

A POLYMATH IN ARCADIA: THOMAS WRIGHT (1711-1786)

The name of Thomas Wright is chiefly remembered for achievement in the realms of astronomy and architecture but his contribution to English landscape has received limited attention by comparison despite association with over thirty notable locations. It might have been the existence of other eighteenth-century quasi-eminent Thomas Wrights which led him to adopt the appellation ‘Thomas Wright of Durham’ since Thomas Wright was certainly not an uncommon name in County Durham if tombstones in proximity to Wright’s are any indicator - indeed the present day bishop of that diocese is one Tom Wright. This essay will trace the emergence of Thomas Wright as a key contributor to eighteenth – century landscape architecture through designs uniquely imbued with significance derived from his polymathic passions.

‘THOMAS WRIGHT OF DURHAM’

Thomas Wright’s ranking amongst his contemporaries in garden history has waxed and waned like the heavenly bodies whose progress he traced so diligently. It is fortuitous that the Journal that he kept for the first thirty-five years of his life has survived revealing how a largely self-taught polymath with a lifelong habit of application to the acquisition of knowledge became a tutor, companion and landscape advisor to a host of inter-connected families of note.¹ Whilst this complex web of aristocratic genealogical association linking Wright to an extended galaxy of locations remains to be fully explored, his Journal together with commentary from his contemporaries, surviving correspondence and manuscripts contribute to our understanding of the man and the equally complex web of philosophical and aesthetic influences weaving significance through his landscapes.²

Written in a fresh and disingenuous manner Wright’s Journal presents a man who attracted trouble in his youth with escapades that included fleeing his indentures, planning an unsuccessful elopement and running away to sea.³ His account of the arduous journeys he undertook, complete with an encounter with highwaymen, recall the picaresque adventures and naïve foolhardiness of Wright’s contemporary, the fictitious *Dr Syntax*. Wright’s papers were later acquired by George Allen (1736-1800), the first to edit the Journal and a self-appointed biographer who intended ‘to save from oblivion the memory of Mr Thomas Wright’. He traced the development of Wright’s character from an early ‘pedantick stiffness of manners’ to where ‘better stars

were now rising upon him' as 'his merits began to come forward in public reputation'.⁴

He declared Wright a 'singular character' with 'extensive genius and good disposition at heart' and continued:

His temper was gentle and affable, and his mind was generous, but his studies leading him out of the common track of human affairs, left him very little conversant with the ordinary duties of life. There was something flighty and eccentric in his notions, and a wildness of fancy followed even his ordinary projects.⁵

This observation would apply to Wright's apparent ambivalence regarding his profile, evidenced in the sparse use of his image in his published works. Despite the importance of portraiture as a means of self-promotion in eighteenth-century life an engraving by Foudrinier of Wright in mid-life from a painting by George Allen was published only once in Wright's lifetime whilst an image of Wright aged twenty-one which graced the copperplate of his Edinburgh almanac remains virtually unknown to this day (Figure 1). This unworldly disposition is reflected in lines carried in his pocket book:

Few have the fortitude of soul to honour
A friend's success without a touch of envy;
For that malignant passion to the heart
Cleaves close, and with a double burden loads
The man infected with it: first he feels
In all their weight his own calamities
Then sighs to see the happiness of others.⁶

Further insights into Wright's character are gained from his contemporaries.

William Cowper (1731-1800) wrote to Wright in 1753 and may have been instrumental in influencing him to concentrate on a career in landscaping rather than scientific pursuits.⁷

Wright's former pupil Elizabeth Carter, (1717-1806), likened him to Endymion, fascinated by the night-sky and anticipated that others would acknowledge his achievements:

.... To Minds like thee, these Subjects best belong;
 Whose curious Thoughts with active Freedom soar,
 And trace the Wonders of creating Pow'r.
 For this, some nobler Pen shall speak thy fame;
 But let the Muse indulge a gentler Theme,
 While pleas'd she tells thy more engaging Part,
 Thy social temper and diffusive Heart ...⁸

Despite these tributes the Will of Wright's natural daughter Elizabeth expressed concern that his works would be overlooked.⁹ Today Wright is not awarded automatic inclusion in commentary on eighteenth-century landscape and he remains an enigma who can be summarised as 'Individualistic ... does not fit in easily to the traditional account of the eighteenth-century landscape movement'.¹⁰

'PHIL. NAT. ET MAT. PROF.'

The word '*Philomathematicus*' used on Wright's earlier portrait expressed the essence of his early polymathic interests. The epithet '*Phil: Nat et Mat: Prof*' that encircled Wright's later portrait was also to provide an epitaph for his gravestone. Wright was living through a period that experienced a paradigm shift towards a new experimental science where geometrical axioms were replaced by empirical observation. An ancient notion of the World being 'law-like' had prevailed since the Middle Ages presenting the World as designed, purposive and capable of being understood. In the seventeenth century the concept of final laws developed by Descartes and others came to the fore, culminating a generation later in Newton's book, probably the most significant in the history of science.¹¹ An earlier focus of Newton's studies had been alchemy and theology and he described God as 'Scientist', governing the Rules of the World, and as the 'Eye', seeing everything, alone capable of delivering the complexity of a stable Universe amidst the myriad interplay of gravitational force. Wright's Journal recorded his early interest in astro-theological matters and his early application to mathematics coincided with a time of great renewal for natural philosophers who hoped for a 'second' Reformation based on science and mathematics.¹²

When Wright moved to London in 1733 the need for patronage was paramount and scientific invention was the order of the day. Despite bearing the patronage of the Earl of Scarborough and a letter of introduction to Roger Gale, Treasurer to the Royal Society, Wright was unsuccessful in his application for membership of the Society, failing to achieve two thirds of the ballot.¹³ With the range of skills in his early apprenticeships to a watchmaker and later to Jonathan Sissons, prominent instrument maker, Wright remained highly motivated, noting his inventions ‘run to(o) fast for Execution’.¹⁴ His Journal recorded a stay with a fellow auto-didact Stephen Duck, royal protégé, librarian and caretaker to the Hermitage recently built by William Kent and noted for its fashionable ‘celebration of national success in new science and new philosophy’.¹⁵ In turn the Royal Society requested to know more of Wright and he maintained a proactive relationship with them, delivering lectures and undertaking several commissions.¹⁶ Since fellowship was never granted it may have been perceived that his ideas were not in harmony with an organisation whose statutes stated explicitly that its business was ‘not meddling with Divinity, Metaphysics, Morals’.¹⁷

Wright’s role as tutor of mathematics to the families of the aristocracy was to afford him the opportunity of hitherto unimagined cultural development. Firstly it must be assumed he overcame his early ‘very great Impediment of Speech’ added to which he hailed from the North East of England at a time when dialects were many and impenetrable.¹⁸ Secondly if there remained concern about his moral suitability as a tutor to wives and daughters of high estate he appeared to rescue his reputation by distance and active reference.¹⁹ Lest it be thought Wright sought to ingratiate himself, Allen recorded that his early awkward formality ‘was not polished down by his frequent intercourse with people of fashion’²⁰. An intangible reward of his peripatetic lifestyle was access to his patrons’ libraries, notably at Wilton. In the time outside his teaching commitments Wright continued his love of study during ‘a rotation of visiting and journeys to the houses of illustrious personages; yet even there we see him pursuing his studies with unremitting

ardour'.²¹ Notes in Wright's pocket book refer to volumes on European Revolution and Machiavelli which he had borrowed from Lord Huntington and even in retirement he borrowed works from the Dean and Chapter of Durham.²² His manuscripts were full of references to Milton, Virgil, Dryden and Ovid and he recommended celebrated Greek and Roman poets and philosophers with confidence.²³ Wright's own library featured many dramatists and when the opportunity presented he was an avid theatre-goer.²⁴

