

THOMAS ANSON AND THE GREEK REVIVAL

In the early 1750s Shugborough's landscape was dominated by a variety of eccentric buildings, including the pagoda, cascades, ruins and Cat's Monument. The mixture reflected the Ansons' travels but this fanciful style was popular in the 1740s. Several gardens laid out by Thomas Wright (who may have been responsible for the first landscaping at Shugborough) have a similar bizarre mixture.

This eclectic style went out of fashion almost immediately.

When Admiral Anson bought Moor Park near Watford in 1752 Thomas was asked for advice on the landscaping. Lady Anson wrote to him:

"We wait for you to comb it, a genteel phrase for opening and improving"

Perhaps at Thomas's suggestion Admiral Anson employed Capability Brown, who was revolutionising landscape with his artificial creation of woods and water which imitated natural forms.

For the first time, it seemed, people were starting to look at nature, exploring places for picturesque views and wanting estates which brought the wild harmonies of nature to their front door.

Richard Owen Cambridge, a satirist and writer on landscape, may have known Thomas Anson since the 1740s as both were members of the Divan Club. Cambridge remained a close friend until Thomas's death when he was one of the recipients of a memorial ring. (They were pink enamel – one is still in the possession of the Bagot family).

Lady Anson mentions Cambridge as a gossip Evidence of Cambridge as gossip ("Mr Cambridge has just stepped in with news of new government appointments" she wrote in June 1757) and Horace Walpole called him "The Cambridge Mail".

Cambridge was an influential writer on garden and landscape in "The Word" a magazine from 1753-1756 edited by Edward Moore, a protegee of Lord Lyttelton

Lady Anson visited Cambridge's own garden at Twickenham in April 1750 – "*Mr Cambridge will make his place very pretty; he has charming view of the river now he had opened it*"(1)

In 1754 he wrote in *The World*:

"I remember the good time when the price of a haunch of venison with a country friend was only half an hour's walk upon a hot terrace; a descent to the two square fish ponds overgrown with frog spawn: a peep into the hog sty or a visit to the pigeon house. How reasonable was this when compared with the attention now expected from you to the number of temples, pagodas, pyramids, grottos, bridges, hermitages, caves, towers hot houses etc etc"(2)

This could almost be a dig at Shugborough. The Shugborough pagoda had been built only two years before, in 1752.

The new fashion was for improving nature and working with the Spirit of the Place., producing landscapes which would be reminiscent of the paintings of Poussin, and Claude Lorrain.

The romantic landscapes would be the setting for classical monuments.

The Greek revival in architecture is generally considered to have begun in around 1758 with Lord Lyttelton's Doric temple as its first famous example. This temple was a place in which to sit and look out at a natural landscape, which Lyttelton called his "Vale of Tempe". The new interest in Greek style brought with it the desire for ideal wildernesses, Arcadia found in Britain. The romantic quest for nature and the Greek revival go hand in hand.

Classicism is the balance of classical form and Arcadian nature.

It now appears that Thomas Anson, an old friend of both Cambridge and Lord Lyttelton, was at the forefront of the movement.

One of the only letters in Thomas's handwriting in the Staffordshire Record Office is evidence of a historic moment at the start of this new outlook.

"...Capt Parker who desires the honour of being remembered to you, goes with me as far as Mr Berkeley's , who I hear is at Stoke, so I shall quit myself of a promise made him that if he would permit me to see his place in December I would certainly revisit it in a better season. God's country, as Lord Littleton calls Brecknockshire, I shall not reach. Going up and down mountains takes a deal of time and is too tedious when one is alone. Mr Allen says that Monmouthshire, which I shall see thoroughly is a fine part of Wales. We dined yesterday at Prior Park"(1)

Mr Berkeley was Norborne Berkeley, Thomas Wright's most important patron and his home, Stoke Gifford, north of Bristol, was a Wright landscape in a romantic Druidic style. (The word "romantic" may seem to belong to later period of cultural history but Thomas Wright himself uses it when describing caves and grottoes.)

Lady Anson wrote to her sister in law from Stoke Gifford (mentioning "your Mr Wright") in winter 1755. She certainly visited Bath with Thomas so it is likely this was the occasion on which Thomas was there, promising to visit Stoke "in a better season".

This would date Thomas's unsigned and undated letter as Spring or Summer 1756.

Mr Allen, Ralph Allen, was the rich promoter of Bath and Prior Park his own spectacular house and garden at Bath.

Thomas is going on to Monmouthshire. Though it is only a guess it is a very reasonable guess that Thomas, touring picturesque scenes, is crossing over to Chepstow by the ferry (only a few miles beyond Stoke Gifford, following the route now taken by the Severn Bridge) and that he is on his way to Piercefield.

