Prior Park Landscape Garden
Conservation Plan 2002

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Illustrated by Corinne Romow-Clarke
Photograph of Palladian Bridge
Palladian Bridge - NT12

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### Summary and Purpose of this Document

Prior Park is an 11.4 hectare 18th Century Landscape Garden to the south east of Bath. It forms a part of the 200 hectares of The Bath Skyline owned by The National Trust. Its acquisition in 1993 was a logical extension to the existing area owned by The National Trust as well as a vital act to save the garden and in particular the Palladian Bridge from irreversible neglect.

Since its acquisition The National Trust has researched all aspects of the garden's history and now has a clear idea about what needs to be done to complete the restoration of the garden to what we believe it would have been like in 1784. This was the year in which the garden's creator Ralph Allen died, and it has been chosen because it was the point of culmination in the garden's design, the English landscape style in this instance being more significant than the garden's earlier formality.

Much work has already been done as restoration of the garden began immediately after acquisition. Phase 1 was completed by 1996. This work included restoring the Palladian Bridge and Stair Bridge, making good the lakes and dams, and establishing a circular path. Phase II is ongoing and has included much planting, surrounding the pasture with railings and the establishment of a glade in the area of the Summerhouse. Phase III mainly comprises the restoration of the wilderness area of the garden. This includes the re-instatement of the Serpentine Lake, Gothic Temple, Grotto and Grass Cabinet, and the establishment of a permanent visitor reception area. This phase has not yet begun.

After 10 years of ownership the National Trust is poised to complete the restoration of the garden and one of the main purposes of this document is to clearly state what needs to be done to achieve this exciting goal.

Reference is made throughout to the information gathered together in past research (see bibliography) as well as plans drawn by Corinne Renou-Clark. This document therefore is a vision for the future of the garden, with full reference to historic precedent.

As a result of this document, an action plan containing a three-year work programme combined with financial forecasts, risk assessments, and importantly its links to the National Trust Strategic Plan will be produced and published. The combined documents will comprise the Property Management Plan, which will be complemented for example, by The Bath Community Learning Strategy.
Introduction
2.1 Statement of Significance

"In all, let Nature never be forgot... Consult the Genius of the Place." These words by the poet Alexander Pope encapsulate the philosophy of the English Landscape style. The combination of a dramatic site and rural scene so close to a busy city centre gives Prior Park its special character.

The mansion, not owned by the National Trust, was built as a showpiece for the Bath stone which Ralph Allen (1694-1764) did so much to promote in Bath and further afield. Part of the World Heritage Site of the city of Bath, the garden is listed Grade I in the register of Parks and Gardens compiled by English Heritage.

Ralph Allen began landscaping at Prior Park in the late 1730's and for some thirty years carried out several formal schemes before arriving at the simple unified design we see today. After his death in 1754 no planting took place to obscure the simple sweep to the Palladian Bridge and lakes or detract from the pastoral scene.

Alexander Pope was a friend and regular visitor and had great influence especially in the area known as the Wilderness. Lancelot "Capability" Brown was consulted but the extent of his influence has not been established.

2.2 Map 1: Plan of Prior Park Landscape Garden

Prior Park Landscape Garden - by Caroline Brunner-Claire

Reproduced from Guidebook.

- Visitor route (both directions)
- Entrance and Exit
- Kiosk
- Lavatories
- Centro
- Site of Serpentine Lake
- Wilderness
- Sham Bridge
- Site of Gothic Temple
- House (not NT)
- Path (no Access)
- Palladian Bridge
- Steps
- Site of Thatched House
- Icehouse
- Rock Gate
- Ralph Allen Drive

The following Statement of Significance was written for Prior Park Landscape Garden in 1998. It serves as an overview of the property and the foundation for this Conservation Plan and the Property Management Plan to follow.

2. Introduction

Bath is at the southernmost end of the Cotswold range and although it has the feel of that area, the character of the city and in particular the stone with which it has been built ensures that it remains quite distinct.

It is the distinct qualities of Bath stone that Ralph Allen capitalised on, and the building of Prior Park mansion provided the perfect showpiece for this stone that he quarried nearby. Positioned at the head of a valley overlooking Bath, the building of the mansion preceded the challenge of creating the suitable setting of a garden.

