



Painting a picture with parks

Beauty was originally a fundamental element of park design. **Stewart Harding** takes a look at whether this can still be said to be true of parks and green spaces today.

These days we assess the value of parks for the different ways in which they contribute to our sense of wellbeing. The list of what parks are expected to provide seems to grow all the time so that we now evaluate them according to how they contribute to the following:

- Physical and intellectual access
- Community involvement and volunteering
- Social inclusion and community cohesion
- Exercise and fitness through sport and games
- Tackling obesity
- Education and training
- Horticultural practice
- Biodiversity
- Mitigating climate change
- Sustainability and recycling
- History, ecology and other interpretation

This is all fair enough, but we seem to have lost sight of one of the original principal functions of parks and the benefits that stem from it. This is beauty and the spiritual and emotional responses that people have to it: relaxation, reflection and wonderment. The fragmentation of society and the atomisation of community have resulted in a generally accepted view that each individual's unconsidered preference is as valid as any other, so that commonly held

'truths' have been abandoned in favour of subjectively held realities. Beauty, like other ethereal concepts of goodness, tends now to be accepted as being in the eye of the beholder.

It was not always like this: there was a time when it was believed that what constituted beauty could be analysed, understood, learned, applied and promulgated. This was nowhere made more real than in the laying out of parks for the gentry in the English Landscape Garden movement of the 18th and 19th centuries, in which the pursuit of beauty in all its variety was uppermost in the minds of owners and designers. Originally propelled by an appreciation of poetry and of painting, particularly the Italian and Dutch landscape painters, landscape gardening's pursuit of beauty was expressed through successive and overlapping styles such as the Baroque, Classical, Arcadian, Rococo and Picturesque, as taste developed and fashions changed.

These styles were informed by an intense debate on the nature of beauty in numerous treatises, the most famous of which was Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). The discussion culminated in the late 18th century in a war of words between differing aesthetic ideals: the picturesque, the beautiful and the sublime.

This debate was a reaction to the empirical view that beauty could be seen as an entirely rational and objective



Capability Brown landscape at Blenheim Palace

condition. The appreciation of the sublime and picturesque extended aesthetic enjoyment from the orderly smoothness of the landscape parks of Capability Brown to a romantic taste for enjoying wildness and beauty in its raw form, unmediated by the hand of man (although it was also a guide to replicating these experiences through clever and informed landscape design).

“According to Burke, qualities which reveal beauty include lightness, mildness, clearness, smoothness, gracefulness, and gradual variation...Although the sublime may be strong and powerful, the beautiful may be gentle and calm. Although the sublime may be tragic and gloomy, the beautiful may be joyful and bright. Thus, the sublime and the beautiful may be combined in varying ways in works of art.” (Alex Scott, www.angelfire.com 2002)

Burke thus defined some of the attributes of beauty, and interested readers should also refer to the writings of the pre-eminent landscape gardener, Humphry Repton (1752-1818). In his many commissions he emphasised the importance of understanding a site's existing character, the ‘Genius of the Place’, and exploring ways to improve it. His layouts boasted “all the variety, contrasts and even whim where that can produce pleasing objects to the eye”.

The debate about beauty was profound and wide-

ranging and makes fascinating reading today, and not just in an abstract sense. These natural philosophers dealt with practical matters such as the effects of placing of dark and light foliage trees in the foreground, the middle and the distance in views; the siting of woods on top of and below hills and in valleys; the creation and form of water bodies; the siting of buildings; the planting of verges and hedges; the placing of banks, paths drives and bridges: in fact every detail of how to conjure specific emotional effects from the manipulation of nature.

This was not idle speculation either: they were so proficient in their art that not many people could come away from a visit to Stourhead or Stowe or any other of our great landscape compositions without having drunk deep from the well of happiness. The overriding aim was to create effects that imitated and improved upon nature, yet looked entirely natural - as if the result of happenstance.

Following Capability Brown's death in 1783, Horace Walpole observed, “so closely did he copy nature that his works will be mistaken”. We do indeed mistake his artfulness for nature, and overlook the ingenuity and skill that went into the creation of the landscapes we enjoy today.

Perhaps the conclusions reached by different exponents of landscape gardening are less important than the fact that there was such intense interest in the >>>

“The overriding aim was to create effects that imitated and improved upon nature, yet looked entirely natural...”

<<< way people responded to landscapes. We seem today to lack any such tests in our assessment of what makes a successful park, and our landscape designers and architects seem to have lost confidence in their ability to tap into the vast pool of human response to the look and meanings of the scenic environment.

The laying out of public parks was directly informed by over a century of debate, practice and experience in the design of private parks. Early examples such as Regents Park and Birkenhead Park used the familiar tricks of the English Landscape Garden style in their disposition of the main design ingredients: grass, trees and water, with functional and ornamental buildings carefully placed to enliven and enrich the scenery.