Piercefield was the most spectacular of the picturesque landscapes

Richard Owen Cambridge had tried to buy it in 1748, but it went to Valentine Morris. Cambridge helped Morris lay out its walks and views over the Wye Valley.

This rare surviving letter gives us a flavour of Thomas's own voice at critical moment in the history of Shugborough and of architecture.

It is possible that James "Athenian" Stuart was at Shugborough building or rebuilding the Shepherd's monument very soon after Thomas's tour.

Without a doubt by 1758 he and Thomas were the motive force that brought Greek style and ideas to the picturesque landscape.

THE SOCIETY OF DILETTANTI

Thomas Anson is listed nineteenth in the list of members of the Society of Dilettanti which was drawn up on the 6th March 1736. He joined at the same time as a Cheshire friend, William Degge, whose brother Simon had joined the Royal Society with him in 1730.

The Society had been founded by Sir Francis Dashwood and other travellers in Italy including Charles Sackville, Earl of Middlesex and Lord Boyne, in 1731. At first it was a club for gentlemen who had visited Italy though Horace Walpole said the real qualification was that they were drunk. It only gradually started to promote serious interest in the arts of the classical world. There are no records of Thomas Anson's involvement with the Society, and yet the evidence of his support for James "Athenian" Stuart suggests he was a key figure in encouraging the Greek Revival and the story of Anson's visit to Tenedos suggests that Ancient Greece was a major driving force in his life.

James Stuart, later known as "Athenian Stuart", and Nicholas Revett announced their plans to travel to Greece and measure and draw Greek architecture in 1748. They travelled to Greece in 1751, via Venice, where Sir James Gray, the British Resident, nominated them for membership of the Society of Dilettanti.

The first volume of the *Antiquities of Athens* (not published in 1762, and subscribed to by both Thomas and George Anson) illustrated mainly smaller late classical buildings which, by chance or design, were suitable for copying as garden monuments, or to supply features for other architectural projects.

After his return to London, in 1755, Stuart began to attract patrons who were excited by the idea of commissioning work based on his drawings. Kerry Bristol in an article in *Apollo* (2000) writes:

"Without doubt, the most important of these patrons was Thomas Anson of Shugborough."

THE FIRST SPARK OF THE GREEK REVIVAL

The first well known building in the authentic Greek Doric style, regarded as the beginning of the Greek Revival, is Stuart's garden temple at Hagley. (In fact it is not particularly authentic and it might not be the first, but it is iconic all the same.)

The first mention of this temple, as a scheme, is in a letter from Lord Lyttelton to Mrs Montagu, the leading hostess of intellectual and artistic London society, in October 1758.

Lyttelton writes that Stuart *“is going to embellish one of the Hills with a true Attick building, a portico of six pillars, which will make a fine effect to my new house, and command a most beautiful view of the country.”* (3)

Note that the portico is designed to “command a view”.

J Mordaunt Crook in his classic 'The Greek Revival' says 'the date is sacrosanct.' (7)

It may seem that Thomas Anson and Shugborough have been beaten to it in the race for new ideas.

However, extraordinarily, the same letter reveals that Stuart had visited Hagley in the company of Thomas Anson. (2)

It seems that Thomas Anson had introduced Stuart to Lyttelton, resulting in the building of this iconic building – and sparking the whole Greek Revival movement.

Kerry Bristol writing in *Apollo* (2000), argues that many of Stuart’s commissions in other places owed their origins to introductions by Thomas Anson of which Hagley Park was the first. A major commission for painted interiors came from Philip Yorke, by then 2nd Earl of Hardwicke, in 1766. Other commissions came from Sir William Bagot, Thomas Anson’s friend and neighbour. Stuart also became Surveyor to the Royal Naval Hospital, Greenwich, thanks officially to Lord Anson, but no doubt originally due to Thomas.

This is the earliest record of Stuart and Anson together. There is no way of knowing how soon after Stuart’s return to London in 1755 they had met, or whether Anson had known Stuart before he set off on his travels in 1751.

If the Shepherd’s Monument was Stuart’s work it could be that their association dates from a year or two earlier (1756 is a possible date) – even from the moment Stuart returned from Greece.

The Hagley Temple was actually built in 1759 by Sanderson Miller, who also worked at Wimpole for Lord Hardwicke.

Thomas may have introduced the plasterer Francesco Vassalli to Lyttelton.

Vassalli, had made the fine ceilings in the Library and Dining Room in 1748/9 and was described as living in the neighbourhood of Shugborough by Philip Yorke in a 1763 journal entry. He had worked on Hagley Hall itself from 1754 and in various Midlands houses, as well as Wimpole, probably, in the face of the evidence, introduced to his employers by Thomas Anson, just as Stuart seems to have been.

