

Humphry Repton (1752--1818)

Knight's *The Landscape* and Price's *Essay* were in part directed against the landscape designs and unpublished writings of Repton, whom they took --- rather mistakenly --- to be a mere follower of 'Capability' Brown. Repton replied to them both in a 'Letter', which was incorporated in his *Sketches and Hints* of 1795, and the controversy flourished for some years. Misunderstandings, inevitably, obscured the debate and still tend to hamper modern assessments of it: basically, Repton did not follow Brown's schemes and styles of design, though his personal contributions to landscape history seem to emerge and express themselves more distinctly after the quarrel with the picturesque exponents flared. Nor was he committed to their picturesque principles, despite some affinities with them: in particular, he mistrusted Knight's landscapes which were really only 'fit ... for the representation of the pencil'. Repton chose, in fact, an intelligent, thoughtful and independent course, which spurned effects that would appear well in a picture in favour of utility and social convenience. He was above all a professional designer: this meant not only that 'scenes of horror, well calculated for the residence of Banditti' did not suit the needs of his clients, but that they would be 'absurd, incongruous and out of character ... in the garden of a villa near the capital, or in the more tame, yet interesting, pleasure-grounds which I am frequently called upon to decorate'. His designs catered for human society and increasingly incorporated older garden forms --- terraces, raised flowerbeds, geometrical planning, trellis-covered walks, conservatories --- with less appeal to an eye alert for picturesque capabilities and more respect for the convenience of those who used the garden. In this he anticipated the 'gardenesque' style of John Claudius Loudon and William Robinson, and it is significant that Loudon issued a collected edition of Repton's writings in 1840. The first extract, which is taken from the transcript made for the Bristol City Museum, shows Repton adjudicating between social needs and the extreme picturesque demands of the site of Blaise Castle (Plate 99), well known for its romantic potential (it figures in Jane Austen's mockery of the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*). He tempers the sublime and terrible by ideas of 'agreeable surprise' and by the comfortable assurance of social values and utility. The second passage, twenty years later, suggests how Repton developed designs for small suburban villas, which increasingly involved professional designers in their improvement: suggestions for the flower garden and the conservatory arcade indicate his abilities to adapt to, and create, fresh garden tastes.

from the 'Red Book' for Blaise Castle (1795--6)

INTRODUCTION

Sir,

It has been objected to the mode in which I deliver my plans, that they do not always convey instructions, sufficiently clear, to act as guides for the detail of execution; but this ought no more to be expected in *gardening* than in *architecture*, since no work can be so well compleated as under the eye of the person who projects the improvement or designs the building. I have therefore peculiar satisfaction in marking out such lines of roads and walks as cannot be described on paper, and being very anxious to see the whole of my intentions, with respect to this place, compleated from my own directions given from time to time upon the spot, it may perhaps be asked for what purpose a plan is delivered, which rather follows than precedes the improvement? To this I must answer by observing, that upon first visiting every new subject I am obliged to conceive in my own mind such a plan as I afterwards render visible to others; and endeavour to fix on my memory the several leading features of each place by making sketches, without which from the multiplicity of various situations it would be impossible for me to pursue any regular system of improvement. Altho' much of the matter contained in this small volume has been previously hinted in conversations on the spot, I hope the repetition will not be unacceptable in this more lasting form, and if it does not serve as a minute guide in the progress of the work, it will at least record the improvements and the principles on which they are suggested. I must also beg that it may record my gratitude for the friendly attentions I have received from every part of the family at Blaise Castle.

I have the honour to be Sir

Your most obedient

and obliged humble Servant
H. REPTON

On the Spot August & October, 1795
Plan'd at Harestreet by Romford Feb. 7, 1796

SITUATION

I have been told that my predecessor, Mr. Brown, was always afraid of what is called a very fine situation, by which is generally understood, one of those lofty spots that command a boundless prospect: and as nothing can be so ill calculated for the purposes of habitation as a house on the summit of a hill, so nothing is more difficult to improve by an Art which can only perform its office by means of deception, effecting its purpose well in proportion as that deception remains undiscovered, but from a lofty eminence where the eye ranges over a vast space, and surveys the great visible horizon of nature: the foreground, (or that part which falls within the improvers power) bears no comparison with the rest of the scenery and becomes little in proportion as it affects to attract the attention.