An overview of Wright's intellectual preoccupations would be incomplete without reference to his interest in *pansophia* or Universal Knowledge expounded in England by Comenius a hundred years earlier.²⁵ Pansophic reformation based on education for the good of mankind had much in common with the nascent Royal Society but subsequent prolonged civil and denominational upheaval in England had intervened. Who better than Wright to pick up Comenius' mantle than an auto-didact, passionate about the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge for its own sake? Wright wrote 'I have very little pretense to Natural Knowledge, but when I meet with any thing uncommon, I rarely pass it by without inspection'.²⁶ Wright's unpublished 'Pansophia, or An Essay towards a General Compendium of Universal Knowledge Compriz'd in Three Distinct Systems of Science and Comprehending Nine Ordinal Categories' covers a wide range of topics, many of a horticultural or landscape nature, grouped into systems, categories and faculties in a classic Enlightenment attempt to define and conquer.²⁷

'PROFESSOR OF GARDENING'

Wright did not publish anything in the last thirty-eight years of his life yet his manuscripts undated but which appeared to have been written during Wright's semi-retirement included over a hundred pages of guidance on building and planting under the headings 'Ideas and Rules to be Observ'd in ye Disposition of Building and Planting', 'Planting &c', 'Introduction to Building and Planting', 'Rules for Planting Hills and Valleys and of the Mixture or Blending of Different Trees' and 'The Business of Building and Planting.'

There is some evidence that Wright had intended to publish them: a single sheet is entitled 'Preface to Planting', another read 'For their Innumerations see ye appendix &c', a third document stated 'But of the various sorts of Fencing I shall speak of in its Proper Place', another read 'Of Arbours in their true original or more confined Sense, the Author will have occasion to speak in another Place' and finally there was a sheet which stated 'The Elements of Planting and of Planning Pleasure Grounds Both Natural and Artificial, Illustrated with variety of Design for various Purposes, Suitable to all Sorts of Situations. By T. Wright'. The ten pages entitled 'The Business of Building and Planting' differentiated between 'Works of Knowledge and Experience', 'Works of Reason & Tast' and 'Works of Geneous and Fancy'. This use of three categories recalled Wright's pansophic classification which had included several pages on horticultural and agricultural topics indicating his broad awareness of rural affairs. Wright's manuscripts included specific advice on the use of trees, plants and flowers, colour, seasonality and water as well as the wider themes of working with Nature, Regularity and Irregularity and expenditure. He listed 'The 4 Elements of Taste, Wood, Water, Earth and Air' his inclusion of 'Air' explaining the contribution of 'light' and 'shade' as well as a spatial dimension to his designs.

Wright was not originally included in George Mason's influential essay on gardening but he was included in a revised edition some thirty years later where Mason noted Wright's apparent reluctance to seek commissions as befitted his perceived station of 'a gentleman my hearsay evidence tells me that he was'. Mason's good opinion was not readily won but he recognised Wright as a 'professor of gardening' inexplicably unknown to Horace Walpole and Uvedale Price despite Wright's 'admired effort of genius' at Beckett Park.²⁸ Wright however was familiar with Walpole:

[I] hear nothing of Mr Walpole's work, but have a very good opinion of him as an author. He writes well & what he writes must be well worth reading.²⁹

Wright's execution of an extended terrace and a serpentine treatment of the river at Oatlands, Surrey, together with the lawn design for Beckett Park, indicate that he was willing to contribute to pre-existing schemes which in part would account for the prolific number of locations with which he is associated. It has been suggested that 'temporal matters of finance did not interest him'.³⁰ However Wright's manuscripts included numerous observations on the expense of landscape design, probably not intended for publication, which indicated his unease with the astronomic amounts lavished by owners whom he considered ill-advised in their pursuit of 'All the Tast of ye Present Age, not much above ye Capacity of an Hottentot.'³¹ In Wright's 'Tour of the North of England' he referred to the Vanbrugh - designed property of a Mr Fox Lains 'a most expensive and ill plan'd place ... and in the garden we were told there were near to 40 miles of clip'd hedges' and 'the gardens [at Chatsworth] very expensive but in a *foreing taste*'.³² He questioned the ideas of landscapers who made extensive use of topographic reorganisation as this required 'a Liberal Patron & often at a Great Expense and suited only to the Purs of Princes'.³³ The continuing interest he showed in the management of returns for the Dowager Duchess of Beaufort's dairy farm at Stoke Park showed Wright attuned to the trend of more practical and profitable use of the parkland in tandem with creating a greater degree of ornamentation and beautification of the landscape.³⁴

FEATURES OF WRIGHTIAN LANDSCAPE

In common with other Enlightenment figures, Wright struggled to reconcile his religious beliefs with advances in scientific knowledge as he became increasingly aware of the plurality of worlds with its inference for the traditional location of the Creator. When Wright's astronomical observations required him to envisage an alternative concept of

Heaven, his vision incorporated vocabulary related to the three key features of his vision of landscape:

And hence it is obvious that there may not be a Scene of Joy, which poetry can paint, or Religion promise, but somewhere in the universe it is prepared for the meritorious Part of Mankind, thus all Infinity is full of States of Bliss, Angelic Choirs, Regions of Heroes, and Realms of Demi-Gods, Elysian Fields, Pindaric Shades and Myriads of Enchanting Mansions.³⁵

Wright's notable contribution to elysian landscape was his appreciation of colour, principally expressed in his use of flowering plants which he is credited with restoring to the proximity of the house.³⁶ In his manuscript observations he wrote:

In the Blending and Mixing of plants ... great care should be Taken to link them to ye Seasons, sort them to their Tints or Colours which will have an effect Equal to Light and shade & produce a sort of Perspective and make a Living Picture.³⁷

Wright's pansophic 'Theory of Colour' contained three subgroups: 'Primogenial', 'Congenial' and 'Combinial', from which he calculated there followed 7261 degrees of Light and Shade and 21,783 degrees of Colour. Wright recommended the benefits of sequential planting exploiting the dynamic of the seasonality of flowers. His manuscripts listed named floral combinations to gain the best effect of colour and fragrance for each season. He referred to a 'serpent of flowers' specifically describing a 'Flower Gardens in the form of Serpents, composed of Dwarf flow'r provided a well Chose Class of contemporary Flow's Suited to ye Season'.³⁸ There is no evidence that this shape of bed was executed but crescent-shaped beds featured in his *Plan of a Flower Garden*³⁹ and later kidney-shaped beds set into the lawn featured in Wright's unexecuted design for St. James' Park.⁴⁰ Details of Wright's treatment of the lawns at Beckett Park have not come to light but may relate to his drawing of *Construction of Rosery or Flower Garden* which offered a new take on the geometrical parterre.⁴¹ Consisting of densely filled segments the design might have proved impractical in practice unless, as the title implied, roses were the intended planting. Another flowerbed design intriguingly entitled *Urim and Thummim*⁴² was inspired by the jewelled breastplate of a Jewish High Priest composed of twelve

precious stones inscribed with the twelve tribes of Israel, the colour of each stone presumably represented by the choice of flower (Figure 2).

Wright's reference to 'Pindaric shades' was contemporaneous with the first publication of the poet in English translation.⁴³ Pindar's verse continued to be considered dark or obscure because of its stanzaic form and its abundance of classical allusion, consciously indecipherable to the untutored reader. Pindar's odes were also constructed within a strict metrical and structural template, notable for its irregular stanzaic form. Wright's concept of 'regularity' in the garden equated more to pleasurable perfection than to the 'formality' of earlier gardens and the graduation of his 'irregularity' proceeded from planted clumps on the lawn through the circular clearings of his 'salons' to the distinctive irregularity of his serpentine wood walks best illustrated by his designs for Stoke Park.

