

How an English designer shaped the US landscape

Some of the most scenic US highways owe their allure to the principles of Humphry Repton

The Blue Ridge Parkway, North Carolina © Getty

Christopher Woodward SEPTEMBER 14, 2018

Humphry Repton, landscape designer to Regency England, died 200 years ago. The bicentenary is being celebrated with an exhibition at London's Garden Museum, four books, and a new London street named in his honour. Yet 100 years ago Repton's name was all but forgotten in his own country, while — as new research reveals — his reputation was flourishing in early 20th-century America, as a hero of the landscape architects shaping and framing the cities and roads of a new continent.

Repton was born in Suffolk in 1752, a tax collector's son who tried and failed to support his family as a textile merchant, a promoter of faster mail coaches and as a painter. But a welcome inheritance allowed him to live as a country gentleman at Sustead Old Hall in Norfolk, where he planted trees and shrubs and in 1783, when the great landscaper Lancelot "Capability" Brown died, Repton saw an opportunity. At the age of 36, he downsized to a cottage in Hare Street in Romford, Essex, and printed fliers declaring himself "Landscape Gardener" to the aristocracy of Britain.

Success came quickly. Repton developed a gift for refreshing old and tired estates, for showing a client possibilities they had not seen for themselves: felling trees to open a view of a distant castle or spire, or damming a river so that a new pond glittered below the bedroom windows. His artist's eye transformed the surroundings of Woburn Abbey, the great square house of the Duke of Bedford, by replacing a straight avenue with a curving approach through the woods. Repton was soon so fashionable that he would be name-checked in Jane Austen's 1814 novel *Mansfield Park*.

Another gift was for siting new houses. His intact masterpieces are Endsleigh (now a hotel), set in a rocky gorge in Devon and designed in collaboration with Jeffrey Wyattville, and Sheringham Hall, which nestles in a valley in Norfolk and was designed in partnership with his son, John, an architect.

Sheringham, begun in 1812, is the perfect Regency family home, where an Austen hero and heroine might live happily ever after. But, by that date, Repton had little else on his drawing

board and was in a wheelchair after a carriage accident. At the end of his life, he declared “my profession is soon to be extinct”.

© The British Library Board 59.e.20

Repton's 'before and after' illustration of 'General view of Sherringham Bower, Norfolk' from 'Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening' (1816) © The British Library Board 59.e.20

During the 19th century Repton was forgotten, as fashions in British gardens turned to carpet bedding and rockeries and to herbaceous borders connecting secret rooms of yew. But in 1918, on the 100th anniversary of his death, a group of landscape architects in Boston in the US gathered for dinner as The Repton Club. On the table were photographs of the cottage in Hare Street while the club read aloud the words from his last book, *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816), in which Repton described how he preferred the view from his porch to the “lonely parks” of his grand clients: “Others prefer still life, I delight in movement; they prefer Lawns fed by their own Cattle; I love to see mankind . . .”

The photographs had been commissioned as an act of homage by Frederick Law Olmsted, co-designer of New York's Central Park, whose carriage drives were modelled on Repton's designs for parks. In 1886, he wrote to a colleague travelling in England to find Repton's cottage and get a photograph. The visitor succeeded, although “nobody seemed to know who Repton might have been, not even the family living in the same cottage”.

Dan Marriott, visiting professor of landscape architecture at Pennsylvania State University, recounted this story at a symposium of UK and US landscape historians hosted by The Oak Spring Garden Foundation in Virginia, at the former home of Rachel “Bunny” Mellon. It was an appropriate setting for Marriott's revelation that Repton provided inspiration for US “landscape architects”. Though fabled for her art collection, her friends and her chic houses, Bunny Mellon's greatest love was gardening and collecting historic garden books, and at the heart of Oak Spring, in Upperville, Virginia, is one of the world's greatest horticultural libraries. After her death in 2014, the art collection was sold to endow the Oak Spring Library.

Sir Humphry Repton © Getty

Among the treasures of the library are four of Repton's “Red Books” — for Armley Hall in Yorkshire, Aston Park in Cheshire, Newton Park in Somerset and Point Pleasant on the Thames — the handmade albums made as presentations to clients. These four will be on loan to a new exhibition at London's Garden Museum this autumn titled *Repton Revealed*, along with 22 other Red Books; these include Repton's vision for Brighton Pavilion presented to the Prince Regent, to Sundridge Park on the edge of London, in which an unremarkable farm is swept away to become an ornamental lake.

