Gothic Temple

Precedents

This was built around 1744 by 1931 it was in a ruinous state with a different roof. It was sold by the Christian Brothers to the Mallet family who were then living in Rainbow Wood House and it still stands on this site. Architecture students have prepared good drawings of it.

The stone work is highly carved and overall the effect is substantial but delicate. Gillian Clarke has suggested that the design was from an architectural pattern book, possibly one published by Baty Langley in 1742.

"From hence you turn down a little serpentine gravel walk, into a little opening, made with yew and other evergreens as dark and melancholy as it were possible to make it and on one side of it stands a pretty little Gothic building..." 

This description gives a good indication of the character of the area in the 18th century.

Excavation of the foundation of the Temple in 1993 clearly shows the site and also the original proportions - it is possible that when re-erected at Rainbow Wood House, the sides were elongated.

Also new stone work in the rear of the building suggests that a doorway was blocked in at the time of moving it. This is significant because it is likely that the original arrangement of paths took the visitor through the back of the Temple out onto the covered front where the full view of the pasture (but not to the Palladian Bridge) would open up.

Proposals

3.12.9 Recreate a new stone Temple using the original as a model as well as the drawings.

3.12.10 Create a path that enters the Temple at the rear.

3.12.11 Redirect the water that flows through the culvert so that it follows a course that is visible in front of the Temple.

3.12.12 Plant up around the temple to enclose it and create a tunnel effect at the rear so that the approach for the visitor is enclosed. This would contrast dramatically with the open vista on exiting the Temple. This element of surprise is in keeping with the theatrical way in which visitors to a landscape garden would have been constantly entertained on a varied walk.

Mrs Allen’s Grotto

Precedents

As the name suggests this feature of the Wilderness was particularly associated with Ralph Allen’s wife Elizabeth. In 1740 Alexander Pope wrote "...for joye that Mrs Allen has begun to imitate the great Works of Nature, rather than those Bubbles which ladies affect". Pope was an enthusiastic Grotto builder and created an extraordinary one at his home in Twickenham. His close association with the Prior Park grotto is significant although the structure was fairly modest when compared with Twickenham and other contemporary Grottoes such as Goldney in Bristol (1737 onwards). William Botts, who supplied rare Cornish minerals to decorate the Grotto, described it as "a natural cave in which the passenger may even entertain himself with all the delicacies of subterraneous nature, and more justifiably delay his entrance for a while into the Elysium it leads him to".

Within the grotto is buried Miss Bounce, a Great Dane dog given to the Allens by Pope in 1736. An epitaph inscribed on a stone slab in the floor, read: "Weep not, Tread lightly my grave, Call me Pet."

Part of an elaborate floor survives made of pebbles, bones and ammonites "arranged in tasteful forms" of sunrays. Apart from the floor all that remains are fragments of walls and two rock arches.

In 1996 the whole structure was covered with a corrugated metal and scaffolding structure to halt further deterioration and protect the floor which was excavated during the initial archaeological survey between 1993 - 96. The floor is further protected by a layer of sand over fabric. A full survey has been carried out by the Bath Archeological Trust. The carriage drive that was constructed in the 19th century has had the effect of divorcing the Grotto from the rest of the Wilderness, also Ralph Allen Drive is now a busy road with much traffic noise.

Proposals

3.12.13 Present the Grotto as the ruin that it has become in the years of neglect.

3.12.14 Stabilise the rock arches and walls.

3.12.15 Protect the elaborate floor and devise a way of showing either an area of the original floor or recreate on top a replica using pebbles, bones and fossils to show what the floor would have looked like.

3.12.16 Soften the drive that leads from the entrance past the Grotto – excavate the tarmac and instate a surface that will be firm enough for occasional vehicular use but of a natural appearance.