The landscape garden that gradually evolved sits in the valley below that sweeps dramatically down from the mansion and towards the city and conveys through its style the feeling of a rural scene in the foreground. It faces north and is a natural frost pocket that the winter sun hardly penetrates.

The soil in the valley is a calcareous loam and deep enough in most places for plants to get established. Geologically important is the shift from limestone to underlying soil. This means a spring line runs through the valley providing water, the availability of which was important at all stages of the garden's landscaping.

The following Statement of Significance was written for Prior Park Landscape Garden in 1998. It serves as an overview of the property and the foundation for this Conservation Plan and the Property Management Plan to follow.
2.3 Brief History of the Development of the Garden

Phase 1 (c. 1734-44): Alexander Pope

Allen began planting around 1734. Anthony Walker's engraving of 1754 (page 8) shows the garden below the house in the first phase, when it extended only halfway down the valley, terminating at the round pond with a wall but also with views to 'borrowed landscape' beyond. On the left (east) side, a straight hedge punctuated with urns on plinths suggests a formal layout and screens the vegetable garden and cold bath (now vanished). By contrast, the right-hand (west) side of the lawn shows the Wilderness with a serpentine path. Within this area there are still the remains of irregular moocco features, strongly influenced and probably laid out by Allen's friend, the poet Alexander Pope.

Pope was a pioneer of the landscape movement with his Guardian essay (1733) and his Epistle to Lord Burlington (1731): 'In all, let Nature never be forgot... Consult the Genius of the Place'. His own garden in the new freer English style was begun in Twickenham in 1720. Pope visited Bath in 1734 and corresponded with Allen, who visited him at Twickenham in 1736. He first came to Prior Park in 1737, making five more long visits — for three months in 1739 before he died in 1744. He ordered Bath stone urn for his garden and recommended Lord Burlington's gardener, Henry Scoth, to help Isaac Doddsley to grow pineapples. If Scoth visited Prior Park, he would have encouraged here the latest more informal style of garden being undertaken at Chiswick at the same time by landscape designer William Kent.

The general formal shape of the grounds in the first phase, with straight edges to the planted areas either side of the lawn leading down only as far as the pond, and with formal avenues above the house, is indicated on Thorpe's 1742 map of 'The Country Round Bath.'

Phase 2 (1744-c.1760): The Palladian Bridge

After Pope's death in 1744, Allen received plenty of advice from amateurs and friends, such as Sanderson Miller, who probably designed Sham Castle further round the hillside, visible from Allen's own house but not from Prior Park. Samuel Richardson described the scene in 1748:

"Below the house, the gardens were laid out on two terraces and two slopes but all these are adorned with vases, ornaments, and other Stonework; and the affluence of water is so great that it is received in three places and after many agreeable falls, at the head of one is a statue of Moses (now gone), down to his knees, in an attitude expressive of the admiration he must have shown after striking the rock and seeing water gush out of it."

The park was extended in the 1750s down to the bottom of the valley where the old falponds were enlarged. The Palladian Bridge was built in 1755 by Richard Jones, who had taken over from John Wood. The bridge was the third such structure to be built in England. A large cascade flanked by thick planting was constructed on the slope below the Round Pond at the old boundary of the garden, as can be seen in a drawing of about 1758 by the Bath artist Thomas Robins.

At much the same time the woodland fringes were made more informal according to the characteristic English landscape style. Most of the original trees have gone, but many were replanted in the 19th century. Notable recent losses have been all the elms (through Dutch elm disease) and a strategically placed old oak in the park half-way down the valley.

Phase 2 (c.1760-c): Capability Brown

Allen employed the landscape designer 'Capability' Brown to carry out the third and last phase of the garden in the early 1760s. It seems to have been Brown who took away the diverse central cascade and united the whole valley in one great sweep of parkland between the Palladian masterpieces of the house and the bridge. At the same time he reinforced and made more informal the structural planting rather sole.