The situation of the castle from whence this place takes its name, is of the kind I have described, and however sublime in itself as an occasional spot to be visited, must be wholly inapplicable to a family residence: it was, therefore, with much pleasure that I found the comfort of the house was not to be sacrificed to extensive prospect, but that several spots had been judiciously proposed, each partaking of the quiet and sequestered scenery in which this place so remarkably abounds. It is a most singular circumstance that within a short distance of the largest City in England except London, and even in the neighbourhood of the most frequented watering place in the kingdom, the woods and lawns and deep romantic glens belonging to Blaise Castle are perfectly secluded from the "busy hum of man."

CHARACTER

Altho' I object to an exposed hill as a situation for a constant residence, yet it is not inapplicable to a Villa, which as a retreat from the bustle of the world should either be so snugly placed that nothing can intrude on its privacy, or so seated on an eminence as not to be overlooked.

The command of surrounding property, the size of the proposed mansion, and the general uses of this place as a *family residence*, seem to justify my intentions of treating the subject less under the character of a Villa than its relative situation with respect to the City of Bristol might at first suggest. It is for this reason that I think the greatest improvement in the character of the place will be the entrance from the high road, without passing thro' the village of Henbury, where a number of Villas or large country houses seem to dispute with each other by their size and cumbrous importance. Some difficulty occurs with respect to the name of Blaise Castle, and as the house neither does nor ought to partake of the castle-character, there may perhaps appear a little incongruity in making the entrance in that stile, yet I cannot propose an entrance-lodge of Grecian architecture to a house which is no where seen from the road, while the Castle, both from its giving name to the place and from its conspicuous situation, seems to demand a very different stile of entrance. I have therefore subjoined the kind of lodge which I hope will not be deemed inconsistent with its purposes or situation as the first object to attract notice in the approach to Blaise Castle

THE APPROACH

A stranger to the shapes of the ground in this romantic Place would be at a loss to account for the crooked and distorted lines represented on the map, which can only be explained by stating, that a deep ravine crosses the wood and seemed at first to render hopeless all attempt to make any approach except that thro' the village of Henbury. I trust however that the line of road will be found perfectly easy and accessible

on the ground, however violent it may appear on paper, and that when Time has thrown its ivy and creeping plants over the rawness of new walls and fresh hewn rocks, the approach will be in strict character with the wildness of the scenery, and excite admiration and surprize without any mixture of that terror which tho' it partakes of the sublime, is very apt to destroy the delights of romantic scenery. The gate being in character with the castle to which it is the prelude, introduces us to a wood with which it is in harmony, and I expect the stranger will be agreeably surprized to find that on quitting this wood, he is not going to a mouldering castle whose ruined turrets threaten destruction, and revive the horrors of feudal strife, but to a mansion of elegance, cheerfulness, and hospitality where the comfort of neatness is blended with the rude features of nature, without committing great violence on the Genius of the Place. It may perhaps be urged that I have made a road where nature never intended the foot of man to tread, much less that he should be conveyed in the vehicles of modern luxury, but where man resides, Nature must be conquered by Art, and it is only the ostentation of her triumph, and not her victory, that ought never to offend the correct Eye of Taste.

If Mr. Brown was afraid of fine situations, I am not less afraid of those beautiful scenes in nature which defy the powers of my pencil to imitate, because I cannot shew on paper the effect of improvement where no change is proposed, and this is particularly the case at Blaise Castle. I can shew the effect of a new house instead of an old one, but I cannot describe those numberless beauties which may be brought before the eye in succession by the windings of a road, or the contrast of ascending and descending thro' a deep ravine of rich hanging woods. My sketches therefore will give little idea of the grand and sublime combination of rocks and trees, which I am endeavouring to display upon the spot without fatigue; and which are at too great a distance and too inaccessible to become frequently visited from the house. This consideration makes it peculiarly desirable to have an easy road of approach thro' a part of the ground not interfering with those walks, that connect the house with the castle, and which being of course the more common objects of pleasure may therefore be deemed the home pleasure ground, in opposition to those on the other side of the glen. Yet the approach for a certain distance will serve as the line of communication betwixt the house and some objects highly interesting. Of this kind is the cottage which I shall mention hereafter, and also a view from the mouth of a cavern impossible to represent; it consists of a winding valley of wood and rock terminated by a smooth hill, and this is enlivened by frequent groups of carriages and company who visit the spot, and produce an astonishing contrast to the solemn dignity of this awful scene.

