

THOMAS ANSON'S LIBRARY AND ART COLLECTION

The library at Shugborough is not a pretentious status symbol but a cosy gentleman's study.

Thomas Anson's home was, before rebuilding at the end of the 18th century, at heart a modest villa, a place for repose and serious contemplation. It contained the fruits of the classical and ancient world, according to the anonymous 1767 poem -

*"Not metaphysic dream, or sceptic doubt,
Or fierce polemic wrangle; but the songs
Of ancient Greece, that universal strain
That earth & Heaven applauded, & the Gods
With rapture stoop'd to hear...."*

Thomas's collection of books and art treasures was offered up for sale almost in its entirety in 1842 to pay for the disastrous gambling debts of Thomas, 2nd Viscount Anson (1795-1854). A few important pieces were saved but most was lost.

The 1842 sale catalogue shows the content of Thomas's library and is a guide to his interests though it is easy to forget that he must have had other treasures and other books at 15 St James Square.

There were many editions of Greek and Latin literature, including Aldine editions of Greek literature from published in Venice in the early 16th century, and, not surprisingly, books of architecture and art, including a complete set of Piranesi. He owned a 1713 edition of Newton's "Principia" and, more esoterically, Newton's "Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms amended" of 1727.

ROUSSEAU

There was an intriguing group of first editions, in French, of works by Jean Jacques Rousseau, including the novels "Emile" (1762), two editions of "La Nouvelle Heloise" (1761), "A Discourse on Inequality" (1755), letters (1769) and "Remarks on his writings", (1767).

This suggests that Thomas had a fairly serious interest in the philosopher.

Rousseau was a powerful influence on radical thinkers in England. The presence of his works in Thomas Anson's library is an indication that Thomas, by then in his late sixties, was forward looking and even revolutionary in his thought. In "A Discourse on Inequality" Rousseau argued that man "is born free but everywhere is in chains", and that society corrupts the essential goodness of humanity.

Rousseau may seem remote from Shugborough but there were surprising points of contact in the 1760s.

In the novel "Julie, of the New Heloise" (1761) Rousseau sends a principal character on the voyage round the world with Admiral Anson. Rousseau had been inspired by descriptions, in Admiral Anson's Voyage, of the unpopulated islands, Tinian and Juan Fernandez. In 'Julie' the hero, with Anson, visits the islands and returns to find Julie has made a wilderness garden.

'I was looking at the wildest, loneliest spot in the whole of nature, and I seemed to be the first mortal who had ever penetrated within this wilderness.' (5)

It is curious that Anson's voyage inspired Rousseau, and who in turn influenced landscape design.

In 1766 Rousseau came to England in temporary exile after the publication of his "Social Contract" had made him an outcast, assumed to be a dangerous revolutionary.

He stayed at Wootton Hall, near Ellastone, Staffordshire, from March 22nd 1766 and spent his time walking to Dovedale, studying the wild plants, and writing his "Confessions". Erasmus Darwin, an admirer, went out of his way to meet Rousseau "by accident" while walking. This was so contrived the philosopher was very annoyed. David Hume, who had invited him to England, persuaded George III to grant Rousseau a pension, but Rousseau became neurotically suspicious of Hume and returned to France in June 1767.

At Wootton Hall Rousseau's closest friend was 22 year old Brooke Boothby who visited him again in later life and called him "a divine man". Boothby had lived in Stafford in his school years and after 1772 was part of the Lichfield literary circle with Darwin and Anna Seward.

Rousseau was near enough to Shugborough for a day's visit – as Wootton Hall is very near the Weaver Hills, where Thomas's agent had gone to watch Bonnie Prince Charlie 20 years earlier.

The world of Shugborough, as described in the 1767 poem seems to be a world inspired by, or very close to, Rousseau.

The Greek ideals of harmony and beauty match Rousseau's "back to nature" feelings and simplicity. The park was apparently open to passing shepherds and shepherdesses, and it was a place where wild animals are safe from shooting and hunting. As with other grand projects in country houses a large part of the object was to create employment.

Though Thomas was buying property in the village of Shugborough the paintings by Dall suggest the village buildings were integrated into the landscape and local peasants were free to come and go. The villagers were only finally moved out in the developments at the end of the century when Shugborough became barer the "model farm" dominated..

The 1767 poem, written when Rousseau was in Staffordshire, ends in a romantic and picturesque mood.

*"Along the sunny ridge that overhangs
Eastward thy fair demesnes, & wide commands....
Westward, with near approach, & bolder swell,
The wavy hills rise mountainous, befringed
With gloomy groves of never-changing leaf,
Cedar, or pine, or fir: plantations vast,
And venerable! ...
...Oft let me wander, when the morning ray*

*First gilds thy groves & streams, & glittering towers,
And meditate my uncouth DORIC lay...*

A carving of a mask of Pan on the sandstone caves on the Haywood Cliffs, now separated from the house by canal and railway, suggests that they were part of the original landscape, a Rousseau style hermit's cave.

WINKELMANN

The only book to be held back from the 1842 sale, perhaps as a single representative example of Thomas Anson's collection, was a copy of the French Translation of J J Winckelmann's "Letter about the Herculanean Discoveries", of 1762.

Winckelmann was the principle theorist of the Greek revival, though he never travelled to Greece himself. It was he who expressed the 18th century view of the purity of Greek art – of pure lines and white marble – which was not a true image of the art and architecture of the Greeks as it was at the time but an ideal. Later generations were shocked to discover Greek sculpture had been coloured.

Winckelmann's attitude is likely to parallel Thomas Anson's, the devotion to the "noble simplicity and quiet grandeur" of Greek Art. (Thoughts on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture, 1755). "The only way for us to become great... is the imitation of the Greeks".

