

Wild and Pleasing Horrors

Twelve Garden Landscapes
and their role in the
Gothic Imagination



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Cover: The Cleft at Hawkstone

Frontispiece: Gateway at Banzwell

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Introduction

Planning what to do on my autumn holiday in 2007, I looked across Ordnance Survey Explorer Map no.241 (Shrewsbury) and noticed Hawkstone Park – ‘Tower’, ‘Obelisk’, ‘Grotto’, the map showed, arranged around what you could tell from the contour lines was a dramatic landscape. I thought that would be worth going to look at.

The day turned out to be bright and clear, but, as an October weekday in term-time, hardly anyone was there to share my visit to Hawkstone. Trudging over the grass from the visitor centre I turned into the central valley and, I think, literally gasped. Tree-capped cliffs towered to either side while the green swoop of the valley floor ended in the baleful block of Grotto Hill. As I followed the paths up and down the hills, negotiating bridges over deep clefts, plunging into dark tunnels and averting my eyes from perilous abysses, I began to see how those who planned this environment had skilfully devised experiences of mild terror for their visitors – just enough for them to be able to imagine what might befall them if, after all, they were not entirely safe. It was a sort of 18th-century theme park, designed to provoke the same kind of thrill.

I sat in the café at the end of my visit, and mused how different this was from other great designed landscapes I knew about, such as Stourhead in Wiltshire, the jewel in the crown of the National Trust. Organised around its calm lake, Stourhead is dotted with Classical temples, celebrating the values of order, placid contemplation, and natural virtue: Hawkstone was aiming at very different effects, encouraging its visitors to imagine their own destruction, crushed by rocks, flung into crevasses, or attacked by *banditti* in the dark. To sum it up in cultural terms, Stourhead was *Classical* while Hawkstone was *Gothic*. I’d spent a long time thinking about the development of the Gothic imagination and knew how the established story included follies and fake ruins, but I had no inkling anything like this existed – the Gothic sensibility actually *expressed* in landscape terms.

My Shropshire holiday venue had been St Winifred’s Well at Woolston, a property owned by the Landmark Trust, which buys and restores historic buildings for use as holiday lets. Where should I go in 2008? Flicking through Landmark’s list of properties I noticed The Ruin at Hackfall in Yorkshire, and realised this was part of *another landscape* like Hawkstone. I began reading around the history of landscape gardening and gradually it became clear that there was an entire category of sites – not many, but more than a couple – which, like Hawkstone, were designed with Gothic intentions; one of them, Busbridge Lakes, was only just round the corner from my home in Surrey. The more I discovered about how these places were put together and used, the

more I was convinced that this was an overlooked aspect of the development of the Gothic sensibility. You could sit at home in front of a fire and read a Gothic novel by candlelight; you could also go and visit a 'Gothic Garden' and respond to an actual environment shaped to produce the same sort of excitement.

I can't quite remember how I learned that Professor Clive Bloom of Middlesex University was co-ordinating a vast project about the history of Gothic on behalf of the publishers Springer, but having done so I decided to put in a proposal for an essay on these Gothic landscapes. Despite not being attached to any academic institution, nobody ever objected to me taking part (though I continually feared they would!), and so at the end of 2021 my piece was published as part of *The Palgrave Handbook of Gothic Origins*, itself one of a trilogy together with *Steam Age Gothic* and *Contemporary Gothic*. My one original contribution to Gothic scholarship! That essay treats the phenomenon of the Gothic Garden from a historical-analytic point of view, whereas this booklet takes each landscape in turn, pretty much in the order they were made, seeing what it's like to encounter them now and imagining how visitors responded in the past. Sometimes, we know exactly how, because they've told us.

A Gothic Garden is not just a landscape with follies scattered around it, even Gothic ones. It requires on the part of its creators a creative engagement with the possibilities of the local topography to draw out its melancholy implications. That said, you will find that each of the places listed below has its own character and sometimes that rule is a bit stretched. Radway, the earliest landscape here (it isn't really a 'garden' at all), represents the first glimmerings of an awareness of melancholy and drama which within twenty years will come to full fruition at Hackfall. Belsay doesn't have a single folly, and is almost an accidental landscape.

And of course many of the gentlemen (and gentlemen they all were, Gothic Gardening seems to have been a malady the ladies have escaped even if the occasional female was caught up in it) who generated these weird landscapes were, in general, utterly, splendidly nuts. Bishop Law at Banwell appears actually to have been *driven* mad, in a sense, by the landscape he created.

So follow us to the caverns and the damp woods, the haunted follies and remnants of incurable melancholy, romantic fever, and ruinous overspending. To the Gothic Gardens.

1. Radway – Making a Ruined Landscape



From the Castle Inn at Edgehill in Warwickshire, you can look out across a grand prospect of Midland countryside – tranquil enough now, at least from a distance, but once the site of the first major battle in the English Civil War. The clash of armies, and of deep principles as to how England's political life should be organised, took place there: steel, blood, and gunpowder among the placid fields far below the hilltop.

The manor house down in the village just below the Castle Inn is Radway Grange, and here in 1716 Sanderson Miller was born. His father was a wool merchant from Banbury who'd prospered enough to buy this pleasant little estate

and to provide his son with sufficient funds to spend the rest of his life enjoying himself as a jobbing gentleman-architect. Sanderson became a prodigious folly-builder and -designer for Britain's gentry and aristocracy, knocking up very pleasing ruins and towers across the country. He could have had no greater accolade than that accorded him by Horace Walpole who, after seeing in 1753 the mock-castle Miller built for Lord Lyttleton at Hagley, declared it possessed 'the true rust of the Barons' Wars'.

Of course, being a fake, it really possessed no such thing, nor was it the first Gothic folly on an English estate: Alexander Pope's grotto-castle at gentle Twickenham dated to 1718. But Radway had *real* history. Here, for the very first time, there was the crucial element of the true Gothic Garden, an interaction between imagination and landscape. What a set of associations it had, what a spur to reflection and contemplation about matters ranging from the transience of human ambition to the liberties of the trueborn Englishman.

Miller inherited the Radway estate in 1737, and set about Gothicising the Grange itself, adding pinnacles and spiky bits, and perhaps a grotto of his own which remains in the grounds, private and currently inaccessible; 'My study holds three thousand volumes', he wrote in a poem in 1756, 'And yet I sigh for



Gothick columns!’ His first manipulation of the landscape as a whole was to plant a stand of trees, King’s Ley Copse, where Charles I had spent the night after the battle; within a year or two of taking over the estate, he had built a cascade with three ‘rustick arches’ and water running through ‘broken stone work’, and above that a platform allowing a better view of the battlefield. Between 1743 and 1744 Miller constructed Edge Cottage on the hilltop, its round corner bastions and Gothic windows creating the impression that the building was assembled from the ruins of a fortress; he bought a wall and arched gateway a few yards further along, which was all that survived of the medieval Ratley Grange. Finally, between 1745 and 1750 Miller marked the place where King Charles had raised his standard by erecting the Octagonal Tower, modelled on Guy’s Tower at Warwick Castle: the medieval archway became part of its stables. As well as the real battle down in the plain, Radway now



possessed a symbol of *imaginary* bloodshed, dominating and binding together the landscape as a composition, and accentuating the steep incline of Edge Hill. Miller apparently intended the castle to house a statue of Caractacus, that defender of British liberty from centuries before, but no one knows what became of that.

Radway parish underwent Enclosure in 1756, and as a result Miller had the chance to consolidate his landholdings. He laid out a series of paths and walks across the grounds, so his many visitors could admire the views and vistas. One of these was Richard Jago, the clergyman and poet, whose four-book poem *Edge Hill*, written after a trip there in 1767, paid tribute to his friend's work:

*Thanks, Miller, to thy paths
That ease our winding steps; ...
And oft the stately towers, that overtop
The rising wood, and oft the broken arch,
Or mould'ring wall, well-taught to counterfeit
The waste of time, to solemn thought excite,
And crown with graceful pomp the shaggy hill.*

Despite his great success, Sanderson Miller's later life brought him into dire straits: smitten by occasional madness – 'all the signs of a damaged and paranoid psyche' – he died in Dr Duffield's asylum in Chelsea, far from his hills, his library, and his Gothick columns.

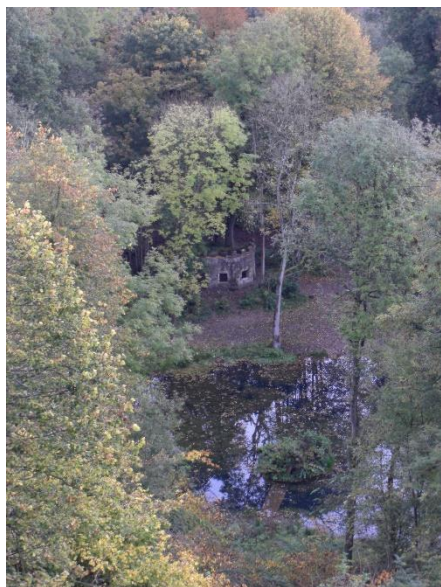
The cascades and cottages are largely gone, but the Castle Inn still stands resplendent and brooding on its steep hilltop, and you can walk Sanderson Miller's paths up and down the incline and through the woods. There are two other elements that complete the ensemble at Radway, both lying within the lozenge of land which is the Grange estate and defined by the footpaths that run around it. The obelisk on the hillside is nothing to do with the imagination of Sanderson Miller, and was raised in 1854 to commemorate the gallant conduct of his descendant, Col FS Miller, commanding the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons at the Battle of Waterloo. The stone staircase up the hill, though, known as Jacob's Ladder - a common name for this type of feature in 18th-century gardens - is of unknown origin. Strange it should be there.



