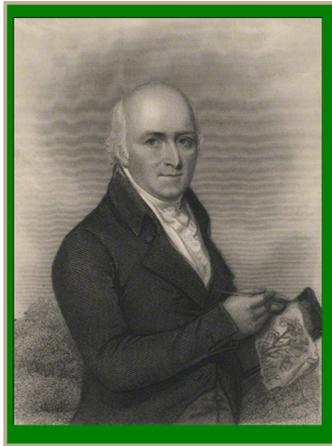


Humphry Repton at Moseley 1792

Humphry Repton (1752-1818)
Stipple and line engraving
published by Longman & Co. 1839
by Henry Bryan Hall after Samuel Shelley
National Portrait Gallery

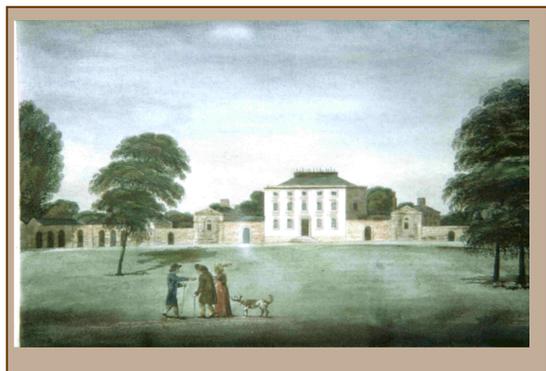


John Taylor II was the owner of Moseley Hall in 1791 when it was burnt out on July 16th by a mob who attacked the properties of religious dissenters (non-conformists) in Birmingham, who had recently held a dinner to commemorate the French revolution, with which they had sympathies. The rioters claimed to be on a mission to uphold 'Church and Country' but really simply laid waste the property of landowners in the town.



Although Taylor did not live at Moseley Hall, which had been let to The Dowager Countess of Carhampton, he promptly set about having it rebuilt (between 1792-6) employing John Standbridge of Warwick as the architect. At the same time he sought advice from Humphry Repton who visited Moseley in September 1792 and submitted a 'Red Book' with a scheme of improvement in December 1792.

It is interesting that Repton's watercolour of the Hall is as it was subsequently completed four years later. The central portion of five bays appears identical to that of the house at the time of the fire. Presumably the facade was retained with wings added and the interior remodelled. Careful inspection today of the blocks of stone at the front supports this view, showing apparently different ages and appearances of those in the centre when compared with those interdigitated from the wings.



Moseley Hall after the riots, the roof is burnt and the stones above the windows are blackened.
Drawn by P.Witton, aquatint engraved by William Ellis May 1792

Humphry Repton, the first person to call himself a landscape gardener, was born in Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk on 21st April 1752 to prosperous parents. He was educated initially in Bury and later in Norwich until the age of 12. Then until the age of 16 he was in Holland learning commerce and the Dutch language, which was useful for trade in East Anglia. He had a lively mind, a pleasant manner and demonstrated great skill in drawing. On returning to Norwich he was apprenticed to the textile trade and, after marriage at the age of 21, was set up in business by his father as a general merchant. He was successful but unenthusiastic and gave up commerce at the age of 26 when he inherited on his parents' death. For several years he lived with his wife and children in North Norfolk enjoying family life and developing his artistic aptitude. He learnt about plants and the countryside and made social contacts which were to be of value in his later career. In 1763, in reduced circumstances, he moved to a more modest house in Hare Street, Essex. During these years he started to undertake schemes of environmental improvement, including the area around his own house, and subsequently used his contacts to obtain patronage for more ambitious projects. He stated 'I have adopted the term landscape gardening as more proper, as the art can only be perfected by the united powers of the *landscape* painter and the practical *gardener*'.



Trade plate of Humphry Repton included in all Red Books

Starting with local contacts in Norfolk, he gradually built up a series of commissions to produce schemes of improvements for the landed gentry. From the outset he produced watercolour paintings of the proposals and had them bound as a 'Red Book', 12" by 9" (30.5 x 22.9 cm) in size, covered in red Morocco leather. The pictures were accompanied by a text in sometimes provocative, sometimes flattering and often patronising language. The paintings were usually covered by removable flaps which revealed 'before and after' images. Repton travelled the land preparing schemes as the result of numerous commissions. It became fashionable 'in the best circles' to have Mr. Repton prepare one of his 'Red Books' with suggestions for improving the estate.

Repton's books were intended and treated as suggestions from 'one cultivated gentleman to another'. They were offered as advice only and not with any sense of obligation. The cost for preparation was 5 guineas per day on site and 2 guineas per day at home when preparing the book. It is likely that few of Repton's schemes were carried out in their entirety but most landowners adopted some of his suggestions. It is estimated that he worked at more than 400 sites in less than thirty years. Besides the landed gentry he was commissioned by the new industrialists who had established estates or built villas in proximity to large towns as did John Taylor at Moseley.

For his extensive travels he never possessed his own transport and hired a carriage to travel 500-600 miles per month. It was a carriage accident in 1811 that caused a spinal injury from which he never recovered - he remained at home at Hare Street in Essex until his death in 1818. He was buried at St Michael Archangel in Aylsham, Norfolk and was joined there by his wife on her death in 1827.