Since then, very little change has taken place in this picturesque scene. Thorpe and Overton's survey plan of Prior Park c.1776 (page 10) records this final Brownian layout, but also shows that Allen retained features of the first phase in the Wilderness, where they did not intrude upon the larger scene.

2.4 1764-1993: Changing Fortunes

Through these years the main changes in the garden were those brought about by neglect. Trees seeded themselves in the woodland as can be seen from the fact that many are of a similar age and have grown sparsely due to competition for light.

The estate changed hands several times after Ralph Allen's death, there being no heir. Some stability was brought about from 1839 after purchase by Bishop Baines. The mansion was run as a seminary and during this time changes were made to the architecture, notably the addition of the steps and chapel.

When the mansion was sold again in 1867 the long history of use as a Roman Catholic School began, which continues to the present day. Two major fires have been suffered, in 1856 and 1991.

Through three years of changing fortune the landscape seems to have been largely left alone, although the immediate surroundings of the mansion were well cared for. The addition of a carriage way to the front (north) side of the mansion in the 1830s diverted the Grotto from the other wilderness features and it was probably at this time that the Serpentine Lake was filled in. A photograph dated around 1856 shows the Palladian Bridge much overgrown.

A scheme to create a garden where the summerhouse now stands was carried out in the early 20th century and the summerhouse and small pool remain from this. Little deliberate planting seems to have taken place although a sizeable Place on the east side of the view point was probably planted in the 19th century.

The garden structures suffered from the effects of decay as in the case with the grotto, bridge and rock gate. The Grotto Temple was in a similar state of disrepair and was sold to the Mallet family, then living in Rainbow Wood House where it still stands.

Prior Park has become primarily a wooded landscape with clearings, glades and views to open field as at Stowe. It was never a pleasure ground with shrubby's and flower beds as at Painshill.
2.5 Restoration Since
Acquisition by the
National Trust in 1993

The work necessary immediately following acquisition was obvious and dramatic. Repairs to the Palladian Bridge and the lake dams were carried out and at the same time overgrown laurel was cut back and the circuit path laid. There was no question of public access at this time except for guided groups. As soon as arrangements for access were considered it became apparent that there was nowhere to park cars. This resulted in the policy that we now operate whereby visitors are encouraged to use public transport from the city centre.

After the decision to operate a green transport policy was taken there was a period of two years (1996 – 1998) when planning approval had to be gained by proving that such a policy would work. Plenty of work was required to consolidate and bring general presentation up to standard in time to open for this trial period. Long term development at this stage was however in doubt.

If, subsequent to the trial, permission for opening had been refused then further restoration would have been in doubt.

This period of uncertainty has now passed, the sustainable transport policy has been deemed a great success and the National Trust has received several awards in recognition of this.

Much work has taken place in the garden since acquisition in 1993, apart from major repairs to the bridge and dams. Many trees and shrubs have been planted and are now growing well providing important screens and variation within the garden. The pasture has been enclosed by railings based on the design of original fragments found grown into trees. Many sections of these railings were manufactured at a workshop at Dythaun Park.

Much overgrown Laurel was cut back and has since re-grown, this is now pruned annually to keep it in check and create specific effects as practised in Soutthead Garden.

Before the garden could open to the public a lot of tree surgery took place to make remaining trees safe. Some very tall yews were reduced and have responded well by producing good regenerative growth.

To establish the site for the kiosk and lavatories much tipped material was removed.

A dedicated team of volunteers as well as National Trust staff has carried out the work mentioned above. They continue to work in the garden and are responsible for the good standard that is generally kept.
3. Character Areas

This section divides the garden up into distinct areas in line with the "Character Area" model (an accepted model used throughout the Trust for garden conservation plans). By defining areas that have a discreet character or feel to them a picture is built up of the garden as a whole. The changes necessary to recreate or enhance the desired character of each area are outlined in the proposals that follow. A map is provided on the following page showing the main layout of the garden.

