

Chapter 2

Estate Landscapes in England: Interpretive Archaeologies

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Introduction

Landed estates in post-medieval England have been studied for many years by archaeologists, geographers and economic and social historians (Clemenson, 1982; Daniels and Seymour, 1990; Rawding, 1992). Much of this work has concentrated on the mansion and its immediate surroundings (Aston, 1978; Brown, 1991; Currie and Locock, 1991; Dix et al., 1995; Everson and Williamson, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Pattison, 1998; Taylor, 1983; West, 1999; Williamson, 1998). But attention has also been paid to the wider countryside in (for example) Jon Finch's examination of the impact of fox hunting on the development of the landscape or Wade Martin's work on "model" farm buildings (Finch, 2004; Wade Martins, 2002).

"Landed estate" is in some respects a dangerous term, for it embraces a very wide range of social and economic forms. Even in England estates varied in character, from region to region and across time: even greater variations are apparent when we adopt a wider, trans-Atlantic focus. In England an estate might be defined as an extensive and continuous, or near-continuous, unit of landed property, owned by an individual although not necessarily (following the elaboration of the institution of the strict settlement in the later seventeenth century) his or hers to alienate at will. It typically possessed a central core of mansion and garden, often accompanied by a park and "home farm", which was surrounded by an outer penumbra of farms and farmland. The latter was mainly leased, for defined periods of time, to tenants, although scattered areas were kept in hand by the owner, especially plantations and game preserves. This definition, broad as it is, would simply not apply in most trans-Atlantic contexts. On the east coast of America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as in the West Indies, few mansions had parks and gardens as extensive (relative to the productive part of the estate) as those in England; while a far greater proportion of estate land was usually kept in hand, managed directly, and exploited by populations of slaves or bonded labourers. Such differences, as well as wider contrasts in the character of rural society, mean that the term "estate" needs to be treated with some care by archaeologists. Context is all.

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The Character of Landed Estates in England

Throughout its history the English landed estate has vaunted its rural and traditional character. A great house was always a “country house” even when its owners lacked another, specifically urban residence. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and even more in the nineteenth, large landowners emphasised the stability and longevity of their property, and of their title to it, by manipulating symbols of the past, ostentatiously displaying heraldry and, in certain circumstances, consciously adopting archaic forms of architecture or landscape design. Modern critics of landed wealth often describe the estate as a “relic of feudalism”: but in reality it is a specifically modern form, something which only developed in the post-medieval world. Its distinguishing feature was individual control over the exploitation and physical appearance of an extensive tract of countryside. In the middle ages, large properties had seldom been held as unitary blocks and, more importantly, rights over land were usually multiple, complex and diffuse. The landed estate could only emerge in a world in which absolute rights of property in land were recognised, something which only happened as feudal concepts of tenure decayed, and the power of the Crown was limited, in the course of the seventeenth century.

By the eighteenth century estates were fully involved in capitalist production. They played an important (although perhaps not crucial) role in the so-called “agricultural revolution” (Clay, 1985; Habbakuk, 1953; Mingay, 1989). Enclosure, engrossment and the replacement of customary tenures by leases led to an expansion in the cultivated acreage and the emergence of larger and (it is alleged) more efficient and productive farms (Mingay, 1989). On these, “best practice”—especially the use of new forms of crops and rotations—could be enforced by leases. The estate system allowed, moreover, a pooling of resources between owners and producers: the landowner supplied and maintained the fixed capital, of farms and fields, while the tenant farmer provided the working capital, of stock and equipment. But estates were also active in fostering industrial expansion, developing their urban properties and systematically exploiting the mineral rights on their estates and other industrial opportunities. Many were also involved in the development of the Atlantic economy, through investments in shipping or colonial plantations. Landed estates did not stand aloof from modernity: they embraced it.

Landed estates never came to dominate in all parts of England. In some areas—especially old-enclosed, pasture-farming districts like the Weald of Kent and Sussex or the East Anglian claylands, or areas of particularly fertile land—their impact was limited. While large parts of such districts did eventually fall into the hands of substantial proprietors this was normally in the form of fragmented blocks. It was in areas of relatively poor land that estates reached their greatest extent: moorland districts and, in particular, in areas of light, sheep-and-arable land where small freehold farmers found it difficult to make a living in the increasingly market-orientated economy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was in these districts that we find most of the really large properties—those belonging to the group that Clemenson defined as the “great landowners”—which extended over 10,000 acres or more; although scattered examples of such units could, of course, be found

throughout the country (Clemenson, 1982:7–9). Moreover, such relatively marginal environments were often blank canvasses, with extensive tracts of unenclosed common and open field land which could be enclosed, “improved” and generally made to bear the mark of individual ownership. New roads, new hedges and new buildings (often, from the late eighteenth century, in some recognisable estate style) proclaimed the owner’s control, involvement in modern agriculture and—by the nineteenth century—his or her paternalist care for the local poor.