Winckelmann's writing is contemporary with Stuart's work in England. His "Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks" was translated into English in 1764 by Henry Fuseli. In Winckelmann's mind true beauty in art was masculine. The notes to the anonymous 1767 poem at Shugborough includes a quotation from Fuseli's translation.

Thomas's agent John Dick, in Leghorn, wrote to Winckelmann for advice on a statue of Venus that Thomas was buying.

Thomas's library also contained the very latest texts on gardening and botany.

HIS COLLECTION

The house and grounds were full of genuine classical sculpture and modern copies. It is hard to imagine, now the gardens are quite bare, the effect of the many marble statues, herms and altars scattered about.

Scheemakers was employed transporting, supplying and mending statuary. In 1767 he sent Anson a bill, in his mixture of Dutch and English, which includes:

for two heds maid in to busts on pedestals 12.12.0
for sending a statue in a cart to the wagon an openen 0.9.0
for packin a figure of Flora 0.7.0
for two men packing op sonderi tings 0.7.0
for mending brutus and four locks of hair to Adonis 1.0.0
payd for 8 heds from Rome 3.8.0

The bill also includes a chimney piece made for the back parlour by John Flaxman the Elder, father of the neo-classical artist:

for a chimney piece in the back parlor slab & corns 35.14.0 (1)

Scheemakers continued to work regularly with Stuart after this.

Between 1765 and 1771 Thomas Anson bought pictures from Italy through Sir John Dick, British Consul at Leghorn, and sculpture from Joseph Nollekens, who had been Scheemakers assistant, in Rome. The bill quoted above shows that Nollekens sent the works to Scheemakers, who then arranged their transport, by wagon, to Shugborough.

Nollekens wrote long detailed letters to Thomas, and competed for the purchase of all kinds of classical sculptures with cardinals and the Pope. He carved a statue of Castor and Pollux in the classical style, which, though modern, reached the highest price of any sculptures in the Shugborough sale and is now in the Victorian and Albert Museum.

Other statues included Flora and Adonis in the Green House, centaurs which were originally in the Tower of the Winds, a Thalia, muse of comedy, which Thomas Pennant thought particularly fine, Roman sarcophagi (which often have the "DM" inscription) and many other ancient and modern works.

A large quantity was bought from a bankrupt merchant in Leghorn, in 1766, including many medals, which were a particular interest of Anson's.

Joseph Banks visited in 1767 and described his visit in his journal:

"...went with Mr Sneyd [of Bishton] to Mr Ansons about 4 miles off at a place call'd Shuckborough to see his architecture and marble both which are reported to be beyond any thing else in their kind. Find a large company to dine there and are forc'd to content ourselves for this day, with taking our dinners and resolving to return and see things properly the next day: by an accident however found the estimation in which every thing there was held by its master.

Stealing from the company after dinner I got a candle and was employ'd in examining his chief marble which was an Adonis in the interior. He passes by. I took the opportunity of complimenting him by saying "truly sir this is a most elegant piece of workmanship"

"Indeed it is, sir" said he, and shewing me the different parts of it "there's a grace sir...Believe me the Venus of Medicis is clumsy to it."

Having said this he retired and left me to my contemplations.

The figure is certainly a very elegant one tho I can not prize it so highly, as its master does. He is represented not with the Chase, having just thrown a light robe over his shoulders to cool gradually. Probably the Game is suppos'd to lye at his feet as he rests himself upon one leg and seems to contemplate something lying before him with a look of satisfaction."

The paintings included landscapes by Claude and Gaspard Poussin (Nicholas's stepson), and a few striking religious paintings, including Susanna and The Elders, copied from Guido Reni.

It seems very possible that Thomas “launched” the almost complete Shugborough in 1767, when Banks visited and that the anonymous poem celebrated that occasion.

THE TRENT AND MERSEY CANAL

Shugborough played a literally central role in the development of the canal network, which was a crucial part of the industrial revolution. Haywood Junction, just outside the Shugborough estate, is the junction of two major canals which received Acts of Parliament the same day, 14th May 1766, and would become the core of the network.

Lord Anson, Earl Gower and Thomas Broade had commissioned a survey of a canal from Stoke-on-Trent to Wilden Ferry, on the Trent, from James Brindley in 1758. As Lord Anson had no particular interest in the area by that time it was very likely Thomas who was the real supporter, and he continued to be a supporter of the Trent and Mersey canal in the 1760s.

Josiah Wedgwood was the inspiration for the canal project in its final form, with Thomas Bentley, his partner, and Erasmus Darwin, the extraordinary philosopher and poet from Lichfield. Wedgwood saw the canal as the answer to the transport of fragile pottery.

A meeting was held on 30th December 1765 at Wolseley Bridge, just south of Shugborough, to launch the plan. It was essential that Anson would support it as the canal had to pass through Shugborough alongside the Trent. Thomas Anson was one of the “Company of Proprietors of the Navigation from the Trent to the Mersey.” (4)

The first sod was dug by Josiah Wedgwood at Brownhills near Tunstall on July 26th 1766. The next year Wedgwood began work on his new factory in at Etruria, alongside the canal, which was opened on 13th June 1769.

It was in the last years of the 1760s that Wedgwood developed his “black basaltes” stoneware and began his range of neo-classical vases. The canal was important to his business success.

The Canal opened as far as Shugborough, from the south, on 24th June 1770, and reached Stoke on Trent in 1772.

The canal project demonstrates that Wedgwood and Darwin knew Anson from at least 1765. Darwin, who had a fertile mind, inventing steam cars and revolutionary theories of evolution long before his grandson, became a close associate of Wedgwood.

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

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

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

(4) <http://wedgwoodmuseum.org.uk/canal.htm>

(5) David Jacques: The Georgian Garden, Batsford