2. Hackfall – Hanging Woods and Drowning Waters

Once upon a time, a fairly small-deal Yorkshire landowner and businessman, John Aislabie, became Chancellor of the Exchequer because nobody else wanted to be. They thought finance was a bit beneath them, all those aristos. A gang of traders called the South Sea Company came to him and suggested they take on board Britain's National Debt in return for shares, which were a sure bet because the Company was going to make untold amounts of money in the new markets of the far seas. The shares inflated and inflated. It was called the South Sea Bubble. Then they collapsed. When the smoke cleared and thousands were ruined, it was noticed that Aislabie, who'd owned plenty of South Sea shares himself, had sold them just at the right moment. His public reputation was destroyed, but he'd made a massive fortune to console him in his disgrace. Part of the consolation was the estate at Studley Royal, where he remodelled the landscape around the most colossal garden ornament in Britain, the ruins of Fountains Abbey. It was a Classical garden, all about reason, order and tranquility. John's son William, however, did something very different with one of the family's other properties, Hackfall.

'Hackfall', it was said, was 'Hag's Fall', the abode of witches. In fact the name probably means 'bend in the river', but the error was an expressive one. The River Ure here cut a gorge through the Yorkshire hills, a dramatic, haunted



landscape of precipices, cliffs and cascades. It was already a Gothic site. William Aislabie set about accentuating that thrilling shuddersome glen with ruins and vistas, making the cascades a bit more exciting, the views a touch more interesting.

The first folly at Hackfall, already described by Dr Richard Pococke in 1751, was 'Fisher's Hall', a little octagonal pavilion now shrouded by the woods, and named after Aislabie's gardener. Twenty years later it had been joined by a fountain, a mock-castle, and The Ruin. When he came to Hackfall in 1772, that well-travelled writer on the Picturesque,



Revd William Gilpin, was less than complimentary about Mowbray Castle, so-called after the medieval lords of the manor – ‘a paltry thing’, he called it, no fan of follies as he was – but all the visitors raved about The Ruin, or at least the view from it. It was a strange little banqueting house, originally, a Gothic pavilion on one side and a Romanesque wreck on the other. The point of this structure, apart from providing a pleasant place for Aislalie guests (and later the tourists) to enjoy a bit of refreshment, was to frame a surprise view as dramatic as John Aislalie’s arrangement of Fountains Abbey at Studley Royal. Early visitors were conveyed along the road from Ripon with no idea that they were on high ground. They would draw up outside The Ruin, and were met by the owner, who would lead them inside, and then throw open the doors on the far side. That revealed a view that ranged over the gorge of Hackfall itself, and beyond – way, way beyond, in fact as far beyond as the hill of Roseberry Topping some 35 miles away – ‘one of the

grandest, and most beautiful bursts of country, that the imagination can form’, Gilpin admitted. And just along the hilltop is the Gothic Kitchen, built a short while after The Ruin, to allow the servants to prepare a few little light 14-course snacks for the guests. Other features of the landscape included the Rustic Temple, a Grotto, the Forty Foot Falls, a Dropping Well, and a Chinese Tent – at least Dorothy Richardson saw that in 1771, though everyone else seems to have overlooked it. Hackfall became famous: its ‘truly American’ views were featured in prints and drawings (which often accentuated reality for effect, or brought together objects that were not actually visible in the same view), and it even appeared on the ‘Frog Service’, the vast collection of

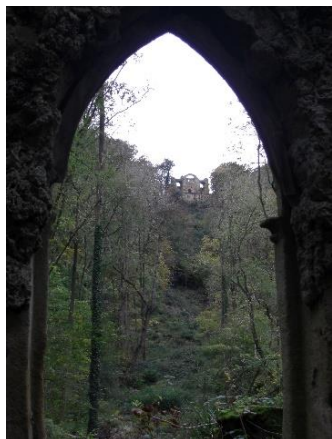
ceramics depicting the beauties of England and Wales, commissioned by Catherine the Great of Russia from Wedgewood's factory.

When that inveterate Gothic enthusiast William Beckford came to Hackfall in 1779 his fertile imagination almost got the better of him. 'In front a vast theatre of woods crowned by ruined arches and the remains of an awful temple ... to the left a venerable cell, mantled with Ivy, probably the abode of an anchorite who often meditates on the mossy stones ... I came to a spot darkly shaded by oaks overgrown with ivy and mistletoe ... strewn with dry leaves and so strangely hemmed in by mis-shapen roots that I could not help thinking I was entering the domain of a wizard'. He had to catch his breath.

After Aislaby's death in 1781, the estates passed to his son-in-law William Lawrence and, subsequently, granddaughter Elizabeth, who despite being determinedly single all her life was always known as 'Mrs Lawrence'. She was a notable philanthropist in and around Ripon and maintained the garden at Hackfall too. Throughout her time, and that of the next owner, the Earl of Ripon, Hackfall was generally open to all and the gardens appeared in tourist guidebooks. The Earl added a number of waterfalls, walks and stairways to make the woods more accessible to day-trippers, even constructing steps up the side of the Forty Foot Falls. The age of Gothic literature was past, but the sensations people came to seek at Hackfall remained: an 1844 guidebook promised that at Mowbray Castle they would find 'the abyss at your feet, where black waters sleep in cavernous gloom'.

As time went on, though, like other Gothic Gardens, Hackfall became wilder and unloved, and its Gothic qualities began to derive more from that sense of neglect than the effects that William Aislaby had striven for. In *Rambles with a Rambler*, published in 1932, Thomas Thirkell reported that 'the coo of the wild dove from the leafy gloom sounds like a wail of distress ... These shady woods were once frequented by parties of young schoolchildren on holiday trips, but is now hardly safe for them to ramble'. The ruinous forces of the natural world began taking the landscape back.

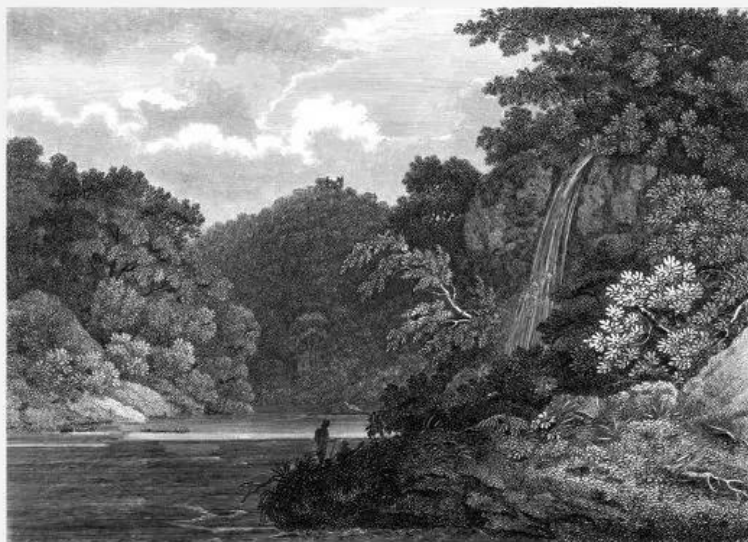
Hackfall began to re-emerge from its wreckage in the 1990s. The Woodland Trust started managing the wood again; the Hackfall Trust rescued the remaining buildings, and the Landmark Trust pulled The Ruin back from the brink, quite literally, of destruction, as one of its weird holiday lets; it would have fallen down its precipice otherwise. Even though the Weeping Rock is swallowed in undergrowth, and the Wishing Stone Mr Thirkell described in 1932 ('all the testimonials speak well of its efficacy') is gone; though the Chinese Tent may have been a transient feature, and the Grotto was beyond repair (it's been turned into a Gothic arch), the great Fountain now spouts



again, and Hackfall is well-known once more, and groups of trippers traverse its muddy walks.

I came to stay at The Ruin on a windy October evening, and spent the night listening to the tempests outside. Once I got spooked enough to pull back the curtain and found myself confronted by the reflected eyes of a sheep. The Ruin is cozy enough with its underfloor heating, but none of its three rooms communicate with each other so to go to bed or have a wee you have to go outside onto the terrace, facing that incredible drop down to the woods.

Exploring later on, I found that one of the ways Hackfall dramatises its landscape is to ensure that the follies are visible from one another. The Ruin looks down the gorge on Fisher's Hall; the Rustic Temple and Fisher's Hall frame views up to The Ruin at the top of its precipice. Either side of the path leading, eventually, to Masham, the garden's western edge is marked by two stern gateposts like diminutive obelisks. The environment is exciting anyway, but wherever you look the natural features are heightened and tweaked to make them even more lively; the Forty Foot Falls rumbles away in the valley below The Ruin, while steps and walks run around cliffs within the woods such as Raven Scar and Ling Scar. The woods are alive with water cascading and running through the trees; and at the very bottom of the valley, of course, runs the thunderous River Ure, a sinister and threatening presence whose voice can be heard all around the gardens.



An engraving by Letitia Byrne from a painting by Francis Nicholson, early 1800s, showing Mowbray Castle and the Weeping Rock

3. Yester – Horrid Intimations

North of the Scottish border, there is only one Gothic Garden as far as I know, and that survives – appropriately enough, perhaps – only in phantom form. There is just enough remaining to hint at what its founder, Lord John Hay, was trying to achieve.

