ignored.

The surprise of the approach, as achieved at Compton, is a recurrent theme for Repton, who favoured approaches where, for example, the house is at first hidden from view, then revealed at an imposing and surprising angle before again being hidden and then at last revealed on arrival. Such an approach provided the

variety that was considered an essential ingredient of the picturesque. As Repton wrote of Antony House, Cornwall, "Few parts of modern gardening have been so much mistaken as the management of approaches, there is no branch of the art on which I have so often had occasion to deliver my opinion" (Repton f.11). One suspects that his opinion might have been favourable of the approach to Pemberley, where the road wound uphill through a beautiful wood to a summit where the house was suddenly revealed on the far side of the valley (*Pride and Prejudice* 245).

All this was the antithesis of the formal avenues and straight lines of Sotherton as it is described. The avenue that engaged Fanny Price's sympathy was not itself the approach to the house, but ran west from the garden front. All we know of the main approach to the house is that from the entrance lodges the road ran downhill half a mile to the house, and that "'it would not be an ill-looking place if it had a better approach'" (82).

Rushworth's designs on the avenue at Sotherton ("There have been two or three fine old trees cut down that grew too near the house, and it opens the prospect amazingly, which makes me think that Repton, or any body of that sort, would certainly have the avenue at Sotherton down" [55]) reflects contemporary distaste for straight lines in gardening—lacking any picturesque qualities, inconsistent with Hogarth's Line of Beauty, and devoid of variety. "It is not easy," William Shenstone had written in his *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening*, "to account for the fondness of former times for strait-lined avenues to their houses; strait-lined walks through their woods; and, in short, every kind of strait-line; where the foot is to travel over, what the eye has done before" (Shenstone 130). Shenstone's garden at the Leasowes was a ferme ornée with winding walks through wooded groves, by streams and past ruins and hermitages amply stocked with literary inscriptions, elegaic, allusive, with undertones of pleasing melancholy. Repton's less literary aesthetic seems to have been oblivious to these references—he merely noted of his visit that the grounds had "many beautiful small fields, connected with each other by walks and gates" (Carter 36). It is interesting that Dodsley in his *Description of the Leasowes* feels impelled to apologize for the one straight avenue of trees that it contains; "Though the walk . . . be

strait-lined, yet the base rises and falls so agreeably, as leaves no room to censure it's formality" (Shenstone 358).

Despite all this, Rushworth's remark is potentially unfair to Repton, who rarely recommended the wholesale removal of avenues of trees. At Cobham Hall he had argued that the formal elements of the old garden near the house should be retained, and his preference (as at Nacton, Langley Park, Tatton Hall, and elsewhere) was for cutting across avenues to allow for cross views while still retaining the grand perspective view from within them (Carter 35-36 and 48).³ This attitude was innovative for the 1790s, when Repton's career was at its peak. Straight avenues of trees were still felt to be unnaturally formal and inconsistent with the essential quality of Variety—as in the undulating surface of Shenstone's avenue, which Dodsley implies to be its saving grace. Informality and variety are fundamental virtues, though surprise in itself has its limitations, as exposed in Mr. Milestone's rebuff to the Scots reviewer Mr. Gall, enthusing on the quality of unexpectedness in *Headlong Hall*: "Pray, Sir . . . by what name do you distinguish this character, when a person walks round the grounds for the second time?" (Peacock 38). At the Leasowes, Johnson records in his *Lives of the Poets* that persons ill-disposed to Shenstone would take unsuspecting visitors round the gardens the wrong way, thus defeating all his carefully contrived vistas and effects (Johnson 327).