Wright's 'myriad mansions' in the two published elements of *Universal Architecture* were uniquely presented in carefully planted contexts which served as a pattern-book for arbours and grottos. In '*Panasophia*' Wright listed the buildings 'Properly attendant on every Royalty or Manor House [...] Temples, Towers and Pavilions: For Pleasure' and 'Stables Brewery and Laundries: For Use.' Wright designed a wide range of buildings for pleasure and his sketchbooks also included designs for practical constructions such as ice-houses, gatehouses and water-gates.⁴⁴ His signature use of castellated facades ennobled a number of farm buildings on the Badminton estate the most imposing of which was Castle Barn. Wright's castellated Gothic seat is one of three surviving elements from the hundred acre pleasure ground surrounding Sir Charles Sedley's Palladian villa at Nuthall Temple, its rear elevation concealing a circular dovecote (Figure 3).

Wright responded to the mid-eighteenth-century taste for Chinese-inspired design producing drawings for a Chinese temple in a 1750 design for Badminton, a Chinese 'garb' for nearby Swangrove House, Chinese fretwork fences and a pleasure barge for George, Prince of Wales. Chinese garden buildings were not only for external appreciation but intended to facilitate contemplation and philosophical pursuits, tradition requiring carefully

placement in irregular parts of the landscape where sinuous paths and planting featured. The majority of Wright's executed *chinoiserie* was at Shugborough, Staffordshire. and plasterwork from a Chinese House in the garden has been attributed to Wright ,now in the Veranda Room of the main house,includes a roundel featuring Confucius. ⁴⁵

The Society of Antiquarians had been relaunched by William Stukeley and others in 1717 and his introduction to Wright might have been effected through Jonathan Sissons, a member of Stukeley's 'club' which met to discuss scientific and aesthetic matters, or through Roger Gale, Stukeley's brother-in-law. Wright assisted Stukeley with surveys of standing stones and visited other significant Druidic sites in County Durham, Derbyshire, Somerset and Wiltshire.⁴⁶ Druids together with Freemasons were thought to have brought Egyptian mysticism to Britain. Also in 1717, four London-based lodges of freemasonry combined to form the Grand Lodge which marked the beginning of speculative masonry and a move away from its older craft-based origins. Freemasonry provided a genuinely non-denominational apolitical environment committed to charitable endeavour but its principal focus was on rediscovering ancient wisdom, notably geometry and spreading information on scientific and cultural development in London and significantly to the provinces. The synergy with the activities of the Royal Society was apparent and by the 1720s forty-five percent of its fellows were masons.⁴⁷ Wright's polymathic interests explained his enthusiastic embrace of freemasonry which upheld his belief in a Universal Religion or the Religion of Nature.⁴⁸

The Rosicrucians were thought to have been influential in the development of early Masonic hermetic and esoteric tradition whose craft-based origins strikingly lacked its own mythology since earlier focus of allusive symbolism being mainly biblical. By the eighteenth century they had developed into an organisation of moral and religious reformers whose doctrines contained mystical references based on the study of the elements, numbers and heavenly bodies and their influence on Mankind. Rosicrucians believed that a great advance in the knowledge of Nature would lead to *Pansophia* and

were intent on establishing a universal reign of mystic and philosophic harmony. Rosicrucian symbolism included the *Serpens Candivorens*, known to the Greeks as *ouroboros*, representing both the eternal self-regenerating cycle of nature in a chain of creativity, destruction and renewal and also the zodiac in its entirety. Incorporated in Wright's portrait it also featured in a drawing amongst Wright's manuscripts combining Druidic and Masonic symbols (Figure 4). The importance of the architect in freemasonry has been well-documented and Wright's skills in combination with the egalitarian ethos between freemasons would have explained his welcome in the home and confidence of so many eighteenth-century aristocrats. With such a fabulously rich hinterland of ritual and symbolism to draw on it is unthinkable that Wright would not carry these influences across into his landscape design.

SIGNIFICANCE IN WRIGHTIAN LANDSCAPE

Wright's interest in numerology was demonstrated in his design for 'A Talisman Grove';

A Talisman or Magical Grove form'd of Scarlet and Evergreen Oaks upon the following plan, as judg'd to be Productive of the most indefinite of all regular varieties; every walk being compos'd of an Equal number of Trees and yet no two clumps to be found alike.⁴⁹

At Stanway House, Gloucestershire, a building capped with a forty-foot pyramid was built at the head of a cascade by Robert Tracey in 1750 in honour of his late father. Whereas there is no archival evidence to link Wright with the building the finesse of the interior of the pyramid and the elegance of the interior alcoves topped by armorial shells shows a skilled hand and the design is reminiscent of the sham fortress built by Wright for Sir Calverley Blackett at Rothley, Northumberland. The Stanway building is reminiscent of the Masonic cubic stone with pyramid and was framed by a grove of Cedars of Lebanon also of masonic significance.⁵⁰ An aerial photograph of the area adjacent to the garden's canal records pathways in a hexagrammic formation, recalling Wright's design for a

Plantation Walk, and an adjacent pathway lead to a mature planting of yews such as might have screened a temple or similar from the main house.⁵¹

Wright's use of circular and crescent - shaped motifs in woodland salons and flower-beds mirrored heavenly bodies. Study of the stars was an important element of Hermetic philosophy and Wright was fascinated by the regularity of the circle stating 'the Sun's Disk is a Perfect Circle, the Horizon at Sea is a Perfect Circle'.⁵² He designed an unexecuted circular kitchen-garden for Badminton based on the solar system which included planets and a central temple of the Sun picked out in gold (Figure 5).

Cosmological inspiration had featured in the design by Salomon de Caus (1576-1626) for an Orange Parterre at Heidelberg. There beds of flowers bloomed sequentially and de Caus was known to have assigned:

the qualitative characters of zodiacal categories...the use of cosmic diagrams as planting schemata is undertaken with a vague ambivalence between astronomical and astrological references.⁵³

A contemporary of de Caus, Oswald Croll, subscribed to the Paraclesian theory that:

Nothing is placed in the family of plants either unadvisedly or in vain, but in a rare manner, from their seasonable ordained causes, are produced in exact number, time and place.⁵⁴

Croll explained the concept thus:

The stars are the matrix of all the plants and every star in the sky is only the spiritual prefiguration of a plant, such that it represents that plant, and just as each herb or plant is a terrestrial star looking up at the sky, so each star is a celestial plant in spiritual form, which differs from the terrestrial plants in matter alone...the celestial plants and herbs are turned towards the earth and look directly down.⁵⁵

Wright's immensely detailed charts, collected together in *The Universal Vicissitude of Seasons* assisted the user 'to know the right scheme for any day sought'.⁵⁶ The signs of the zodiac were incorporated into the ceilings of many Masonic lodges and served to illustrate the relationship of Man within the macrocosm of the Universe. At Horton House, Northamptonshire he designed the Menagerie garden building for the 2nd Earl of Halifax.

The interior featured large plasterwork zodiacal medallions above the cornice, each decorated with an appropriate flower-garland.⁵⁷ Wright is thought to have designed a house and garden for the same patron at Hampton Court House.⁵⁸ The façade of the grotto overlooking the heart-shaped lake strongly resembles Wright's drawing on the title page for *Grottos* and its domed ceiling is studded with stars, the alcove on one side paler to denote sunrise, the opposite one darker for sunset, the whole dominated by another splendid sun. The exterior is a typically Wrightian mix of found objects with fragments of fine pillars nestling alongside textural tufa and shells and it is set into an artificial mound with pathways around its perimeter integrating the feature into the landscape circuit. The intimate scale of this garden with its encircling walkway and the careful proportion and placement of its features suggest one hand and is a rare example of English rococo and may represent one of the most complete surviving Wrightian landscapes.