The Character Areas are as follows:

3.1 Map 2: Character Areas of Prior Park

by Corinne Renou-Clarke

3.2 Main View and Pasture
3.3 East Woodland including the Summerhouse
3.4 East Path including borrowed views out
3.5 Fishponds Cottage and the Shrubbery
3.6 Work Area
3.7 Lower Lake, Dam and Overflow
3.8 Middle Lake
3.9 Palladian Bridge and Upper Lake
3.10 West Path to Rock Gate
3.11 West Path beside Ralph Allen Drive
3.12 The Wilderness

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3.12 The Wilderness

The system of paths to link these features, and the visitor facilities.
3.2 Main View and Pasture

Precedents

Following the removal of the formal features in the third phase of the creation of the garden the simple sweep of pasture to the lake was achieved. The lakes were created to give the effect of a graceful river flowing under the bridge and away to the east. The overall effect is a picture of simplicity; an expanse of grass down to the Palladian Bridge and lakes, framed on either side of the valley by woodland.

The longer one looks more elements become apparent and a wider picture emerges: a church amongst trees beyond the lakes, Crowe Hall above the church, then woods which give way to buildings and, as the eye is raised, the city of Bath is seen. A search for familiar buildings and bearings comes before views to the other side of the bowl that the city lies within. Beyond the city are wooded hills and a ridge in the far distance and, if one cares to take in the whole scene, the sky. The quality of light is ever-changing, at different times of day and weather. The extent to which people appreciate this view varies from person to person and how long they spend "taking it in".

When the Trust took over responsibility for Prior Park in 1863, post and wire fencing surrounded the pasture. In a photograph dated 1900 wires are clearly visible separating the upper lawns from the pasture. At several places remains of iron railings were found embedded in trees that had grown into them. Although these were probably installed in Victorian times it was decided to reinstate them as they are an unobtrusive form of fencing that become invisible when viewed from a distance. Their style was taken from the existing fragments and the whole pasture was enclosed by 1909.

Throughout history others have admired the scene and commented on:

"A noble seat which sees all Bath and which was built for all Bath to see." Philip Thickness, 1788.

"This house is acknowledged to command perhaps the finest view in the kingdom; and from its lofty situation, the magnificence of its Portico, and its general appearance, affords a splendid object to the city of Bath and its environs" John Collinson 1791.

"This is still one of the finest urban landscape views in the world" Abercornbe and others, A Plan for Bath 1945.

Proposals

3.2.1 Nothing should be allowed to detract from the simple view across the pasture to the lakes.

3.2.2 The National Trust should actively support any application to remove the clump of leyland cypresses that threatens to obscure the view of Widcombe Church within the next ten years.

3.2.3 Set a grazing regime that maintains and enhances a flower rich sward and also keeps it at a length that is aesthetically pleasing. Grazing animals were important in landscape gardens as they provided a sense of scale and enlivened the scene.

3.2.4 Protect the young trees that are within the pasture and consider the planting of a few outliers to the woodland edges to soften the line where trees meet grass. Photographs show a large oak in the field up to the 1960s.

3.2.5 Retain the simple arrangement of lawn and urns on plinths by liaison with Prior Park College if necessary.

3.3 East Woodland to Summer House Glade

Precedents

Thorpca and Overton's survey plan of 1760 (page 10) shows this part of the garden as being quite open with occasional trees well spaced. It is possible that a field boundary existed and that views were out into the borrowed landscape. These views would have been unimpeded by means of a ha-ha wall, the remains of which can still be seen.

In the early 20th century a scheme was carried out in this area to link with the Priory which is nearby. Senior masters of the school resided here and some remains of a formal layout exist around the building. A Summerhouse was built, completed in about 1910, a photograph taken at its completion exists in the collection of Mr Peter White of Strawberry Gardens. The photograph shows some wortmen one of whom is Mr White's grandfather. This structure still stands and was re-roofed by the Trust in 1994.

Another feature that was installed is a round, stone built pool that is placed to fill from the small stream that cascades down the slope from the upper garden. In times of heavy rainfall this cascade is a beautiful feature, during dry spells, hardly noticeable. Apart from a large clump of bamboo and an ornamental Malus no planting remains to suggest that an elaborate scheme was ever carried out. A few snowdrops and daffodils flower in spring.