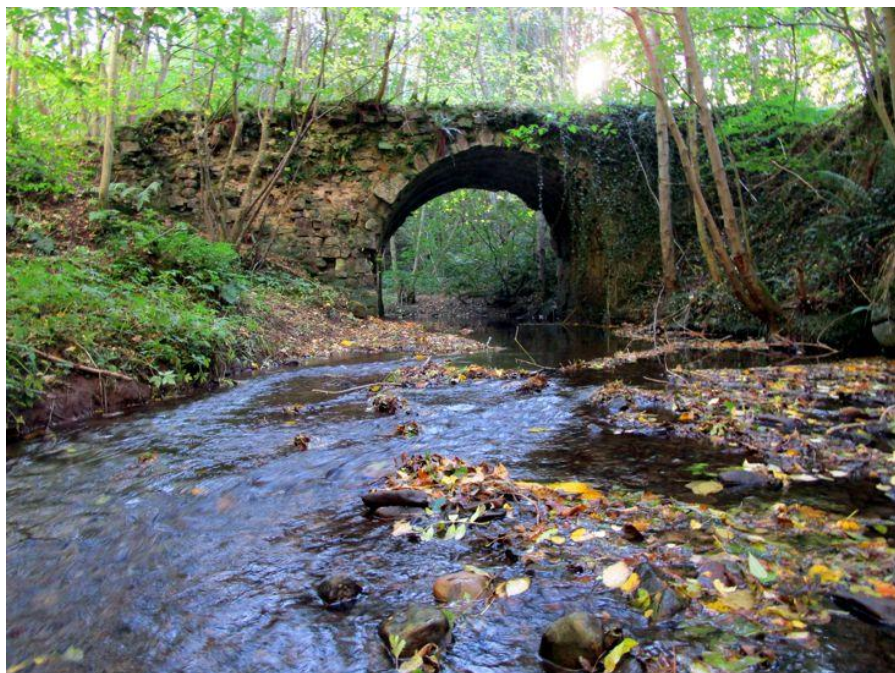


From Wikipedia

Although the Hay family had been granted the title Lords of Yester in the 15th century, inheriting it from their predecessors, the Giffords, they lived elsewhere until John Hay became 4th Marquess of Tweeddale and rebuilt Yester House in grand style, using the classicist Adam

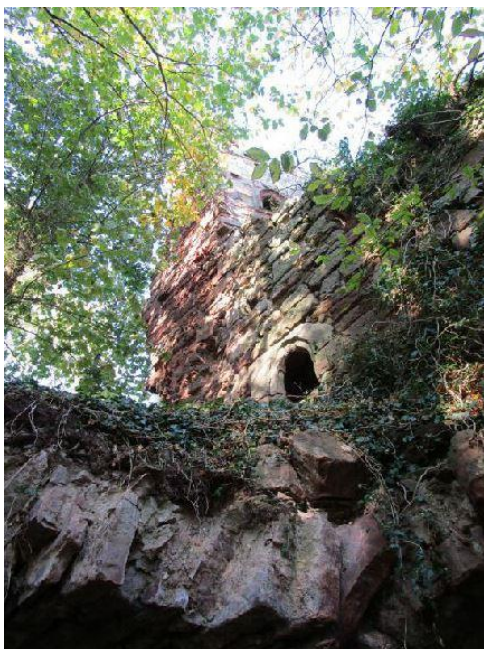
family as his designers and architects. Outside the house, he decided to do something different. In the 1750s he employed the Musselburgh gardener and designer James Bowie to remodel Yester House's existing formal garden into something more Picturesque with lawns and follies. One element Bowie suggested retaining, and indeed enhancing, was the ancient Chapel of St Bathan yards from Yester House itself; his Lordship decided to make it his family mausoleum, and adorned it with an elaborate Rococo-Gothic frontage. Much as it may look like a horror movie set now, it was probably intended to conjure up different associations in 1753. Bowie wanted to separate it from the rest of the grounds by 'a fence rudely formed' so that it 'may be a piece with the antiquity of the place' ('rude' was Bowie's favourite descriptive word: he advocated facing over a set of stone arches with 'rude stones naturally disposed, the lower ones to form a Grotto, the upper ones a rude Cavern'). Two stone heads were carved for the Grotto, and the shells and other figures for its decoration were imported from London.

Outside the immediate grounds of the house, the Gifford Water carved a steep gorge - just the same as at Hackfall, and other Gothic Gardens - running eastwards, along which walks seem to have been laid around the same time as Bowie's work near the mansion; their destination was the wooded ruin of Yester Castle, a 13th-century fortress finally abandoned by the Hays in 1557. Today the walks continue to the next village, Garvald, but I imagine the 18th-



century visitors to Yester would have taken the loop around the Castle and then returned back, a round trip of about a couple of miles. This, I think, was the composition Lord John had in mind. Bishop Richard Pococke came here in 1760 and was taken to see the Castle, though his account of it is frustratingly undramatic; he was very complimentary about Lord John's efforts in planting trees on the estate, however, and also noted a 'Hermitage' in the grounds of the house.

Having once failed to reach the Castle from the east due to impossibly boggy ground, in 2018 I took the other direction and



approached from the Gifford end. Yester House is private so the effect is now muted, but just east of the grounds you join the paths which lead through the woods - woods which now obscure the sides of the gorge, unfortunately, but the way the path winds to and fro across the tumbling, rocky stream of the Gifford Water shows how artificial the landscape is. My assumptions were confirmed by the presence of two beautiful bridges: one just beside the main path, which is completely unnecessary although I did ignore the signs warning of a 'dangerous structure' and used it to traverse the stream and follow the path to the Castle; and the other further in the wood, near the Castle itself.

The path twists and turns back on itself and, beyond the second bridge, just as you think you've gone the wrong way, there the Castle is up a knoll among the trees. There's not much of it left, and it's hard to see, but that can't detract from the fact that - it's a ruined castle!

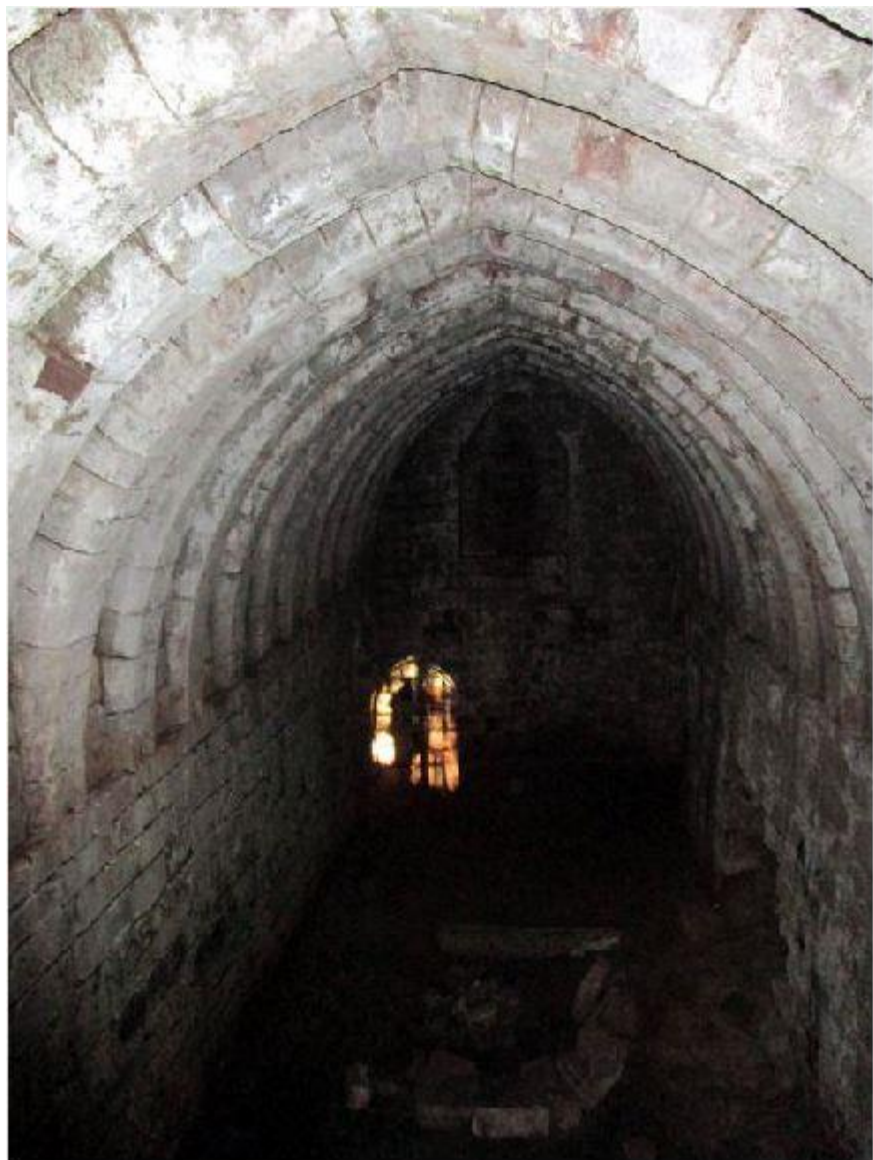


Ruins are great, but they're just antique remains with historic associations and the ability to provoke reflections on destruction and loss. But Yester has another thrill in store for visitors, both in the 1700s and now. This is the strange subterranean chamber below the Castle known as the Goblin Ha'. The Goblin Ha' was constructed in the time of Sir Hugo de

Gifford, about 1267; Sir Hugo dabbled in alchemy which brought him a sulphurous reputation, and such was the strangeness and splendour of the vaulted underground chamber he inserted beneath the Castle that nobody would believe it had been built merely by human agency. The chronicler John de Fordun wrote that de Gifford raised an army of infernal creatures to assist him in the work of building the Ha', and centuries later Walter Scott repeated the story in *Marmion*. Imagine that being the destination of your post-prandial walk from Yester House.