Alistair Duckworth and Edward Malins have both helpfully analysed the discussion on landscaping in *Mansfield Park*, and have not only noted the moral ambiguity of improvement, but have also suggested how Fanny Price's affection for Cowper reflects something of the landscape aesthetic that imbues Cowper's poems, particularly the landscape passages in *The Task* (Duckworth 44 and Malins 132). Mavis Batey has in turn suggested how this aesthetic is itself reflected in the little book of engraved views, *Cowper, Illustrated by a series of Views in or near the Park of Weston Underwood*, produced by the engravers James Storer and John Greig in 1803 (Batey, *Landscape* 24). Fanny quotes Cowper ("Ye fallen avenues, once more I mourn your fate unmerited") in some lines from Book I of *The Task* as a comment on the threatened demise of the avenue at Sotherton (56). She could as easily have quoted from

four pages earlier in the same Book, where Cowper celebrates the survival of an avenue of chestnuts in Weston Park:

Not distant far, a length of colonade
Invites us. Monument of ancient taste,
Now scorn'd, but worthy of a better fate. . . . (252-254)

Cowper, Illustrated follows the poet in his walks in the undramatic countryside of the Ouse valley in and around Weston Park. The landscape of the Park as described is mannered and designed, as indicated by the plates that illustrate the incidents of the walk—the Peasant's Nest, the Rustic Bridge, the Alcove, the Wilderness, the Gothic Temple; nonetheless, there is an unaffected freshness to Cowper's landscape descriptions which, with his underlying faith, make him a natural choice for Fanny to quote. By contrast, when we consider Fanny's concerns, and indeed Peacock's satire, it is the artificiality and presumption of landscape improvement that is being questioned.

The landscape at Sotherton, as described in chapters 9 and 10 of *Mansfield Park*, is the theatre in which the drama of Edmund and Mary Crawford, and of Henry Crawford and Maria Bertram, is played out, but it is no mere background. Rather, it eloquently addresses the issues we have been considering, and in so doing gives further resonances to the conduct and opinions of the players. The landscape and the estate speak of old-fashioned formality and old-fashioned values, but values that are now embalmed. These include values of restraint and containment, as the lawn is bounded and contained by high walls on each side, and as the bowling green is contained by the terrace walk and its iron palisades. It is no coincidence that it was Mary Crawford, in discussing Sotherton before the visit, who was insensitive enough to the sense of place that she would “be most thankful to any Mr. Repton who would undertake” the improvement of an estate for her, “and give me as much beauty as he could for my money” (57). Edmund, meanwhile, wished to aspire to beauty by his own choice and efforts, without the assistance of an improver. Beauty, whether aesthetic or moral, is not to be purchased. When at Sotherton, it is Mary Crawford, with her impatience of social restraints, who wished to leave the formal, exposed terrace for the relative informality and novelty of the wilderness—at Weston “a

deeply-shaded, winding path" ran through the wilderness as described in *Cowper, Illustrated* (42).

At Sotherton it provides the opportunity for Edmund and Mary Crawford to disappear for an hour; ironically, beyond the wilderness to the very formal avenue (where they had been "sitting down under one of the trees" [103]) that Fanny vainly wishes above all to visit. Edmund gets to the right place, but at this stage of the novel in the wrong company. More famously, the wilderness is bounded by the locked gate that, with its attendant ha-ha, gives Maria Bertram "a feeling of restraint and hardship" (99). She and Henry Crawford escape by squeezing round it, prefiguring the escape from Maria's sterile marriage that is to seal her fate. What does not emerge from the day at Sotherton, unsatisfactory in its way as the excursion to Box Hill, is any positive or specific proposal for the improvement of the grounds.