On less marginal land the estates of the local gentry, embracing a parish or two and ranging from around 1,000 to 10,000 acres, tended to be more prominent (Clemenson, 1982:7–9). In these long-settled and, in many cases, long-enclosed landscapes the impact of landed properties was often rather less than in more marginal districts because they were already cluttered with features—they were not so ripe for change and “improvement”. But everywhere in post-medieval England the impact of private ownership on the landscape grew over time, as both the will to mould the environment and the opportunity to do so increased.

Phases of Development

The changing character of estate landscapes has been charted in detail by a number of researchers, but only a very brief account can be presented here. We may define an initial phase, running from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth century. In terms of mansions and gardens, this has received particular attention from English archaeologists, especially excavators, with important studies of the conversion of monastic houses into country houses in the aftermath of the Dissolution of the Monasteries (Howard, 2003); ideological interpretations of Renaissance architecture (Johnson, 1993) and the excavation and earthwork surveys of a large number of designed landscapes (Pattison, 1998; Taylor, 1983). Mansions which were, at least ostensibly, defended by moats, towers and battlements declined in popularity. They were replaced by a succession of forms loosely based on Renaissance models, derived directly or indirectly from Italian designs. Symmetry—increasingly of internal plan as well as external elevations—became of paramount importance. New kinds of room, such as the long gallery, were adopted as old medieval forms—hall, “lodgings” for retainers and other members of the household—declined. These changes have been interpreted in a variety of ways, but most agree on their social and political implications (Girouard, 1978). As a centralised state developed under the Tudor dynasty, power was based less on patterns of local allegiance and the potential of armed force, than on attendance at court and a knowledge of the appropriate social skills for advancement—a familiarity with Renaissance civilisation.

The gardens associated with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century mansions similarly went through a series of formal, geometric styles, featuring various combinations of topiary, knots and parterres, terraces and complex water features. Many residences, and certainly all the larger ones, also possessed a deer park, more ornamental in appearance than the hunting grounds of the middle ages but essentially simple landscapes of woods, grass and scattered trees. The scale of

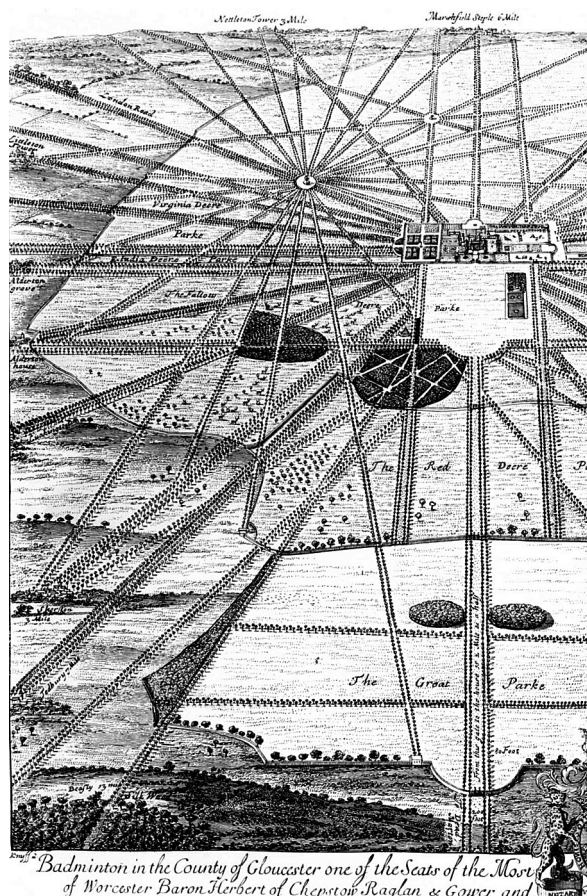
designed grounds increased during this period but even the greatest residences usually retained such productive facilities as barns and farmyards in close proximity, and many apparently “aesthetic” features also had a practical significance. In a society which was still in essence vertically integrated, rather than horizontally stratified, landscapes of ostentatious production served to impress and overawe local communities, just as the wit and sophistication of monuments and statues in the ornamental parts of the grounds might impress social equals (Williamson, 1995:31–35). These were landscapes which did not operate primarily or at least solely through intellectual exclusion: many of their key features were to be found in the grounds of yeoman farmers, but on a diminutive scale, a point to which I shall return.

