

Discovering Repton

STEFFIE SHIELDS discusses the Bicentenary of Humphry Repton, the eighteenth-century landscape gardener who continues to enrich the lives of every gardener inspired by the gardens of the past.

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"A PICTURE is worth a thousand words", so goes the early twentieth century saying. Humphry Repton (1752-1818) must have had a similar thought in mind when he chose to set up as a landscape gardener. His trade card survives in Lord Brownlow's papers in Lincolnshire Archives. He depicted himself supervising land improvements, with theodolite at hand, framed with cedar boughs, ferns and lilies. His paintbrushes, and to some degree his pen, came to be of more use than his surveying tools.

In an age of publications with black and white engravings, Repton produced refreshing watercolours. These, sandwiched amongst pages of detailed advice in neat, copperplate handwriting, were all bound in red, gold-embossed Moroccan leather, and his trade card glued inside. His unique selling point

or 'USP', long before today's garden designers' computer-generated, model 3D images and plans, were these 'Red Books'.

What was so novel then, by pulling back a painted flap on a carefully drawn sketch, often the main view from a client's house, Repton swiftly conveyed a charming, improved panorama. The landowner could envisage, at a glance, how a new curvaceous, upgraded approach drive would suit his sporty phaeton, the latest lightweight, open carriage. In similar fashion, he quickly appreciated how the removal of a foreground fence would open a pleasing oblique view of his deer park. Meanwhile, the prospect of a flower border and rose arbour revealed beyond a smart new balustrade would delight his style-conscious wife.

The son of a tax collector, Repton was born in Bury St Edmunds, schooled

in Norwich and, unusually, abroad in Holland. His first career in a Norfolk textile business was not successful. After trying his hand at journalism and various writing, including plays, his love of botany and gardening came to the rescue. It was hard to make a living, but increasingly prosperous and art-aware gentry were also emulating the nobility by commissioning picturesque 'natural landscapes', settings for their new country villas and 'sporting-boxes'. Then following the sad demise of the great landscaper 'Capability' Brown, his eldest son, Lancelot Jr, handed over all his father's office plans and papers. Repton based himself in Essex, nearer London, and took to the road offering his services to Brown's clients, and through his own social contacts including a Norfolk landowner, William Windham MP, and Sir Joseph Banks.

Early on, June 1790 found Repton in Lincolnshire, accompanying Sir Peter Burrell to Louth Rectory to inspect vicar Wolley Jolland's 'curious, but much-admired Hermitage Garden'. Come July, he was consulted by Lewis Dymoke, the King's Champion, whose house at Scrivelsby had been damaged by fire. That October, Repton returned with the Scrivelsby Red Book, containing collaborative designs with William Wilkins (1751-1815), a builder/architect. Repton expert Professor Stephen Daniels describes the suggested dramatic castellated alteration as "an early essay in Gothic with the Lincoln Chapter House feel". At the



time, however, Dymoke wrote in pencil 'Shocking!' and stuck to his own ideas.

In 1791, on a Lincolnshire tour, Viscount Torrington recorded in his diary: 'Mr R is here employ'd to improve the grounds... The minister's house lately repair'd upon Mr R's plan, is excellently done simple and thatched yet pleasant and neat...much new paling is finish'd.' This rectory (or 'parsonage' according to Repton's plan) near the back gate is no longer extant. The Lion Lodge, sweeping drive and some park planting were probably Repton-inspired. The planned triangular lake in the vale to the south was never tackled, though St Benedict's Church was later upgraded as recommended.

'Leave a border twelve feet wide from the wall and a walk six feet wide

1: Oak in Scrivelsby Park west of the church, as seen in Repton proposal

2: Repton Anniversary logo

3: Humphrey Repton by Haddonstone, £399 plus VAT

4: Scrivelsby by Repton 'After', courtesy of Francis Dymoke





5: St Benedict's Church, Scrivelsby
6: Scrivelsby Repton Red Book cover
7: Scrivelsby Moat
8: Scrivelsby by Repton 'Before' courtesy of Francis Dymoke
9: Repton Trade Card, Normanton Red Book courtesy of Grimsthorpe and Drummond Castle Estate
10: Repton Red Book Normanton Park (unusually in monotone wash) courtesy of Grimsthorpe and Drummond Castle Estate
11: Lion Gate



– a border of Strawberries – then Gooseberries, Currants and Raspberrys – then intermix filberts with Laurels, holley – Privet – Firs – Thorns – Berbery – Guiton Roses – Broom – mountainash – maples – etc, and towards the Park add hornbeam Birch Oak and Spanish chesnut.’