The ancient philosophical tradition of Hermeticism emphasised the importance of inner enlightenment or *gnosis*, as opposed to that of pure rationalism or doctrinal faith. The deification or rebirth of Man through *gnosis* provided a rich source of Masonic esoteric symbolism and analogy in the eighteenth century. Care is necessary in order to differentiate between gardens with a truly ritual function and those whose features were paramasonic. A variety of French mid eighteenth-century floor-drawings for masonic use representing the 'journeys' undertaken by varying degrees of initiation featured a small garden building or hut as one of the stages in the progress. Wright's guidance on proximity of garden buildings stated 'Buildings of Different genius ought never to be plac'd in sight of one another nor admitted in ye same scene to avoid a Masquerade of Building.' He also advised that 'No Plantation should be so dispos'd as Capable of being Discover'd from any point all at once.'⁵⁹ Adherence to this advice would have ensured that areas of the garden were rendered entirely suitable for Masonic use and an eclectic range of garden buildings placed in a circuit around the landscape provided the potential for an architectural progress suitable to fulfil the Masonic concept of:

‘God’s Wide Open Space as a cult room ... associated with the ancient notion of the Garden of Eden ... as the freemasons believed in a Utopia on Earth, the landscape garden provided a ritual space for Masonic work and for contemplating Divine Nature.’⁶⁰

As the eighteenth century progressed there had been a reduction in the interest in mazes and labyrinths but towards the end of the century there were a number of garden developments in Europe where the maze assumed metaphysical significance. The Royal York Lodge in Berlin adjoined a garden whose ‘maze-like walk around the Parnassus on top of the mount [and] grotto’ had a ceremonial purpose in a garden that was ‘enclosed, allowing the apprentice to proceed along the route of initiation with perfect ease.’⁶¹ The preference for the less fashionable ‘maze-like walk’ in preference to a labyrinth in a garden used for Masonic purpose provided a progress made via a series of choices in order to successfully move towards the goal. Wright’s manuscripts included a detailed description of a ‘Maze of Morality’ which was studded with garden features appropriate to Enlightenment and Masonic ideals where the traveller had to overcome obstacles before arriving at the Temple of Virtue.⁶²

By the middle of the century interest in Druidic lore had permeated not only literature and culture but also gardening with Stukeley thought to be ‘probably the first [to associate] Druidic mythology to actual gardening’ incorporating trees planted in temple-circles, a rockwork hermitage and sacred mistletoe in his Lincolnshire garden.⁶³ The growing popularity of root-houses, also known as hermitages, referred to ancient Saxon culture and were intended to appear roughly constructed by a hermit from materials ‘to hand’. In the late eighteenth century the Duke of Sudermania, Grand Master of Sweden, held initiation ceremonies which included a walk in the adjoining garden. He built and furnished a ‘hut made from the trunks of bark’ and advised:

About the Choice and Preparation of the Location of the Cult...for the sake of ye who shall conduct the work, first choose a location within a Wood, Park or Garden and there erect an altar, surround it with a hut.⁶⁴

Wright designed a rustic ‘Bladad’s Temple’ for Stoke Park⁶⁵ and the Hermit’s Cell survives at Badminton originally with a Wrightian ‘turret’ in the centre of its thatched roof. In Wright’s pocket book there are references to the Archimedean puzzle still visible on its floor and to an inscription once visible on a picture frame in the hut alluding to activities in a rustic temple which began ‘You shall be purified by the Magic Rite’.⁶⁶ Attempts have been made to attribute to Wright the root-houses at Spetchley, Worcestershire and Berkeley, Gloucestershire and more recently, a ruined building in the garden at Chavenage, Gloucestershire.

At Halswell Park, Somerset, eclectic constructions representing Egyptian, Classical and Memorial influences survive and a root – hut known as the Druid’s Temple was built for Sir Charles Kemeys–Tynte, a prominent freemason, in 1756. The construction strongly resembled the design on the title page of *Arbours* incorporating twisted pillars reminiscent of Masonic temples. It was demolished in the 1950s when extensive tree-felling changed the approach but an early photograph gives an idea of its sylvan context deep in Mill Wood (Figure 6). The atmosphere was described in 1791 as ‘quite gloomy and confined, nearby is a gushing fall which hurts not the moods raised by so sequestered a scene’.⁶⁷ The topography of the Halswell landscape would have lent drama to the potential for an architectural progress.

The wood today contains the Spring Grotto with a tablet inscribed with a stanza of poetry relating Moses’ striking of the rock in the desert. A Mosaic theme recalling the Israelites’ journey through the desert was a suitable reference if the location was used for Masonic trials of initiation. Moses was an iconic figure in hermetic tradition, perceived as the first Grand Master providing a link between ancient and modern times; his rod, often transformed into a serpent, was significant in Masonic regalia besides symbolising wisdom. Adjacent to the grotto is a bath-stone bridge encrusted with carvings reminiscent of the ‘found objects’ embedded in the grotto at Hampton Court House. Once graced by a pair of herm-like statues, the surviving example emerges from stylised reeds of

Mosaic association repeated in a plasterwork frieze in the main house. There is as yet no archival evidence to link Wright with the location but his influence permeates the landscape. A rockwork screen constructed by the lake adjacent to the house in 1755 resembles the drawing for the title page in *Arbours and Grottos*. A route leads directly from Mrs Busby's Temple with its death's head frieze to Mill Wood and whether designed for initiates or other visitors, the circuit would certainly have fulfilled the owner's desire to possess a garden which 'evoking Arkady and Elysium, embellished with eclectic architecture and mnemonic devices, could help to bring about a new golden age of enlightenment and ever-increasing perfection in society itself'.⁶⁸

SUMMARY

Wright's retirement to Byers Green gave him a unique opportunity to apply his theories to a 'greenfield' site where unsurprisingly the house that he built to replace the original family home 'was not built or fitted up, upon the model, or in the order of other men's buildings'.⁶⁹ Wright's description of the property was published posthumously and described his use of the existing topography despite its compactness to ensure an intense experience.⁷⁰ The house was set in a natural amphitheatre that afforded prospects of the River Wear and a Gothic backdrop provided by Durham Cathedral which he enjoyed from the vantage point of the terrace he constructed. His interest in antiquities had earlier led him to organise the restoration by public subscription of a Roman race-ground or circus visible from his property in a manner that recalls Pliny, and there was some form of triumphal arch in the garden (Figure 7). He was not deluded by the size of his domain, charmingly referring to it as 'My own little spot is also beginning to smile upon me too. But compared with elegant Stoke they are only the innocent smiles of an infant'.⁷¹ Wright has been referred to as an exponent of the English rococo because he favoured a wide range of exotic constructs threaded together like jewels on a strand of serpentine silk. The most perfectly rococo garden he designed was never executed but the drawing intended for Badminton's east front was imposing for its sheer scale, proposed to extend half a mile into

the relatively featureless parkland (Figure 8) With its strong axial aspect it provided symmetry near the house but soon erupted in a celebration of the exotic and the Irregular whilst managing to incorporate natural watercourses into the design in a manner Wright would have observed at Wilton. On leaving the house the first feature is the Duchess' garden for which Chinese temples were planned, an example provided at the top right hand of the drawing; to the right of the flower-garden Wright planned a double-fronted Orangery designed for 'curious hardy [and] tender exotic plants'.⁷² Next there followed a circular evergreen plantation with Greek-inspired architecture and extensive views through its open and closed planting to the original deer park. Without detracting from the central vista leading the eye to a temple dedicated to Hercules, the visitor would have been enticed to follow winding pathways that revealed in turn grottos, the magical Talisman Grove in serried formation and culminated in an open-lawn featuring a number of Egyptian-styled obelisks. The eclectic nature of the Badminton design is quintessentially rococo and at the other end of the spectrum from the landscape at Halswell. Yet both needed to be experienced in person to fully appreciate the effects of light and shade and the winding pathways leading to the sudden revelation of the unexpected.