3.12.17 Commision a statue of Moses striking the rock to stand where water issues beside the Grotto.

3.12.18 Plant around the grotto to enhance a dark and mysterious atmosphere.

3.12.19 The large turkey oak that is growing on the bank behind the Grotto will have to be removed as it's roots are interfering with the structure and the top is prone to shedding branches.
4. Planting Policy

4.1 History at Prior Park

Little evidence survives to suggest what planting was carried out at Prior Park during Ralph Allen's lifetime. After the early formal planting associated with the first phase of landscaping, the general planting would have aimed towards a more naturalistic effect in keeping with the philosophy that underpinned the landscape movement.

A few yews and beech survive from the 18th century but the majority of trees present self seeded themselves during the long years of neglect. This has led to rather crowded woodland with a predominance of ash, sycamore and laurel. There are good specimens amongst the weak however, notably large beech, oak and Norway maple. Some of the yew are of a significant size and age and their unusual grouping in places lead to questions as to the intentions behind their original planting.

Shrub planting can only be guessed at, two intriguing accounts are quoted in the publication Bath Entertain’d by Trevor Fawcett published in 1998. The first is attributed to one Edmund Rack who enjoyed a ramble through Prior Park after Ralph Allen's death in the late 18th century. He is said to have passed "through that charming wilderness of sweets". This suggests flowering shrubs, sweets being a common term for flowers at the time. There is also an account of a 10 year old, Mary Anne Galton, who took delight in walking with her French mistress near Prior Park describing it as "then rich in botanical treasures".

Shrubs, particularly laurel, would have been used to create the contrasting effects of light and shade and the concealment and revelation of views throughout the garden. To what extent ornamentals were used remains unknown.

It is apparent how much planting was carried out historically from a comment made by William PITT in 1755 in the scenes at Prior Park change every hour. The present joy at the birth of an heir (Allen's niece gave birth to a son, Ralph), does not respite the labours of the gardener. Half the summer will show the bridge, the dairy open to the lake; west woods have taken possession of the naked hills; and the lawns slope uninterrupted to the valleys.

4.2 Eighteenth Century Practice

Recent research (Mark Laird 1999) suggests that apart from carefully placed clumps of trees, flowering shrubs were an important element in 18th century landscape gardens. Newly imported from North America, shrubs such as magnolias, camellias, carya and clethra were enthusiastically planted in carefully planned shrubberies. Competition was fierce amongst landowners to have the best displays, and nurseries began to spring up to supply the demand. We know that Allen grew oranges, lemons and pineapples and it seems likely that he would be interested in cultivating the American shrubs.

Apart from planting newly introduced exotics much attention was given to tree pruning and spacing. Open and closed groves, bosquets and theatrical plantings were all techniques for the creation of very definite effects within landscape gardens. The careful intermixing and also separating of deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs led to sophisticated schemes that showed much sensitivity to how light and shade vary at different times of day and through the year.

"The greens should be ranged together in large masses as the shades are in painting; to contrast the dark masses with light ones, and to relieve each dark mass itself with little sprinklings of lighter greens here and there" is how Henry Hoare at nearby Stourhead described it.

Writing in 1782 about William Kent, Horace Walpole said: "He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden. He felt the delicious contrast of hill and valley changing imperceptibly into each other, tinctured the beauty of the gentle swell, or the concave scoop, and remarked how loose groves crowned an easy eminence with happy ornament, and while they called in the distant view between their graceful stems, removed and extended the perspective by delusive comparison." This description surely gives an idea of the way in which Allen was looking at things.
4.3 Planting Carried out by The National Trust 1993-2002

Most planting carried out during this period has been of trees to replace gaps left by the falling of dead and dangerous trees during the initial woodland work. Beech, yew, oak and lime have been the species most used.

Some screen planting was carried out in the areas of the lakes to enhance the lakes and to screen the work yard and Fishponds Cottage. A matrix of field maple, yew, cherry, hawthorn, hornbeam, beech and some willows was planted.

