

HAGLEY PARK, WORCESTERSHIRE: PARADISE REGAINED

Joe Hawkins

Nestling amongst the partially wooded slopes and meadows that rise beyond the deer park behind Hagley Hall is one of our region's long-forgotten gems. Originally pre-dating the Palladian mansion, and coaxed gently from its origins as a medieval deer park, George Lyttelton's eighteenth-century park was in its day considered one of the finest of all English landscapes, drawing praise from some of the century's most enlightened minds.



The newly restored Palladian bridge in Hagley Park, Worcestershire.

Courtesy Joe Hawkins

Early in the creation of Hagley Park, poet and critic Alexander Pope, visiting as a family friend, contributed designs for three of its garden buildings and declared a friendly 'ownership' of his favourite part of the park. Similarly, Scottish poet James Thomson's first visit inspired his deeply descriptive prose to praise the park's natural beauty in *Spring*, in that quintessentially British nature poem *The Seasons*.

Indeed, the period's pre-eminent art historian and critic, Horace Walpole, reflecting on his visit wrote: 'I wore out my eyes with gazing, my feet with climbing, and my tongue and vocabulary with commending'. As the century wore on and its reputation grew, Hagley's iconic landscape began to attract international visitors. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the second and third American presidents, Polish and Italian princes, even a Russian count, all made pilgrimages to witness the beauties to be found in Hagley's 'hallowed ground'.

Inspired by the sister arts of painting and poetry, the park's miles of pathways meandered through a varied terrain of

green dales and deep-wooded vales, where streams fed tranquil pools to create a sensory sequence of contrasting atmospheres, all intended to provoke mood and ignite the visitor's imagination. *En route*, flourishes of art in the shape of temples, seats and urns, along with an obelisk and a ruined castle enriched the scene, again stimulating conversation and contemplation, whilst the constant murmur of cascades added to the park's idyllic calm.

More recently, Hagley's prestigious position as a pioneer in the evolution of the English landscape garden was hidden. Its former beauties buried by a century and a half's neglect, its period significance was betrayed only through archive descriptions and that rarely awarded Grade-I designation on the English Heritage Register.

Today, with the first phase of an ongoing restoration intent on reinstating the park's former glories complete, its decline has been halted, preventing the park joining that long list of landscapes whose former prestige, grandeur and cultural importance are now sadly forever lost. With its

footpaths uncovered, the Palladian bridge restored, the Rotunda re-roofed and ten thousand tons of silt dredged from the central pond system, the park's numerous cascades play once more and a growing influx of new visitors, both domestic and international, show Hagley Park's appeal is undoubtedly resurgent. ●

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The author is currently overseeing the restoration of Hagley Park and would be very interested in hearing from anyone who has images, paintings, or photographs of the Park. Any image that brings new light to the restoration project can claim a free personal guided tour. Contact: info@hagleyhall.com

Further Reading

Anon, *A companion to the Leasowes, Hagley, and Enville, with a sketch of Fisherwick, near Lichfield* (Swinney & Hawkins, 1800)

Michael Cousins, 'Hagley Park, Worcestershire', *Journal of the Garden History Society*, Volume 35, Supplement 1 (Garden History Society, 2007).

Joseph Heely, *Letters on the Beauties of Hagley, Envil and the Leasowes etc* (R. Baldwin, 1777)

Websites: www.hagleypark.com/
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