And I have to say - it's horrible. You can't go in except by special arrangement, but just looking through the grille-covered windows reveals a chamber which has, even to this insensitive soul, a deeply nasty atmosphere; a sense that visitors are not welcome. This is nothing more than auto-suggestion, I'm sure, but it's hard to shake the feeling that something very disagreeable has happened here, quite different from the slightly campy excitement I've met at other Gothic Gardens. It is one of the eeriest

experiences you can have north of the Border. It was a relief to leave, my photos safely taken – and not to find any spectral presences on them when I checked later.



4. Busbridge Lakes – Walking with Ghosts

Little did I realise when I began investigating the Gothic Gardens of Britain that there was one on my doorstep in Surrey – and even that I'd been through it, or what had been it, looking for the Lady Well at Tuesley. This invisible spring sits just below the public footpath that runs alongside the estate now known as Busbridge Lakes, just south of Godalming. It was in fact here that I first realised that Hawkstone was not a one-off, but that other sites of similar nature existed.

When you look at the contour lines on the map, you can see that the same thing is going on at Busbridge as at Hackfall, Yester, and a number of other Gothic Gardens – a steep-sided gorge centred on a river forms the framework for an assemblage of features which dramatise and make more exciting what nature has already produced. In fact, the landscape at Busbridge is really relatively gentle in comparison to some other sites of this sort, but the designer has done good work with it; and that designer (in the first instance) was Philip Carteret Webb.

Mr Webb was a barrister whose family came from Wiltshire. He developed an expertise in constitutional law, and after becoming the lead Government prosecutor of the Jacobite Rebels in 1745, was regularly used by a succession of Tory administrations, culminating in the action against the radical pamphleteer John Wilkes in the 1760s, earning the obloquy of Horace Walpole among others: 'that dirty wretch', he called him, 'a most villainous tool in any iniquity'. Eventually MP for Haslemere, Webb only escaped a prosecution for bribery in the Wilkes case right at the end of his life on the grounds of his blindness and infirmity. But there was a less contentious side to Philip Webb: he was an enthusiastic antiquarian, and this shows itself in the landscape he made in Surrey.



Webb bought Busbridge in 1748: the house he would have known was demolished in 1906. His only children had died in infancy, and then in 1756 their mother, Susannah Lodington, also died. Susannah made the odd request of her husband that she be buried in a cave in the grounds of Busbridge, their summer residence. It was odd not only because of the basic matter of it, but because there



wasn't a cave, and so Philip got in a team of soldiers from Guildford to help excavate one. There he laid to rest not only Susannah, but also the remains of their children; the mausoleum, hollowed out of the hill, became the first of the Busbridge follies, and Mr Webb would often take visitors to see it. The next owner of Busbridge, General Barker, understandably found this a bit creepy and had the bodies moved to the parish church; what the second Mrs Webb, Rhoda, made of it all is anyone's guess.



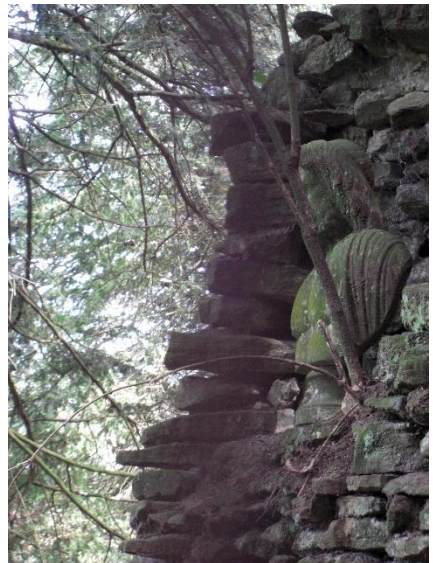
This seemed to open the floodgates. Not all Busbridge's follies are Gothic: there is a Doric temple in the woods north of the lakes, a statue of Hercules way off to the south, and, once, another Classical temple nearer the new house, now long lost. There is a placid canal pond with a gentle lawn near the site of the old house, too. But all around the estate are rough stone walls now moss-encrusted, bridges, a Gothic boat-house, more grottoes and 'augmented caves' most of which await restoration. Mr Webb also allowed his antiquarian hobbies to make their mark. In 1973 the Lower Lake (now outside the boundaries of the garden) was dredged, revealing, sunk in the silt but presumably visible when first placed there, five Roman altars arranged in a semicircle.



Over the entrance to the mausoleum-grotto, Mr Webb placed an inscribed stone bearing the title of the Legio II *Augusta*. Several of the antiquities can be proved to have come from a collection gathered at Scaleby Castle in Cumbria which was dispersed in 1741: Philip Webb must have bought them after that date. Through the chain-link fences which now separate the area of the Lower Lake from the modern garden, you can glimpse very artificial-looking arrangements of rocks which have the air of 'Druidical remains' about them. All this added up to a sort of physical meditation on loss and

transience. Though General Barker did very little with the gem he bought from Mr Webb's estate in 1770, *his* successor Henry Hare Townsend did tweak a grotto here and there, it seems.

But the masterpiece of Busbridge Lakes is a feature without parallel elsewhere. Just south of the old site of Busbridge Hall, a dramatic thirty-foot-deep cleft runs up from the main gorge through the sandstone: this Mr Webb turned into the Ghost Walk. The walls are shored up with stone, there is a castellated lookout point on the top, and a Hermit's Cave burrowed in the side. Once upon a time, the gaps and niches in the walls would have held white-painted busts. Entry to the Ghost Walk is via an unnecessarily precipitous path at the top or, facing the house, through five colossal Gothic arches of rough stone. What kind of mind contemplated this topographical quirk and thought of doing *that* with it?



The old Busbridge Hall perished in 1906 and was replaced by an Edwardian mansion up the hill, away from the gardens: eventually that was sliced off, and turned into apartments. The gardens fell into even more ruin than they were designed for. The story

got about that on dark and stormy nights the ghost of Susannah Lodington would rise from the waters of the Middle Lake, holding the bodies of her two dead children, and wailing.

In 1966 Mr & Mrs Douetil bought the derelict estate. They moved into the stables, gradually making the building habitable, and then discovering the amazing landscape they'd got into the bargain. They started clearing the follies, put poor Hercules back on his pedestal, and set up a wildfowl-breeding business. It is, however, a hard battle against the depredations of cruel Nature. There is only one sculpture remaining of the many that used to adorn the Ghost Walk, and while I first saw it gazing doggedly down the hill just outside the Five-Fanged Arch, by a subsequent trip it had fallen into the leafmould.

The gardens are open most Bank Holidays now, and I try to go when I can, as a sort of ritual to renew my inner acquaintance with my forebears in the Gothic tradition. The gardens tend to be quite busy on a nice day, but not so much that you can't find a quiet corner or two, and in fact on my first visit I managed to go a long way and not meet another soul. The cries of the fowl are less a distraction than an addition to the atmospherics. I admire the owners' attempt to keep the whole place intact. I imagine Mr Webb's or Mr Townsend's dinner guests, after a port or two, coming out to the Ghost Walk with lanterns and scaring themselves half-silly in the dark like a bunch of kids. And I rejoice that this place exists.



5. Hawkstone – The Pleasures of Terror

The Hills of Hawkstone were confusingly all called Rowland or Richard. The fortunes of the family were laid by Sir Rowland, 16th-century Lord Mayor of London, and cemented by Richard, ‘the Great Hill’, diplomat, clergyman, paymaster of the Army, and as massively corrupt as any other 18th-century public servant: he inherited Hawkstone in 1700. After he died childless in 1727, the estate passed to one of his nephews, created Sir Rowland Hill of Hawkstone in his uncle’s honour.

This Sir Rowland saw the potential of the local landscape south of his house, with its valley running between two towering red sandstone cliffs one of which was ringed by the remains of a real medieval castle: it had every capacity for improvement from what was already an interesting reality to the most exciting fantasyland. The first step came in 1748 when Rowland incorporated the Red Castle into his park and laid out walks around it, but for the most part he seems to have left the landscaping and folly-building to his son and heir Richard. Richard was a bit of a religious nutcase – a Methodist with a very odd sense of humour which was often remarked on by his colleagues in Parliament and others – and, along with his youngest brother Rowland (who was ordained deacon but refused ordination as a priest by no fewer than six Anglican bishops) caused his father endless headaches: Sir Rowland ‘spent his later years trying to moderate the religious propensities’ of his sons.

There were already plenty of visitors by the time Sir Rowland died, and when he inherited Richard was determined to turn the park into even more of a tourist attraction. He lost little time in having a guidebook printed: 1783 was the first edition, sold locally; the next just a year later was distributed in London; and by 1809 it had reached its ninth. He built the Hawkstone Inn, ‘genteelly fitted out for the reception of the company who resort thither to see the park’; by 1799 it had become ‘the Hawkstone Inn *and Hotel*’. He completed the Grotto his father had begun – the largest in England – and discovered ‘The Cleft’, a dramatic narrow gorge on the crest of Grotto Hill, opening a dank tunnel between it and the Grotto, a pitch-black two hundred feet of terror. By the end of the process the gardens included a hermitage, St Francis’s Cave, an Urn, a worryingly narrow path around a cliff called ‘The Squeeze’, a Gothic Arch, and a White Tower, enough to excite the most interesting feelings.

