Repton Revealed
The Art of Landscape Gardening
24 October 2018 to 3 February 2019

Above: Sundridge Park; before and after designs

Our new exhibition celebrates Humphry Repton (1752 – 1818) and his rare and beautiful Red Books.

Visitors will be able to see how Repton’s career unfolded in this special exhibition which brings together Red Books and watercolour paintings, many never publicly displayed before, to celebrate the bicentenary of his death.

It will display 23 Red Books, so named by Repton due to the distinctive red leather bindings he favoured. Very few remain, and this exhibition reunites the largest number of Red Books in one place in 25 years.

Ingenious in design and each one unique, the books were devised by Repton as a clever marketing tool. Clients would open the book to see Repton’s delicate watercolours of their garden as it currently appeared, and then would then lift a flap, revealing Repton’s new design for their garden as it could be (provided they paid Repton handsomely to make the design a reality!). As pages are turned, trees rise or are felled, a stream becomes a lake, an untidy farm becomes a genteel park, or, as is the case in the Sundridge Park Red Book above, a house is suddenly replaced with another, grander manor. The watercolours are interspersed with notes from Repton, often in a conversational style, recalling walks with the owner of the house during his visit. Compliments are followed by criticism, very often of the designer who had preceded Repton.

As well as exploring the relationship between the interior and exterior, and between the garden and the wider landscape, the exhibition will also look at Repton himself, at his comparatively late start in landscape design (at the ripe old age of 36) and his use of a wheelchair later in life, after a carriage accident, form which he continued gardening.

Christopher Woodward, Director of the Garden Museum describes opening one of Repton’s Red Books as “One of the great treats of garden history. They’re probably the most seductive client presentations ever made.”
Repton saw himself as the heir to Capability Brown, but they were as different as chalk and cheese. Brown was solid, silent, and masterful and made his fortune by digging and planting, not by drawing designs. Repton had been dandy, a failed entrepreneur, a social satirist and an artist before he set up as a landscape designer. He would have been great fun to travel through Jane Austen’s England with. And he was a restless, melancholy man who knew that his landscapes would change or vanish and saw these Red Books as his greatest work – and as the legacy of his genius’.

The exhibition includes objects from around the world, and from public and private collections, including the Royal Collection Trust, the British Library, Royal Academy of Arts and The Oak Spring Garden Foundation.

As well as seeing the Red Books and other Repton watercolours, the exhibition will include a specially commissioned digital animation of Armley, a Repton Garden in Leeds, produced by the Garden Museum with permission and support from the Oak Spring Garden Foundation. Narrated by Jeremy Irons, this allows visitors to step inside and experience the magic of Repton’s designs.

The exhibition is been curated by Stephen Daniels, Professor Emeritus at the University of Nottingham, who has studied Repton for 30 years, and is author of the definitive guide to Repton. His considerable expertise will bring the Red Books to life in this special exhibition.

-ENDS-

Notes to Editors

Humphry Repton (1752 – 1818)

Humphry Repton designed around 400 English landscapes and gardens, and was the original Landscape Gardener (having coined the term). He was born in 1752 in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk and moved to landscape design following an unsuccessful start in the textile business. His designs include Longleat (Wiltshire), Woburn Abbey (Bedfordshire) and Russell Square (London). He was a skilled salesman, styling himself as the heir to Capability Brown, and creating his famous Red Books which he used to present his proposed improvements, showing ‘before’ and ‘after’ views of the landscape.

In Repton’s own words, looking back on his career:
‘In every place in which I was consulted, I found that I was gifted with the peculiar facility of seeing almost immediately the way in which it might be improved and I only wanted the means of making my ideas equally visible, or intelligible to others.’ However, Repton was also very aware that the books were also his legacy. As he wrote: ‘The deaths of the proprietors, the change of property, the difference of opinions... the frequent opposition I have experienced from gardeners, bailiffs and land stewards, who either wilfully mar my plans, or ignorantly mistake my instructions. It is rather
through my opinions in writing, than on the partial and imperfect manner in which my plans have been executed, that I wish my fame to be established’.

This exhibition is sponsored by City & Country, and has been supported by the Oak Spring Garden Foundation.

Images

Humphry Repton Sundridge Park Red Book1793, with kind permission of City and Country.

Humphry Repton Mulgrave Castle Red Book1793, with kind permission of the Marquis and Marchioness of Normanby.

High resolution images available on request from nicola@gardenmuseum.org.uk

Garden Museum

The Garden Museum is housed in the deconsecrated church of St Mary-at-Lambeth. The Museum contains the burial place of John Tradescant, the first great gardener and plant hunter in British History. In order to preserve his tomb, Rosemary Nicholson founded the Museum in 1977. The Museum explores and celebrates British and Gardening through its collections, temporary exhibitions, events and garden visits. Visitors will enjoy the permanent collection of paintings, tools and ephemera and historic artefacts, all providing a glimpse into our love affair with gardens.

Whether you are an enthusiastic amateur gardener, more of a specialist or someone with a passion for museums, history or architecture, the Museum has something for you.

City & Country

As the UK’s leading heritage developer, City & Country is delighted to be sponsoring the Garden Museum’s Repton Exhibition. In 2014 City & Country became the proud owners of The Mansion at Sundridge Park along with its iconic Humphry Repton Red Book. Since then, the business has been restoring and converting the mansion to provide a collection of unique apartments, whilst the Red Book has been on loan to the museum for all garden and landscape enthusiasts to enjoy.

As part of the restoration City & Country will be reinstating part of Repton’s landscape designs for the house, including the reinstatement of ‘the gentleman’s pleasure grounds’. The development is set to launch this Autumn, interested parties should visit www.cityandcountry.co.uk and register their interest to acquire a piece of this heritage asset.

Visitor Information

Garden Museum, Lambeth Palace Road, London, SE1 7LB
020 7401 8865; www.gardenmuseum.org.uk
Admission: £10, concessions apply, see website for details
Opening hours: Sunday to Friday: 10.30 – 17.00, Saturday: 10.30 – 16.00
Closed the first Monday of the month