

Birthplace of the English garden landscape

Andrew Bascott visits Rousham House in Oxfordshire
to explain its seminal place in horticultural history



Oxfordshire is a county with a rich heritage: it's home to the world's oldest university; the River Thames, England's most iconic river, flows through much of it; and Britain's most admired Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was born and also buried here. But less known is its part in the birth of English garden landscape design.

A dozen miles north of Oxford's 'dreaming spires', tucked away beside the meandering banks of another river, the Cherwell, there is a country-house garden that has changed little over almost 300 years. Rousham House dates from 1635 and, although architecturally interesting in its own right, it is the gardens that are of historical importance. Sir Robert Dormer built the house, but it was William Kent who really left his mark.

Kent is thought to have been born in

1685 in Bridlington on the Yorkshire coast. The son of a joiner, he became a man with many creative talents. His working life began as a sign and coach painter, but over time he worked as an architect, interior designer and illustrator, before finally embarking upon perhaps his most influential career, that of garden designer.

Like many in the early eighteenth century he was drawn to Italy, one of the Grand Tour highlights. His time spent exploring and working there, amongst its Classical art and architecture, was to have a great influence on his work both as an architect and garden designer.

His pioneering vision was one of blending gardens with Nature; to create a natural landscape with the look and feel of a classical painting. Horace Walpole, the great writer with a passion for gardens, wrote of Kent that "he had leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden"; while Kent himself remarked that "all gardening is landscape painting".

He contributed to the designs of some of England's great country-house gardens, including those at Chatsworth and Stowe; but it was only at Rousham where he conceived the whole garden. It is his lasting legacy.

Kent was hired in 1738, carrying on from the work of renowned royal gardener Charles Bridgeman. His first task was to build the impressive stable block and add wings to the south front of the house. The grounds presented Kent with an irregular-shaped canvas,



Left, William Kent's Praenest is the largest of his architectural features within the grounds of Rousham House. Above a view of the house across extensive parkland.

complete with a steep slope down to the banks of the Cherwell, upon which he could create his 'painting'.

Bridgeman's designs at Rousham were largely formal and symmetrical, and so Kent's vision for the gardens were to be almost revolutionary. However, one feature Bridgeman had started, and which Kent completed, was the ha-ha. The sunken stone wall allowed open views of the tree-planted parkland from within the gardens and, unusually, at Rousham snakes its way to within a few feet of the house.

While trees, ornamental ponds and wooded glades were all important elements within Kent's vision for Rousham, so too were the strategically placed pieces of statuary and Classical architecture, designed to intrigue and delight. These features also extended well beyond the garden boundary,

