

The folly and the temple: Nostalgia practices in the eighteenth century

English landscape garden

*"...one comes round to a Dorick building like the front of a Temple & then to a Gothick building not quite finished, &...up to a round Ionick Temple, something in imitation of the Temple of Hercules at Tivoli...& from that are three or four visto's cut, one of which is terminated by Dorick building...& to the west of the garden in the Park is a thatched house..."*

- Richard Pococke, *Travels through England, 1750-7*<sup>1</sup>

The architecture seen and described by Richard Pococke at "Mr Fox's Bramham house" on 4 August 1750 was a defining aspect of the eighteenth century English landscape garden. Typically, a visitor such as Pococke would follow a route through the garden where they would encounter structures ranging from classical temples to Chinese pavilions to rustic hermitages, which were designed to "entertain [the] Fancy".<sup>2</sup> Numerous other contemporary sources also indicate that these structures were designed to evoke associations, a fact that has been broadly recognised by scholarship on garden and architectural history. However in examining the motivations for building associative structures, a more complex web of memory relations is unravelled. The gothic folly and the classical temple were two of the most popular structures in the eighteenth century English landscape garden, and have been traditionally viewed as stylistically opposed phenomena. This paper argues that, despite differing stylistically, both gothic follies and classical garden temples are the product of nostalgia for past eras, where a creative reworking of the past results in a set of fabricated memories for the eighteenth century garden visitor to experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Hunt & Willis, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*, 1975, p.264

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.234

Nostalgia comes from the Greek, *nostos*, meaning homecoming, and *algos*, meaning grief, pain or distress.<sup>3</sup> The etymological meaning, therefore, is of ‘a painful desire to return home’. The definitions of nostalgia today have expanded to encompass a “sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, especially one in an individual's own lifetime”, a “sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past”, and an “acute longing for familiar surroundings”.<sup>4</sup> The reference to home in the etymological meaning of the word is significant as it ties nostalgia to a specific place. It does not reference temporality as the eighteenth century usage referred to a pathological form of homesickness.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, the modern definitions identify nostalgia primarily as a desire reaching across time. Considering that memories of past events or people are inevitably tied to place, the modern concept of nostalgia encompasses the longing both for spatially and for temporally removed places.

These spatial places are often landscapes, which elicit a powerful emotional appeal for humans, but places defined by the built environment are also subjects of



Fig. 1

nostalgia . It is with examples of the built environment that space, as distinguished from place, comes into play, as structures delineate and define space within a place. In his analysis of Pierre Nora’s work on *lieux de memoire*, Stephen Legg quotes Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw’s condition that “evidence of the past is required to prompt nostalgic yearning”.<sup>6</sup> In the English landscape garden, it is the

<sup>3</sup> ‘nostalgia’, Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=nostalgia&searchmode=none>

<sup>4</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, nostalgia

<sup>5</sup> ‘nostalgia’, Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=nostalgia&searchmode=none>

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Legg, “Contesting and surviving memory: space, nation, and nostalgia in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2005, Vol. 23, p.486

materiality of the classical and Gothic structures that provides this “prompt”. The materiality of the built structures dotted across the landscape garden mark out the space around them that is connected to, but separate from, their place in the landscape. It is this space, surrounding and flowing through the structures, that creates the site for nostalgic practice.

In the eighteenth century English landscape garden the Gothic Revival manifested itself in the



form of follies, or mock ruins. The medievalist movement in the eighteenth century influenced architecture as well as literature, and the building of gothic follies can be read as a straightforward method of referencing the medieval past. It was a past that was woven into the fabric of the English landscape in the form of authentic ruins that were the legacy of Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries from 1536-41. However, the building of follies implies these authentic pieces of history were not sufficient, suggesting that the follies were a more complex engagement with the past than simply an architectural recreation of the Middle Ages.



Fig. 2

The gothic folly is a subject widely addressed by scholars of the Early Gothic Revival, and there are a variety of interpretations about the motivation

behind their creation. Most, however, involve a manipulation of the medieval references for modern purposes that can be seen as an active reworking of medieval memories. Authentic ruins traced a family’s lineage back to the fifteenth century, as the oldest members of the English aristocracy had



received much of their land after the Dissolution when monastic lands were appropriated for private ownership. Building mock ruins on private land could act as a method for the *nouveau riche*, who had made their money in the early stages of the industrial revolution, to legitimise their ancestry.<sup>7</sup> For the new class of aristocracy, therefore, a folly was a “concocted memory”<sup>8</sup>, designed to fabricate a family history through imitation of medieval ruins.