Where overgrown laurel was cut back large spaces were opened up in the area of the Palladian Bridge and a range of shrubs were planted here including Viburnum tinus, Ribes odoratum, Euonymus europaeus and Philadelphia coronarius.

On the bottom dam shrubs have been planted to screen visitors as they walk along the dam. A view up to the mansion has been created at the lake outlet.

The bank between the visitor kiosk and Sham Bridge was planted with a graduated planting to form a backdrop for the Sham Bridge, and to screen the college chapel and kiosk. Also, evergreens were planted beyond Sham Bridge so that the dramatic view down the valley is not revealed until the pasture is entered.

A "tongue" of trees was planted in 1999 on the east bank above the bridge; this is clearly shown on the Thorpe and Overton survey map of 1790. It will have the effect of making the lakes appear as if a river disappearing around to the north-east from the top viewpoint.

The shrubbery planted near Fishponds Cottage have been planted in a "theatrical" style using a range of shrubs including, Cotulae arborescens, Hydranga arborescens, Hypericum androsaemum, Cistus ladanifer and Russus acauleus.

4.4 Proposed Planting

In the absence of detailed records, there is an opportunity at Prior Park to carry out planting of a style that would have been popular during the heyday of the garden (1750-64). As suggested above, 18th Century planting styles have been re-evaluated. Given that there were a variety of ways in which shrubbery was planted, a coherent policy is needed for Prior Park to avoid picnemal planting. The majority of plants remaining in the garden at the time of Trust acquisition were common species. The accounts given by visitors (see 4.1) in the late 18th century mentioning "sweet" and "rich botanical treasures" suggest at least some exotic planting. Our planting policy will reflect this and a limited palette of the North American introductions will be used, especially in the theatrical style plantings.

Alexander Pope's influence in the area of the Wilderness is significant and planting carried out here should follow his philosophy as expounded in his poetry, as for example, from his Epistle to the Earl of Burlington:

"Consult the genius of the place in all; That tells the waters or to rise, or fall; Or helps the ambitious hill the heavens to scale, Or scoops in circling theatres the vale; Calls in the country, catches up those glades, Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades; Now breaks, or now directs, th' impending lines; Paints as you plant, and, as you work designs."

Pope however died in 1744 and much work was done at Prior Park without his direct influence. It has been suggested that Allen's adoption of the Gothic style for a temple, and the Chinese influence evident in the Rock gate, were deliberate statements by a man eager to show that he could carry out works of taste. This may also have been the case with the planting of The Wilderness.

Plating away from the Wilderness will be in keeping with 18th century principles as outlined above. Only plants that were introduced to England before 1764 will be planted. Laurel is present throughout the garden and is a useful shrub when it comes to creating effects of light and shade. Pruned annually, its height can be set so that views can be hidden and revealed at predetermined points. It grows in shade and forms a good contrast to deciduous shrubs in woodland.

Other areas have been identified for planting with a range of shrubs at the path-side, especially from the Rock Gate to the entrance kiosk. These will be informally planted between the laurels and holly and hawthorns that form the boundary beside Ralph Allen Drive (see 3.11) of the character areas. Apart from ferns, shrubs would include Daphne laureola, Hypericum androsaemum, Phillyrea latifolia, Cercis siliquastrum and Rosa eglanteria.

On the east side of the garden the emphasis will be on simple effects of light and shade in the style already described. Views within and out of the garden being revealed and concealed by the careful pruning and occasional planting of laurel and some deciduous shrubs.

Tree cover will be maintained and regular plantings of beech, oak, hornbeam, yew and holly will be carried out to ensure woodland of varied age. Thinning of young trees has become necessary after the ten years of planting by the Trust.
5. Visitor Arrangements

5.1 History

Arrangements for visiting Prior Park are unusual for a National Trust property. In 1993 the initial major projects to repair the bridge, dam and lay a path around the garden meant that visits by the public were by prearranged guided tours only. After this work was completed it was policy to open as a paying property as soon as possible and to this end facilities were considered. No space was available in which to create a car park. This resulted in a transport policy whereby visitors would be encouraged to come to the property using the bus service that passes the entrance, on foot, or by bicycle.