And the visitors responded, fulsomely. Even so stolid a personality as Dr Johnson was impressed by Hawkstone, ‘the awfulness of its shades, the horrors of its precipices ... The ideas which it forces upon the mind are the sublime, the dreadful, and the vast. Above is inaccessible altitude, below is horrible

profundity'. 'The Aweful Precipice', he termed one dizzying drop, and so that was what it became called. Other accounts drew parallels with the work of painters they knew – Poussin, Claude, and, naturally, Salvator Rosa. Otherwise, the Guidebook helped you anticipate what your sensations might be. The Alpine Bridge led across The Cleft, a drop the guidebook emphasised was simultaneously perilous, and entirely safe to cross; while in The Cleft itself, it suggested, visitors might imagine 'the violent convulsion of the earth' that had formed the narrow gap between its towering walls of rock, in places barely two feet wide. The Red Castle formed the finale to the tour: its genuine historical significance became overlaid with stories about King Arthur and a pair of giants. It's unclear whether the 'Giants Well' – possibly an oubliette for the consignment of prisoners, the guidebook speculated – is a medieval feature or a creation of the Hills. 'This seat of warriors', went on the Guidebook, was now just 'fragments of desolation' 'inhabited only by birds of prey'. At the ruins' foot, tourists could encounter a stone lion ('the most timid may without danger take him by the tooth'), a final brush with sublime excitement before repairing for refreshment at the Hawkstone Inn.

Hawkstone's final burst of glory came in an *Illustrated London News* report of its heir-apparent's 21st birthday in 1854. A succession of Hills had tweaked and amended the landscape, but in 1894 the 3rd Viscount went bankrupt, the Hall's contents were auctioned and gradually the estate was sold off and the follies were forgotten. After decades of vicissitude, the Hawkstone Park Hotel company acquired the parkland in 1990, and over the next three years restored as much as possible of what they were pleased to refer to as 'England's first theme park'.

Although modern visitors enter the Park at the south end rather than sweeping in along the old carriage drive from the north, the current owners have arranged the route rather cleverly. The visitor centre is in the 'Gothic Greenhouse', from which you get not the slightest hint of what lies in wait – apart from the glimpse of the White Tower on the hilltop. But once around the corner you enter the central valley with the Red Castle on the left and the follies on the right. One of the delightful things about Hawkstone is the gradual revelation of prospects and environments. I spent a couple of hours touring the park, delightedly moving from one landscape effect to another – traversing the Alpine Bridge, negotiating the narrow cliff paths, creeping along the Cleft and plunging into the tunnel; marvelling at the copper-stained peaks and the colossal vistas far, far below; enjoying my own enjoyment of ever-so-slight feelings of danger that the odd people who manipulated this environment in a Gothic way clearly intended me to feel. The weather was clear and bright – would it have even been better on a day of umbrageous mizzle and gloom? I'm not completely sure.



*The Grotto
In 1854*



6. Piercefield: Don't Look Down

Do the walkers along the Wye Valley Way realise they are plunging into a Gothic landscape when they follow the path around the great bend of the river surrounding the Lascaut peninsula? Valentine Morris inherited Piercefield from his father, whose own fortune rested on slave estates in Antigua, in 1743, but only moved there after ten years. Disappointingly he seems to have been less thoroughly mad than several of our other Gothic Gardeners, but was rather an improving sort of landowner, with a burning interest in bettering the roads of Monmouthshire - in 1771 he even fought, and lost, a by-election to be the county's MP on the issue. Thankfully for the reputation of Gothic Gardening, Morris was an outsider - a Creole, no less - who never fitted in with English society. Eventually finding life at home impossible, he departed to the West Indies and became Governor of St Vincent, but had to surrender the island to the French, and returned to London in the 1780s in disgrace and near-bankrupt from gambling, political adventuring, and hopeless generosity. His wife ended her life in a madhouse, and Morris himself died in poverty in 1789 having had to sell Piercefield five years before. It was in those 19 years when he was resident on the estate that he developed the network of paths, views and features that make the area a Gothic Garden.

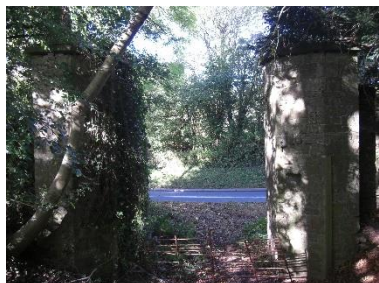
Trips along the Wye Valley were increasingly part of the home tourism circuit from the 1740s, excitable 18th-century romantics taking in the ruins of Tintern Abbey as well as the wooded gorges by the river. Piercefield Park happened to include a huge, near-circular meander of the Wye, which left a bowl of verdant farmland surrounded by towering cliffs: Morris caught the bug and provided visitors with a means of viewing this landscape, which cried out for a little dramatisation. In contrast to the precipices and drama of the walks, the house sat in parkland which was gentleness itself. Piercefield is the only Gothic Garden which *may* have been partly-designed by a woman: fellow gardener and theorist William Shenstone stated that Valentine Morris's wife, poor Mary Mordaunt, had had a hand in the developments.

Morris employed William Knowles, the Chepstow builder who had cleared the ruins of Tintern Abbey for the Duke of Beaufort, to open ten views along the river including the precipitous Lover's Leap; it was there that Morris almost fell to his death while supervising the works, his life only saved by the shrubbery on the slope from which he was rescued. 'We cannot call these views picturesque' commented William Gilpin tellingly after his visit to Piercefield in 1770, 'but they are extremely romantic'. There was a little 'Giant's Cave' along the walks, the fun added to by 'a Herculean figure' in the act of throwing a rock at visitors: it stood above the path until it was attacked

by frost and the arms fell off. Like similarly-named features in other places, the Giant's Cave would only fit a very modest giant indeed, and in fact the swarming bees we encountered there were much more menacing. Other features included a 'Druid's Temple' ('a seemingly-random placing of square boulders and a standing stone'); a Cold Bath; and a Grotto that seems to have been bought out of a catalogue, so closely does it resemble other, similar sites, sitting on the western flank of a perfectly genuine Iron Age enclosure or hillfort within the Park boundaries. What the antiquity of the standing stone on its northern edge might be, though, is anyone's guess. Valentine Morris admitted tourists to the Piercefield walks on Tuesdays and Fridays: at other times trippers could take in the site from the river as part of a journey down the Wye from Tintern Abbey, and stay at the Piercefield Hotel.

Piercefield's owners tended to bad luck. Mary went mad and Valentine bankrupt, a fate which also befell its next resident, the banker George Smith, who commissioned Sir John Soane to design a new house there. His daughter Elizabeth, a brilliant teenager obsessed with Gothic poetry and Welsh history, persuaded her father to build a turreted tower called Grove House where she could write: captivated by the romanticism of the landscape, Elizabeth imagined she had found at Piercefield the site of the final battle of Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, last Prince of Wales. After Mr Smith went bankrupt the family moved to Windermere where Elizabeth died from too much walking in the rain. Of later owners, Col Mark Wood MP experienced few problems, and Nathaniel Wells – son of a slave and a slave-owner – prospered enough to become Britain's first black Sheriff and JP, but failed to sell the house in 1825 after discovering dry rot, and moved away.

Outside Piercefield proper, the Duke of Beaufort added another feature in 1828: the 365 Steps, which lead up to the Eagle's Nest on the top of Wyndcliff, affording views out over the whole of the Lascaut bowl. With its stone steps, bridge and cleft rocks, it stops just short of being completely terrifying. By then, however, the new turnpike road had cut the Wyndcliff off from the rest of the park, and the walks became open to paying visitors only, when they



were open at all. Piercefield House fell into ruin in the 1920s, and so it still remains, all attempts to do anything positive with it having come to nothing. The creation of the long-distance Wye Valley Way in 1975 and the designation of the woods as a nature reserve have rescued what is left of the landscape, at least, now listed Grade 1 by Cadw, the Welsh heritage agency.

My visit to Piercefield began at the northern end, entering the walks through a pair of lowering gateposts. The paths meander their way through the woods, here and there opening up to frame views across the strangely enclosed environment of the Lascaut basin, the Forest of Dean a dark strip along the clifftop some miles away. You don't have to look far to realise that precipitous drops lie just feet away from the safety of the path, and think of the terror Valentine Morris must have felt as he clung to the bushes at Lover's Leap while the workmen scrambled to pull him back, and stop him becoming a victim of his own garden.



There is a strangely-decorated standing stone in the wood: its modern adornment with Aboriginal-style symbols by some recent visitor seems entirely in keeping with the mysterious atmosphere Mr Morris was aiming to capture - even though he would never have thought on these particular lines. Finally, not far off the main path you can glimpse a set of sad, twisted rails - important to note, as they mark the old route from the walks to the house. In a brutal irony of time the ruined mansion has now become a feature in its own Gothic landscape.

My trip took place on a sunny day, but I found Piercefield frightening in a way the inventiveness of Hackfall and the eccentricities of Hawkstone avoid. The paths skip perilously close to awful abysses which tempt the frail mind to abandon its hold on life, and the house



and outbuildings are somehow remarkably horrid and desperate ruins. It is, as they say, worth seeing, and thinking on.



7. Downton: A Sketch for the Sublime

Before he entered Parliament, Edmund Burke was a writer and thinker. He set a philosophical hare running with his 1757 essay *An Inquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, analysing these aesthetic categories. Artists - including garden designers - spent much effort debating these concepts. Later in the century a new concept emerged, supposedly partway between the controlled terror of the Sublime and the gentle perfection of the Beautiful: the Picturesque, describing something worthy of being put into a picture, or looking like one.