Wright's landscapes were associative rather than allegorical making little use of statuary and designed to deliver delivered a heightened experience for those who relished the experience of individual response, prefiguring the Romantic Movement. Whether visitor or initiate, entry into a Wrightian landscape offered a journey that was both spiritual and physical, progressively moving from regularity to irregularity, each transition marked by placement of garden buildings and planted features, with a requirement to acknowledge feelings and validity in addition to taste. Wright was unequivocal in his conviction that both scientific and artistic knowledge had a role to play in the development of architecture and gardens of merit:

The Business of Building and Planting well understood Depends upon the knowledge of so many of ye Branches of Natural and experimental Philosophy that it is no wonder we find most of ye

antitient & even many of the Modern productions of Both kinds so very defective, in many Particulars and in some Articles of greater consequence than People in general are aware of. Without great Reading, observation, Science and invention The very Clearest Head, Best Judgement, and most active understanding can never arrive at any tolerable Degrees of Rational Tast, or turn the most lively fancy to any material advantage. Every Naturalist, I mean every genius comprehending architecture & gardening as Sciences aught to be well acquainted with ye natural Dependency the one has upon the other, and ye consequent beauty, grace & utility resulting from the Coordinate harmony of every part of ye Creation.⁷³

Whereas his landscapes could be enjoyed on an aesthetic level, Wright expected and delivered more: ‘To attempt anything without a meaning will always be insipped and only once a surprise’.⁷⁴

NOTES

¹ . Thomas Wright, Early Journal, *Add MSS.15627*, covered events from 1711 to 1746 in fos 1-15, followed by notes from tours made in Ireland and England between 1748 and 1759 and concluding with details of his semi-retirement after 1762. In 1950 Edward Hughes undertook to revise and annotate this earlier transcription which he entitled ‘The Early Journal of Thomas Wright of Durham’, *Annals of Science*, 28 March 1951, VII, No 1, 1-24.

² *Wrightiana*, a collection of notes and iconographic material; *Thomas Wright Manuscripts*, largely consisting of cosmological, astronomical and meteorological drafts and notes; *Wright MSS.*, 8 volumes of Wright’s manuscripts on microfilm are located in Durham University Special Collections.

³ Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp.4, 5 and 6 respectively.

⁴ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, January 1793, pp.9-10.

⁵ *ibid.*, February 1793, p.126.

⁶ , Badminton Muniments, FmK 1/4/4. Wright’s pocket book, accessed courtesy of His Grace, The Duke of Beaufort. Extract is from Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, *The Tragedies of Aeschylus*.

⁷ *Wright Thomas, 1711-1786: Arbours & Grottos. A Facsimile of the Two Parts of Universal Architecture (1775 and 1758); with a Catalogue of Wright’s Works in Architecture and Garden Design*, ed. by Eileen Harris (London, 1979), unpaginated. Cowper’s advice was especially poignant since he had suffered through being obliged to pursue a career in law later turning to practical gardening for therapeutic benefit.

⁸ Elizabeth Carter, *Poems on Several Occasions*, 2nd edn. (London, 1766), p.7, ‘In Diem Natalem’ ll. 46-52.

⁹ *Wrightiana*, Reference no: 13, '...in order that my Dear Father's works may not be sunk into everlasting Oblivion but that they may have some Hopes of one Day being ushered into the World I give and bequeath all of them to the University of Oxford.'

¹⁰ Ed. by Jellicoe, Jellicoe, Goode and Lancaster, *The Oxford Companion to Gardens* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 615-6.

¹¹ Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (London, 1687), published in English translation in 1729.

¹² Hughes, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

¹³ *Wrightiana*, Reference no: 76. Extract dated 23 January and 24 April 1735.

¹⁴ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p.13.

¹⁵ Stephen Duck, 'On the Queen's Grotto, in Richmond Gardens', *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1764), pp.116-7. The publication's subscribers included 'Thomas Wright: *gent*'.

¹⁶ They included a brass *hemispherium*, a brass cylindrical dial dedicated to Dr. Desaguliers, Curator of Experiments at the Royal Society, and a brass system of the Planetary Bodies presented to the Earl of Pembroke.

¹⁷ Leila Belkova, *Minding the Heavens: The Story of Our Discovery of the Milky Way* (Bristol, 2003), p. 50. Wright waited until 1750 to publish his accumulated manuscripts on these subjects adopting a letter-based format which mitigated the controversial content.

¹⁸ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p.3.

¹⁹ Wright's Journal contained details of two impetuous emotional entanglements which were ill-fated and potentially scandalous

²⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1793, p.127.

²¹ *ibid*, January 1793, p.12.

²² FmK 1/3/16: Letter to 4th Duchess of Beaufort, 19 March, 1778.

²³ *ibid.*, 20 April and 5 May, 1778.

²⁴ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p.9.

²⁵ John Amos Komensky (Comenius), *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, (by author : 1623, trnsl. by Count Lutzow London, 1950). The doctrine was based on universal harmony providing a bridge between Man's inner world and the outer world of Nature.

²⁶ *Wrightiana*, Reference no: 14.

²⁷ *Thomas Wright Manuscripts*, Reference number: 17.

- ²⁸ George Mason, 'An Essay on Design in Gardening, first published in MDCCLXVIII. Now greatly Augmented, Also a Revisal of Several Later Publications on the Same Subject' (London, 1795), pp.124-8.
- ²⁹ FmK 1/3/16. Letter to 4th Duchess of Beaufort, 10 November 1780, In addition Allen recorded a visit by Wright to the home of Horace Walpole, *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1793, p.127.
- ³⁰ Harris, *op.cit.*, unpaginated.
- ³¹ *Wright MSS.*
- ³² FmK 1/12/14: 'A Tour of the North of England with Norborne Berkeley', taken from *The Reliquary, Quarterly Archaeological Journal and Review*, ed. by Llewellynn Jewitt, Vol. XV, 1874-5, 216-220.
- ³³ *Wright MSS.*
- ³⁴ FmK 1/3/16: Letters to the 4th Duchess of Beaufort, 19 March, 5 May, 6 May and 20 April, 1778.
- ³⁵ Thomas Wright, *An Original Theory or A New Hypothesis of the Universe Founded Upon the Laws of Nature and Solving by Mathematical Principles the General Phenomena of the Visible Creation and Particularly the Via Lactea: Compris'd in Nine Familiar Letters from the Author to his Friend* (London, 1750).
- ³⁶ Mark Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden* (Philadelphia, 1999), p.194.
- ³⁷ *Wright MSS.*
- ³⁸ *ibid.*
- ³⁹ V&A reference: E.3967-1983 taken from 'Sketches and Designs of Planting by Tho. Wright', E3938-4010-1983, a sketchbook containing 72 drawings.
- ⁴⁰ Royal Library, Windsor, RL 176250.
- ⁴¹ V&A reference: E. 3982-1983.
- ⁴² V&A reference: E.4008-1983. The breastplate is described in Exodus 28,17-21,(Hebrew 'Urim' plural of 'or', a light, and 'tummin' plural of 'tom', completeness or perfection).
- ⁴³ Pindar (c.518 – 428BC) had been published in England since 1697 but did not appear in translation until 1749.
- ⁴⁴ 'Varied & Various Sketches and Designs of Buildings: Consisting of Designs for Mansions, Towers and Other Buildings, also Designs for Gardens, Mazes, Ornamental Works, Fountains &c', Avery Architectural Collection, Columbia University, a sketchbook containing 175 drawings.
- ⁴⁵ Wright's manuscripts have not revealed any reference to Eastern philosophy. or aesthetic.

⁴⁶ Thomas Wright, 'Observations on the Most Remarkable Remains of Antiquity: Relating to the Druids, Romans and Saxons: Taken on a Tour Through England', *Add. MSS 15628*.

⁴⁷ Paul Elliott and Stephen Daniels, 'The "School of true, useful and universal science"? Freemasonry, natural philosophy and scientific culture in eighteenth-century England', *Journal of the History of Science*, vol. xxxix, (2), June 2006, 211-230, p.213.

