

## PREFACE

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Throughout 2018, The Gardens Trust supported a celebration of the work of Humphry Repton (1752–1818), often described as the last great landscape designer of the eighteenth century, to mark the bicentenary of his death. It was a chance to look afresh at Repton's life, work and legacy. Dozens of Repton-inspired activities took place across the country under the banner 'Celebrating Repton', from research projects and study days to exhibitions and special garden openings. A grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund also allowed the trust to work with local volunteers piloting activities that welcomed diverse local communities into Repton's landscapes.

A significant contribution to the celebrations was a two-day conference exploring 'Repton & Horticulture', held in Sheffield's glorious Botanical Gardens on 20–21 September 2018, which generated the papers in this special issue (Figures 1 and 2). The topic was first suggested by Peter Goodchild of the GARLAND Trust, as a development of some of the themes in the Repton exhibition that he and Nathalie de Vernon curated for the North of England Horticultural Society. The Sheffield conference was organized by the Friends of the Botanical Gardens, Sheffield, and the Department of Landscape at the University of Sheffield, with the aim of sharing and building expert knowledge about the role of plants in Reptonian and late Georgian gardens. It was ostensibly the only 'Celebrating Repton' event that focused on the contributions of horticulture to historic gardens of the period.

As Goodchild explained in his introduction at the conference, Repton may be remembered as a landscape gardener, but he was a man of many parts. He came from an upper middle-class family with a background in the educated professions, men of business, and owners or holders of small landed properties. By inclination, he was a gentleman of leisure. Between 1778 and c.1786, while living at Sustead in Norfolk as a country gentleman, Repton followed various pursuits; 'The improvement of his garden, as may be expected, was his favourite; the beauties of Nature were his delight; and the investigation of her wonders his amusement. Not an insect or a flower passed unnoticed by his inquiring mind.'<sup>1</sup> His essential disposition was optimistic, cheerful, outward-looking and benevolent. He was a family man with a strong attachment to home life, but he was also gregarious and enjoyed company and engaging with other people from different walks of life. He was philosophical and enjoyed reading, writing, drawing, painting in watercolours, music, the theatre, architecture, local history, natural history and gardening. All in all, he was a very observant, genial, quick-witted and cultivated man with a variety of interests and talents. He enjoyed engaging in a constructive way with people, with life and with the world around him.

Repton did not take up landscape gardening as a career until 1788 when he was thirty-six, about halfway through his life. As a landscape gardener, he turned his creativity to the improvement of the home environments in which people lived their lives. When he introduced the term 'landscape gardening' he saw this as a new profession which focused on providing advice and designs for the improvement of landscapes and gardens without



Figure 1. The Grade II\* glass pavilions at Sheffield Botanical Gardens. The gardens were designed by Robert Marnock and first opened in 1836. Photo: Jan Woudstra, September 2018



Figure 2. The Sheffield Botanical Gardens Dorothy Fox Education Centre opened in 2017. Photo: Elin Sinclair, May 2018

also being a contractor. With this in mind, Repton produced written and illustrated reports that he presented as his leather-bound ‘Red Books’. These contained proposals that were to be implemented by the owner; some schemes were laid out years after they had been designed; some not at all.

In his writings, Repton says little enough about the horticultural aspects of garden design, and yet it is clear that he had a personal interest in gardening and related matters and he lived in interesting times of significant change. He had known Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown’s parks of classical austerity, which were criticized by the next generation, and

he found himself in the centre of the Picturesque Debate that saw him challenged on the character of his designs. He also experienced the influx of exotic plants after the ending of the Continental Blockade in 1814. These developments evoked responses from Repton that affected the appearance of his gardens and ultimately also general horticultural practice. Yet with the emphasis on research and writing having been on his design practices and influences, the horticultural aspects have been largely overlooked. The aim of the 'Repton & Horticulture' conference was to address this gap. The papers presented at the conference and published in this special issue consider the contribution of horticulture to Reptonian parks and gardens, and explore a number of issues:

- How far did Repton value and understand horticulture, and what was its contribution to the gardens he designed?
- What horticultural trends and fashions can be evidenced from the designs he produced over the course of his career? How far was he their innovator?
- What was the social, political and economic context for Reptonian and late Georgian horticultural styles and practices?
- How did Repton's maxim that 'gardens are works of art rather than of nature' play out in his use and placement of trees, shrubs and flowers?
- How were his gardens designed, implemented and maintained? How far did this differ from previous generations?