Open a Red Book — so-called for the red leather binding — and you open the most seductive client presentation ever made by a landscape designer. Copper-plate text is illustrated by

Repton's watercolours of your estate as it is. But there is a unique feature: a small flap cut out from the painting which, like in a child's book, you lift, to reveal a second watercolour showing how the view could be. That lawn becomes a balustraded terrace, a slow stream transforms into a pond flashing with trout.

Bridge in New York City's Central Park © Getty

Each Red Book begins with *The Approach* — the drive made by a carriage from the public road. As the entrance curves before us, Repton explains how objects such as buildings or sculpture must be placed to revolve in the view, to vanish or disappear; how water and trees must be placed with the sun behind them; how a new gas-lit factory or one of Admiral Nelson's warships can "peep" into view. It's a box of magic tricks which he called "a generous deceit". Critically, these optical illusions were designed to be seen at speed.

It is Repton's approach to speed which, Marriott believes, explains why he became an American hero. Innovations in his lifetime had quickened horse-drawn travel so that a phaeton (a two-seater carriage) could travel at up to 20mph. In 1907, the first textbook of the new American profession of landscape architecture was published to "supply the demand for Repton's counsel", as its editor put it.

'View from My Own Garden in Essex' by Repton © Getty

A year earlier the Bronx River Parkway was begun in Westchester County, New York. A year later came The Model T. And, soon, Marriott explains, Henry Ford's "great multitude" were exploring the American landscape on roads which were designed on Reptonian principles. Visitors could travel at a similar speed to Mr Darcy's phaeton and stop for a soda at a cliff-top pavilion, whose panoramic form echoed the picnic temples Repton placed in parkland.

Drive the Blue Ridge Parkway, a linear park created on the spine of the Appalachians under Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal in 1935, and it is reminiscent of driving through the grounds of Sheringham Hall. Views open and close with a "peep" or a "burst" (Repton's words). Except that the views are on a scale of sublimity unimaginable to the 19th-century inhabitants of Sheringham. "My efforts have contributed to the happiness of some hundreds", wrote Repton from his wheelchair.

Repton would have loved 20th-century America, its jazz (he played the flute), its jostlings and its variety. He wrote a fantasy of a balloon flight to the moon discovering a silver-plated Utopia of perfect uniformity; misery is unknown, but neither is happiness.

Sundridge Park Red Book (1793) © With kind permission of City and Country

Stephen Daniels, curator of *Repton Revealed*, suggests Repton knew that his legacy would be on paper. Planted landscapes change, blur or are built upon; clients change their mind. He had seen how quickly Capability Brown's style had come to be badly imitated and he knew his

genius would be preserved intact in the Red Books.

I am hoping that through the exhibition a new generation of British designers will rediscover his gift for changing reality by an enchantment of the eye. Indeed, there is a rumour that the panel of experts advising on the landscape setting of HS2, the high-speed train line proposed to rip from London to Birmingham, is turning to “Mr Repton’s Counsel”. Not just to learn how to soften its impact on the landscape but on how to shape the views that passengers on board will enjoy from its windows. Repton would have loved that: the countryside curving by at 200 miles per hour.

Humphry Repton’s *Variety*, a collection of 33 essays published in 1788, is a smorgasbord dedicated to smorgasbords, **writes Todd Gillespie**. In the preface Repton warns the reader not to expect a “plain family dinner”, but rather “what the French call un petit soupé”: it covers topics as various as puns, the essence of fashion and the love life of llamas.

The collection includes a fictional letter by “Lunaticus”, an asylum patient who narrates his trip to the moon, somewhat despondently, finding that “a perfect sameness dwells throughout the extensive regions of this mighty luminary”, while earth is a place “where life is chequered by the never-ceasing pleasures of novelty and change”.

The essays have a clear moral dimension. Probably started just after he abandoned his mercantile career, they lament the sins of industrial society and hope for a more meaningful existence.

Christopher Woodward is director of the Garden Museum in London. ‘Repton Revealed’, October 24 2018 – February 3 2019, gardenmuseum.org.uk

for photographs and images see:

<https://www.ft.com/content/ad398b3e-b5a5-11e8-a1d8-15c2dd1280ff>

allenfisherstudio@icloud.com