A Herefordshire gentleman regarded as something of a dangerous radical in Tory quarters, and heir to an iron fortune, Richard Payne Knight, made his contribution to this debate in 1805 with his book *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*. It was these ideas that were expressed in the landscape of his own estate, Downton. However, his earlier claim to – well, if not fame, then notoriety – was the publication in 1786 of *An Account of the Remains of the Worship of Priapus*, a scholarly survey of the reverence of the phallus in antiquity, printed complete with a frontispiece of a charming range of archaeological willies. That he never married somehow comes as no surprise.

On inheriting Downton in 1772 Payne Knight set about rebuilding the house as a Gothic castle. It stood high above the waters of the River Teme which, for the most part, cut a dramatic gorge through the Herefordshire hills - just the same sort of environment we encounter in other Gothic Gardens. Walks, climbing to and fro along the riverside, dramatic bridges, and a cold bath made their appearance, watched over by the castle itself from its more decorous parkland surroundings. The keynote was the possibilities of the natural environment, rather than nutty follies, but the form of the landscape skewed the exercise more towards the Sublime than the Beautiful, as such: 'Where sympathy with terror is combined/To move, to melt, and elevate the mind' - as Payne Knight himself wrote in his 1784 poem, *The Landscape*. Payne Knight stressed the idea of *contrast* in his ideal landscape, but when the great garden designer Humphrey Repton came to visit Downton it was its sublime aspects he described with most enthusiasm: 'the beetling rock' and 'awful precipice', 'the foaming waters heard roaring in the dark abyss below', and, in summary, 'the wild but pleasing horrors of the scene'. At first the visitors were Payne Knight's guests, but in latter years trippers came in quite some numbers; the Woolhope Naturalists' Field Club were noted tourists in the later 1800s.

Nowadays the Castle is owned privately (by someone who reputedly only visits

once a year) and most of Downton Walks is a nature reserve with no public access, so currently we can only gain glimpses of this Gothic Garden.



My introduction to the Downton landscape was walking down a footpath under threat of disappearing between seven-foot-high stalks of corn, which would have been deeply unsettling if I'd seen too many horror movies. At the bottom of this you join the Herefordshire long-distance path, and enter the Downton estate just before Forge Bridge, one of Mr Knight's beautiful crossings of the Teme. The waters seethe and boil beneath – thanks to a massive horseshoe-shaped weir which has no other purpose than making them do so. From beside the bridge, a gap in the trees affords a far-off sighting of the turrets of the Castle, rising

above the leaves in a fairytale fashion. When you reach it, however, it seems rather on the squat and twee side – a bit like something from a model village.

Once over Castle Bridge, the footpath, and its public access, climbs up the other side of the valley and leaves Downton Walks behind. Somewhere beyond the Natural England sign lie weirs, a cave, rocky cliffs, the towering Rock spoken of by 18th-century visitors, and a variety of exciting views. All you can do is gaze along the river and imagine the dramatic landscape that so delighted Georgian seekers after the Sublime.



Well - nearly all. I was a little naughty and scuttled as far as I dared along the gorgeside path, a hundred yards or so, to the first of the 'features' of the Walks, a Giant's Cave - exactly the sort of rock-hewn archway or tunnel we find at Piercefield, which was constructed a bit earlier. I don't think I disturbed any terribly rare fauna along the way.

Given its proud place in embryonic Gothic tourism, it's a great shame that Downton remains so inaccessible. The old 1:50,000 Ordnance Survey map shows a bridleway extending along the

south of the valley as far as Bow Bridge, so this closure is presumably relatively recent. It was never the most extreme of these maddened landscapes – just a sketch for the Sublime, really – but it would be fun to sample more.



8. Hafod: Cascades in the Dark

I was horrified when I discovered where Hafod was, and that it was nowhere near anywhere else, if you see what I mean. This bit of Mid-Wales is a long, long way away if you start from, well, almost anywhere.

But this was where Thomas Jhones, member of an old family of Welsh squires, decided to exploit the Gothic possibilities of landscape. He seems not to have been particularly crazy himself, but his father was married to Elizabeth Knight, a cousin of Richard Payne Knight of Downton, and he and Elizabeth had rebuilt their own house, Croft Castle, in Gothic style, so young Thomas had Gothic Gardening in his family. After attending Edinburgh University and the Grand Tour, he returned to Wales, visited Hafod, and was captivated by it. By 1788 he had replaced the old manor house with a mansion Gothic in style, though Classical in form, and set about developing the network of walks and points of interest to decorate them that would overlay the dramatic valley of the Ystwyth river which carved its way through this barren, otherwise unproductive estate. Mr Jhones tried many inventive ways of improving the agricultural output – some of his millions of trees were planted for economic rather than aesthetic reasons – but they seldom succeeded.

At Hafod the landscape included wild stretches of woodland, rocky gorges where the waters crashed and raged, and punctuations of pastoral grassland: Johnes's genius was to design a series of walks that utilised the most dramatic contrasts of these, and offered views across the valley to remind walkers of whichever mode of landscape they weren't walking through at that moment. North of the Ystwyth was the Ladies' Walk, while to the south lay the Gentlemen's Walk through rather rougher and more challenging terrain. All that can be said is that, time having intervened, the gentlemen have much the more interesting time of it. The mansion has gone, the trees have closed in, and the greatest treasure of the Hafod landscape lies on the river's southern side, the Cavern Cascade, an artificial feature achieved by blowing out a cave to divert the waters of two streams.

At first, Jhones did all he could to encourage visitors to make their way to wild mid-Wales and seek Hafod out. William Gilpin's first edition of *Observations on the River Wye and several parts of South Wales* had failed to mention the Devil's Bridge, which had long been a stopping-point on the itinerary of more adventurous tourists and was now on the edge of the Hafod estate, and Jhones invited Gilpin to come and see for himself. Sure enough, when the new version of the guidebook came out in 1789, it included a glowing account of the Bridge and of Hafod itself. In 1790 Jhones bought a parcel of land near Devil's Bridge and at the junction of two turnpike roads where he turned a

former farmhouse into a lodge for visitors; he enlarged it five years later and renamed it 'the Hafod Arms'. The building was augmented in 1814 and yet again in 1839 by the Duke of Newcastle, the subsequent owner of the estate. Perhaps inspired by the example of the Frog Service, Mr Johnes commissioned a Derby dinner service entirely devoted to Hafod, and presented it to Lord Chancellor Thurlow – though what he hoped to gain is a mystery.

Thomas Johnes knew that people came to Hafod to be *scared*. He wrote to a friend about having installed the 'swing bridge of chains from Rock to Rock, so do not be surprised if you read in some Tourist of my having caused the death of several by fear or drowning'. His friend Benjamin Malkin reported being overcome by 'horror', claiming his travelling companions barely

recognised him when he met up with them:

Hafod was, Malkin claimed, 'eccentric and wonderful – nothing but rock and water'.

Certainly there were only a couple of follies, a Gothic Arch raised on the road to the south of the park in 1806 to celebrate George III's Jubilee – 'a mad monument for a mad king', Mr Johnes might have said – and the Gothic Arcade in the woods above the Ystwyth's snarling waters. The map apparently drawn by William Blake to accompany George Cumberland's *An Attempt to Describe Hafod* (1796) shows a 'Druid's Temple' on a hill, but that never seems to have been built.



But eventually Thomas Johnes could be found complaining about the behaviour of the very visitors he had encouraged, and his attitude changed decisively after his daughter Mariamne died aged only 27 in 1811. While the Johneses stayed on at Hafod for another four years, it seems that with the death of Mariamne the place had lost its charm for them. They moved to Dawlish, where Thomas died the year after. In common with so many such landscapes, Hafod lingered in memory and fact a long while; the house, left empty more than a decade, was demolished in 1958 by the Forestry Commission who'd acquired the estate. Then the Hafod Trust was established in 1994 to conserve and publicise the garden. In 2016 they managed to restore the Gothic Arcade: when I visited Hafod, it was just a single stone pillar swathed incongruously in blue plastic. So Hafod lives again.

The walks start at Hafod New Church - only 'new' since the 17th century - which has a certain threateningly Hawksmoorian look to it despite James Wyatt, the Gothic Revivalist, being Mr Johnes's architect. In 1932 it burned

down, destroying the monument the Jhoneses had had erected to Mariamne. Mariamne has lost her face as a result - her father still has his (albeit not in the right place), but now looks more peeved than griefstricken.



The path leads down from the churchyard. The pine trees soon begin to grate on the nerves with their mixture of oppression and monotony. Just when you think your reason will break, things change, and you enter a landscape of bridges and cascades. The grandest of these is the Ystwyth Gorge, which slices through the rock either side of a rickety chain bridge, with the Gothic Arcade just above.

The Gentleman's Walk to the south snakes up the valley of Nant Gau. The path climbs and becomes more rocky and hazardous as it goes, especially if you

have unsuitable shoes (and I always make a point of having unsuitable shoes). There are waterfalls, piles of rocks left by visitors, and a Dripping Well.

Finally the path levels out, providing a last episode of comfort before the climax. The path stops, and on the right is an ominous hole. You must clamber in here, and find a dark (and wet) tunnel leading into the rock, along which you grope your way, the thunderous sound of water increasing with every inch. A turn into the dark, and there it is - the Cavern Cascade, a toplit sheet of water hammering into a rock basin. And when you've had enough of being blinded by the light and deafened by the crashing water, you make your way back again. I found myself exhilarated and giggling - it's a (quite) safe

brush with feelings of danger which epitomises the 18th-century Gothic Sublime perfectly.