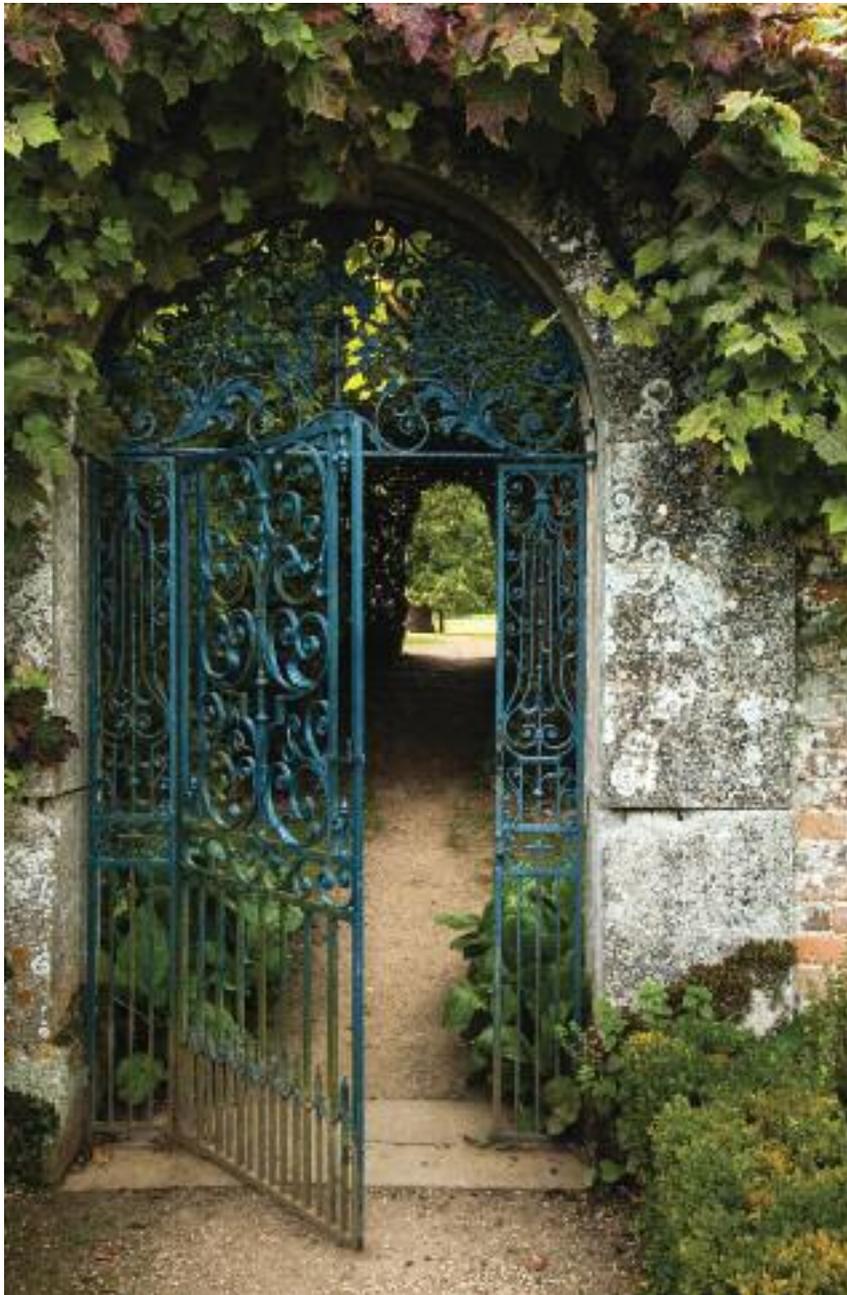
with a Gothic stone arch, the Eye-catcher, perched across the valley, acting as a distant focal point.

Today, all is much as Kent left it. The statues dotted throughout, range from the romantic such as Apollo and Venus, to the macabre and gruesome of Scheemaker's the Dying Gladiator and the Lion and Horse.

Water features are found in Venus' Vale, a grass amphitheatre edged by woodland, with a large octagonal pond linked to two stone-arched cascades. Just beyond the vale is the Watery Walk, a woodland path with a stone-lined rill running down its middle. Spring water flows along the rill, meandering beneath tall trees, into the Cold Bath, a smaller octagonal pool intended for bathing.

Kent's most impressive piece of Classical architecture is his seven-





Left, the ornate iron gate and arch of Cotswold stone at the entrance to the walled garden. Above, the statue of Apollo stands at the end of the tree-lined walk.

arched arcade, sitting atop a steep grassy bank overlooking the Cherwell. The Praeneste, as it is known, was inspired by the Temple of Fortune in the ancient Italian city of Praeneste, and was built as a place to rest and admire the riverside views.

Pre-dating Kent's work, however, and screened by a thick hedge of holly, yew and box, is the walled garden. Set within a high seventeenth-century brick wall, it provides a colourful respite from the greener, Classical landscape beyond. This 'secret garden' is entered through an ornate wrought-iron gate and is best visited in summer. Contained within its red-brick walls are deep herbaceous borders, a large vegetable garden and an ancient

espalier apple orchard; but its real gem is perhaps the Pigeon House garden. Here a stylish dovecote (circa 1685), provides the backdrop to the rose parterre, with its geometric-shaped box-hedged borders.

A small team of dedicated gardeners keep the gardens in the style that Kent created. They don't undertake dramatic makeovers but strive to preserve his vision and maintain the tricky balance he sought between Nature and design. The result is a unique and unspoilt piece of garden history. ■

Rousham Gardens are open every day. Admission fee. Telephone 01869 347 110; email ccd@rousham.org; website www.rousham.org