

Rousham

Rousham, Oxfordshire, UK

Photographs by Alan Ward 1985, 1997, 2014

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Rousham is one of the most significant designs of the eighteenth century, comprising a house and gardens, as well as the rural landscape along the River Cherwell in Oxfordshire. It includes one of William Kent's earliest designs, which is relatively intact on a small walkable site - still owned by the Dormer family. When General James Dormer inherited Rousham in 1737, it had a paddock west of the house and walled kitchen garden to the east, as well as an existing improvement along the river known as the New Garden, designed by Charles Bridgeman. Dormer engaged William Kent to update both the manor house and the site - to make it more naturalistic with classical elements added to the composition. As a result, Rousham has multiple layers, that are now experienced as an integrated design.

Kent retained the paddock stocked with animals with its ha-ha wall, as well as the kitchen garden (4,12). He adjusted Bridgeman's layout along the river into a circuit of curving paths passing through shaded woodlands and glades. A path at higher ground parallels the curving river with contrasts of dark and light under trees, and includes garden seats with distant views to the pastoral landscape beyond, including a constructed ruin as an eye-catcher in the distance (2). A 1750 letter from the gardener at Rousham survives, describing in detail the intended path through the garden. The photographs are generally arranged to correspond with that sequence.*

A series of cascades were made out of what were probably originally fishponds (16), first by Bridgeman, and later revised by Kent. Bridgeman's design along with Kent's theatrical garden sequence includes classical sculptural pieces along the route and other water features (2,9,10,11, 17,18). The path enters a woodland and follows a serpentine rill that flows from an octagonal basin flanked by a grotto, known as the Cold Bath. It is an unlikely juxtaposition of a geometric, octagonal pool in the midst of a shaded grove (18-20).

The irregular site with varied topography includes architectural focal points and resting places fit into the sloping grades along the circuit. The Townesend's Building (15), named after its mason, is approached from a lower elevation near the river. It is followed on the route by paths near the river leading to the Roman inspired Praeneste on high ground. The Praeneste is a garden arcade, acting as a retaining wall for a path above at a higher elevation (21-22). With seats in the arched openings, it is a place to pause and contemplate the sinuous river below and countryside beyond. Eighteenth-century writers likened Rousham to the Elysian Fields and the Arcadian landscapes of Greece. These terms are associated with burial places for those of honor and valor, perhaps linked to General Dormer's declining health when the garden was built.**

List of Photographs

1. South front of house and stables, 1997
2. Bowling green, Lion and Horse, and eye-catcher beyond, 1997
3. Rousham house, circa 1630, remodeled by Kent in 1730s, 1985
4. Gothic seat by Kent and 1730s ha-ha wall, 1997
5. Paddock with longhorn cattle, 1985
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7. Heyford bridge, circa 1255, 1985
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13. Garden seat, 1985
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29. Herbaceous borders in walled garden, 2014



























































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Linden-Ward, Blanche, *Silent City on a Hill: Landscapes of Memory and Boston's Mount Auburn Cemetery*

* The photographs are arranged based on a route through the garden from a 1738 map and a 1750 letter from John McClary, the gardener. Both are in an article by Marvis Batey, "The Way to View Rousham by Kent's Gardener," in *Garden History*, Vol. 11, (Autumn 1983), pp. 125-132.

** For more on the meaning of the garden elements at Rousham see the article by David R. Coffin, "The Elysian Fields of Rousham," in the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 130, No. 4 (Dec. 1986), pp. 406-423.