

‘Rich gifts from Nature, and very pleasing ones from art’¹: the enduring beauty of Mill Wood, Halswell Park.

Such is the legacy of Somerset’s favoured cultural heritage that it is possible to travel through landscapes ‘from the seventh century to the twenty-first in a matter of an hour and a half, crossing the county from west to east’.² The 179 hectare landscape of Halswell Park in the village of Goathurst, 3 miles south-west of Bridgwater, boasts a similarly impressive historical span from the Exeter Domesday Book to the present day.³ In 1536 there is a record of the ‘building of the manor [house] of Halswell’ and a survey dated 1597 lists ‘Mill Wood’ implying the early existence of an impounded water source. Further signs of continued prosperity are the cupolaed dove-cote and the ice-house beneath the rotunda, both Grade II; the heronry, now lost; the herds of red and fallow deer present until the early twentieth century.⁴

The parterres and pavilion of the formal garden extending from the north front of the house⁵ would have disappeared once Sir Charles Kemys-Tynte, (1710-1785), commenced transition to the English landscape style having inherited the estate in 1740. He was later to expand the parkland to the east and west, undertaking significant landscape improvements with skills contributed, directly or indirectly, by many notable figures.⁶

Such endeavour was being replicated elsewhere in England in the mid eighteenth century as sophistication and wealth acquired in the city was imported to country estates. However, significantly, Halswell was also to benefit from the owner’s close association with Henry Hoare II, (1705-1785), similarly engaged at Stourhead, and with near neighbour Coplestone Warre Bampfylde, (1720-1791), at Hestercombe. These three engaged in mutual encouragement and emulation as they strived to enhance their pleasure gardens and parkland in a spirit of camaraderie celebrated by the Friendship Urn which has survived at Hestercombe since 1786. The shared topography of Hestercombe and Halswell Park served

to provide a fitting setting for a series of high quality garden buildings and the wooded combs endemic to the area provided protection from the ravages of time. However Robin Hood's Hut, Grade II*, (1765), exposed on a high ridge to the south of Halswell House and the Temple of Harmony, Grade II*, (1767), marooned in pastureland following extensive tree-felling in the 1950s, fared less well but were eventually rescued by a number of organisations working together and the Temple is now owned and managed by Halswell Park Trust (HPT), formed for that purpose twenty years ago.⁷ Today a rustic rockwork screen (c.1756) below the lake to the east side of the house and the rotunda, (1755), known as 'Mrs Busby's Temple on the Lawn', both attributed to Thomas Wright (1711 – 1786),⁸ are fast disappearing beneath undergrowth from which they have all too recently been released. A stepped memorial pyramid, Grade II*, (1740), has fared better and in 1948, the sale of Halswell House, Grade I, and adjacent buildings for multi-occupancy has ensured they have remained standing. However the resultant fragmented title has rendered impossible more recent attempts to reunite the house in its entirety with its parkland.⁹

Thankfully Mill Wood, the jewel in Halswell's landscape, has survived such vicissitudes remarkably well. Located in a once heavily-wooded combe 350 yards west of the house this intensively designed pleasure garden was intended to be enjoyed as a circuit by carriage or, benefiting from its proximity to the house, on foot.¹⁰ In a contemporary account too lengthy for this article¹¹ Arthur Young describes his visit to Halswell and its 'decorated grounds', his ascent through darkly wooded plantations to '*Robin Hood's Temple*', his appreciation of the Picturesque landscape culminating in his descent into Mill Wood where his repeated use of the personal pronoun engages the reader's imagination in preparation for its impact on the emotions. When Mill Wood lost its heavily wooded character in the 1950s it also lost its rustic hut, (1756), known as the Druid's Temple, its design again attributed to Thomas Wright.¹² Anecdotal evidence has confirmed its former location which appears to

coincide with the spot described in Young's account where 'the gloomy shade of numerous most venerable trees, is a fit residence for Contemplation to dwell in.'¹³

The title of this article refers to the artistic endeavour and inspiration associated with Halswell's landscape and Mill Wood in particular. The symbolism of the Mosaic verse inscribed in the Spring Grotto at the head of Mill Wood and Halswell's 'eclectic range of garden buildings placed in a circuit around the landscape [which] provided the potential for an architectural progress suitable to fulfil the Masonic concept' has been explored elsewhere and further research of this 'garden of allusion' is underway.¹⁴ The features of Mill Wood have been captured in several works of art: a partially-complete cascade bridge features in the background of a portrait of Sir Charles attributed to Hogarth;¹⁵ an atmospheric pen and ink drawing by Lady Elisabeth Lee (Figure 1) shows the outline of an imposing rubble-stone archway, (the east pier is extant), but the giant statue of Neptune it framed is indiscernible. The ashlar cascade bridge with its encrusted carvings and [now] solitary and enigmatically androgynous term were to inspire John Piper a century later .