Proposals

3.3.1 Thin the wood to open up a glade and grass down. Retain plenty of shrubs and trees at the boundary with the Priory buildings to act as a screen. In time, open up a view along the glade to the east wing of the mansion and past the summerhouse into the "borrowed" landscape.

3.3.2 Grass will eventually "Bow" from the Summerhouse to the college boundary to the south.

3.3.3 Retain the Summerhouse. Although of a later date, it does not impinge on the wider scene and is a welcome feature of some quality.

3.3.4 Retain the pool as a feature of the glade, it is inconspicuous in the landscape.

3.3.5 Add to the daffodils by planting Narcissus pseudonarcissus and the snowdrops by planting Galanthus nivalis to naturalise.

3.3.6 Reinstate the ha-ha wall to keep the view into the field open. Lift some of the branches of the trees on top of the bank.

3.3.7 Maintain the laurel at the path edge to give alternate screening and revelation of the pasture to the west and into the woodland and glade on the east of the path.

3.3.8 Create a way out into the field behind the Summerhouse. This could be established through an existing gateway across a corner of the field (NT owned) where there are good views of a different aspect of the city, returning through a belt of trees and into the garden by means of another existing gateway.

3.3.9 Repair the boundary wall from where the ha-ha finishes along to where it becomes inconspicuous among bushes.
3.4 East Woodland and Summer House to Fishponds Cottage

Precedents

This section of the circuit walk descends steeply with views coming and going behind laurel clumps between the path and the pasture. To the east of the path a bank topped by tall trees screens further views out to the adjacent field. The Palladian Bridge is seen closer to and becomes the focus of attention as it is revealed obliquely between laurel clumps and the trunks of mature trees.

To the east of the path a clump of old yew trees gives a sombre counter to the spacious views across the pasture. The recent felling of some diseased yew canes has revealed a splendid silver birch the trunk of which shines amongst the yews.

The path descends between banks in a cutting, the steep banks close all lateral views and make for an enclosed, inward looking atmosphere before emerging near Fishponds Cottage to a different scene.

Proposals

3.4.1 Prune the laurel annually to maintain current height and allow predetermined views to the west, into the pasture and towards the bridge.

3.4.2 Maintain clear stems on the mature trees to the west of the path so that the bridge can be viewed between them.

3.4.3 Encourage a “country lane” feel to the cutting by planting ferns, honeysuckle, wild strawberry etc.

3.4.4 Remove the tops of the tall yews to encourage stability and maintain health.

3.5 Fishponds Cottage and the New Shrubberies

Precedents

Shortly after acquisition by the Trust, this area was planted with a range of common shrubs and trees, field maple, hornbeam, cherry etc to form screening and a shelterbelt around the east side of the middle lake. A hornbeam hedge was planted to provide a barrier between the public access areas and the private garden of Fishponds Cottage.

An aerial photograph of 1946 shows a denser tree cover and the Thorne and Cverton plan of 1760 shows regular planting, possibly an orchard.

Proposals

3.5.1 In the absence of planting records for Prior Park the area either side of the path has been identified (Gardens Report dated 7th June 1991, 1.1) as suitable to plant two shrubberies in a style that would have been popular in the heyday of the garden, around 1755. A tiered style will be adopted drawing on the research carried out by Mark Laid and presented in his book, The Flowering of the English Landscape Garden, published in 1999.

3.5.2 Retain the shelter-belt planting to the west of the shrubberies towards the lake and encourage a “spine” of taller trees (beech and tulip trees) to connect the yews at the foot edge to the entrance from Church Lane.

3.5.3 Access from the gates beside Fishponds Cottage to the field must be maintained to allow cattle on and off the property.

3.5.4 There is considerable demand for an exit only gate in this area, this would enable pedestrians to leave the property and go onto the Skyline walk or return to the city along Church Lane, a charming walk. This exit would be next to Fishponds Cottage.

(see section 3)

3.6 The Work Yard

Precedents

The original Priory House, the country estate of the Prior of Bath Abbey, stood in the area in front of Fishponds Cottage. No information is available to be sure of its appearance or full extent. The exact date for the building of the present cottage is also in doubt but as recently as 1946 there were several other cottages on what is now the work yard, this is proved by an aerial photograph taken that year.