This cannot be said of Henry Crawford's visit to Thornton Lacey, Edmund's future living, which produces a detailed scheme for converting a rectory facing a farmyard into what Crawford tellingly describes as "the residence of a man of education, taste, modern manners, good connections" (244). Again, the key is novelty and transformation: Crawford proposes not merely removal of the farmyard, but changing the alignment of the house, so it fronts and is approached from a different direction, creating a new garden, acquiring some meadows if necessary, and enlarging the stream. Edmund rejects all this for his own far more modest proposals, that would give the house "the air of a gentleman's residence without any very heavy expense" (242)—adaptation not transformation, modest improvement in place of novelty, and the acceptance of his own social status. He is happy to project his house as "a gentleman's residence" as opposed to Henry Crawford's dissatisfaction with "the mere gentleman's residence" (244). This tension echoes Repton's concern that house and grounds should accurately express the owner's social status. He commonly began his Red Books with a section on Character, addressing this issue. For example (and most pertinently to Thornton Lacey), it was essential to distinguish between the house of a farmer and that of a gentleman: the farmhouse "may look on ploughed fields, but with more propriety should command the view of its barns, stables and muckyards . . ." (Carter 38), while the Country Gentleman "can only

ornament his place by separating the ideas of farm and park” (Repton f. 3).

One aspect of this debate is Crawford’s self-satisfaction. At his own estate at Everingham he had completed its landscaping by the age of 21 (61). At Sotherton he was “the first to move forward” and was soon in “busy consultation” on the terrace (90). Of Thornton Lacey he comments to Edmund on his proposals; “I do not really require you to proceed upon my plan, though by the bye I doubt any body’s striking out a better” (243). This self-assurance in re-ordering nature is reminiscent of the complaisance noted of Repton himself, as in John Byng’s account of a meeting with him in 1792: “he is a gentleman I have long known, and of so many words that he is not easily shaken off; he asserts so much, and assumes so much, as to make me irritable, for he is one (of the many) who is never wrong; and therefore why debate with him?” (Byng 9). Indeed, both William Mason, the poet and gardener, and Horace Walpole described Repton as a coxcomb (Batey, *Mason* 23, and Farington 184).

The fact that the attentions of a Repton should seem needed at Sotherton reflects not only its antiquated garden layout, but also the forlorn nature of the estate—“quite a dismal old prison.” A telling precursor to this, given to the reader before the gardens have been described or explored, is the abandonment of services in the family chapel when “the late Mr Rushworth left it off” (86). In precisely the same way, the precursor to the account of the grounds at Pemberley, provided well before Elizabeth Bennet’s excursion to Derbyshire, is Darcy’s account of his library (“I cannot comprehend the neglect of a family library in such days as these” [*Pride and Prejudice* 38]). The contrast is between use, application, improvement, and disuse, abandonment, neglect—between effective and inadequate stewardship. The moral dimension to this is transparent, and of course the attribution of a moral dimension to landscape gardening, as to any field of aesthetic endeavour, goes back past the picturesque theorists to Pope, Shaftesbury, and beyond. The grounds at Pemberley have clearly been improved (before the house “a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial importance” [*Pride and Prejudice* 245]), but to analyse them in terms of the details of Gilpin’s picturesque ideals, or the disputes of Payne Knight, Uvedale Price, and Repton, is as vain as to attempt to identify them with some estate that

Jane Austen may have visited. Pemberley is, quite simply, a fine estate with grounds in perfect taste. It does not require further improvement by landscape gardeners, and, as Alistair Duckworth has stressed, is imposing, well maintained and, aesthetically pleasing as a mirror of the status, sense of responsibility, and virtues of Darcy himself (Duckworth 124). It is a landscape whose function is to acquaint both Elizabeth Bennet and the reader with the nature of its owner.

There is nothing specifically original in this, if we recall the idealised descriptions of the grounds of Squire Allworthy's seat in *Tom Jones*, or of the perfectly ordered grounds of Grandison Hall in *Sir Charles Grandison*, both estates reflecting the merits of their owners. There is, indeed, a direct echo of the account of Grandison Hall in Jane Austen's early piece, *Evelyn*, which appears to have passed unmentioned, though its other reflections of Richardson have been duly noted: at the house of Mr. and Mrs. Webb in *Evelyn* the circular paddock was "bordered with a plantation of Lombardy poplars, & Spruce firs alternatively placed in three rows" (Chapman, *Minor Works* 181), whereas at Grandison Hall the land beyond the orchard was planted in a semicircle "with three rows of trees, at proper distances from each other; one of pines; one of cedars; one of Scotch firs."