Such detailed planting advice for the Scrivelsby Kitchen Garden does not appear in later Red Books such as the one for Sir William Manners’s Buckminster estate, near Grantham. Unfortunately, some of the original 120 have not survived, including the First Baron Yarbrough’s, lost in the terrible



1898 Brocklesby Hall fire. Considerable numbers of ‘before’ and ‘after’ Repton watercolours, now found online, show how keen the artist was to demonstrate family values and perfect domestic scenes: taking walks, riding, boating, and music-playing in the flower garden.

A chance remark led me recently to a new discovery at Grimsthorpe. The Red Book for Normanton Hall, once a seat of the Earls of Ancaster, had lain in the castle library unrecorded by Repton specialists who thought it lost. I was fortunate to engage in the same picture-book experience enjoyed originally in July 1797 by Sir Gilbert Heathcote and his family. I slowly turned each precious page, here and there lifting a flap, intrigued by layers of Normanton history, and the revelation of a park landscape long since disappeared, much of it now under Rutland Water. Thomas Cundy later ornamented the rustic old Normanton Church, St Matthews, with tower and portico. The classical eye-catcher, once the Heathcote family’s private chapel within the park, survives much as Repton suggested, now surrounded by a sea of water rather than lawn. He had also pictured a lake in the valley. How he would marvel at the scale of today’s reservoir!

Marking the bicentenary of Humphry Repton’s death, the garden ornament firm Haddonstone has commissioned a bust

by Hannah Northam, based on extant engravings, in five different colours of cast stone to suit every garden setting. No previous portrait bust exists. Marketing director Simon Scott tells me he has placed ‘Capability’ Brown and Repton together in their superb show garden near Northampton, open, free of charge, Monday to Friday during business hours. What a conversation piece!

Character and situation were crucial to Repton. Recognised as the inventor of the term ‘landscape gardening’, he defined a garden as ‘a piece of ground fenced off from cattle and appropriated to the use and pleasure of man: it is, or ought to be, cultivated and enriched by art’. His 400 plus works countrywide and five books on gardening philosophy, with *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening* (1794) his most admired, left a great impression on nineteenth-century gardening. In understanding, he is remembered more for the Red Books, a successful formula ‘designed to appeal to the mind as well as the eye’ to attract clients who found it difficult to visualise three-dimensional space. He effectively demonstrated how effectively their money could improve nature’s living canvas.

In 2012 the Red Book for Moggenhanger Park, Bedfordshire sold at Christie’s, New York Auctions for the equivalent of almost £82,500! Those kept on-site, proudly displayed, now more likely in a glass cabinet than on a study table, continue to stimulate discussion as how best to conserve ‘sense of place’ in gardens, how to recreate and manage parkland settings, and



whether to frame similar views. If, after 200 years, a tad faded, they still have the power to communicate ways of looking at landscape. Will we ever tire of such child-like pleasures: perusing pastoral and painterly ‘gardenesque’ scenes in the English countryside by simply lifting a fairy-tale flap for the surprise ‘reveal’? ■

Photographs: Steffie Shields

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Saturday 24th March: Lincolnshire Gardens Trust ‘Celebrating Humphry Repton Anniversary’ at Scrivelsby Court, Near Horncastle LN9 6JA. 2pm. Garden Tour with Steffie Shields. Refreshments and opportunity to view Repton’s 1790 Scrivelsby Red Book, courtesy of Mrs Susan Dymoke. Members £10, Non-members £12. Booking essential www.lincolnshiregardentrust.org.uk For countrywide Bicentenary events and opportunities to inspect some surviving Red Books see also www.thegardenstrust.org