After acquisition in 1991 the area soon became the work base for operations in the garden and several garden sheds were erected as a temporary measure before more permanent buildings could be planned and funded. As in any large garden there is a need for certain facilities to run things efficiently:-

• Small nursery for the propagation of plants
• Compost and chippings heaps
• Log store, due to the terrain at Prior Park all wood has to be cut up and brought down to the yard
• Small car park for staff and volunteers
• Site office
• Mess room
• Secure storage for tools and machinery
• Workshop facilities

Proposals

3.6.1 Plans have been drawn for a purpose built structure to replace the sheds. At time of writing, planning permission has been gained and plans drawn up. Completion should be in early 2003.

3.6.2 The new building will incorporate as many environmentally sustainable features as possible.

3.6.3 Planting exists that will screen the building from the garden as much as possible, further evergreens will be added during the next planting season.
3.7 Lower Lake, Dam and Overflow

Precedents

Planting to screen the work yard was carried out soon after acquisition by the Trust. This is growing well and has achieved the objective; it will be crucial when the larger scale building is in place. A matrix style planting of cherry, field maple, hawthorn and yew was used and there are four main drifts as the bottom dam is approached. These trees not only screen the work yard but also act as natural stands of woodland that break up the lake to the east, and provide a link with the woodland beyond the garden to the west. As a balance to these planted areas sections of grass open out providing clear views across to the bridge.

The repair of the lower dam was one of the major projects necessary immediately after acquisition in 1993. A completely new face was built to the dam and this was left as a stark line of concrete. Two rather narrow borders flank the path as it crosses the dam. To the north a fence is in place to keep deer from our neighbour’s property; this is screened by a variety of shrubs. On the south (water) side, a similar range of shrubs is growing but at the crest of the dam a line of creeping willows was planted to tumble over and disguise the concrete face.

In the middle of the dam is the overflow where there is a weir plate; this allows water to flow from the lake in a controlled way through a culvert. At this point there is no waternode planting and a view across the lake to the bridge and part of the mansion opens up. This is a natural pause and the halfway point of the circuit. Further along a full view of the mansion is gained without the bridge. As the visitor reaches the west bank the mood changes as the path passes under a steep hanging wood with the lake close by at the bottom of a grassy bank. Neither the mansion or bridge is visible to begin with but then as progress is made along the west bank both come back into view.

Up the bank not visible from the path are the remains of an ice house which may have been attached to a thatched house that is mentioned in several 18th century accounts of the garden. A depression in the ground nearby supports this theory (Land Use Consultants Survey of Prior Park 2.51).

Proposals

3.7.1 A "spine" of trees will be planted through the lakeside plantations as a visual link from the large yews by the pasture to the north end of the garden. These that eventually will be tall, ie beech and tulip trees will be planted.

3.7.2 Continue to prune shrubs to keep them off the path and in proportion with the border width.

3.7.3 The views out to the mansion and bridge will be decided upon and kept to look natural and not contrived.

3.7.4 A programme of bank stabilization is an ongoing requirement on the south, east and west banks of the lake. The method decided upon will be as unobtrusive as possible. Some marginal planting will be carried out when the works are complete to soften the edges and lessen bank erosion in future.

3.7.5 Restore the Icehouse. Install lighting to enable visitors to view it and build steps up the slope for access.

3.8 The Middle Lake

Precedents

The view across the middle lake to the Palladian Bridge is open and from here the scale of the structure becomes apparent. Reflections in the water are seen on still days when the surface is unrippled. To the west of the path shrub planting was carried out after the initial clearance of overgrown trees, this includes Viburnum tinus, Egmont Rose, Ribes odoratum and Eucryphus euryops. The bank above is planted with a mixture of cherry, lime, beech and yew.

On the east side of the lake a clear sweep of grass has been created by moving the railing line up the slope, this is in line with the Thorpe and Overton survey map of 1760 which shows this arrangement and a "tongue" of planting stretching past the bridge. Planting has been carried out to recreate this using a mixture of lime, turkey oak, yew, hornbeam and hawthorn.