There has also been a lot of attention paid to the various political connotations of the follies.<sup>9</sup> Follies are by no means the

only example of a historical style being used to support a political agenda, but the association of the follies with Whig or Tory politics of the day is another example of how the mock ruins catered to the nostalgia for medieval England whilst utilising the past for the present by reworking the memories associated with the original gothic structures.

Like gothic follies, classical structures could be reworked to relate to the present. The Temple of Victory at Kew Gardens, designed by William Chambers “was built in commemoration of the signal victory obtained, on the first of August 1759...by the Allied Army... over the French Army”<sup>10</sup>, and utilised

<sup>7</sup> David C. Stuart, *Georgian Gardens*, 1979, p.50

<sup>8</sup> Robert Harbison, *The Built, the Unbuilt and the Unbuildable*, 1991, p.19

<sup>9</sup> For a site specific example, see David Adshead, “The Design and Building of the Gothic Folly at Wimpole, Cambridgeshire”, *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 140, No. 1139 (Feb. 1998), p.79, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/887688>. The defensive architecture of the medieval period referenced the nobility’s thirteenth century struggle against the monarchy that resulted in the signing of the Magna Carta. The association of political independence from the monarchy was in keeping with the Whig ideology of constitutional monarchy over absolute monarchy, and this association was not lost on eighteenth century contemporaries. However the associations of the Gothic were not set in stone and the style could be manipulated according to agenda. The Tories, the political rivals of the Whigs, could just as conceivably make the claim that the Gothic represented the style of political tradition and legitimacy.

See also Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival*, 2002, p.19

<sup>10</sup> William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew in Surrey*, 1763, p. 5

the association of Rome with military might. This close relationship with the classical past was felt by many exponents of neoclassicism, and it extended to the landscape garden. Horace Walpole, in his highly influential *History of the Modern Taste in Gardening* (1780), wrote of the “restoration of Greece”<sup>11</sup> in the landscape garden, and publications such as Robert Castell’s *Villas of the Ancients* (1728) identified the ancient gardens of Rome as the precursors of the emerging English landscape garden.<sup>12</sup> Robert Morris’s *Lectures on*

*Architecture* (1734) compare a Roman senator’s garden (described in language suspiciously similar to that applied to the English landscape garden) to the eighteenth century gentleman in his use of the garden for reflection.<sup>13</sup>

The attempts to connect eighteenth century England with ancient Greece and Rome indicate nostalgia for a foreign past, removed



Fig. 4

both spatially and temporally, and an appropriation of this past through material means. The classical, unlike the gothic, was not a native English architectural style, and subsequently a more tenuous memory link occurs with the classically inspired buildings in the landscape garden. Nevertheless, the building of classical garden structures encouraged nostalgia for the past civilisations of Greece and Rome as the gothic follies did for the Middle Ages, and formulated a set of classical memories for the eighteenth century visitor. Constructing classical garden structures allowed the access

<sup>11</sup> Horace Walpole, *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, 1995, p. 44

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pope was another exponent of the ancient garden and its contemporary influence. See H. F. Clark, “Eighteenth Century Elysiums: The Role of Association in the Landscape Movement”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 6, 1943, p. 166

<sup>13</sup> Hunt & Willis, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*, 1975, p.235

to a past that was based in fact, and yet imaginary for the eighteenth century English visitor- a set of memories that were simultaneously historical and romanticised.

The reflective intent behind the structures evidenced by contemporary literary sources demonstrates a conscious grappling with the medieval and classical pasts. The structures attest to the fact that the architects, designers, and educated elite of the eighteenth century were actively engaged with the past and reworking it for their present, rather than merely being “incurably wistful” about past eras.<sup>14</sup> The issue of active rather than passive nostalgia is addressed in Susan E. Alcock’s *‘Archaeologies of the Greek Past’*. Her arguments address nostalgia as “a vital term of engagement” with the past, through the reconfiguring and reworking of memory in the landscapes and built environment of Roman Greece. It rejects the notion of nostalgic practices as passive, and “negative or at best neutral developments”, instead addressing reversions to the past as “active strategies of self-assertion”.<sup>15</sup> That eighteenth century garden critics and theorists acknowledged the associative nature of gothic follies and classical garden temples indicates that engaging garden visitors with the past through these structures was a conscious act, an ‘active strategy’.