THE HOUSE

In fixing the situation for a house, the aspect or exposure should be the first object of consideration, because no landscape however delightful can compensate for the want of sunshine in this climate; it is therefore very fortunate that in this instance the best views are towards the south, and the two living fronts will be so placed as to command them to advantage, especially if the house be raised a few feet above the present level, which will make it appear to stand on a small knoll with the ground gently sloping from it in every direction.

In speaking of this building I must pay a just compliment to the skill of Mr. Patten for the attention given to the internal arrangement of the whole, and for the simplicity adopted in the several fronts, especially as I cannot help mentioning a circumstance that has often occurred to me viz: that in those counties where the stone is cheap and easily worked, there is always more bad taste in external architecture, because every builder becomes an Architect. Thus houses are built without any knowledge of the first rules of that difficult Art or because those rules are stubborn to bend to the common purposes of life new proportions are adopted, new combinations attempted and all the fantastic forms of vases, urns, ballustrades, and other enrichments are added to plain houses without considering the relative propriety of such appendages. I know the difficulty of introducing columns according to the strict rules of architecture, and have hardly ever seen an house perfectly correct; it is therefore very dangerous to attempt what has so often failed, yet lest I should be thought an advocate for discarding such ornament, I will insert at the end of this volume a sketch of the portico which my ingenious friend Mr. Collison

suggested, and which might at any time hereafter be added to the south-east front without making any internal alteration.

VIEWS FROM THE HOUSE

The landscape from an eating room is of less consequence than any other yet this will be very interesting, altho' from the height of some trees which ought not to be cut down till the house is built I cannot give an accurate idea of it by any sketch. But the principal view is along that rich glen of wood so feebly represented in the following sketch. This is the first instance in which I have been consulted where all improvement must depend on the axe, and tho' fully aware of the common objection to cutting down trees, yet, it is only by a bold use of that instrument that the wonders of Blaise Castle can be properly displayed.

"Nor let the axe its beak, the saw its tooth
"Refrain, when e'er some random branch has stray'd
"Beyond the bounds of beauty."

It is less necessary to explain the intention of opening a bay into the wood beneath the castle . . . because the effect has I hope already been partly produced upon the spot, by taking away the trees marked by me in the autumn. But the side of the sketch . . . will shew the improvement there suggested under the following heads viz : first, The removal of a white rail fence which catches the eye and prevents its seeing anything but itself, secondly the taking away the tops of several tall trees which hide the opposite wood, and also a corner of the lawn where, thirdly a cottage is proposed to be built. This cottage will give an air of cheerfulness and inhabitancy to the scene which would without it be too sombre, because the castle tho' perfectly in character with the solemn dignity of the surrounding woods, increases rather than relieves the apparent solitude.

THE COTTAGE

The effect of this building from the house [Plate 99] can be very little conceived from the drawing, because it is one of those objects that derives its chief beauty from the ideas of animation and movement. A temple or a pavilion in such a situation would receive the light and produce an object to contrast with the sameness of wood and lawn, but it would not appear to be inhabited; while this, by its form will mark its intention, and the occasional smoke from the chimney will not only produce that cheerful and varying motion which painting cannot express, but it will frequently happen in a summer's evening that the smoke from this cottage will spread a thin veil along the glen, and produce that kind of vapoury repose over the opposite wood which painters often attempt to describe, and which in appearance so separates the two sides of the valley that the imagination will conceive it to be much wider and more extensive than it really is. The form of this cottage must partake of the wildness of the scenery without meanness; it must look like what it is, the habitation of a labourer who has the care of the adjoining woods, but its simplicity should be the effect of Art and not of accident, it must seem to belong to the proprietor of the mansion and the castle, without affecting to imitate the character of either. I think a covered seat at the gable end of a neat thatched cottage will be the best mode of producing the object here required, and the idea to be excited is "la Simplicité soignée."