Reptonian horticulture had a variety of purposes. In the first paper, Camilla Beresford explores how many of Repton's recommendations involved the judicious removal of trees to reveal attractive features or undulating ground, which he described as 'undrawing the curtains'. Conversely, he also 'drew the curtains' by planting shrubberies, clumps and belts to disguise offices, less attractive buildings or boundary fences. Beresford discusses what Repton chose to conceal or reveal, how the planting varied from a static point to a circuit around the landscape, and when artifice was allowed to gain the upper hand over nature. At the conference, Jonathan Finch set out his early thinking on Repton's relationship with colour in his planting schemes and landscapes as well as in his Red Books, and he hopes to publish this research in a later issue of *Garden History*. We have, instead, included here a version of the paper that Finch presented at the Norfolk Gardens Trust event 'The Prophet In His Own Country', which explores how Repton's designs were influenced by the distinctive ornamental and formal garden styles he experienced during his youthful sojourn with the Hope family in the Netherlands. Finch also speculates that the rich cultural and social milieu of his Dutch hosts imbued in Repton a life-long appreciation of family, domesticity and meaningful social relationships; this may in turn have inspired his reintroduction of flower gardens and other small-scale planting into grand landscapes, as features designed for family use and private recreation.

Mark Laird explores Repton as the successor to Brown, explaining how the 1805 Red Book for Woburn Abbey refers to Brown's 'removal' of gardens as an 'inconvenient part of his system'. His paper examines the basis of that argument and the resulting claim that Repton brought 'specialized gardens' (with distinctive horticulture) back around the house, notably at Woburn. It also reviews what followed after the Red Book proposals, notably through examining what was revealed in James Forbes's *Hortus Woburnensis* (1833). The following contribution by Mick Thompson confirms how Repton was at the forefront of a significant change in garden design, reviving the use of flower gardens in many of his commissions. He looks at these proposals from a historical design perspective and considers how the great influx of new plants during the period fitted into Repton's horticultural understanding.





Figure 3. Humphry Repton's 1790s' waterscape at Wentworth Woodhouse following restoration in October 2016. Courtesy: Fitzwilliam Wentworth Estate



Figure 4. Conference delegates visiting the Doric Temple at Wentworth Woodhouse.  
Photo: Jan Woudstra, September 2018

Patrick Eyres focuses on the horticultural and silvicultural proposals revealed in Repton's Yorkshire commissions. Although the planting details are generically unspecific throughout the Yorkshire Red Books, Repton subsequently chose to emphasize the silvan improvements in illustrations of the schemes, and clearly saw the work at Wentworth Woodhouse (which delegates visited during the conference to gain a greater understanding of Repton's work on the spot) as one of his crowning achievements (Figures 3 and 4). In contrast, Jan Woudstra looks at Reptonian influences on the late Regency planting at St James's Park, London, examining how far the redesign of the park by architect John Nash, in particular its shrubberies, was attributable to Nash's former partner Repton and his two sons, despite being described in Prince Pückler Muskau's *Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1835) as an innovation following the 'principles of Mr Nash'.<sup>2</sup>

The 'Historic England Guidance: Late Georgian Hardy Plant List (1780–1820)' is introduced by its author Sarah Rutherford, who explains how it is intended as a starting point for researchers and those restoring landscapes of the period, providing a core list of hardy plants commonly available and used – and still widely available today.

Brent Elliott completes this special issue with an analysis of two centuries of Repton's reputation. He argues that his reputation has not shown the common pattern of decline and revival, but rather one of 'wobbling' between the two phases of his career. During the Victorian period, Repton was looked back on as the founder of modern gardening, his work sparking the revival of topiary and the flower garden. Yet, Repton's reputation did not suffer greatly as Victorian gardening was repudiated; attention shifted to his early works, seen as the continuation of Brown's aesthetic.

The 'Repton & Horticulture' conference was designed to appeal not just to Repton academics but also to those who own and manage late Georgian gardens, researchers in the county gardens trusts, landscape architects involved in restoration projects, horticultural and garden history students, and anyone with an interest in plants and design in an historical context. It was funded in part by generous grants from the Stanley Smith (UK) Horticultural Trust, the RHS Coke Trust Bursary Fund and the Yorkshire Gardens Trust. Thanks are also due to the North of England Horticultural Society for donating display material on Repton; Anthony Barber-Lomax of the Fitzwilliam Wentworth Estate, for providing a bespoke tour for delegates of the Repton landscape at Wentworth Woodhouse; the Wentworth Woodhouse Preservation Trust for offering tours of the house; and to all the conference speakers themselves for generously sharing their expertise. Finally, Historic England, together with The Gardens Trust, enabled a legacy and lasting record of this conference in the form of this special open-access publication of the refereed papers, which we hope will have a wide appeal also.

JILL SINCLAIR AND JAN WOULDSTRA

Conference organizers

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> John Claudius Loudon, *The Landscape Gardening and Landscape Architecture of the late Humphry Repton, Esq* (London, 1840; repr. Farnborough: Gregg, 1969), p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Fürst von Pückler-Muskau, *Andeutungen über Landschaftsgärtnerei* [*Hints on Landscape Gardening*] (Stuttgart, 1835), p. 101.