⁴⁸ Wright was a member of the prestigious Horn Lodge in London where Desaguliers was a major influence .

⁴⁹ *Wright MSS.*: Wright explained how the trees totalled 34 when counted across, down or diagonally:

12	1	15	6
4	9	7	14
5	8	10	11
13	16	2	3

⁵⁰ The family had connections with the 5th Earl of Wemyss, Scottish Grand Master between 1743/4.

⁵¹ V&A reference: E.3978-1983.

⁵² *Wright MSS.*

⁵³ Richard Patterson , 'The *Hortus Palatinus* at Heidelberg and the Reformation of the World: Part 1: The Iconography of the Garden', *Journal of Garden History*, No. 1, vol.1, 1981,67-104, p.96.

⁵⁴ URL<<http://www.alchemywebsite.com/croll_signatures.html>>

⁵⁵ Patterson, *op. cit.*, p.97.

⁵⁶ Thomas Wright, *The Universal Vicissitude of Seasons, Exhibiting by Inspection at One View, the Various Rising and Setting of the Sun to all Parts of the World* (London, 1737).

⁵⁷ Wright's manuscripts listed each zodiacal period as running for the calendar month.

⁵⁸ There is no archival evidence to link Wright to the site but Halifax's mother was the sister of the Earl of Scarborough, Wright's early patron

⁵⁹ *Wright MSS.*

⁶⁰ Magnus Olausson, 'Freemasonry, Occultism and the Picturesque Garden Towards the End of the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Garden History*, Vol XX, No.1, 1981, 413-434, p.423.

⁶¹ Olausson, *op.cit.*, p.422.

⁶² Thomas Wright Manuscripts, Reference no: 10/1-4.

⁶³ David R.Coffin, *The English Garden: Meditation and Memorial* (Princeton, 1991), p.117.

⁶⁴ Olausson, *op. cit.*, p.424.

⁶⁵ Avery Collection: *Plan of a Grotto, Inscr.*: 'Plan of Bladud's Temple at Stoke': Number 154.

⁶⁶ FmK 1/4/4: 'Mottos in the Cell'.

⁶⁷ John Collinson, *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset: Collected from Authentick Records and an Actual Survey made by the Late Mr Edmund Rack*, 4 VOLS, (Bath,1791),1, pp.79-83.

⁶⁸ James Stevens Curl, *The Art & Architecture of Freemasonry* (New York, 1991),p.181.

⁶⁹ *Gentleman's Magazine*, February 1793.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 'Description of Peg Pool Lodge at Biers Green', March 1793, 213-216.

⁷¹ Fmk 1/3/16: Letter to the 4th Duchess of Beaufort, 20 April 1778.

⁷² *Wright's MSS*

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ *ibid.*

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FIGURE 1

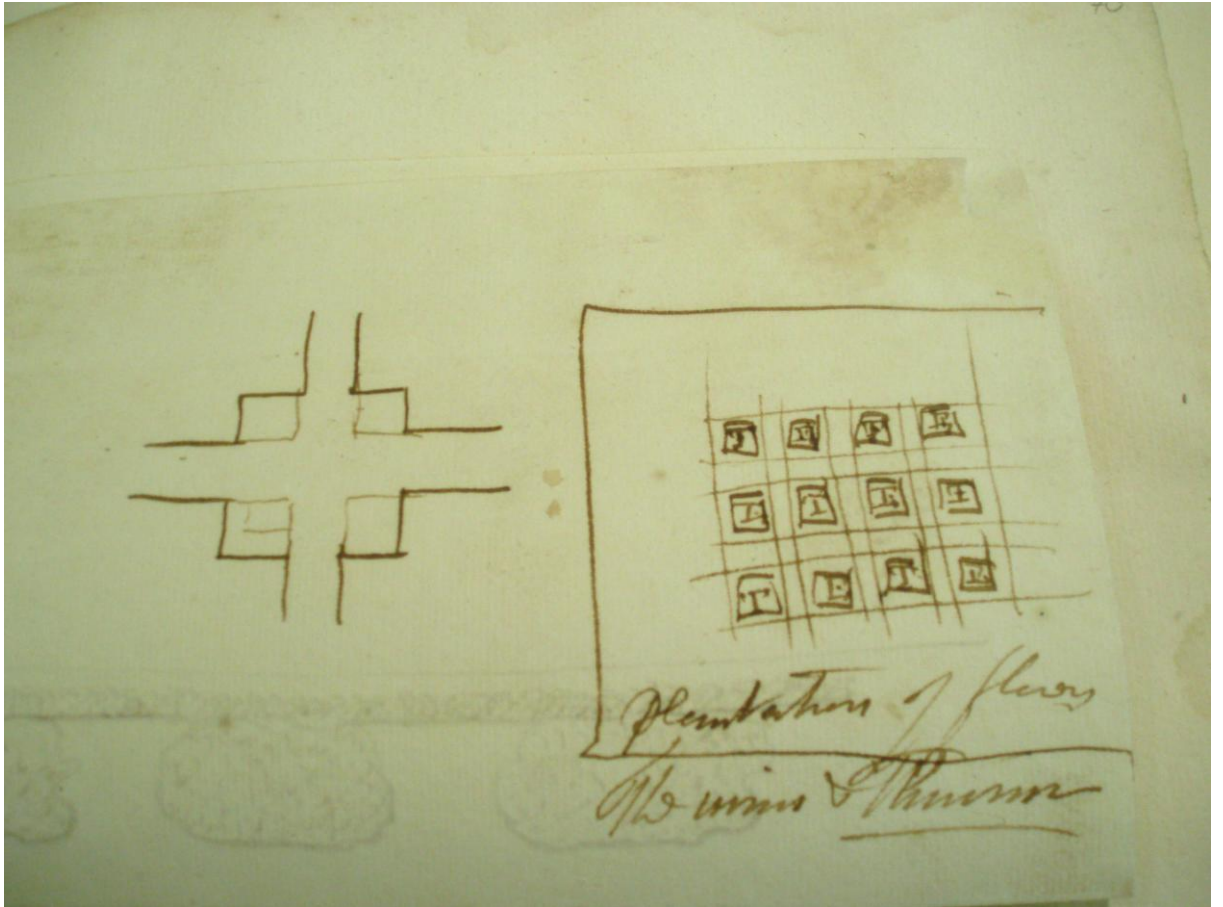


Engraving of Thomas Wright by Paul Fourdrinier, based on a painting by George Allen, used as a frontispiece to Wright's *Clavis Coelestis, Being the Explication of a Diagram Entituled a Synopsis of the Universe; The Visible World Epitomized* (London, 1742). The image was also published posthumously in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, January 1793, p.10.



Detail from the copper plate for Wright's Edinburgh Almanac, 1733: Badminton Muniments 1,210.8.1. Photograph by author, courtesy of His Grace the Duke of Beaufort.

FIGURE 2



'Foursquare it shall be ... set in it settings of stones ... a sardius, a topaz and a carbubcle...an emerald, a sapphire and a diamond ...a ligure, an agate and an amythest ...a beryl, and an onyx and a jasper.'