STUART'S MONUMENTS AT SHUGBOROUGH

The Doric portico at Shugborough is almost identical to the one at Hagley. It was originally the entrance to the kitchen garden, (a doorway is visible on old drawings) and it was built a year later than the Hagley Temple, in 1760.

THE ARCH OF HADRIAN 1761 onwards

The first building to be based on the drawings Stuart and Revett made in Greece (not published until 1762) was the Arch of Hadrian at Shugborough. An estimate for the construction of this, from builder John Hooper, is dated November 1761. It cost £282 /14s/1d (2)

Lady Anson had died in 1760, and George died in 1762 and the Arch became their memorial. The Marchioness Grey wrote, in August 1763:

"We have been this Morning through a very Stormy Wind on one of the Neighbouring Hills that commands a very fine prospect, & on which is erected a triumphal Arch out of Mr Stuart's Athenian designs & under his Direction. A most beautiful Structure that has been long begun, but will now I understand (by a Drawing Shewn but not mention'd) be applied to a different purpose from what could be first intended."

Scheemakers carved the "trophies" as memorials to Lord and Lady Anson. In August 1764 Stuart wrote to Anson:

"Scheemakers is very happy that you approve his Trophies. He says he cannot take less than 800l & wishes to have the (as he hinted to me) to have the payment completed as he is about purchasing the house he lives in..." (3)

The medallions on the lower stage were added in 1769, as Stuart writes to Anson 7th June 1769: *"Mr Scheemakers has modelled one of the medallions for the Arch & I am much pleased with it, Neptune & Minerva are establishing naval discipline – he is pleased with it himself."*

THE GREEN HOUSE 1763/4

Stuart's Orangery, or Green House, which may have been based on a Thomas Wright greenhouse of 1750, was begun in 1763. Philip Yorke wrote to his father, Lord Hardwicke, in August 1763, having arrived at Shugborough with Thomas from a visit to Hagley:

"The place has received many embellishments since I saw it in 1748 & the owner is still improving it both within doors and without – I cannot help comparing it with the Virgin's Chappel at Loretto – wch remains in its original State an ordinary Brick Edifice, whilst the superstition of its Votaries has surrounded it with one of the finest & most costly churches wch the Romish religion has to boast of – Thus Mr Anson has left his small Family Hall, little drawing room & narrow passage, but added to them on each wing Apartments wch are fitted up and furnished with all the Elegance & Ornaments wch the Arts of Italy & the Magnificence of China can afford. He still meditates further Additions to the House, in order to gain more room for guests and is enlarging the Offices. In his Garden he is laying the foundation of a handsome

Green House, designed by Stewart, and in his Grounds he is erecting an Arch of Portland Stone.....”

The letter goes on to describe the Poussin relief of the Shepherds Monument.

The Green House was a showplace for sculpture as much as for plants, as the 1767 anonymous poem describes:

*“....the ravish’d eye
Surveys he miracles of Grecian art
In living sculptures, godlike shapes & forms
Excelling human!”*

The statues include Flora “first protectress of this place”, “the sculptured forms of Demigods or heroes” and the poet comments:

*“nor shall the learned eye deem here misplaced
A smooth Adonis, thy transcendent form.”*

The Note at the end of the poem explains:

“Adonis, Thammuz & Osiris are the Greek, Phenician & Egyptian names for the same person. His statue is not misplaced in a Green house because under all these denominations he is looked upon by the best Mythologists as the Power of Vegetation: particularly the Vegetation of corn: whence in the fable that six months he lieth in Prosepine’s lap, that is, whilst the seed of corn continueth underground; & the other six months, that is Spring & Summer he lieth with Venus.”
(5)

The work displayed included modern statues, presumably based on classical originals, of Hymen and Narcissus.

In 1770 a mural of by Nicholas Dall, who painted several views of the house and landscapes in the 1760s and 1770s, was installed in the Orangery.

Stuart wrote to Thomas (25th September 1770):

“The subject for the Green house is a view of the temple of Minerva Polias with the Caryatides, on the principal ground, & in the distance he has introduced what remains of the Odeum of Pericles, both of them Subjects engraved for my second volume....The water fall, with the scenery accompanying it, he has contrived with great ingenuity. I think it will have a wonderful effect, it must astonish & delight every spectator.”

THE TOWER OF THE WINDS

The Tower of the Winds was begun in 1764, based on the Horologium of Andronikos Kyrrhestes, in the old agora in Athens. The original building had relief carvings of the winds on its eight sides.

Joseph Banks, later President of the Royal Society, but then a young botanist, visited Shugborough in 1767 was unimpressed.

“But the Temple of the Winds is what he seems to have least of all succeeded in here he has left the ancient design making two Porch entres instead of one and leaving out that most elegant freeze said to be the work of Phideas, to which the Building certainly owes the most of its beauty in the original as this plainly shews for want of it appears scarce more Beautiful than a common Octagon Pidgeon house.”

