

His greatest legacy...

200 years since Humphry Repton's death, his work lives on at Hotel Endsleigh, writes SUSIE KEARLEY

2018 marks the bicentenary of the death of Sir Humphry Repton, one of Britain's greatest landscape designers, who succeeded Capability Brown. He left a legacy of glorious parks and gardens across the UK, including the sweeping landscapes of Woburn Abbey, Sheringham Park, Attingham Park, and Kensington Gardens (where he was employed to improve the existing design).

In Devon, his greatest legacy is Hotel Endsleigh in Milton Abbot - a Grade I historic building set in 108 acres of enchanting woodland, with follies and grottos.

The sought-after designer visited Endsleigh in 1814 and drew up proposals for landscaping the gardens and wider estate. The owner, the 6th Duke of Bedford, owned a third of Devon at the time and said this was the most beautiful spot, so he built a private fishing and hunting lodge there. His wife, Georgina, asked Repton to incorporate some typically Scottish features into the garden, to rekindle memories of her happy childhood in Scotland.

When Repton visited Endsleigh, he was carried around in a sedan chair for three days, because he'd been injured in a carriage

accident years earlier and couldn't walk. He produced a red book of watercolour paintings with descriptions, and the work was then carried out following Repton's designs.

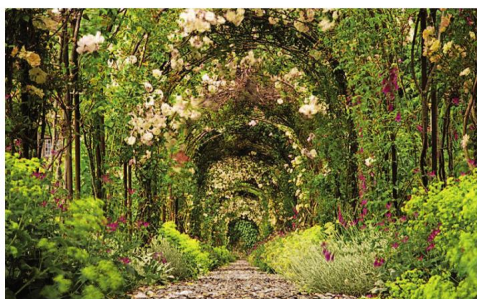
200 YEARS LATER...

Today, the hotel's owner Olga Polizzi is still in awe of the gardens. "Every time I go to Endsleigh I feel privileged and happy to have such a wonderful garden," she says.

"I think it's one of the only gardens to have remained very like it was originally conceived by Humphry Repton. Many of the Repton drawings in his red book illustrate what we still see now. As we clear the undergrowth we are continually discovering new areas of the garden. I was recently so excited when Ben, the head gardener, led me to an exquisite waterfall that in over ten years of owning Endsleigh, I had no idea was there!"

In 2014 the 200th anniversary of Repton's visit was celebrated with a series of events. "We had talks by celebrity garden designers, including Arabella Lenox Boyd and Alan Titchmarsh," explains Evelina Conti who organised the Repton weekends.

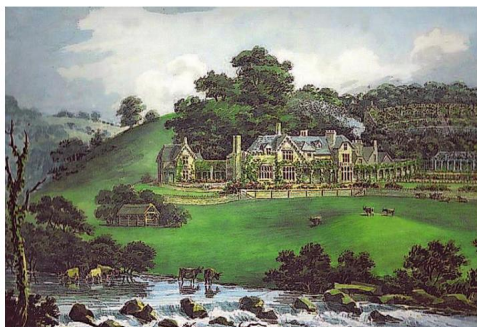
The Long Border is the longest in England. Replanting it so it's beautiful for every new season, is a huge job!



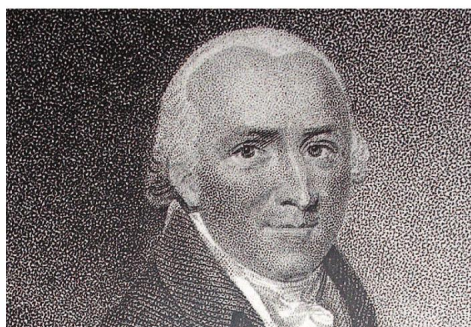
The Rose Walk. This tunnel created by espaliered roses, is perhaps the most romantic part of the garden



The Parterre in the summertime, planted with pink and mauve meadow flowers



Sir Humphry Repton's greatest legacy is Hotel Endsleigh



Sir Humphry Repton was one of Britain's greatest landscape designers

THE DUKE AND DUCHESS OF BEDFORD AT ENDSLEIGH

Back in the 1880s, the Duke and Duchess wanted to escape the constraints of their luxurious lifestyle at Woburn Abbey, so when they visited Endsleigh, they tried to live a relatively normal life.

"They arrived with a cow and 12 or 13 children and babies," says Olga. "They bought the cow for fresh milk for the children, and the Duchess liked to pretend she was a milk maid. They called the house Cottage Orné because it was like five or six little cottages, not a grand house.

"About 30 gardeners worked on the site, but they had to make themselves scarce when the Duke rose in the morning. I suspect they worked in the walled garden where they were out of sight."



Hotelier Olga Polizzi

THE CHALLENGES OF
RUNNING A BIG
ESTATE

Guests enjoyed good food, garden tours and expert talks. “We organised visits to other Repton gardens nearby,” continues Evelina. “One was Antony House, where they had a guided tour and lunch.

Following his visit, Alan Titchmarsh wrote: ‘If ever a hotel were built in paradise it would be like Endsleigh - a fairytale cottage set in an Arcadian landscape with delicious food and blissful rooms. I love it and envy that sublime landscape - the perfect opportunity to step back in time to a graceful age.’”

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

The seed for Endsleigh’s transformation into a hotel was planted in 2004, when Olga saw an article about the important historic property, in need of restoration. As an experienced hotelier and owner of Hotel Tresanton in Cornwall, she felt compelled to save Endsleigh, even though the idea made little business sense.

Repton’s beautiful garden swung her decision. Following the purchase, major restoration work began on both the house and garden. “I’ve improved the

‘As we clear the undergrowth we are continually discovering new areas of the garden’

garden by reseeding and replanting,” she says, “but I haven’t tried to improve on Repton’s original design. The gardens would have been glorious when they were created, with the water features going and children enjoying the parterre.

“When you look at the cascade, rocks, and a lot of the planting, you can still see the Highland features that Repton created for Georgina, the Duchess of Bedford, who wanted aspects of her Scottish homeland integrated into the design.

“I particularly like the rocky faces and gunnera plants (giant rhubarb) with 2m long leaves! The long border is one of the nicest parts of the garden. There’s a shell house, or grotto, beside the river - I enjoy sitting there, among the trees, with a nice glass of wine.” ♦ hotelendsleigh.com

“Like any garden, there are always challenges,” says Olga. “The very long border needs regular planting - it’s the longest border in England, and you can see it all from the hotel, so it’s important to keep it looking good all year round. I try to imagine Repton’s planting schemes. We use English plants and architectural planting to mark different areas.

“Re-planting the parterre is always a huge job too. It needs to look good for weddings and takes thousands of plants each time. The 100-acre garden is huge and expensive for a small hotel, but it’s so beautiful. It has the most wonderful views, with no traffic, no aircraft and no light pollution. It has a river running below, and is just lovely.”

The gardens are open to the public and you can visit Endsleigh for lunch, afternoon tea, or attend the various events.