



He embodied the spirit of the age

The leading garden-maker at the turn of the 19th century, Humphry Repton (1752–1818) was a man of feeling, as well as business. On the eve of his bicentenary, Steven Desmond charts the fortunes and misfortunes of one of the best-loved luminaries of English gardening's history

SO well-known was Humphry Repton in 1814 that he made a cameo appearance in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, published that year, as the adviser of choice to improve the grounds of bumptious but clueless landowners such as Mr Rushworth: "I must try to do something with it," said Mr Rushworth, "but I do not know what." "Your best friend upon such an occasion," said Miss Bertram calmly, "would be Mr. Repton, I imagine." Even Repton's day rate was widely known: Austen gives it, correctly, as five guineas a day.

Repton, then as now, was one of the great names of British garden history. He was the

leading garden-maker in England for 30 years until his death in 1818 and generally acknowledged as such. His client list was stellar and his writings, both in his reports and his published books, are intelligent and informative. His polished and adaptable style evolved during his career to reflect developing trends, so that he seems, from our perspective, to embody the spirit of the age.

However, if we look up for a moment from his ingenious proposals and accomplished watercolours, inspired by a wish to visit a Repton garden and walk through it to admire the great man's handiwork, the vision seems to melt away like the morning

dew. There aren't many places where this can be done. How can a man be so famous and respected and yet appear to leave so little trace of his work on the ground? Perhaps the answer lies in his personality and in the circumstances of the time.

Repton was born in 1752, the son of an East Anglian tax collector. He was intended to follow in that line of business, but showed little inclination to do so. He bought himself a small estate, picturing the comfortable life of a country gentleman, but, as his family grew, it became apparent that the ends did not meet. He recalled a sleepless night at the age of 36 when he hit on the



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idea of setting up as a landscape gardener, a term he invented himself.

The famous Capability Brown had died only five years before and no great character had emerged to assume his mantle as the nation's leading improver of grounds. This, he felt, was his moment. He was interested in the subject, a skilled landscape artist and blessed with a persuasive tongue and pen. He learnt some elementary surveying and wrote to every useful contact he could think of. The effect was immediate and highly favourable. Mr Repton had arrived.

Within a year or two, the plan seemed to be working better than he could have hoped. We see him at Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire, Kenwood House on Hampstead Heath, Sheffield Park in Sussex and Blaise Castle on the outskirts of Bristol.



*Top: One of Repton's illustrations for **Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening** (1795), produced as he was coming to prominence. Above: A portrait of Repton by John Downman painted in about 1790*

He had got over the apparent architectural gap in his skills by forming partnerships with two leading men, James Wyatt and John Nash. His clients were illustrious, and his letters to them show him overrun with lucrative work as he travels all over the country advising, sketching and supervising.

Repton's initial success was rooted in his ability to communicate his ideas to his clients. As a gentleman, he had an entrée to polite society and we are more likely to find him as his clients' weekend guest than discussing drainage improvements in the steward's office. Repton was an asset at the dining table and in the drawing room, where his manners and wit were welcome. He played the flute, sang with a pleasant light tenor and was 'an undoubted acquisition at a ball'. He had his feet under the table in ways that his rivals could only envy.

Repton's decisive skill seemed to lie in his ability to describe his proposed improvements in evocative prose and paint. Posterity is as fascinated as his clients were by his Red Books showing before-and-after views from the same point by means of clever overlay flaps. Miserable fences are ➤



Before and after: the Ten Foot Pond at Sheffield Park, East Sussex (preceding pages) was created in about 1882–85 to Repton's designs (above). Facing page: The Pheasantry from *Designs for the Pavilion at Brighton* (1808)

succeeded by extensive rural views. Mud and rushes give way to glittering sheets of water in the middle distance.

An exposed site is resolved by positioning a delightful new house in a sheltered position, backed by woods and flanked by tempting conservatories and rosebeds. It seems to encompass everything that Brown had offered before, but now overlaid with a new cosy domesticity. In Repton's swish new world, a stroll in the shrubbery was more the thing than a ride round the estate.