WALKS AND DRIVES

It is remarkable that no attempt should have been made to render objects of so much beauty and variety accessible in a carriage, for however interesting the walks in hilly countries may be, they can only be enjoyed by great labour and exertion; they require health of body and vigour of limbs to enjoy their romantic wonders, while the aged and the infirm have been excluded from the beauties of the place by the

danger or difficulty of exploring them. I must therefore assume to myself the merit of shewing this situation in a manner before unthought of, and while I reserve some scenes for those who can walk to them, and who can climb steps or creep thro' caverns, I must endeavour to display others from the windows of a carriage with all the interest of surprize and novelty. In the drive which I have marked out from the house to the castle, I shall avail myself of that vista thro' the woods towards the river, which has always been considered as one of the striking features of the place, but instead of merely giving a glimpse of this singular effect like peeping thro' a long tube that is instantly snatched from the eye; the road ought to continue for some time in the same direction, that the most careless observer may have leisure to view the delightful scene, and before he quits the spot entirely the whole expanse of water, of shipping, and distant mountains will pass before the eye.

There is a part of the Castle wood which is seldom seen, because it lies betwixt the two walks, and properly belongs to neither; but as the carriage road is obliged to make a very long detour to ascend with tolerable facility, it must pass thro' that small lawn which surprizes by its unexpected contrast with the other wild part of this thickly wooded precipice. From this lawn the first appearance of the castle is most picturesque, because it presents the three turrets at once, and at this distance they appear of different heights. The form of this castle altho' not gothic, is well calculated for the situation, but it would give it more the character of a real castle at a distance if one of the round towers were elevated above the other two, and this I have shown both in the sketch . . . and also in the following drawing . . . which represents the first view of the castle after quitting the small lawn before mentioned, and entering the naked plain on which it is there discovered to be situated, altho' from every other point of view it appears as it ought to do ---

"embosom'd high in tufted trees".

THE WATER

When we consider the vast expanse of water which the castle commands, it seems hardly possible that bad taste could for a moment suggest the idea of making an artificial river, in the bottom of a dry glen, especially as nature denies the two great requisites for such an attempt, viz., a sufficient supply of water to fill the river, and a practicable level to allow of its being retained within certain limits --- but I must here record, that in defiance of all obstacles, the late possessor of these beautiful premises had prepared a number of narrow channels, about the width of a common navigation canal, secured by different heads or dams, and the sides built with stone walls, for the reception of water which it was afterwards discovered could never be expected: these dry channels became so unsightly, that various expedients were suggested to avoid the expence of filling them in, and amongst the rest an engineer proposed to raise water from the bowels of the earth by a steam engine, but instead of exposing the *Genius of the place* to all the horrors of fire and steam, and the clangour of iron chains and forcing pumps, for the sake of counteracting the mischief already begun, I have on the contrary advised that all the yawning chasms be hid by plantations, rather than let any traces remain of works, done under the influence of such barbarous taste, as could scar those rich hanging woods by cutting furrows down their sides, and disturb the tranquil ideas suggested from this secluded spot, by planting huge wooden cannon upon every projecting rock.

While I congratulate the present possessor on having attained the command of such romantic scenes, I must rejoice that they have fallen into his hands, and am highly gratified and flattered by his having called on me, to direct how best to preserve or heighten the native beauties of such a delightful subject.

from *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816)

REPORT CONCERNING A VILLA AT STREATHAM,
Belonging to the Earl of Coventry.

MY LORD,

I CANNOT but rejoice in the honour your Lordship has done me, in requiring my opinion concerning a Villa, which, when compared with Croom or Spring Park, may be deemed inconsiderable by those who value a place by its size or extent, and not by its real importance, as regards beauty, convenience, and utility. I must therefore request leave to deliver my opinion concerning Streatham at some length, as it will give me an opportunity of explaining my reasons for treating the subject very differently from those followers of Brown, who copied his manner, without attending to his proportions or motives, and adopted the same expedients for two acres, which he thought advisable for two hundred. Mr. Brown's attention had generally been called to places of great extent, in many of which he had introduced that practice distinguished by the name of a belt of plantation, and a drive within that belt. This, when the surface was varied by hill and dale, became a convenient mode of connecting the most striking spots, and the most interesting scenes at a distance from the mansion, and from each other. But when the same expedient is used round a small field, with no inequality of ground, and particularly with a public road bounding the premises, it is impossible to conceive a plan more objectionable in its consequences; for as the essential characteristic of a *Villa* near the metropolis consists in its *seclusion* and *privacy*, the walk which is only separated from the highway by a park paling, and a few laurels, is not more private, though far less cheerful, than the path in the highway itself. To this may be added, that such a belt, when viewed from the house, must confine the landscape by the pale to hide the road; then by the shrubs to hide the pale; and lastly, by the fence to protect the shrubs; which all together act as a boundary more decided and offensive than the common hedge betwixt one field and another.