There were important changes, especially in the scale of landscape design, in the period after the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. With the security of landed property now protected against the arbitrary power of the Crown by a parliament of the propertied, with the adoption of new inheritance practices (entails and strict settlements), and with significant developments in the structure of farming, landed estates grew steadily in size (Beckett, 1984, 1986). Enclosure, and the replacement of customary tenancies with leaseholds, ensured that their control over the landscape also grew. Parks increased in number and size; avenues, focussed on the mansion, spread across the landscape; and, encouraged by writers like John Evelyn and Moses Cook, there was a general upsurge in the planting of woods and plantations (Fig. 2.1) (Daniels, 1988; Williamson and Bellamy, 1987:192–199). Such extensive landscaping beyond the core of mansion, garden and park arguably represents the archaeological signal of the emergence of the true landed estate and of real private property in land. Sixteenth-century lawyers and topographers had described an estate, in essence, as a collection of rights and incomes; by the mid-eighteenth century it was a block of privately owned and controlled land.

A second phase in the development of estate landscapes spans, roughly, the middle and later decades of the eighteenth century. Broadly Palladian, and subsequently Neoclassical, forms of architecture were universal for mansions, and to some extent the design of their grounds mirrored this. Gardens became simpler and less geometric in character, and under designers like William Kent often evoked the idealised landscapes of Italy, as well as incorporating complex iconographic schemes. The formal structure of geometric gardens was now removed from the walls of the mansion, together with the various productive features in which the gentry had once delighted. In the classic landscapes of Capability Brown and his contemporaries the house stood “free of walls”: shrubberies and informal gardens or pleasure grounds were retained to one side of the main façade but the principal setting for the mansion was now the landscape park, more manicured in appearance than the deer parks of previous centuries (Fig. 2.2).

These changes have also been interpreted in social terms (Daniels and Seymour, 1990; Girouard, 1978; Porter, 1990:45; Way, 1997:40; Williamson, 1995). In particular, as a fully developed capitalist economy emerged, society was divided along class lines—horizontally stratified, rather than vertically integrated through ties of obligation, deference and local or regional identity. This, as I shall explain below, had important implications for the gardens and courts in the immediate vicinity of

Fig. 2.1 Badminton, Gloucestershire. The landscape of power in the later seventeenth century, as illustrated in Johannes Kip and Leonard Knyff's *Britannia Illustrata* of 1707



the house. But most archaeologists and historians have emphasised the importance of the park as an extensive insulating space, wrapped around the walls of the mansion. The mansion was isolated within the park, as perimeter belts proliferated and roads and footpaths were routinely closed or diverted, especially following important legal changes in 1773. All this manifested the growing gulf that was emerging between the aristocracy and gentry on the one hand, and the wider community on the other: as well as the increasing consolidation of the upper ranks of society into a single social group, “the polite”, comprising (in Girouard’s words) “the people who owned and ran the country” (Girouard, 1990:76–77). Landed estates now dominated extensive tracts of the English countryside: plantations spread across the countryside, flamboyant schemes of land improvement were instituted and farm buildings were rebuilt on modern lines. Land management was increasingly geared towards extensive leisure pursuits like fox hunting and game shooting.

A third main phase of estate development spans the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. The landed estate now existed within an increasingly



Fig. 2.2 Honing Hall, Norfolk: a typical late eighteenth-century mansion in its setting. No gardens interrupt the view across the open parkland, and stables, kitchen garden and other practical and productive facilities are hidden from view

industrial and urban world, one in which the economic and political influence of manufacturers, industrialists and the middle class as a whole were all increasing. These changes in the balance of economic and cultural power are first clearly manifested in the work of the leading landscape gardener of the 1790s and early 1800s, Humphry Repton. His style was more subtle and considered than that of Brown, and thus better suited to smaller properties, the diminutive parks of those on the fringes of landed society (Daniels, 1999). It was not by “adding field to field, or by taking away hedges, or by removing roads to a distance” that the surroundings of the smaller villa or manor house were to be improved: instead, this could only be achieved by exploiting “every circumstance of interest and beauty within our reach, and by hiding such objects as cannot be viewed with pleasure” (Repton, 1816:68). Indeed, in his later work Repton considered the grounds of even more lowly properties, outside the category of the landed estate altogether, writing in 1816 (p. 69) how:

it seldom falls to the lot of the improver to be called upon for his opinion on places of great extent. . . while in the neighbourhood of every city or manufacturing town, new places as villas are daily springing up, and these, with a few acres, require all the conveniences, comforts and appendages, of larger and more sumptuous, if not more expensive places. And. . . these have of late had the greatest claim to my attention.

Repton’s later designs thus show an increasing emphasis on gardens and pleasure grounds and on placing these once more in prominent positions in the country house landscape. At the same time, he consciously manipulated the landscape in order

to emphasise not only the extent of ownership but also the paternalistic involvement of landowners in local affairs, advocating, for example, the creation of gaps in perimeter belts, in order to dissolve social tensions (Daniels, 1982, 1999).