Many clients, or at least their wives, were persuaded by Repton's flattering style, but others were not. On the one hand, he wished to be a man of fashion, recommending the new style of the Picturesque, which replaced smooth, undulating lawns with rough walks through the woods and serpentine, glassy

lakes with foaming cascades and rattling streams. This style was promoted by two Herefordshire men of taste, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price. At first, they saw Repton as just the man to promote their new ideals, but they soon came to dismiss him as weak and insincere. Repton defended himself, saying there had to be a realistic balance between rugged scenery and convenience, but he got nowhere with the stern and influential prophets.

His aristocratic clients, on the other hand, proved awkward from other points of view. Their forefathers had spent hugely on Brownian improvements, but that capital was now gone, so Repton had to turn to the new money of self-made captains of industry. He found they spoke another language altogether, one he was unable to interpret.

One such man looked at the precious Red Book's proposed planting list, drew a line across it and added the single word 'Stuff'. Another, Benjamin Gott of Armley Park in Leeds, commissioned Repton to lay out his grounds and remodel his house. Repton spent some time screening out the canal and works in the middle distance, only for Gott to insist that he liked looking at the source of his wealth, of which he was not ashamed.

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Time and again, Repton found that a Red Book was left on a library table for friends to admire, but the intended commission never transpired. It didn't help that virtually his whole career was set against the backdrop of the never-ending Napoleonic wars.

Even when the big names came calling, there seemed to be a fly in the ointment. The Prince Regent wanted lavish improvements to the grounds of his Pavilion in Brighton. Repton not only produced a Red Book full of excellent proposals, but went to the expense of publishing it to burnish his reputation.

Unsurprisingly, the Prince found himself financially embarrassed and the project was shelved. When it was revived several years later, John Nash took the job, the credit and the money, leaving Repton spluttering but powerless. It was a familiar pattern.

The life and times

1750s

Humphry Repton was born in Bury St Edmunds in 1752 and spent his early life in Norfolk. He entered the textile trade, but found it unappealing. The life of a country gentleman at Susstead Old Hall seemed just the thing, but as his family grew, he sought new sources of income

1780s

In 1788, Repton contacted numerous potential clients: by 1789, he was working for the Earl of Leicester at Holkham, the Duke of Portland at Welbeck and with James Wyatt at Sheffield Park

1790s

As Repton's reputation grew, he travelled widely throughout England, proposing sea views at Mulgrave Castle, north of Whitby, elegant shrubberies at Kenwood on Hampstead Heath and parkland improvements at Attingham in Shropshire. In 1795, Repton published *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*

1800s

By now, Repton's name was sufficiently familiar to turn up in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* as a calculating 'improver'. Major projects at Longleat and Woburn Abbey

led to the glory of the commission (unfulfilled) to remodel the grounds of the Royal Pavilion in Brighton for the Prince Regent. Repton's *magnum opus*, *Observations on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, appeared in 1803

1810s

In 1811, Repton was seriously injured in a carriage accident that left him a permanent invalid. Nonetheless, he worked up a splendid scheme for a house, garden and park at Sheringham in Norfolk. Elsewhere, the Duchess of Bedford offered Picturesque promise on

the banks of the Tamar at Endsleigh Cottage in Devon (now a hotel) which remains as good a place as any to experience the Repton vision. After publication of his final book, *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, in 1816, Repton effectively retired to his cottage, surrounded by 'my flowers & my kittens & my pigeons & my young canaries & my greatest beauties... my boys & dear girls'. He died in 1818, buried near his parents in the churchyard at Aylsham, Norfolk, where he had earlier mused that his remains 'will soon be converted into the pabulum of roses'

Although Repton seemed dogged by frustration at every step, it should be remembered that he maintained his national reputation as the leading man throughout a long and distinguished career. Among his many successes was the Blaise Castle estate on the northern edge of Bristol. His client, John Harford, was a rich and independent-minded businessman, for whom Repton designed a sensational carriage drive down a switchback route through hanging woods in the 1790s.