When this scheme was presented to Bath and Northeast Somerset Council there was debate as to whether it would be feasible. In addition concern was raised by local residents that cars would park in nearby streets and on Ralph Allen Drive. When it came to a vote on the issue it took the chairman's casting vote before a two-year permission was granted during which the National Trust had to prove that these fears were groundless. The garden finally opened for this trial period in July 1996.

The scheme was successful with approximately 41% of visitors arriving on the bus. Consequently full permission to open was granted in November 1996. Four awards have been made for sustainable tourism and also for the public relations exercise that had to be carried out to "get everybody on board".

5.2 The Present Situation

As a consequence of the considerable uncertainty about the long-term future of the garden when it first opened, the facilities developed for visitors were minimal and of a temporary nature. These have not since been changed. All that is provided is a small kiosk where tickets are sold and a temporary lavatory block. There are three car parking places for less able visitors.

Now that long term opening is assured there is a need to improve facilities to the standard normally expected at National Trust properties. These would normally comprise of an interpretation exhibition, a recruitment point, and refreshments as a minimum.

All visitors (however they travel) arrive at the Ralph Allen Drive entrance and the kiosk is situated just inside with the lavatory block a few metres further down the path. This is in the part of the garden known as the Wilderness, the restoration of which is a large part of this conservation plan. Certain changes occurred to the area in the 17th century, including the establishment of the present gateway and associated carriage way to the front of the mansion. When new visitor facilities are built in the area of the present kiosk its design will have to be sympathetic to the original (Alexander Pope) design for the Wilderness area.

The kiosk is the beginning of the circuit walk and visitors should be encouraged to explore the garden going round in either direction. Apart from the main circuit, there will be the Wilderness area to enter and also a walk to a second viewpoint to the north of the Summerhouse.

5.3 An Exit to Church Lane

Many visitors have expressed a wish to exit onto Church Lane at the bottom of the garden. If somebody is walking back to the city or locally to Widcombe there are definite advantages to having this option.

• Visitors who wish to walk back to the city are able to avoid the walk back up to kiosk, then having to walk down Ralph Allen Drive – a busy road with few views

• It is a very pleasant walk down Church Lane with several features of interest, St Thomas à Becket Church, Widcombe Manor and the architecture of Church Street

• The walk through the garden and down the lane provides an opportunity to enter the landscape that has first been viewed from afar

• Links could be made to the surrounding countryside and the Bath Skyline walk

We will therefore install an exit only pedestrian gate adjacent to Fishponds Cottage.

5.4 Education and Interpretation

There is a clear commitment to providing full interpretation and education resources at Prior Park. These are encompassed in the Bath Community Learning Strategy, which outlines objectives for both Prior Park and the Bath Skyline.
Adjoining Land
6. Adjoining Land

As can be seen on map 4 (page 40), Prior Park is sandwiched to the east and west by land that is also owned by the National Trust. To the south is the mansion, owned and run as a school and to the north is the garden of The Dell, a private residence.

Under current ownership and planning regulations there is no threat of development on either of these sites but if development were to be carried out in future then it would impact on Prior Park considerably.

At the north-east corner of the garden Church Lane becomes a rough track. Allen’s Cottage and its attached garden make up the first boundary and then there is an old orchard. This property belongs to Mr Peter White of Strawberry Gardens, Church Lane. It is approximately 77 hectares. It is desirable for the National Trust to acquire this land for the following reasons:

- Although it is unlikely that planning permission would be granted to build on the land at present, future development could impact on Prior Park considerably.
- It is a logical extension of the Trust’s current holding of Rainbow Wood Farm field that bounds it on two sides.
- The Thorpe and Overton plan of 1790 shows a plantation in this area and this could be reinstated.
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