Back onto the path, where a Tunnel, the Mossy Seat falls (without any actual Mossy Seat), and more bridges and darkling trees await you. It is quite a relief to re- emerge into the wider open spaces of the estate. High up on the north slopes are Mariamne's Garden and below it 'Mrs Jhones's Garden', two gentler spaces. I left, not with my countenance marked by horror like Benjamin Malkin, but elevated, even if I would rather there had been a welcoming tea shop after all that traipsing.



9. Bindon: Regret Made Real

Bindon Abbey in Dorset suffers, as far as Gothic (or any other kind) of tourism is concerned, as it's split into two. You can get fairly free access to part of the garden as it's occupied by a health spa, but the most interesting and certainly the gloomiest bit is owned by Abbey Mill, part of the Weld Estate, and not easy to see, although Timothy Mowl managed it for his book *Historic Gardens of Dorset* in 2003. It does occasionally get thrown open for charity, and we managed to view it in 2015 for the first time since 1987.

What's striking about Bindon is the layering of history which makes this so strange a location. First, there was the Cistercian Abbey of Bindon, constructed here in the water meadows of the River Frome, landscape which Mr Mowl characterises as 'scenically rather dull', in 1172. The monks channelled and controlled the watercourses, converting marsh into meadow and millstream. The first post-Dissolution owner of the Abbey site, a Thomas Poynings, raided the ruins for building material for his house at Lulworth but otherwise went nowhere near the place. He was succeeded a mere four years later by Thomas Howard, second son of the Duke of Norfolk, who in 1544 began converting the Abbey buildings into a house and the grounds into a water garden - the oldest surviving in Britain. A lozenge-shaped island appeared surrounded by canals, and accompanied a 'pleasaunce' or viewing platform. Both features were elements in walks laid out around the grounds. This was the second phase of the garden.

In 1641 the Howards sold Bindon, along with other Dorset estates, to their Catholic convert kinsfolk, the Welds. As Timothy Mowl describes, Bindon 'haunted the consciences of the Welds in almost every generation': they were aware they were occupying the remains of a monastery and, in common with other Catholic and Anglican gentry in this situation, felt its ambiguities. Although the house itself was demolished in 1644, the family kept returning to the site in their imaginations, and seem to have contemplated restoring the Abbey, while never quite getting round to it: 'an obsession, a challenge, a pious duty shirked'.

The third phase of the garden at Bindon was due to Thomas 'The Builder' Weld, who between 1793 and 1798 constructed a beautifully Gothick lodge and dwelling house (which contained a small chapel upstairs) and pierced the Mount in the water garden to create what Timothy Mowl calls 'the most depressingly dank brick-vaulted garden room in Dorset'. It's best characterised as a grotto, and contains three Gothic-arched niches at the end of its lightless, featureless tunnel. (Amended) water garden, medieval ruins and Gothick fancies together created an entirely different experience from

what the Howards intended - one that simultaneously reminded the Welds of the Age of Faith they fantasised of returning to and their own ambiguous role in occupying, in a manner of speaking, its grave.

Over the years neglect has changed the regularity of the original Tudor plan into a damp, claustrophobic, haunted landscape: 'a solemn world of dark trees over wide, shadowed waters ... a quiet green gloom of short vistas, its silence broken only by the occasional splash of a brown trout rising in the moat. Everything is enclosed: a world of leaves and water with no sky'; a place of 'magical melancholy', 'a mood creator for gloom and introversion'.

On our long-awaited visit in 2015 the garden was full of sightseers and sunshine, and the sense of pervading ruin was less perceptible than Mr Mowl found, or than I could remember from nearly thirty years past. But the imagination can still do its work on this melancholy raw material.



The Abbey House and Gatehouse are polite though still delightful 18th-century Gothick, and are viewed across neat gravel and swards of mown grass. But the lumpen ivy-choked ruins of the medieval abbey nevertheless exercise their haunting presence. The ruins aren't extensive and won't delay you long no matter what the weather. Soon you're treading the grassy walks between the watercourses, as sluices pour and fish make their way beneath the plank bridges. It's not exactly a maze, but with so little to go on by way of orientation you end up thoroughly confused. Suddenly another tiny bridge appears and, in the centre of the tangle of paths, you discover the Mount, where the centrepiece of Bindon's offerings awaits.

It looks a bit like a Bronze Age round barrow (and who knows? perhaps was meant to), but this is no archaeological feature and surely not an ice house as has been speculated. On our visit, the grotto was being touted as 'The Bear Cave' with notices bearing (no pun intended) images of teddy bears against a

rocky cavern, but we discerned no ursine presence. There were candles and lamps. And damp. Bindon is unique among the Gothic Gardens, in that the landscape itself is flat and watery rather than inclined and intense. But it achieves the same sort of result, and, in fact, a uniquely oppressive and mournful atmosphere.

A final incarnation of gloomy Bindon was a fictional one, given it by that Dorset master of the miserable, Thomas Hardy. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* Tess and Angel Clare spend their ill-fated honeymoon at Wellbridge House, in reality Woolbridge Manor just upstream from the ruined Abbey. Driven to distraction on discovering that Tess is not the virginal creature of his fantasies, Angel sleepwalks from the House with his bride in his arms, across the plank bridges and sluices of the Frome, and, on reaching what we know are the dread remains of the haunted Abbey, lays her in an open stone coffin set into the damp earth, once occupied by the bones of some monkish prelate. And, broken and battered though it may be, the coffin, you see, is still there.



10. Portland: Power and Peril

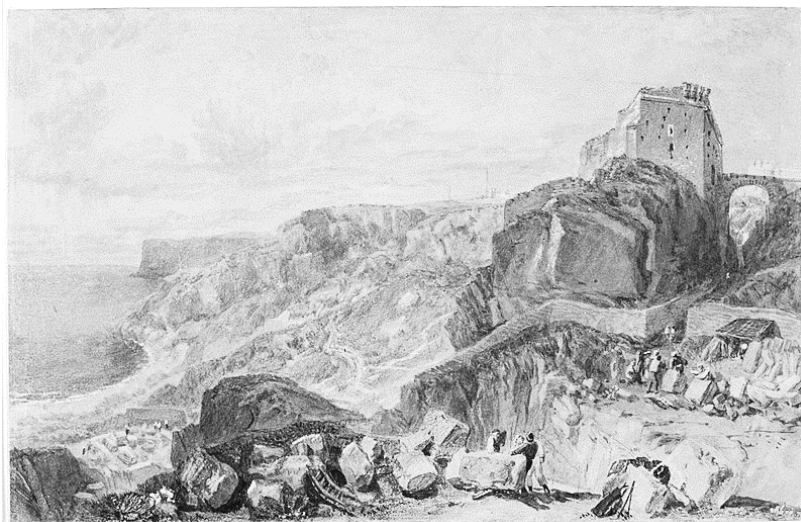
Before a road bridge was built in 1839, the Isle of Portland was a true island, accessible only by ferry, a separate world within the already distinct landscape of Dorset, with its own customs, economy, and dialect. Here John Penn arrived in 1789. Grandson of the Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn, John brought with him from the United States his share of the State of Pennsylvania's compensation to the Penn family for giving up the hereditary rights over it granted by Charles II a century before. Seven years later, Penn commissioned the *doyen* of Georgian Gothic Revivalist architects, James Wyatt, to build on the east of Portland a small, castellated Gothic mansion, which Penn called Pennsylvania Castle.

The house looked out across the storming sea, full of wrecks. Just below it were the ruins of the 12th-century Rufus Castle, and St Andrew's Church, abandoned as unsafe in the mid-1700s. These might be seen as separate monuments, were it not for the fact that Rufus Castle is now only accessible from the grounds of the house; the land Pennsylvania Castle is built on was Crown property sold to John Penn by George III, and it was only several years later that he managed to buy the undercliff with its monuments, clearly intending to make a single composition of them. Rufus Castle was too neat and tidy for his tastes, and he made it gloomier by piling earth around the walls to encourage the growth of ivy.

At the southern end of the church ruins is a Gothic arch sometimes interpreted as part of the church itself, but it has in fact been reset in an old wall. It forms an evocative gateway to a path that leads through a small but dramatic gorge running up to the grounds of Pennsylvania Castle, its turrets glowering at the top of the cliff among the trees. This small landscape composition was a private pleasure, and to Portlanders John Penn was an irascible and antisocial character who more than once got into trouble with the Island's authorities over his building activities; but he was also a prominent landowner and member of the community, holding 'lavish dinners, déjeuners, parties and other entertainment events' which gave guests an opportunity to view the grounds of Pennsylvania Castle.

Portland and Bindon, our two Dorset landscapes, are the smallest of the Gothic Gardens, but Portland exhibits all the elements we can find elsewhere – a grand house, topographical drama, ruins, and a bit of help given to what Mr Penn found when he arrived. I've walked its paths any number of times, in so far as they are accessible, and crossing beneath the appalling gate of Rufus Castle, following the ankle-cracking path to the church above the smashing

waves, and then plunging through the Gothic archway into the walk through the wood with the Castle just visible above the trees, never fails to thrill.



Turner's vision of Rufus Castle



11. Belsay: Gloom Hewn from the Rocks

The usual strategy of Gothic Gardeners was to spot a landscape with potential, scatter it with follies and ruins if no genuine ones were available, and lend the hand of nature a discreet touch of support to bring out the melancholy implications of the topography. Belsay has no follies - unless you count Belsay Old Castle on the edge of the estate - and only acquired its Gothic landscape as a by-product of redevelopment.

