

# ‘THIS PEACEFUL SHADE’ THE GARDEN OF WILLIAM SHENSTONE

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William Shenstone was an important literary figure in the eighteenth century. He was a poet, essayist, correspondent and a landscape gardener who turned a pasture farm into a celebrated landscape garden.



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Portrait of *William Shenstone*, by Edward Alcock, 1760.



View of LEASOWES near Halesowen in SHROPSHIRE, including the Priory & Seat of the late Will<sup>m</sup>. Shenstone Esq<sup>r</sup>.  
*D. Jenkinz. sculp.*

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The 'Ruinated Priory', constructed to recreate an atmosphere of the medieval past. The Leasowes, Shropshire. *Cooke's Universal British Traveller*, 1779.

**O**n 11 February 1763, at the age of 49, William Shenstone died from putrid fever – probably what we would call typhus fever – in his home at The Leasowes, Halesowen, Worcestershire. He was buried in the churchyard of St John the Baptist, the parish church of Halesowen, on 15 February. Shenstone left a legacy through his poetry, essays and correspondence, but most of all in his landscape gardening.

## A Place to Visit

Although The Leasowes started out as a pasture farm he turned it into a celebrated garden. Shenstone's *ferme ornée*, or ornamented farm, became nationally and internationally famous as one of the landscapes garden lovers were delighted to see and many to copy.

Important visitors who came to see included the politician, William Pitt the Elder, the industrialist, Matthew Boulton, the poet and playwright, Oliver Goldsmith, the man of letters, Samuel Johnson, and the founder of Methodism, John Wesley. These were joined by the Marquis de Girardin of Ermenonville in France, Baron Casper Voght of Flottbek in Germany – both European aristocrats – and two subsequent United States presidents, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

## A Special Place

What did they enjoy at The Leasowes? The garden was a special place: it lay on the side of a hill and the prospect west across the upper reaches of the Stour valley revealed a splendid view of the surrounding countryside.

The landscape of the farm itself included fast-flowing brooks, cascades, waterfalls, the gentle movement of water through the vale and silent pools. Associated with these was a multitude of fabricated hidden features, from alcoves and root houses to memorial urns which were dedicated to friends and relations.

Shenstone specifically chose locations where seats were provided for viewers to sit and enjoy the scene or meditate on anything the mind considered. The Leasowes was a place for thought and contemplation.

## A Landscape of Spirits

Shenstone also constructed a spiritual landscape. At the beginning of the circuit path that led all around his farm and garden he placed verses to lead the visitor to engage with an imaginary world.

One began: 'Here, in cool grott, & mossy Cell, We Fauns & playful Fairies dwell.' This gave an other-worldly feel to the garden for the visitor to carry with them all the way around his estate. Would a faun or playful fairy jump out at them, or if they were quiet would they see them gamboling in the glades? This elemental world made it a magical place.

## Gothic and Classical Features

Shenstone also liked the lost world of the medieval period. He placed Gothic features around his garden in an attempt to recreate it and placed a poem in Old English script on a seat in the Gothic Alcove. He also built a Ruinated Priory at The Leasowes. This was a folly, constructed at the beginning of the Gothic Revival, which represented in its decayed state an atmosphere of past times.

Classical references were also important. The Roman figures in the Temple of Pan and the statues of Faunus and Venus showed his appreciation of ancient myths. These antique gods were made to work in his garden. Faunus lay close to the forest ground, being a spirit of woodland, while Venus as a goddess of the garden lay in the shrubbery. He thought of himself as a representative of a dual heritage: an English gentleman and an ancient Roman patrician.

## Versifying the Landscape

Shenstone placed poems within his landscape. Although some were his own, he also placed phrases from Roman verse in individual spots. He was a cultured man who loved the work of the Roman poets Virgil and Horace.

Virgil's Grove was the final flourish of the landscape: it extended from the obelisk at the start of the grove dedicated to this ancient master of rural poetry, through to the seat dedicated to Shenstone's friend, James Thomson, a contemporary master of verse. The grove as well as the farm resonated with poetry.

A poem by Horace, on a bench dedicated to him, epitomised what Shenstone thought about his garden. A translation by Philip Francis from the original Latin ran:

*I often wish'd I had a farm,  
A decent dwelling snug and warm;  
A garden, and a spring as pure,  
As crystal, running by my door, besides a little ancient grove,  
Where at my leisure I might rove.  
The gracious gods to crown my bliss,  
Have granted this, and more than this.*

## A Garden for Lovers

Lovers' Walk was a particularly beautiful part of the garden, not only because of the woodland that ran through it and the bubbling stream with cascades that lay along it, but also because of what it represented – love. Shenstone wished to describe a journey through love in the landscape.

When young love is new it is vibrant like the brook that flows over pebbles in artless abandonment at the commencement of the walk. When it reaches the age of reason, it is slow and deep like the Upper Pool (Beech Water) that lay further along the path, but then it matures and Shenstone's uphill climb resembles the problems that come about with the passing of time.

The Assigination Seat next to the path was a suitable place for lovers to be together, but the lines of verse there carried an unusual message. They tell the story of the Greek myth of Acis and Galatea, whose love was ended when a jealous rival, Polyphemus the Cyclops, killed Acis with a rock. The story is a tale of unrequited love, which resonated in Shenstone's own life.

At the end of the Lovers' Walk lay an urn dedicated to his cousin Maria Dolman who died in London of smallpox at the age of twenty-one. Maria was more than a cousin to Shenstone – he was infatuated by her. She epitomised the youthful love that he never had.

## Shenstone's legacy

Shenstone did more than cultivate a garden. Many of the words which we use about the garden today were first used by him:



Illustration of St John the Baptist Church, Halesowen, seen from The Leasowes. From *A collection of poems, handwritten and illustrated with watercolour paintings*, by William Shenstone (unpublished manuscript), 1753.

landscape gardener, landscape gardening, landscape painter and shrubbery. The garden at The Leasowes communicated both life and death.

Maybe Shenstone's spirit is still there, somewhere amongst the trees and shrubs. He wrote about the quiet and contentment that the garden came to represent for him in Virgil's Grove:

*O let me haunt this peaceful shade  
Not let Ambition o'er invade  
The tenants of this leafy bower  
That shun her paths and slight her power.*

Thomas Whately summed up William Shenstone's landscape garden as a 'perfect picture of his mind, simple, elegant and amiable' and who would we be to disagree? ●

**John Hemingway** was the Archaeological Officer for Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council and has written a number of books on the history of Dudley. He is currently studying William Shenstone's landscape gardening for a PhD in the Centre for West Midlands History at the University of Birmingham.

### Further Reading

John Dixon Hunt & Peter Willis, *The Genius of the Place: The English Landscape Garden 1620-1820* (MIT Press, 1990).

Mark Laird, *The Flowering of the Landscape Garden: English Pleasure Grounds 1720-1800* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

Tim Richardson, *The Arcadian Friends* (Transworld Publishers, 2008).

Michael Symes & Sandy Haynes, *Enville, Hagley & The Leasowes* (Redcliffe Press, 2010).

Tom Williamson, *Polite Landscapes: Gardens and Society in Eighteenth-Century England*, (Sutton Publishing, 1998).