The description of the landscape at Donwell Abbey has a similar purpose. Donwell is an old-fashioned landscape of fishponds and (significantly) trees in "avenues which neither fashion nor extravagance had rooted up," with a low-lying house from which the stream is invisible and whose view is bounded by a stone wall (*Emma* 358). But unlike Sotherton, it is old-fashioned without being desiccated. An improver, whether a Repton or a Henry Crawford, might well extend the fishponds into a lake and remove some of the trees, and so rectify the lack of prospect from the house. But the landscape described is the landscape of Cowper and of Fanny Price: the short avenue of limes give "a delicious shade" (360), the walks beneath them are charming, and the view beyond them extremely pretty. The house (and by extension the grounds, and Mr. Knightley himself) "was just as it ought to be, and it looked what it was" (358). Donwell, Pemberley, and Sotherton, all express the values exercised in their management, just as the values of Fanny Price and Henry Crawford are expressed by their conflicting attitudes to landscape improvement.

NOTES

1. Apart from the Works Cited, see Dorothy Stroud, *Humphrey Repton*. London: Country Life, 1962; Edward Malins, *The Red Books of Humphrey Repton*. London: The Basilisk Press, 1976; and Stephen Daniels, *Humphrey Repton Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1999.
2. Peacock's satire of Repton is prefigured, using many of the same phrases, in his play *The Three Doctors*, written probably shortly before *Headlong Hall*, and first published in *The Plays of Thomas Love Peacock*, ed. A. B. Young, London, 1910.
3. For an example of an avenue of trees before and after Repton had cut across part of it, see the two illustrations from the Red Book for Nacton as reproduced in *Country Life*, Vol. CLXXII, No. 4,442, 7 October 1982, p. 1054.

WORKS CITED

- AUSTEN, JANE. *The Works of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933-69.
- BATEY, MAVIS. *Jane Austen and the English Landscape*. London: Barn Elms, 1996.
- _____. William Mason, "English Gardener," in *Garden History, the Journal of the Garden History Society*, Vol. I, no. 2, 1973.
- BYNG, HON. JOHN. *The Torrington Diaries*, Vol. Three. Ed. C. Bruyn Andrews. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1936.
- CARTER, GEORGE, and others. *Humphrey Repton Landscape Gardener 1752-1818*. Norwich: Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts and the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1982.
- Cowper, *Illustrated By a Series of Views, in, or near, the Park of Weston-Underwood, Buckinghamshire*. London, 1804.
- COWPER, WILLIAM. "The Task, A Poem, in Six Books." Book I. In *The Poems of William Cowper*, Vol. II, 1782-1785. Ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp. Oxford: OUP, 1995.
- DUCKWORTH, ALISTAIR M. *The Improvement of the Estate*. Baltimore: JHU Press, 1994.
- FARINGTON, JOSEPH. *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, Vol. I. Ed. Garlick and MacIntyre. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978.
- JOHNSON, SAMUEL. *The Lives of the most Eminent English Poets with Critical Observations on their Works*, Vol. IV, New Edition. London, 1783.
- MALINS, EDWARD. *English Landscaping and Literature 1660-1840*. London: OUP, 1966.
- PEACOCK, THOMAS LOVE. *Headlong Hall*. London, 1816.
- REPTON, HUMPHREY. Reproduction of *The Red Book for Antony House*. London: Basilisk Press, 1976.
- RICHARDSON, SAMUEL. *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*. London, 1754. The description of the grounds of Grandison Hall is contained in a letter of Lucy Selby attached to Letter 5 in Vol. VII.
- SHENSTONE, WILLIAM. *The Works in Verse and Prose, of William Shenstone, Esq.*, Vol. II. London, 1764.

† Note that Rushworth's first name was actually James and not Henry - see Volume 1, Chapter 9. - C. Moss, JASNA Web Site Manager