The return of formal, structured gardens to prominence—gardens that grew ever more extensive and elaborate under mid-century designers like William Andrews Nesfield (Elliott, 1986)—signalled a cultural *rapprochement* with the bourgeoisie, who had continued (of necessity, given the relatively small areas of land at their disposal) to value gardens, as opposed to parks, as the setting for their homes (Fig. 2.3). This development was also fuelled, no doubt, by the increasing rate of social mobility, as larger numbers of individuals grown wealthy in the expanding commercial and industrial sectors bought, or married, into the landed class. The exploits of the “gardener heroes” employed by the great estates—John Caie at Woburn, Donald Beaton at Shrubland Park, Joseph Paxton at Chatsworth—were eagerly consumed by middle-class readers of the burgeoning gardening press. Yet it was now, somewhat paradoxically, that the image of the estate as a self-consciously feudal and rural entity was also elaborated. The majority of mansions erected in Britain after c.1820 were thus built in some self-consciously archaic style, full-blown medieval gothic or “Jacobethan” (one reason for the return of parterres and topiary in gardens was that they provided a suitable accompaniment for such architecture) (Girouard, 1979). “Model” villages like Edensor near Chatsworth or Houghton in Norfolk, clustering deferentially at the park gates, helped counter the claims from middle-class radicals, that the country was ruled by an essentially selfish clique, but they also harked back to a supposed period of pre-industrial rural harmony—“the rich man at his castle, the poor man at his gate”, in the words of the contemporary hymn (Darley,



Fig. 2.3 Holkham Hall, Norfolk. When completed in the middle of the eighteenth century, the hall was set within an open, “naturalistic” landscape. In the mid-nineteenth century, in keeping with the prevailing fashion, it was provided with a more formal and architectural setting—geometric gardens and substantial terraces—designed by William Andrews Nesfield

1975; Barnatt and Williamson, 2005:164–169). The picturesque styles adopted for such places were mirrored, in more subdued form, by the workers' cottages which were now (for the first time) widely constructed on estates, as well as by farms and farm buildings (Fuller, 1976). And landowners fought hard to keep the appearances of modern, industrial society at bay, often vehemently opposing industrial expansion on their doorsteps and ensuring that railway lines ran far from their park walls.

Nevertheless, while certain features of the modern world were shunned by nineteenth-century landowners, and while their chosen styles of architecture were determinedly archaic, their estates also proudly displayed an easy familiarity with the latest technology. Although few could boast structures to rival Paxton's Great Conservatory at Chatsworth, flamboyant glasshouses and complex heating systems could be found in the kitchen gardens of most country houses. In the mansion itself, gas lighting was standard by the middle years of the nineteenth century (many country houses had their own gas works and retorts) and by the end of the century electric lighting was beginning to appear (Girouard, 1978:250–251, 268). The attitudes of the landed class to science and modernity were thus complex and ambivalent, reflecting their own ambiguous and uncertain position in the modern world.

The Language of Landscape

The above account, a bald summary of the work of a number of scholars, is essentially Marxist in character, in the sense that buildings and landscapes are largely viewed as devices for the negotiation and legitimation of power, while particular styles and forms are seen as responses to changes in social stratification and the distribution of wealth. Yet some of the most important building-blocks of this argument, glossed over in a necessarily brief account, are more *interpretive* in character, in that they rely, in particular, on a dissolution of traditional distinctions between the “vernacular” landscape, primarily structured by economic and agrarian concerns; and the “designed”, embodying mainly social, aesthetic and ideological values. To put it another way, the full complexities of the relationship between social forms on the one hand, and landscapes and material culture on the other, are not brought out by the separations and distinctions inherent in many Marxist approaches, even those which consciously eschew a simplistic base/superstructure model. For this reason, I want to explore in more detail one particular phase of estate archaeology in order to illustrate how, in a particular social context, meaning came to be written into landscape.

As already noted, the key development in eighteenth-century landscape design was the disappearance of enclosed geometric gardens and their replacement by the sweeping irregularity of the landscape park. This has usually, in social terms, been seen as evidence for the increasing spatial separation of different groups, and there is abundant contemporary written evidence to support this interpretation (Daniels and Seymour, 1990). Humphry Repton, in the early stages of his career, thus described how the owner of one Hertfordshire estate:

Might think a public road no less appropriate then cheerful immediately in front of the house; or a foot path. . . cutting up the lawn in another direction, passing close to the windows, leaving the house on a kind of peninsula surrounded by carts, wagons, gypsies &c. &c. who feel they have a right of intrusion. Yet when the place with all its defects shall pass under the correcting hand of good taste, the view from the house will be changed with the views of its possessor. (Williamson, 1995:105)