Watercolours of the Tower at Shugborough do show the reliefs of the winds, and the anonymous poem of July 7th 1767 describes the reliefs in detail:

*“Mark, on the gorgeous frize, in high relief
Embossed, the powers of air...”*

It is most likely that the reliefs were painted trompe l’oeil panels and they had not been fixed when Banks visited.

The Tower of the Winds was converted into a dairy at the end of the century.

The basic design of the tower from Stuart and Revett’s dillustrations was frequently repeated in variations, including one by Nicolas Revett at West Wycombe for Sir Francis Dashwood. (2)

THE LANTHORN OF DEMOSTHENES

The Lanthorn of Demosthenes was planned in 1764. It is interesting to discover that Thomas Anson was responsible for the positioning of the monuments. In June 1764 Stuart wrote:

*“I cannot figure to myself where the lanthorn of Demosthenes can be placed to more advantage than on the spot you showed me near to the Ladies seat. I long to know the spot...
“Pray is the place for the lanthorn of Demosthenes any where by the Canal & near the fine Clump of Trees Just at the Angle, pardon my inquisitiveness. I cant help thinking about it.”*

By Canal, Stuart must mean one of the artificial waterways, now lost, which included Wright’s cascades and colonnaded bridge. Other Wright landscapes, in Ireland, include “canals”. The Trent and Mersey canal was not built until 1770, but the Lanthorn was already standing (without its tripod and bowl) in 1767 when it is mentioned in the anonymous poem.

By the end of Thomas Anson’s life Shugborough was fascinatingly varied landscape, of follies, waterways, statues and wildernesses. Even the expanses of grass were, as Sir John Parnell wrote in 1769, 'fertile to a great degree and bespangled with the finest flowers which grow naturally in fine meadows.' (8)

THE 1767 ANONYMOUS POEM

The 12 page blank verse poem which decribes itself as a “fantastical inventory” of Shugborough gives a detailed impression of Shugborough at its most elaborate. The only feature not complete from Thomas Anson’s time was the tripod and bowl on the Lanthorn.

Many books and articles on Shugborough claim that this is by Anna Seward, but this is an inexplicable error. Lady Anson was given a poem about the Shepherds Monument in 1756 or 8 by Dr Seward which she assumed to be by his daughter Anna.

This important source is anonymous and clearly dated 3rd July 1767. It is written in very flowery blank verse, with phrases that probably come from Milton. The author refers to himself as “he” in the introduction, but the constant evocations of the Muse give parts of it a feminine voice.

The author reads and writes Greek – there are extracts from Pindar in Greek with translations in the notes.

The notes also include an explanation of Adonis as “the principle of vegetation” which shows an interest in comparative mythology.

Very interestingly there is also a section which is a paraphrase of Joseph Winkelmann.

The writer explains that Greek statues are idealised.

“Raphael did the same. In his letter to Count Balthazar Castiglione, speaking of his Galatea, he says “Perfect beauty being so seldom found, I avail myself of a certain Ideal Image”

This seems to be a quotation, from memory, of Henry Fuseli’s 1764 translation of Joseph Joachim Winkelmann’s “Reflections on the Imitation of Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks”, originally written in 1755 and one of the most influential texts in the Greek revival, promoting a very ideal view of Greek sculpture.

Fuseli’s translation reads:

“Thus Raphael formed his Galatea, as we learn by his letter to Count Baltazar Castiglione, where he says, “ Beauty being so seldom found among the fair, I avail myself of a certain ideal image.”” (9)

The last phrase is identical.

This is another clue to the identity of the author – someone who was very well versed in classical literature, could identify all the different mythological themes, and was very much up to date with classical revival writing.

The poem also has a strong romantic strain, with its “let me wander” section describing the landscape – and revealing that no hunting or shooting was allowed on the estate.

Sources -

(1) Letter from Thomas Anson - Staffordshire Record Office D615/P/S/1/117B

(2) David Jacques: Georgian Gardens, Batsford, 1983

(3) Ingrid Roscoe: James "Athenian" Stuart and the Scheemakers Family, APOLLO Vol. CXXVI September, pp178-184, 1999

(4) David Watkin: Athenian Stuart, George Allen & Unwin, 1982

(5) 1767 anonymous poem in Staffordshire Records Office.

John Martin Robinson: Shugborough, National Trust, 1989

(6) Kerry Bristol: The Society of Dilettanti, James "Athenian" Stuart and the Anson family, APOLLO vol. 152 9461) pp 46-54, 2000

(7) J Mordaunt Crook: The Greek Revival, John Murray, 1995

(8) Quoted in The Truth about Mr Brown, John Phibbs, in Country Life April 20, 2006

(9)

<http://books.google.co.uk/books?id=OfAEAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA13&dq=fuseli+ideal+image#PPA12,M1>