Belsay had been home to the Middleton family since the 13th century. Sir William Middleton employed Capability Brown to do a spot of landscaping and had added a Gothick eyecatcher to the hilltop in the later 1700s, but that didn't amount to Gothic re-engineering of the house's surroundings. Then Sir William's third son Sir Charles inherited the estate (he took the surname Monck to secure another legacy) and while on his honeymoon in Greece in 1804 acquired an infatuation with all things Classical. He also saw the ancient quarries at Syracuse in Sicily, and filed away in his mind their arches, formations, and towering pillars of rock.

Back at Belsay Monck built in severe Athenian style perhaps the bleakest stately home I have ever seen, and on Christmas Day 1817 moved his family out of the old Castle and into the new Hall. The photo I give you here is quite good, because it shows very little of it.

The Hall had been constructed from stone excavated from the hillside immediately to the west, leaving a quarry scarring its way through the earth. It seems that Sir Charles, for all his Classical enthusiasms, had had the idea in mind all along, based on what he'd seen at Syracuse – the quarry is no mere hole in the ground, but a tall-sided, narrow canyon with alcoves, winding paths, and dramatic overhangs. The cliffs were planted with pines and yews to make them seem even higher and more gloomy.

The gardens closer to the house eventually contained a remarkable variety of exotic plants, while the quarry itself was planted with native ferns and mosses. Sir Charles's successor and grandson, Sir Arthur, extended the quarry to the west, which is if anything even darker and more grim than the eastern half. There was something peculiar about all this, certainly as far as Charles was concerned: he had had an extremely distant and disrupted upbringing, even for the English aristocracy, and his Grecian obsessions, of which the Garden was a part, seem to have been a way of dealing with them. He was a character who became odder and harder to deal with as time drew on.

Visiting Belsay is an odd experience. It's owned today by English Heritage, who treat the garden in terms of plantings and arrangements rather than an artefact of landscape history: rhododendrons can be sinister in this setting, but they aren't the point. Instead you have to look around and above you, and contemplate the towering stone walls. A great hewn arch leads to the Quarry Garden, and a smaller stone one to the west Quarry. The Grotto is an enclosed rock cell in the upper quarry, possibly the dankest, least pleasant spot in the entire place. You wander round and along a path, and suddenly find yourself confronted by the Old Castle in a completely different setting. The Old Castle is not really part of the arrangement - you simply emerge from the Quarry Garden and discover it, so it doesn't count as a proper folly. However, there's something surreally eerie about the aeronautic fireplaces you find there.

However, the horrible New Hall has a Gothic experience of its own in store. Part of the deal in its being passed to the care of English Heritage in 1962 was that there should be no reconstructed room-sets made up from furniture and fittings brought in from elsewhere, the Middletons' own gear long having been dispersed. So the building remains an eerie, empty shell. The restored parts occasionally house art exhibitions; the rest doesn't even have plaster on the walls. Oddly, this means its history weighs even more heavily in the echoing rooms, and the sun seems reluctant to sidle in.





12. Banwell: Maddened by Bones

It was a bit of a crazy thing to do: to drive over a hundred miles on a damp Summer Sunday to the edge of Weston-super-Mare to walk around a cave and some follies on a hill. But how could I resist given this old write-up from Headley & Meulenkamp's book on *Follies*:

The paths are now heavily overgrown with skeletal, light-starved plants whose fronds brush wetly against your face as you slide on the greasy steps ... Low stone walls border the paths; unnatural shapes can be made out through the bony undergrowth ...

In 1824, Dr Randolph, the Vicar of Banwell, paid two labourers to find a cave which had once been discovered on the hillside; he had the idea of creating a tourist attraction, raising money for a parish school. Instead they broke into a completely different chamber from the expected one, and found it littered with untold thousands of animal bones. The estate was owned by the new Bishop of Bath & Wells, George Law, who was intrigued. He concluded that the bones were the remains of beasts who perished in the Flood, and thus the whole site was proof of the Bible's account of world history. He saw it as his responsibility to open the cave to the public, but having done so, and having built a cottage for the accommodation of his visitors, the whole landscape began to work on his mind. It wasn't enough to prove that the Flood had happened: the Bishop conceived the idea of constructing an open-air sermon on the folly of human endeavour and the triumph of Christianity, and began building ruins, a Druid temple, and all sorts of things. Although the Caves were sited on a steep hill with views across the Severn into Wales, it was far from promising topography; but soon the woods grew gloomier and the melancholy tone of this Creationist theme park was reflected in the landscape itself. This is what gives Banwell its unique, and very strange character.

Banwell is only open a few days a year, and consequently is usually busy. But you get a lot for your trouble - and entry was, when we went, free. Our visit was damp and eventually worse, but that seemed completely appropriate. At various strategic points you can see the improving verses Bishop Law had inscribed and placed around the garden, though only one survives in its original state, almost illegible. As a flavour of the whole lot, try the following:

*Here let the scoffer of God's holy word
Behold the traces of a deluged world:
Here let him learn in Banwell Cave t'adore
The Lord of Heaven, then go and scoff no more.*

Entry into the caves is through a stone arch. There used to be a stone circle and trilithon on the grass - until the RAF knocked into it in the War! We have stone steps, Gothic arches, and the Bone Cave itself, lined and lined with thousands of remains.



The paths around the wooded hilltop lead to more follies. The *Osteoichon* was where the

Bishop's manager, William Beard, farmer-turned-bone-enthusiast, displayed the best of the bones from the cave. There is also a Gothic Summerhouse awaiting restoration, and 'Dr Randolph's Gazebo', which may be the summerhouse built by the Vicar of Banwell, whose fault all this is, which the Bishop transferred to the hilltop on the Vicar's death. Off one ill-frequented path you can also just glimpse the footings of yet another folly.

Finally you emerge from the oppressive woods and discover the Bishop's Tower - a strangely squat, inelegant affair, but still giving wonderful views over to the Welsh mountains, that abode of dragons and monsters. From there, if you are visiting on a day that affords the opportunity, you can retrace your steps to the entrance for suitable refreshments (bat biscuits, when I was there).

Now, this is all very well, this Christian philosophising on ruin, truth and the abiding power of God. But something else went on at Banwell too. Bishop Law was an apparently straightforward man, a bishop's son himself, a stalwart Church of England prelate who opposed Catholic Emancipation, and a reformer in a moderate way. But here, in his retreat from the pressures of diocesan life in Wells, he created a landscape that is perpetually damp and gloomy – he planted the wood on the hilltop, which was hardly necessary to make his point. He died in 1845 after 'a gradual decay of mind and body' which appears to have had an element of paralysing melancholy. Look at the stone in the final photo, positioned along the pathway to the Bishop's Tower. That's a face, isn't it? What was George Henry Law seeing in the woods by the time he finished here? Is this not just a Gothic Gardener responding to the possibilities of landscape, but actually being affected – unhinged – by it? *Stark mad for ruins?*





Afterword

These twelve Gothic Gardens take us to disparate places. There is a core group of major sites, arguably comprising Hackfall, Hawkstone, Hafod, and Piercefield; then some more minor ones that share the same kind of character – Yester, Busbridge, Portland, Downton, and Radway – and finally a third group of landscapes (Bindon, Belsay, and Banwell) that use different effects and techniques. They are very different from one another, as were the people who made them. But they all show a response to the nature and associations of landscape, and the possibility of those landscapes to produce certain emotional and contemplative outcomes. There may be more such gardens out there, unrecognised or completely lost. Yester and Portland, for instance, only really survive in an etiolated form and without the main core group to establish the model of the Gothic Garden, we probably wouldn't recognise them at all. Still other garden landscapes make use of the same kind of effects, but combine them with other modes and moods, rather than majoring on the pleasurable shudder of the Sublime.

My argument has always been that landscape gardening of this sort – a very distinctive contribution Britain has made to the artistic heritage of the world! – has been one technology which had a decisive effect on the shaping of the Gothic imagination. Sensible 18th-century people might have scorned reading a Gothic novel – they were a bit trashy, after all – but they felt no shame in going to a Gothic Garden and having a bit of a thrill crossing an Alpine Bridge or picking their way through a Giant's Cave. You can't imagine Dr Johnson devouring the latest spooky work of Mrs Radcliffe, but he came happily to Hawkstone and pronounced on its effects. Many of these landscapes predated, or were at least contemporary with, first-wave Gothic literature, so if the intellectual traffic was in any direction, it was probably from gardens to books rather than vice versa.

I would like these landscapes to be recognised for what I think they are, a distinct category within the art of these islands. And I would like people to visit them, and love them, and help the good souls struggling to look after them. To fill your albums with photographs, your tummies with bat biscuits and tea, and your hearts with Gothic thoughts.

"The path, in various places, crosses the water by bridges of the most romantic and contrasting forms; and is occasionally varied and enriched by caves and cells, hovels, and covered seats, or other buildings, in perfect harmony with the wild but pleasing horrors of the scene ... "

Humphrey Repton describing Downton Gorge in 1806

Along with bellringing and fish and chips, landscape gardening is arguably one of the great British contributions to world culture. The name of Capability Brown is celebrated, and the artfully naturalistic gardens he created for his clients epitomise a certain vision of England - placid, bucolic, and gentle.

But there was another mode of garden that developed at the same time. Far fewer in number, these landscapes were designed to encourage very different feelings in their visitors - melancholy, loss, and fear. Feeding into and being fed by the first wave of Gothic literature, these were truly Gothic Gardens.

Some were private pleasures intended to be enjoyed by their owners and their friends, while others were entrepreneurial tourist attractions advertised with guidebooks, prints, and even commemorative crockery. Some have been rescued from oblivion by organisations dedicated to their upkeep, while some are just holding onto existence, barely recognised for what they are. But each has a dark and menacing magic of its own.