We know less of the reactions of the local poor to the increasing isolation of the local rich, but there are some indications. An autobiography of a blacksmith from Bedale in Yorkshire, written in verse form in the late eighteenth century, describes how the local country house, the Rand, was rebuilt, a park laid out around it, and ancient rights of way closed or diverted:

And now them roads are done away,
And one made in their room,
Quite to the east, of wide display,
Where you may go and come,
Quite unobserved from the Rand,
The trees do them seclude.
If modern times, do call such grand
Its from a gloomy mood. (Lewis, 1975)

In addition to this rather straightforward argument for social distancing and privacy, the rise to popularity of the landscape park has also been characterised by some scholars as a move towards a more “natural” setting for the mansion, the reasons for which have been interpreted in rather more complex social and ideological terms. The art historian Anne Bermingham has thus interpreted it both as a reaction to the increasingly enclosed character of the English landscape and as a form of legitimisation, serving to make the increasingly stratified character of rural society appear both natural and inevitable.

As the real landscape began to look increasingly artificial, like a garden, the garden began to look increasingly natural, like the pre-enclosed landscape. Thus a natural landscape became the prerogative of the estate. . . so that nature was a sign of property and property the sign of nature. . . By conflating nature with the fashionable taste of a new social order, it redefined the natural in terms of this order, and vice versa. (Bermingham, 1987, 13–14)

But a truly interpretive archaeology should always return, repeatedly, to the details of a cultural transformation: to a dissection of its individual characteristics and their particular significance for contemporary social actors. In this particular case, two questions about, and aspects of, landscape change have usually been ignored or oversimplified. The first is the extent to which, or indeed the ways in which, the manicured simplicity of the eighteenth-century landscape park—with its panoramas of grass and scattered trees, blocks of woodland and serpentine lakes—can meaningfully be described as either new or “natural”. In reality parks were highly contrived environments which bore little resemblance to most of the (semi-) natural habitats which then remained in England, after five millennia or more of intensive land use. Instead they represented a development of one particular, and specifically elite, form of semi-natural land use—the private wood-pasture. In the early middle ages deer parks had been enclosed, wooded and usually isolated



Fig. 2.4 Somerleyton Hall, Suffolk, and its landscape as depicted on an estate map of 1653. The park already has many of the features we usually associate with the “landscape parks” of the eighteenth century. Note the peripheral belts of woodland, and the lines of trees left where hedges have been removed

hunting grounds and venison farms, but in later medieval times they became indispensable adjuncts to the mansion and its gardens, more open in character, and more carefully designed (Fig. 2.4). The eighteenth century simply saw this development taken a stage further, with the park affirmed as the principal setting for the house by the removal of most of the gardens and enclosures from around it. The park was important to contemporaries because it was a *park*, not just as some idealised representation of the undefined “natural”: it was understood by contemporaries, if not always by modern art historians, as a landscape with an immense historical pedigree, loaded with inherited social meaning.

The removal of formal gardens also requires more careful consideration, and more *contextual* consideration, than it is usually afforded by garden historians. Gardens in reality, as already intimated, formed only one part of the complex of enclosures and facilities which clustered around the residences of the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century gentry: farmyards, barns and kitchen gardens, together with a range of special resources for producing socially restricted foodstuffs, most

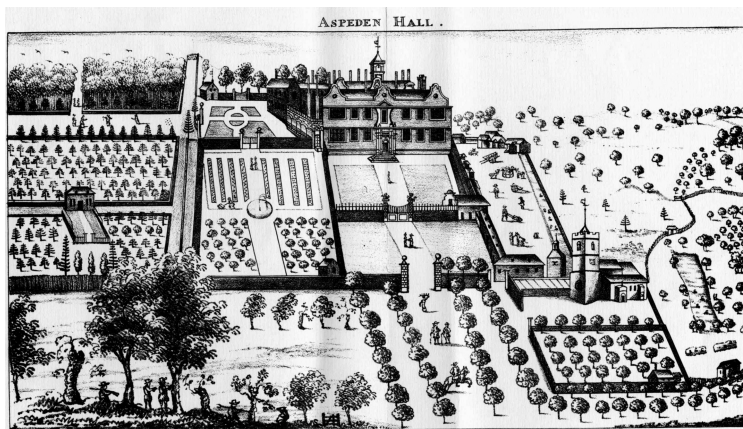


Fig. 2.5 Aspenden Hall, Hertfordshire, as illustrated in Henry Chauncy's *Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire* of 1700. Like most elite residences of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the hall is surrounded by productive as well as by ornamental features, including orchards, nut grounds, a farm yard and a dovecote