The Art of Landscape Gardening is in no instance more obliged to Mr. Brown, than for his occasionally judicious introduction of the Ha! Ha! or sunk fence, by which he united in appearance two surfaces necessary to be kept separate. But this has been in many places absurdly copied to an extent that gives more actual confinement than any visible fence whatever. At Streatham the view towards the south consists of a small field bounded by the narrow belt, and beyond it is the Common of Streatham, which is in parts adorned by groups of trees, and in others disfigured by a redundancy of obtrusive houses. The common in itself is a cheerful object, and from its distance not offensive, even when covered with people who enjoy its verdure. Yet if the whole of the view in front were open to the common, it might render the house and ground near it too public; and for this reason, I suppose some shrubs have been placed near the windows; but I consider that the defect might be more effectually remedied by such a mass of planting as would direct the eye to the richest part of the common only; then, by raising a bank to hide the paling in such opening, the grass of the common and of the lawn would appear united, and form one unconfined range of turf seen point blank from the principal windows; while the oblique view might be extended to the greatest depth of lawn, and to some fine trees, which are now all hid by an intervening kitchen garden not half large enough for the use of such a house.

This naturally leads me to explain the principle of improvement which I have the honour to suggest. The value of land near the capital is very great; but we are apt to treat it in the same manner as if it were a farm in the country, and estimate its produce by the ACRE, when in fact it ought to be estimated by the FOOT. An acre of land of the same quality, which may be worth £2 in Worcestershire, may be worth £5 at Streatham, for cattle; but if appropriated to the use of man, it may be worth £20 as a garden. It is therefore no waste of property to recommend such a garden establishment at Streatham as may make it amply worth the attention of the most experienced gardener to supply the daily consumption of a town-house, and save the distant conveyance or extravagant purchase of fruit and choice vegetables: especially as such an arrangement will add to the beauty and interest of the grounds, while it increases their value.

The house at Streatham, though surrounded by forty acres of grass land, is not a farm, but a Villa in a garden; for I never have admitted the word *Ferme Ornè* [*sic*] into my ideas of taste, any more than a butcher's shop, or a pigsty, adorned with pea-green and gilding. A garden is of different value in different seasons, and should be adapted to each. In SUMMER, when every field in the country is a

garden, we seldom enjoy that within our own paling, except in its produce; but near London, where the views from public roads are all injured by the pales and belts of private property, the interior becomes more valuable, and the pleasure of gathering summer fruit should be consulted in the arrangement of the gardens. In WINTER the garden is only preferable to a field by a broad gravel-walk, from which the snow is swept, except we add to its luxury the comfort of such glass as may set the winter at defiance; and the advantage of such forcing-houses for vines and flowers will be doubly felt in the neighbourhood of the capital.

In SPRING the garden begins to excite interest with the first blossoms of the crocus and snowdrop: and though its delights are seldom enjoyed in the more magnificent country residences of the Nobility, yet the garden of a Villa should be profusely supplied with all the fragrance and the beauty of blossom belonging to "il gioventu del anno."

Lastly, the garden in AUTUMN to its flowers adds its fruits, these by judicious management may be made a source of great luxury and delight: and we may observe, that it is chiefly in spring and autumn that gravel walks are more essentially useful when the heavy dews on the lawn render grass walks almost inaccessible.

It happens at Streatham, that a long range of offices, stables, and farm buildings, fronts the south, and seems to call for the expedient by which it may be best hid, viz. a continued covered way, extending a vista from the green-house annexed to the drawing-room; houses of every kind for Grapes, Peaches, Strawberries, Vines, &c. &c. to any extent, may here be added, without darkening the windows, which may be lighted under the glass, and a low skreen of flowering shrubs in summer will sufficiently hide this long range of winter comfort, without intercepting the rays of the sun.