During the initial restoration work (1993 – 5) the middle dam was re-proofed using a Bentonite sheet buried about 1 metre down in a trench across the dam. Water from the upper lake should cascade over a weir in the central arch of the bridge as shown in Thomas Robins's sketches of the 1790's. Unfortunately, despite the extensive repairs carried out in 1993 – 5 leakage continues to occur around the bridge preventing this for much of the year.

Proposals

3.8.1 The west and east banks of the lake will be protected in line with wherever solution is applied to the bottom lake.

3.8.2 The slope to the west of the path is planted further with a range of shrubs to add interest to the path side.

3.8.3 The stone path between the steps and the circuit path where it passes the work yard (across the middle dam) will be lifted and grassed over to soften the appearance of this path so obvious at present from the top of the garden. The grass seed will be a hard-wearing variety.

3.9 The Palladian Bridge and Upper Lake

Precedents

It was with the building of the Palladian Bridge in 1756 that the landscape at Prior Park was transformed. With it came a shift in emphasis to the lower slopes and lakes.

The last of only three that were built in England the significance of the structure is unquestioned, this is recognised in the Grade 1 listing given by English Heritage. It is the pivot for many of the views at Prior Park and the focus of much admiration. ...lighter and more exquisite in design than the great mansion preceding over the scene... mysteriously satisfying in its proportions, the bridge was the jewel of Allen's estate. This is how Benjamin Boyce in his biography of Ralph Allen, The Benevolent Man – A Life of Ralph Allen of Bath (Harvard University Press, 1967) describes it.

The essential repairs to the structure were the main project carried out in phase 1 of the garden restoration between 1993 – 95. A new roof was put on using Cornish Slates and a major survey was carried out by empyering the upper lake so that areas usually submerged could be inspected. Solutions were sought to stop leakage through the structure but as suggested above these have only partly been successful.

After the major work the whole bed and sides of the upper lake were re-puddled with clay the banks re-profiled and the water allowed back in. To counteract the deposits of silt in the lake a silt trap was installed a few metres upstream along the culvert. This has been very successful and it is a regular six monthly job to empty the trap of the silt that would otherwise end up in the lake. The simple grass banks serve as a foil to the intricate architecture of the bridge.

Proposals

3.9.1 Deal with all leakage so that maximum water flows over the central weir at all times.

3.9.2 Encourage appropriate weed growth in the upper lake so that the water clears but does not get choked.

3.9.3 The bridge should be subject to an annual inspection to determine any necessary repairs and monitor decay.
West Path to Rock Gate

Precedents

The flight of steps that lead from the upper lake were built by volunteers when the circuit walk was established in 1991. Turning through 180 degrees the path leads along a gentle incline. This was cut into the hillside to allow a siding from the railway that ran down from the quarries in Combe Down. Stone to build the bridge was transported along by this route and became part of the circuit walk as shown on the Thorne and Overton survey plan of 1760.

The character of the path at this point is enlivened with the occasional dramatic glimpses of the bridge, the surrounding hillside and the lakes below. As the Rock Gate comes into view one focus shifts towards this unusual feature. Built around 1755 it is obviously of Chinese influence, and reflects Ralph Allen’s experimentation with different styles. The Gothic Temple was another structure which departed from the Palladian style of the mansion and bridge.

The Rock Gate was in an advanced state of decay in 1993 and was completely recut by National Trust craftsmen at the Lacock estate workshops. The original was made from ash wood and this was used in the reconstruction then painted grey to match a scraping of paint on the original. A generous donation from the Winkcomb Association funded the work.

The stone pinnacles on either side of the gate had to be artificially created as the originals could not be found. They have the appearance of natural water worn stone as it is believed would be the originals. A retaining wall had to be built on the east side of the path approaching the gate as the drop here is substantial, this is topped by railings of the same style that surround the pasture.

Proposals

1.10.1 Identify the desirable views to the bridge, lakes and far fields. Thin the woodland accordingly.
1.10.2 Bulk up planting on either side of the path with hazel, holly, box and honeysuckle.
1.10.3 Keep gate painted regularly to prevent tendency of ash wood to rot in the open.