notably fishponds and dovecotes. In addition, many of the “ornamental” features in the mansion’s grounds had a clear productive aspect—and *vice versa* (Fig. 2.5). Canals and basins were stocked with fish; orchards were places for meditation as much as food production; the larger fish ponds were regularly used for recreational boating. Like the park, many of these productive facilities had strong social and ideological meanings which were long in the making, but which we can now often only recover with an effort. Dovecotes, for example, had for centuries been an important part of elite residential complexes, restricted by law to the manorial elite because their denizens fed indiscriminately on the crops growing in the surrounding fields, regardless of ownership: they were, as Hamon le Strange put it in 1649, “the right onely and badge of a lordship or signorye” (Norfolk Record Office Le Strange ND 22.34). Only at the end of the century was the manorial monopoly on keeping pigeons rescinded, but even after this the careful construction and architectural sophistication of dovecotes, together with their prominent location within domestic complexes, show that they remained important symbols of elite status.

Fishponds, too, were productive features loaded with significance by virtue of their necessary associations with landed wealth, while even orchards, while by no means restricted to the gentry and aristocracy, could serve nevertheless as demonstrations of status. Large landowners went out of their way to collect and display innumerable rare and exotic varieties, often meticulously listed in their commonplace and memoranda books: no less than 93 different kinds in the grounds of East Turnbull manor in Berkshire in 1693, for example (Berkshire Record Office D/ED F 14). The removal of this complex collection of features from the walls of the mansion was at least as significant as the destruction of garden terraces and parterres which accompanied it. One collection of ancient symbols was thus removed from the vicinity of the mansion in order to allow for the dominance of another.

As already noted, the eighteenth century was a period in which a growing social gulf emerged between “the polite” and wider society. But it was also a time of considerable economic expansion, leading to increasing rates of social mobility (Langford, 1989:68, 417–419; MacKendrick et al., 1982). Questions of social definition were acute, as early eighteenth-century novels make clear: where, precisely, should the line between the “polite” and the rest be drawn, and how should the former be recognised in a world in which increasing levels of material production were serving to erode the traditional markers of status? The landscape park served to clarify the boundaries of this group, in a number of ways. The growing middle classes made elaborate gardens—the business of gardening, like other forms of consumption, expanded considerably in the course of the eighteenth century. As a result, gardens in themselves were no longer significant markers of social status and thus played a subsidiary role in the country house landscape. They were redolent of the middle classes. But direct association with production, even of a superior kind, was also no longer acceptable in a world geared to fashionable *consumption* and signs of agriculture—barns and farmyards lying close to the mansion—smacked of the tenant farmer. The park, in contrast, was not only a landscape with an impeccable aristocratic pedigree. It also provided opportunities for the enjoyment of the key elite recreations of the period—shooting and riding—and, above all, it signalled membership of the traditional elite at a time of uncertainty because its creation demanded the one resource that aspiring members of the middle classes lacked: land in abundance. The park was the ideal symbol of “polite society”, and an indispensable sign that an individual belonged to this group. The development of designed landscapes in the eighteenth century is a good example of the way in which new meanings, appropriate to new circumstances, are constructed in part from a grammar of long-established and familiar elements, combined, included or excluded in novel ways.

The recognition that the development of the “core” of the landed estate needs to be understood, in part, in terms of a language of landscape rooted in concepts of production shows the value of dissolving the traditional distinction between the vernacular, agrarian and economic on the one hand, and the aesthetic and ornamental on the other. But, and again in an eighteenth-century context, such a dissolution can also throw light on the outer estate landscape, the farms and fields of the wider tenanted land. Some historical geographers have emphasised the extent to which the organisation of estate landscapes exhibits clear signs of “distance decay” (Clemenson, 1982:74–91; Fuller, 1976; Rawding, 1992). Ornamental estate villages thus lay close to the park gates; settlements at a distance, in contrast, might be neglected. While this is a useful model, it is important to emphasise the extent to which the aesthetic, and the functional, interpenetrated each other. Little in the landscape of the estate was either purely functional or purely ornamental, wherever it lay. The landscape park itself was intensively used for grazing and timber production and its form modified accordingly: in the words of John Lawrence in 1801, it should serve as a “theatre . . . for the display of all the notable varieties of experimental husbandry” (Lawrence, 1801:100). Conversely, woods planted at a considerable distance from the mansion were often highly decorative as well as functional and

economic in character. Moreover, although eighteenth- and nineteenth-century parks were generally sealed off from the surrounding landscape by perimeter planting, “rides” or “ridings”—ornamented drives—often extended out into the wider countryside. As Thomas Whateley neatly put it in 1770, gardening “Is no longer confined to the spots from which it borrows its name, but regulates also the disposition and embellishments of a park, a farm, or a riding” (Whateley, 1770(1):164–165). Of all these embellishments of the wider landscape, tree-planting was the most symbolically loaded (Daniels, 1988). Woods and plantations were signs of gentility because only the wealthy could afford to tie up substantial areas of land in such a long-term investment. Planting, moreover, was only possible where land was enclosed, rather than exploited in common: trees on commons were vulnerable to grazing livestock, as well as to the attentions of the poor, in search of firewood. Contemporaries well understood this particular aspect of the language of landscape. Planting symbolised ownership of large areas of land in the form of absolute private property.