One of the most ubiquitous adjectives in contemporary literary sources on the landscape garden is ‘romantick’. John Vanbrugh described the medieval folly at Claremont as “singularly romantick”, and in other writings, those of Sir William Chambers, Joseph Heely, and Humphrey Repton among others, aspects of the garden are described as “romantic”. This romantic appeal was part of the associative

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Legg, “Contesting and surviving memory: space, nation, and nostalgia in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2005, Vol. 23, p.485

<sup>15</sup> Susan E. Alcock, *‘Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscapes, Monuments, and Memories’*, 2002, p.39-41

nature of the structures and is tied to the eighteenth century view of the past. To understand the intent behind the garden structures, the distinction between romanticism and nostalgia should be considered.

The role of romanticism in the appeal of gothic follies has been thoroughly examined in scholarship on the Gothic Revival due to the frequent re-occurrence of the term in contemporary sources.<sup>16</sup> William Shenstone, famous for his landscape at Leasowes that included a mock ruin, wrote in his *Unconnected Thoughts on Gardening* (1764) that ruins can “afford that pleasing melancholy which proceeds from a reflexion on decayed magnificence”<sup>17</sup>. Romantic is defined as “appealing to the imagination and feelings” or “having no real existence; imaginary; purely ideal”.<sup>18</sup> It therefore seems to differ from nostalgia in the quality of the appeal which is based on emotional or imaginative qualities, rather than on the desire for a past or distant *reality*. It is also important to note that romanticism does not relate exclusively to the past- one can romanticise the present. However, the distinction between the two is far from clear. A key aspect of nostalgia is idealisation, with the past being viewed through a “rose-tinted lens”.<sup>19</sup> The “sentimental longing” in the modern definition of nostalgia, and the “painful desire” of the etymological meaning both bring the emotional appeal into play, and this further blurs the boundary between a nostalgic and a romantic view of the past.

The distinction comes with recognising that this is a modern concept of nostalgia that did not exist in the eighteenth century. Much of the language in contemporary accounts of the classical and gothic structures we would today class as nostalgic language, suggesting that eighteenth century ‘romanticism’ encompassed much of the modern concept of nostalgia. This would imply that the construction of structures in the eighteenth century landscape garden can be viewed as the construction of a set of memories deriving from nostalgic practice.

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to the topic see Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival*, 1928; for the relationship to the literary movement see A. Addison, *Romanticism and the Gothic Revival*, 1938

<sup>17</sup> Hunt & Willis, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden, 1620-1820*, 1975, p.289

<sup>18</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, romantic, *a.* and *n.*

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Legg, “Contesting and surviving memory: space, nation, and nostalgia in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 2005, Vol. 23, p.493

Romanticism was generally applied to the discourse on the Gothic Revival structures in the landscape garden, as supposed to the discourse on the neo-classical temple structures. This is partially due to the link between romanticism and anti-classicism that saw the emotional appeal of the gothic as challenging the rational appeal of neo-classicism that was linked to Enlightenment thinking.<sup>20</sup> If we step outside of these traditional art historical lines of thinking and view the tendency to romanticise as an eighteenth century form of nostalgia, these values are equally applicable to classical and gothic structures in the landscape garden, and provide insights to the memory practices surrounding the structures.

Garden structures in the English landscape garden were stylistically eclectic, reflecting the desire for 'variety' espoused in contemporary writings. Two of the most popular forms- the gothic folly and the classical temple- were revival styles. They referenced historical architecture, but their relationship to the past eras they referenced was not simply imitative, or based on aesthetics. In constructing material allusions to the medieval and classical pasts, the folly and the temple constructed a set of memories associated with those pasts but reworked for the present. The contemporary language in the discourse about these structures indicates that this reworking of memory was consciously undertaken, which leads to a more nuanced view of the folly and the temple, not simply as architectural historicism, but as the material products of intentional nostalgic practice in the eighteenth century English landscape garden.

### Images

Fig. 1 Hackfall Woods Gothic folly

Fig. 2 Folly at Wimpole, *above*: Pen and Ink drawing by Sanderson Miller, c. 1749-51 *below*: the folly today

Fig. 3 *Jack the Treacle Eater*; One of four Follies built to mark the boundaries of an estate south of Yeovil built in the 1820's

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<sup>20</sup> A. Addison, '*Romanticism and the Gothic Revival*', 1938, p.3



Fig. 4 The Pantheon at Stourhead Gardens, built 1753-4 by Henry Flitcroft for Henry Hoare.

Fig. 5 Mock ruin of a triumphal arch at Kew Gardens, built 1759 by William Chambers