Last summer the current owners of Mill Wood offered HPT an option to purchase the property having undertaken considerable works with particular success in restoring the aural and visual delights of the spring-fed chain of ponds and cascades. Careful clearance of overgrown vegetation has revealed a previously unknown entrance to the Spring Grotto via a laurel tunnel and, thrillingly, a number of carved stone artefacts together with a newly-revealed inscription 'Passanger Prepare for Chaunge'. Further allusions to be researched but meanwhile the urgent priority for HPT's newly-formed project group is to secure the considerable funding essential to grasp this opportunity to carry out a planned programme of restoration and replanting, re-unite Mill Wood with the Temple of Harmony and, crucially, manage the preservation of this extraordinary landscape by ensuring controlled, regular access for all interested parties. Whist the outcome of major grant applications is awaited the

focus is on raising awareness and securing additional financial and volunteer support. An early initiative, keeping up tradition, has been a newly-commissioned illustration of Mill Wood by two young West Country artists¹⁶ (Figure 2). Halswell has been described as ‘an undoubted triumph of the Picturesque movement’¹⁷ which ‘should one day rival its younger neighbour [Hestercombe] as a place of pilgrimage for garden historians.’¹⁸ Present-day pilgrims to Mill Wood would surely agree that the present Grade II listing reflects the current condition rather than the historical merit of this rare rococo gem and may follow progress at <http://www.halswellparktrust.org.uk/millwoodcampaign.html> which has information about a special exhibition at the Temple of Harmony on Easter Monday.

¹ Arthur Young, *The Farmer’s Tour Through the East of England*, 4 vols (London, 1771), 4, p.21.

² Timothy Mowl and Marion Mako, *Historic Gardens of Somerset* (Bristol, 2010), p.10.

³ I have referred to the outline history in *Halswell Park Historic Landscape Survey and Management Plan*, (Nicholas Pearson Partnership Llp,1995) for key dates in Halswell Park’s development.

⁴ Halswell Park benefitted in some respects from continuous ownership by the Halswell/Tynte/Kemys-Tynte branches of the same family from 1085 to 1948. However it did not always serve as a principal residence and the landscape has been in steep decline since the 1950s.

⁵ Gervase Jackson-Stops, ‘Arcadia Under the Plough’, *Country Life*, February 9, 1989, 82-7, p.82

⁶ These are known to have included Robert Adam, Francis Cartwright, John Jacob de Wilstar, John Johnson, Thomas Prowse, Thomas Stocking, John Walsh, and Thomas Wright.

⁷ In 1997 a Mr John Tuckey generously acquired and gave Robin Hood’s Hut to Somerset Buildings Preservation Trust (SBPT) who restored it and it is now managed by the Landmark Trust. An earlier proposal to demolish the Temple of Harmony led SBPT to acquire and restore it. It is managed by HPT whose long-term aim has always been to acquire and preserve the beauties of Halswell Park as opportunities arose.

⁸ Jackson-Stops, *op.cit.*, p.86.

⁹ The latest attempt failed when the company behind the wedding venue based at Halswell House went into receivership; the house has been shut up since July 2012.

¹⁰ Details of the improvements survive in Sir Charles’ diary dated 1756 and in a lengthy memorandum written by his agent, Richard Escott, c.1781 upon his retirement: Somerset Records Office: DID/X/ELS and DID/X/EMY 1, respectively.

¹¹ Young, *op. cit.*, pp.14-21. For a transcription see URL<< <http://www.halswellparktrust.org.uk/index.html>>>. This account was heavily relied upon by the topographer, Reverend John Collinson in his later publication *The History and Antiquities of the County of Somerset, collected from authentic records, and an actual survey made by the late Mr. Edmund Rack*, 4 vols, (London, 1791,1.

¹² Jackson-Stops, *op.cit.* p.84. Also see URL<<http://www.halswellparktrust.org.uk/halswellhistory.html>>>.

¹³ Young, *op.cit.*, p.20.

¹⁴ Judy Preston, ‘A Polymath in Arcadia: Thomas Wright (1711 – 1786)’, *Garden History*, 38, Number 2, Winter, 2010, 159-176, pp. 170-172.

¹⁵ Jackson -Stops, *op.cit.*, p.84.

¹⁶ ‘Mill Wood, Halswell Park, Goathurst’, completed in December 2012, is a Giclee print on acid-free, archivable Fine Art art paper (310gsm), measuring 23.4 by 16.5 inches. Limited to 75 copies, signed and numbered, the print is available to purchase via the Trust priced £75, unframed.

¹⁷ Jackson-Stops, *op.cit.*, p.87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83.