But even the direct exploitation of the land, by farming, might be informed by notions other than the purely agrarian and economic. Land and the uses to which it was put were important in the game of politics, both in a direct way—economic dominance of a district ensured local obligation and dependence, and thus political support for a family’s chosen candidate—but also indirectly, in terms of demonstrating acceptable values, and thus legitimating the claims of the established elite to be the natural rulers of the country. Land and its exploitation were bound up in complex agendas, and in the kind of agriculturally marginal areas in which large estates flourished extensive improvement schemes were usually only partly motivated by a desire to make money. Indeed, most estates probably had little idea of how much money they *were* making (Gregory, 2005), and even when aware that some reclamation and improvement projects were financially ruinous they often regarded this with equanimity. When in 1774 Thomas de Grey bemoaned the costs of enclosing the heaths at Tottington in Norfolk he observed that the “great expense. . . would but ill answer, unless there was a real satisfaction in employing the labourers and bringing forth a ragged dirty parish to a neatness of cultivation” (quoted in Wade Martins and Williamson, 1999:192). Paternalism and a desire to appear the owner of an “improving” estate, rather than backwoods lord of a rural slum, were powerful motivations. Enclosure of open fields and the widespread “tidying up” of the landscape in long-enclosed areas of England (Turner, 2004; Wade Martins and Williamson, 1999:67–69) both represented, in part, an attempt to transform the countryside along fashionable, rational, “improving” lines which was more aesthetic than agrarian. Economic and agricultural historians would do well to note this: for many of the methods and techniques advocated by elite agriculturalists in this period, such as the artificial irrigation of water meadows, were quite unsuitable for the areas in which they were applied and they served more to demonstrate a fashionable involvement in “improvement” than to actually increase agricultural production. The boundaries of modern academic disciplines, the division between “garden historians” and “agricultural historians”, can obscure continuities in human actions which language sometimes highlights. Contemporaries used the

term “improvement” indiscriminately for the reclamation of “waste”, for schemes of afforestation, and for the laying out of parks and pleasure grounds.

Holkham and Monticello: Style and Meaning in England and America

The landscape of English estates in the eighteenth century thus incorporated a complex language, derived as much from everyday experience, and inherited vernacular meaning, as from broad overarching philosophical and aesthetic concerns and concepts. It follows that while *in general* terms the landscapes of estates everywhere shared important similarities, local environmental circumstances, past trajectories of landscape development and particular social conditions could generate important variations on a central theme. Even in England the design of parks and gardens in the eighteenth century, and later, displays a considerable degree of regional variation (Williamson, 2004). When we come to consider estate landscapes across a broader canvas, more important differences emerge: differences which at one level of analysis might be considered as “noise”, but at another convey important information about life and experience in particular societies.

Some archaeologists have thus come close to attributing a universal significance to eighteenth-century Palladian architecture, and associated styles of material culture: Deetz’s “Georgian Order” (Deetz, 1977; Johnson, 1996). To some extent the widespread adoption of this style may have reflected the adoption of shared values: but whether it had *precisely* the same significance in the case of a Tidewater planter’s home, a great Palladian mansion in provincial England or, indeed, of a diminutive “villa” on the outskirts of London seems unlikely. Indeed, more illuminating than the similarities are the differences between estate landscapes on the two sides of the Atlantic, and especially in the ways in which their main elements were ordered and integrated. A useful comparison can be made here—in spite of considerable differences in scale—between Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello and a house like Holkham in north Norfolk, the home of Thomas William Coke, the Earl of Essex.

Coke was the descendant of the great seventeenth-century lawyer Edward Coke, whose commentaries on the Magna Carta were an important influence on Jefferson’s own political ideas: and he was himself a staunch Whig politician who offered firm support to the American revolutionaries and corresponded with George Washington. These men lived in the same political and philosophical world and shared many interests outside politics. Both had a great enthusiasm not only for architecture and garden design, but also for new agricultural methods—Coke is known to generations of English schoolchildren as “Coke of Norfolk”, the acknowledged leader of the “agricultural revolution” of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Stirling, 1912).