Much later, he found a kindred spirit in Abbot Upcher and his wife at Sheringham on the north coast of Norfolk. Repton felt entirely in tune with his clients' wishes, and referred to the project as his 'favourite and darling child', a telling phrase from a devoted father. Although Upcher died with the scheme half-complete, it remains the classic place to view Repton's skilled harmonising of rural beauty and domestic bliss. Another late project was Endsleigh Cottage, deve-

loped with the architect Jeffrey Wyattville for the Duke and Duchess of Bedford, on a fine site overlooking a bend of the Tamar in Devon. Repton skilfully exploited the Picturesque setting, engineering woodland and river views from the comfort of a level, shrubbery-lined terrace.


For the attached children's wing, a geometric flower garden with a miniature canal for the boys to float their toy yachts was devised. All this survives in excellent condition in the cottage's present use as a hotel.

As Repton's career progressed, his style gradually included more and more elaborate planting detail near the house, a sort of feminisation of the view from the windows. Groves of ornamental shrubs and beds of perennials evolved into elaborate geometric parterres in his final projects, so that we can readily see and feel Repton unconsciously preparing the ground for the dawn of Victorian taste 20 years after his death. If anything justifies his ever-high reput-

ation, it is that skill and sensitivity as a thoughtful and practical arbiter of taste.

Some of his final projects took place after Repton had become disabled following a carriage accident that left him barely able to walk for the rest of his life. In the Red Book for Endsleigh, he surveys a team of workers from a chair in which he was carried from one spot to another. It must have been excruciating and Repton refers in a final letter to his difficulty in walking and breathing.

The same letter is full of wistful remarks regarding his declining circumstances, but the old sentiment and humour are still there: he rejoices in his children, especially his charming daughters, and says at least he need not worry about the new hair-powder tax as he has no hair to powder.

The famous Mr Repton was, as we see from his engaging self-portraits, a man of feeling as well as business. Our well-deserved admiration should be tinged with a degree of indulgence. 

The practice of landscape: 10 great gardens by Humphry Repton

Blaise Castle

A great estate near Bristol redesigned in the 1790s for the banker John Harford. Repton's dramatic carriage drive exploits the Picturesque scenery to advantage. John Nash worked with George Stanley Repton, our man's son, on a series of architectural decorations including an elaborate model village

Endsleigh

A holiday home in ornamental grounds created from 1810 for the Duke of Bedford on his Devon estate. Jeffrey Wyattville's cottage orné, now a hotel, looks out over Picturesque scenery dotted with ornamental buildings

Woburn Abbey

Repton added a series of eclectic garden features fanning out from Henry Holland's Chinese Dairy from 1805, for the Duke of Bedford. Recent restoration work has brought the scene back to life

Ashridge

In a late project, Repton developed an elaborate series of proposals for gardens around the house from 1813 for the Earl of Bridgewater. These foreshadow the coming return of the formality and historicising sentiment of the Victorian garden

Kenwood House

In 1793, Repton developed a series



Watercolour view of the south front of Sheringham Park, Norfolk, from the house's Red Book

of proposals, including shrubberies and a lake, for the Earl of Mansfield at his Kenwood estate on Hampstead Heath. These scenes were partly reinstated by English Heritage during the 1990s

Brighton Pavilion

In the 1790s, and again in 1805, Repton prepared detailed improvements for the Pavilion gardens for the Prince of Wales. These were later modified and carried out by John Nash without acknowledging his former partner's contribution

Attingham Park

Repton worked on parkland improvements, including a carriage drive and a lake, from 1797 for Lord Berwick. The estate is now owned by the National Trust

Corsham Court

Repton was called in by Paul Methuen in 1795 to adapt, refine and update the work carried out a generation earlier by Lancelot 'Capability' Brown

Garnons

In an early project of 1791 for John Geers Cotterell, Hereford-

shire baronet and MP, Repton laid out a characteristic parkland setting with approach drive and backing woods for a new house in the Picturesque style

Sheringham

In 1812, Repton was called in to rework this Norfolk estate for its new owner, Abbot Upcher. John Adey Repton, Humphrey's architect son, designed the house, and Humphry framed it in terracing, a flower garden with conservatory, a park, ornamental drives and sheltering woods