West Path by Ralph Allen Drive

Precedents

As the path ascends the hill, parallel to the road, there are frequent areas of light and shade from the clumps of laurel and both mature and young trees. The bank to the west is topped by a bridge of hawthorn and holly that was planted by the Trust for better security and also to filter out the noisy road as much as possible. This is a long stretch of path that is a steady climb to the exit at the kiosk. About half way up a view opens to the mansion across the pasture, which then gradually recedes behind trees. Notable beside the path is a large beech, probably the oldest in the garden.

Proposals

1.11.1 On the east of the path where the view to the mansion opens up, reinstate the brick wall and remove the railings to create a clear view to the mansion across the pasture.
1.11.2 Planting will be generally deciduous on this side of the garden with occasional pockets of shrubs and forms for path side interest.
1.11.3 Determine a point at which a path should enter the Wilderness area below the present visitor kiosk.

The Wilderness

This part of the garden is divided into areas by the structures that would have to be re-instated to give the area back the distinct character that it had at the time of Ralph Allen’s death – our restoration date.
The Serpentine Lake, Sham Bridge and Cascade

Precedents

The Serpentine Lake was central to the Wilderness, forming a narrow sheet of water that gave reflections of the mansion and the Sham Bridge. Water was fed from several springs that issue in the area. It is probable that it was an over-ambitious scheme for the amount of water that was available. It was filled in some time during the 19th century, perhaps when the drive was introduced into the slope above.

Archaeological investigations show that the base and sides were constructed of stone. Also highlighted is the fact that the feature was originally a more formal canal with straight sides, this would have matched the first formal layout in the valley below the mansion.

Alexander Pope influenced Allen in the early days of landscaping (he stayed at Prior Park six times before his death in 1744) and was probably responsible for the first "loosening up" of the early formality. The area has been referred to as "Pope's Wilderness" though Allen is responsible for adding the Gothic Temple in 1754.

Originally the lake extended around the hillock from the Sham Bridge at the east end to a point below the present visitor kiosk - a distance of some 310 metres. It is probable that a cascade ran from the Grotto down to the lake. It has also been suggested that a statue of Moses striking the rock (Pococke 1754) was at its head, there is an illustration of this dated 1834, but some doubt as to whether it was at Prior Park.

The introduction of the carriage way round to the front of the mansion in the 19th century destroyed most of this but the remains of the cascade that carried water from the lake can still be seen. A weir system seems to have been in place to allow water to run under the path and also to be held back and let out after a good head had been collected.

The Sham Bridge was extensively repaired by the National Trust in 1994.

Proposals

3.12.1 Restore the Serpentine Lake from the Sham Bridge around the hillock, past the cascade to a point where the Sham Bridge cannot be seen, a distance of some 95 metres.

3.12.2 Ensure that all water sources are diverted into the lake, behind the Sham Bridge, beside the Grotto and down the bank below the School Chapel.

3.12.3 Repair the Cascade structure so that water flows over it and introduce a weir system so that water can be held back if required.

Grass Cabinet

Precedents

After tumbling down the cascade the water was immediately channelled into a culvert and flowed under the Grass Cabinet to emerge beyond. The Grass Cabinet was a definite clearing in the Wilderness and is shown on the Thorpe and Overton survey map of 1760. Circular in shape, it would have been surrounded by planting. The effect of being able to walk across grass up to the edge of the cascade would have been dramatic. A path led to the Grass Cabinet from the Gothic Temple and then out towards the Grotto. A Victorian Ordnance Survey map shows a statue in the middle of the Cabinet.

Proposals

3.12.4 Re-establish the Grass Cabinet by levelling and seeding. Its extent is clear from shape on the ground.

3.12.5 Excavate and repair the culvert from the base of the cascade to where it emerges near the Gothic Temple. Archaeologist to keep a watching brief.

3.12.6 Fell four ash to clear the whole diameter of the Cabinet.

3.12.7 Surround the Cabinet with shrubs planted in a graduated "theatrical" style.

3.12.8 Although there is no historical precedent, place busts on plinths around the outside - see illustration above. These would enliven the scene and be in keeping with the spirit of the place.