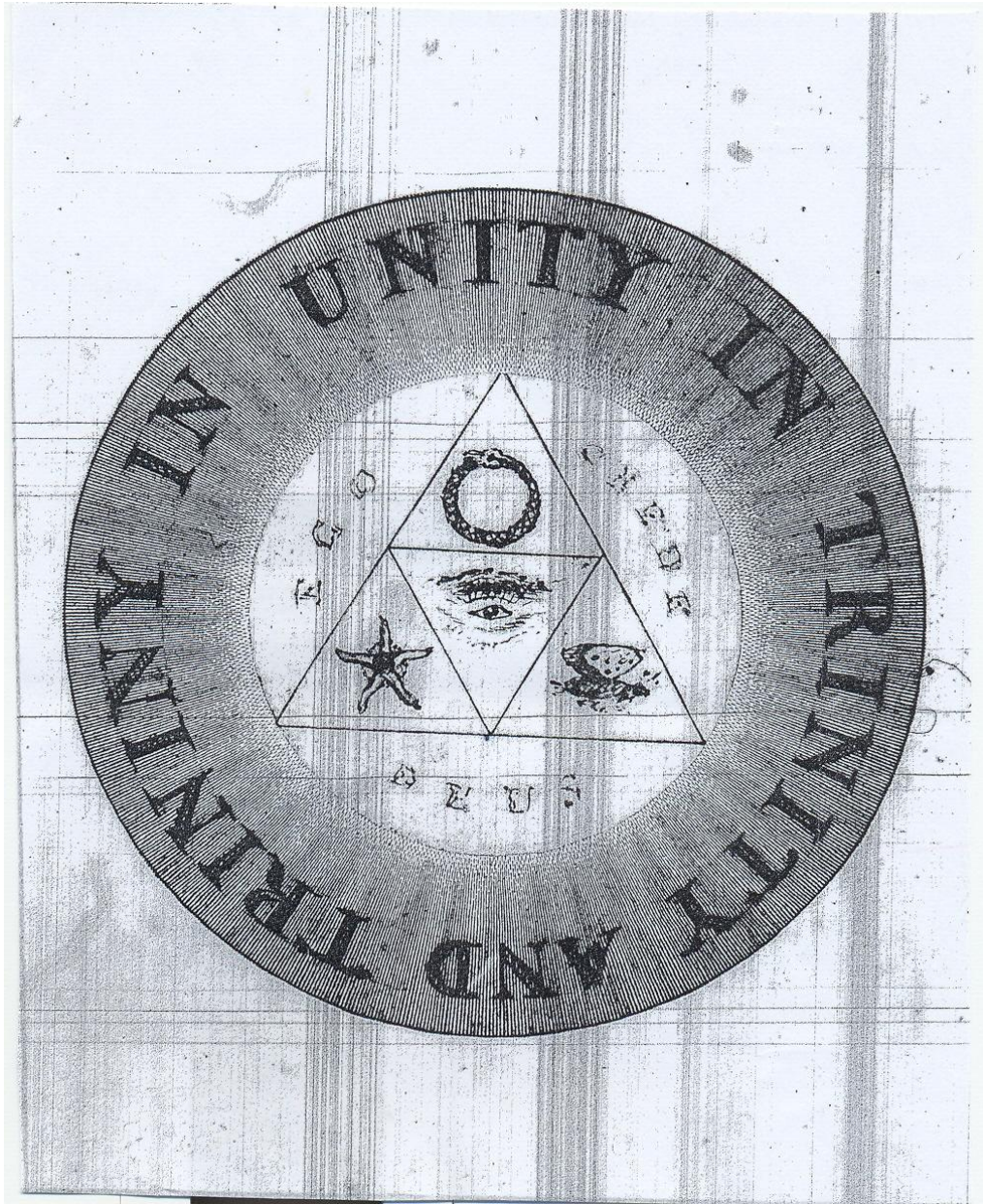
Exodus 28,16-20

FIGURE 3



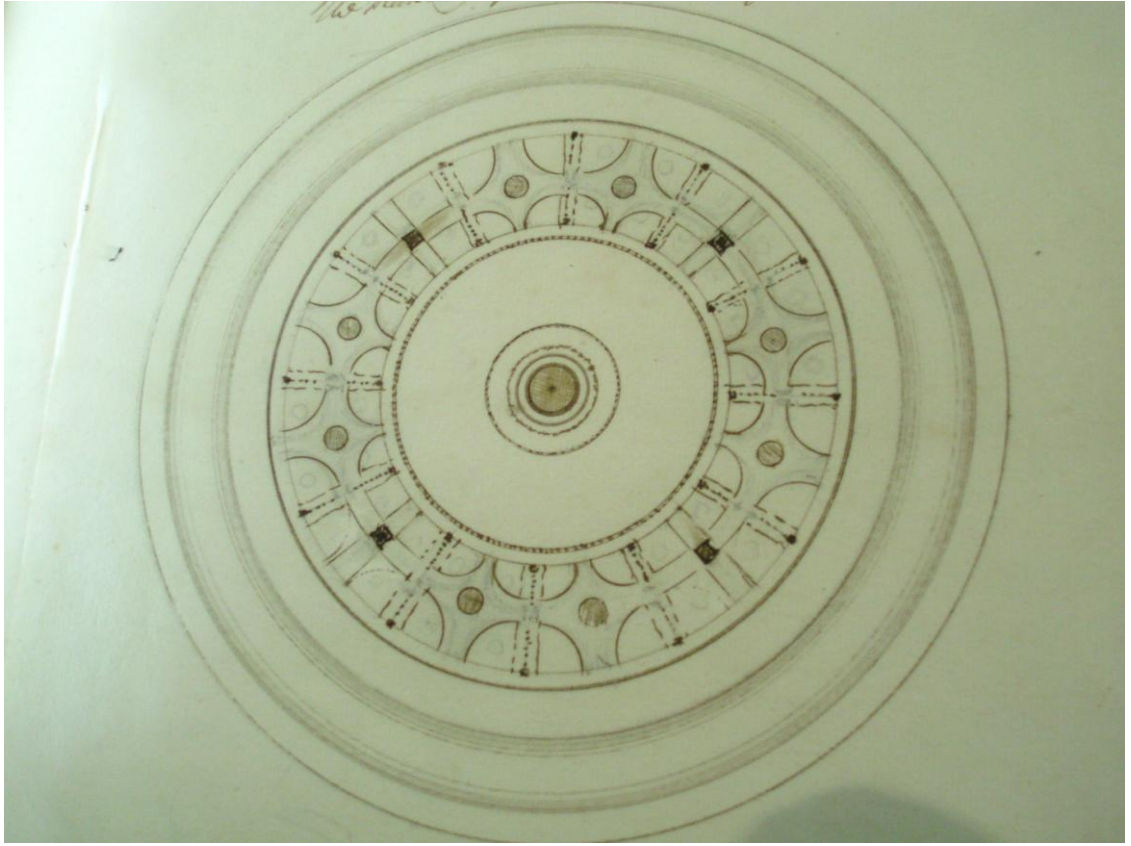
Front and rear elevations of Wright's gothic summerhouse at Nuthall Temple known as 'The Dovecotes'. Its string course has similarities with castellated lodges at Badminton and with Westerton Tower, his observatory at Byers Green. The building backs on to a group of Grade II farm buildings listed with alterations by Wright. Photographs by author.

FIGURE 4



The drawing reflects Wright's fascination with Trinities combining religious and Masonic imagery including an *ourobouros* and a *cromlech* or tipping-stone .