The foremost and frequently imitated practitioner of the design of public parks in this tradition was Thomas H. Mawson (1861-1933), who wrote in *The Art and Craft of Garden Making* (1901) that the role of the designer was:

“To infuse the drab necessities of existence with an inherent beauty, to divert the common crowd from low ideals by the elevation of their environment, and to cause those who never really loved art ... to rise to more worthy aims. Filled with a right conception of the dignity of his art, and fired with a great desire for its advancement, he expresses out of his own soul his passion, and persuades his audience to see what he chooses by materializing his dream, using as a medium to this end, architecture, verdure, flowers and the other materials of his craft, weaving the whole into one rhythmic, harmonious composition.”

This gave British public parks a recognisable and distinctive style – that of idealised and serene countryside with composed views and eye-catching features to be appreciated in a controlled sequence by visitors promenading along serpentine routes.

Public parks were hugely popular from the outset and quickly became subject to increasing demands for additional facilities such as toilets, cafes and provision for games and sport. Where these were provided they tended to be designed in the prevailing architectural tastes, which helped to build a recognisable architectural style for parks, the most familiar of which was probably Tudor half-timbered as seen in innumerable lodges, toilets, shelters, boathouses and bowls pavilions.

These buildings could be seen as setting the standard for a ‘park vernacular’, but there were also other more exotic influences, especially in the design of bandstands that were inspired by Rustic, Gothic, Classical, Mughal, Alpine, Arts & Crafts and Art Deco styles. This opened the door to a wide variety of architectural fancy in minor buildings and landscape features: cottages, bridges, ironwork benches, railings, rockwork, stumperies, pergolas, aviaries and other exotica.

The point though was that these were all designed and located to enhance the scenery of the park as a whole. There was an understanding, a shared vocabulary of design, which recognised the notion of public parks and walks as ‘beauty spots’ – a phrase that tellingly has slipped out of common currency – and that any addition to them should be made with reference to the design context as a whole. Above all, these artefacts contributed to the playfulness of the landscape, each addition bringing an enrichment of the park’s fundamental meaning – that this is a place of fun, relaxation and enjoyment. In design terms, parks expressed a set of similar meanings as that apparent in buildings at the seaside, in spa towns and holiday destinations.

The Parks Agency is privileged to be in a position to provide advice to the Heritage Lottery Fund on bids it has received for restoring and revitalising parks. For us, design



Deer grazing on the Repton-designed Ashton Court Estate, Bristol

©Alan Barber

issues are a crucial consideration because, in the end, people respond most to what a park looks like.

Where heritage aspects are concerned this can be a relatively straightforward exercise, but it can be a challenge to comment on designs for new buildings and landscaping because there is now such a wide divergence of opinion on what is appropriate. This is largely due to a discontinuity in design thinking: training in landscape architecture for many years neglected the English Landscape Garden tradition and, in architecture, we have seen the modernist triumph of function over form and the death of playfulness in design. Today designers tend to be more concerned with, for example, ecological systems management than with questions of beauty, as if beauty is no longer considered by or appeals to visitors.

The new zeitgeist is a particular challenge to anyone who is concerned with the conservation and enhancement of the beauty of parks as a continuity of past ideas and practice. The very notion of beauty itself seems to be regarded as a suspect ideal, as somehow elitist, fanciful or nebulous and that its pursuit cannot be justified in terms of value for money. Beauty has become a dirty word. Or perhaps it is even worse: that we have been brainwashed into not troubling ourselves with such high-mindedness.

This is all a far cry from the inter-war years when local authorities had Beautification Committees to oversee all developments to ensure that they added to a place's attractiveness. It is salutary to search for 'Beautification Committee' online and to see how they now flourish in the US and continental Europe, whereas they were long since disbanded in the UK in order to 'reduce the burden' on developers.

Because there is no longer a consensus on what beauty is, how to produce it, and how to avoid damaging it, we are in danger of sleepwalking into promoting ugliness. There

are many examples of how earlier, joined-up, thinking has been forgotten: the random planting of trees as memorials or as a 'good thing' without regard to their long-lasting effect on the landscape composition, views, circulation and feelings of safety; buildings and facilities designed and sited in ignorance of, or apathy towards, the character of the park; park furniture selected for its durability rather than its character, appearance and comfort; function taking precedence over form in the proliferation of galvanised railings and other cheap and nasty street furniture; the dogmatic specification of native species only, in place of the celebration and enjoyment of the world's bountiful variety of vegetation; ease of maintenance and the fortress mentality that is slowly downgrading all of our once inspiring park buildings and features to a lowest common denominator, ruled by a poverty of imagination and resources. The tyranny of small decisions is leading us inch by inch into forgetting what beauty looks like.

Is it now time that we reinvented forums for debate on this principle? The question of beauty in parks has been isolated from our decision-making process and we seem to expect it to occur as a by-product of our other worthy aims. In my view this is unlikely to happen. Sure, we may come up with new ideas about what constitutes beauty as every age does – but that is totally acceptable, so long as we are conscious of what we are doing and where we are heading. These are big questions that need the kind of thinking past generations invested in the topic. Is there still room for a debate, let alone a consensus?

Dr Stewart Harding is director of The Parks Agency