Both Monticello and Holkham Hall were Palladian structures, even if the latter was built on a much larger scale than the former (it was begun in 1734 and only completed in the late 1750s). But like other contemporary country houses in England, Holkham steadfastly abjured any overt signs of involvement in agricultural

production. There were no farmyards, barns or other agricultural facilities within sight of the house. Even the kitchen garden, where food for the consumption of the household was produced, lay discretely to one side; and in the 1780s, shortly before Jefferson began the transformation of Monticello, it was moved still further from the mansion to a site quite isolated in the park nearly a kilometre to the west. Coke's active involvement in agriculture was proclaimed in the estate landscape, but not in the area close to the house. Although the park at Holkham—partly as a result of the expansion carried out by Coke himself—covered a vast amount of ground, not all of the area lying within the perimeter belts was actually under pasture. In fact, only the northern section, in view of the house, was true parkland, comprising grass and scattered trees. The southern portion was under arable cultivation. This area, moreover, contained only a single “garden building”—the Great Barn, a vast structure designed by the architect Samuel Wyatt in a stripped-down classical style and completed in 1792. It was flanked by ornamental planting and served as the setting for the “sheep shearings”, agricultural shows which were originally intended to demonstrate new techniques to Coke's tenants and neighbours, but which soon attracted visitors from all over England, and eventually from various parts of Europe. Indeed, the whole of the southern section of the park was a showcase for improved agriculture: particularly for the new crops, and the new forms of crop rotation, pioneered by Coke. The landscape was thus designed to combine “beauty and utility”, and one visitor commented: “what can be more beautiful than the diversified scenery which there presents itself? . . . The effects of order and industry, combined with abundance, must be gratifying to every spectator” (Curwen, 1809:238; Williamson, 2003:79–81). But this area was quite out of sight of the house, hidden by rising ground and judiciously placed plantations.

At Monticello, the relationship between mansion house and productive facilities could hardly have been more different. Jefferson's interest in agriculture and horticulture was proudly displayed in immediate proximity: terraces for vegetables and fruit trees descend the hill from the oval lawn, and even the slave quarters were positioned at no great distance from the house. In this, of course, Monticello was not unusual. Eighteenth-century Palladian mansions in America were generally associated with productive facilities in way that would have made most English contemporaries feel uncomfortable. Such differences carry information about the societies in question which is at least as important as anything conveyed by the broader similarity of these “estate landscapes”.

Conclusion: Interpretation and Experience

In spite of its emphasis on the complexities of the eighteenth-century language of estate landscaping, and on the need to understand the contexts of contemporary signs and symbols, this chapter is perhaps more firmly rooted in a Marxist approach to the past than in any other theoretical perspective. Such an intellectual emphasis derives, of course, in large part from personal experience and contemporary political circumstance; and in spite of what I perceive as its strengths, it is unquestionably partial

and contingent. Indeed, the changing experience of the writer continues to raise new possibilities of interpretation. I was brought up in a suburban world in which the landscape of the country estate seemed alien, elitist and exploitative: where I lived, almost everybody shared an abhorrence of the landed rich, both for what they supposedly did in the past and for what they represented in the present. Organised fox hunting with hounds, for example, was and still is almost universally viewed as a pointless barbarity by the urban and suburban majority in England. The traditional rural rich were beyond the pale, in a way that—rather curiously, given their more active role, power and political relevance—the urban and industrial rich were not. They were quintessentially *other*.

Yet, having now lived on a smallholding in rural Norfolk for several years, perceptions quietly, worryingly shift. The fox does not seem quite such an innocent victim after the hen house has been raided for the fourth or fifth time. Estates, where they still survive intact, are almost invariably superior, in environmental terms, to the lands of the agribusiness farmers—often the sons or grandsons of former estate tenants—around them. For the second half of the twentieth century saw English farmers indulge in an orgy of environmental destruction—the bulldozing of hedges, the filling of ponds, the felling of trees—which reduced large areas of the countryside, in the east of the country especially, to something resembling the prairies of the American Midwest. Traditional estates, for the most part, resisted this temptation, imbued as they were with a long tradition of regarding the use of the land (as already described) in complex ways, seeing it as something other than an economic resource, to be ruthlessly milked for what it can produce. Many owners of landed estates still see possession of land as an end in itself, and an estate as something to be cared for, embellished and enjoyed. In a similar way, tied estate cottages seem less a nefarious way of controlling a rural labour force than a positive good in the rural community: for the alternative is to have these houses sold to bourgeois incomers. Working people cannot afford to buy homes in most villages which lie within commuting distance of a large town or city, and most of the social housing in rural, as in urban, areas was sold off by Margaret Thatcher's appalling government in the 1980s. Indeed, the real dividing line in many country districts is now between all those involved in the life of the estate, from owner to farm labourer; and middle-class urban incomers.

Were similar social complexities, and environmental benefits, also present in the past? Certainly, given that the past resides as much in the diverse individual and social experiences of the present, as in those of the past, new agendas for exploring the archaeology of the landed estate will continue to emerge.

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