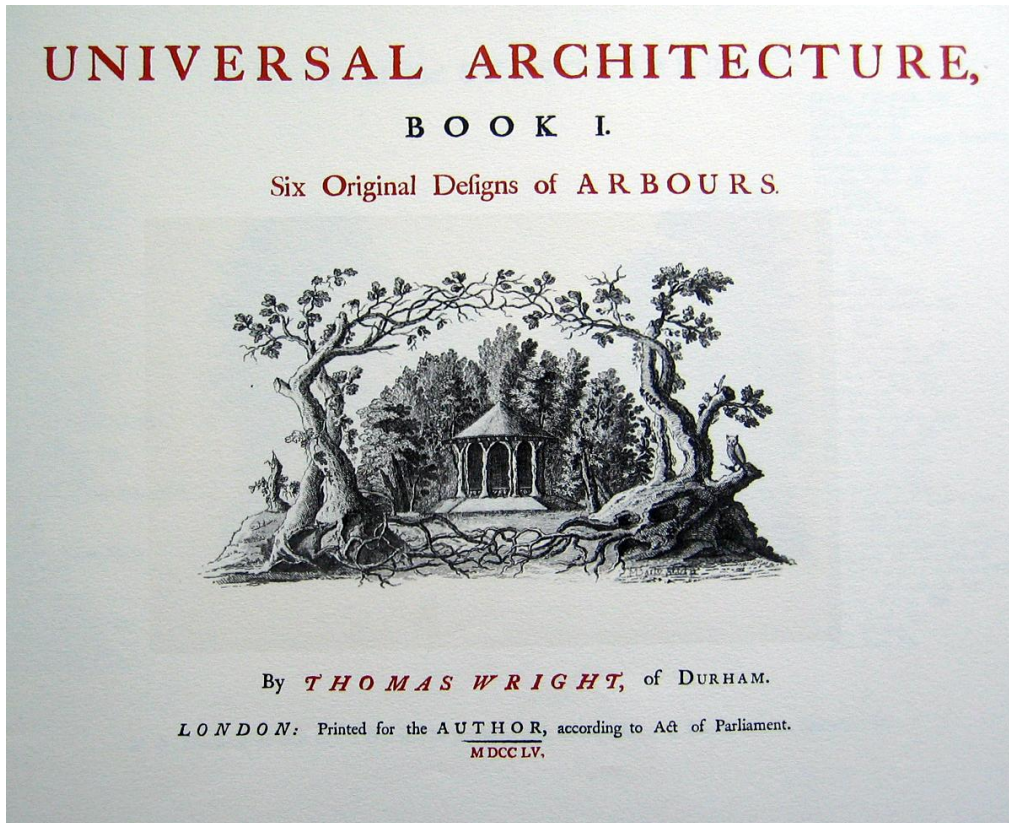
FIGURE 5



‘Construction Circular Kitchen-garden resembling the Planetary System with ye temple of ye Sun in Center.’

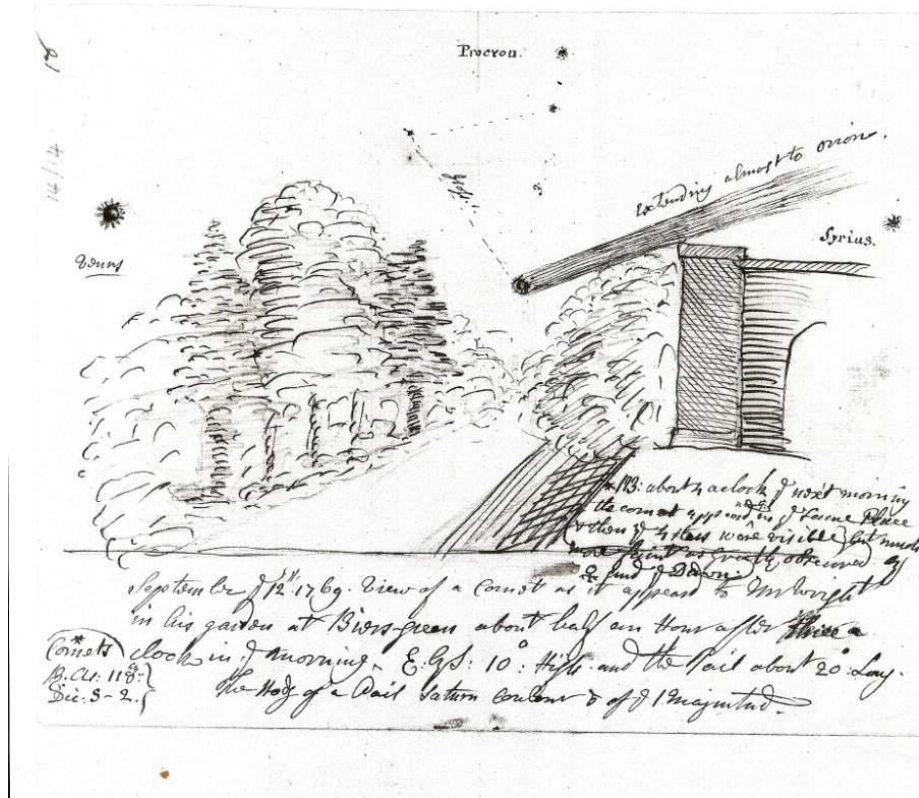
E.3981-1983, V&A.

FIGURE 6



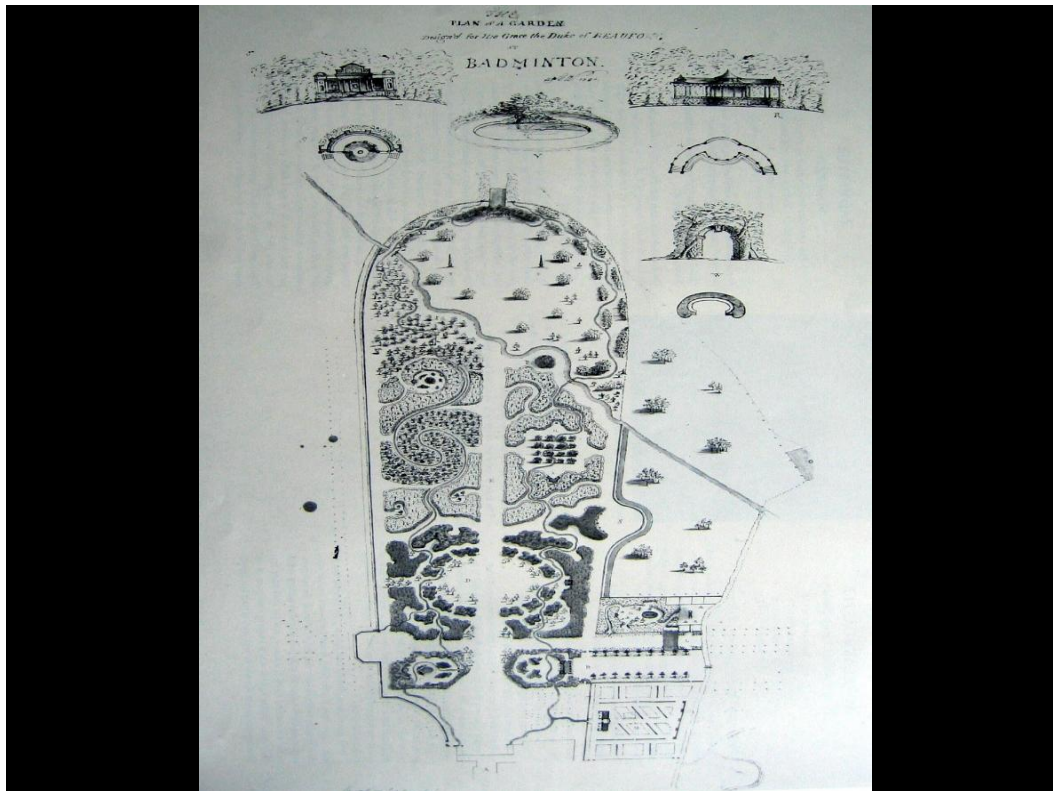
Photograph courtesy of Halswell House

FIGURE 7



Drawing of a comet observed in Wright's garden at Biers Green. There appears to be a triumphal arch to the right which might be a reference to the Roman race-ground visible from Wright's property and whose restoration he helped to organise.

FIGURE 8



Wright's 1750 unexecuted design for the East Front of Badminton (image courtesy of His Grace the Duke of Beaufort).

The drawing has a scale indicating the design was planned to extend half a mile into the park.. Halfway down the central axis and to the right Wright incorporates a Talisman Plantation and the garden is diagonally bisected by a serpentine water-course. A copy of Wright's handwritten key to the drawing has survived and lists Egyptian, Roman and Chinese features as well as exotic planting and a flower garden close to the house.