

**Rachel Grimmer reports on
A talk on Hackfall Wood that was given to Harrogate Civic Society by David Winpenny**



It is that time of year again, blustery showers and sudden high winds have carpeted the ground in golden rustling leaves, and the Civic Society talks have restarted.

I walked down the hill, there is a hint, a promise of that cold fresh air and those lovely clean blue skies and a low sun casting shadows over the soon to be frosty land that will crunch beneath our feet. This walk seems to have existed forever, connecting High and Low Harrogate with their lovely older buildings, cutting across the stray towards the faded grandeur of The Old Swan, but here, the talk is in one of those rather intimate rooms at Grant's Hotel and we are a select group this evening.

David Winpenny chairman of The Ripon Civic Society, who writes, among other things, books on suggested walks in different parts of the country,¹ gave us an interesting talk on Hackfall Woods; complete with the fascinating history of its production, there is an element of the theatrical about it, its decline, and finally its rescue². The talk was illustrated with a mixture of atmospheric photographs and, I was relieved to be reassured, the perfect harmony and balance of a landscape painted by Nicolas Poussin, followed with a painting by Claude Lorraine, both of whom were artists whose work influenced many landscape painters. The gentleman sitting in front of me was clearly very knowledgeable in a reliable and all encompassing way, rather than in odd flashes, and so he answered questions and I remained in the safety of silence as the talk continued.

The history of Yorkshire has its share of Chancellors of the Exchequer and John Aislabie, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1718-21, had inherited the Studley estate from his mother's family in 1693. He started serious development of the garden in around 1716, becoming the first in England to introduce natural landscaping, and creating the beautiful landscaped gardens at Studley Royal. John Aislabie also bought Hackfall Wood for £906 in 1731, although it was his son William Aislabie who was able to add the ruins of Fountains Abbey to the estate, continuing the garden by developing its broad sweeping open views and the long water with its little formal bridge. William Aislabie also created the dramatically romantic fantasy of lost pathways and ruined castles and bowers, grottos that Boswell said were 'for deep thoughts or slugs', out of the part of steeply wooded ravine of the Ure known as Hackfall Wood that his father had bought. William Aislabie had met Robert Adam at Newby Hall where he saw his Italian drawings of Capriccios and decided that they would be perfect for his idea for Hackfall Wood, he would also have been familiar with the work of William Kent, the protégée of Lord Burlington, of whom Horace Walpole had written that he 'leaped the fence and saw that all nature was a garden.'³

I went to investigate, and although there were one or two cars in the car park, on a Tuesday it seemed that for a good two hours I had the entire place to myself and I had to resist the temptation to sing out 'Let us with a gladsome mind' or 'Climb every mountain.' Vistas occur as if by nature's command until you are surprised by a glassy pool with a waterfall cascading down the rocks behind it, and all of a sudden a most un natural fountain

rises before you, a slender column of water tumbling down itself from the top, surely Pan will appear or shepherds and maids will frolic. 'Merrily merrily shall I sing now, under the blossom that hangs on the bough'. But in reality, for winemakers there are Elderberries a plenty. Arcadia has here been redesigned. Just as in the painting by Claude Lorrain with its ruined Temple of Sibyl at Tivoli⁴:



Buildings, the proper points of view adorn
Of Grecian, Roman and Egyptian form
Interspersed with woods and verdant plains
Such as Possessed of Old Th'Arcadian Swains.⁵



Wilderness, but only up to a point; the celebrated William Kent obliterated boundaries between garden and nature,⁶ but walking through Hackfall Wood emphasizes the fact, even more than the beautiful and more serene walk at Fountains Abbey, that time always passes and ruin, decay, and death, are an inevitable consequence of life. Even in Arcadia death confronts us and in a variety of possible guises, as 'Landscape with a man killed by a snake' by Nicolas Poussin makes dramatically clear, harmonious nature looks on as in some small part beauty and calm are shattered.⁷

Neither of these paintings conveys the dramatic force of coming across a sudden drop down a cliff face semi hidden by the trees and bushes that cling to the sides at Hackfall. These chance encounters bring the paintings of the sublime by Caspar David Friedrich (1774 –1840) to mind, and you can look down from a great height at the top of the waterfall down onto the fountain below with nothing to come between you and the fall, the drama here has real danger behind it.

It is no wonder then that Hackfall Wood became a favourite part of The Grand Tour of Europe as wealthy young men continued their travels around Britain. The Romantics found the extreme contrast to Studley Royal invigorating; it might have been the perfect inspiration for a Gothic novel. William Wordsworth recommended a visit, Thomas Bewick sketched and William Turner did several paintings here,⁸ there was even a dinner service known as The Green Frog Dinner Service with scenes of Hackfall Wood on several of the pieces, made to the order of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia.⁹

Although Hackfall Wood had been so much appreciated, in the 19th Century it became neglected. It was not until Mr James Ramsden set up The Hackfall Trust in 1988 that efforts were made to renew the splendour of the 'landscape garden' for which it was justly famous. The Wood of 115 acres is now owned by The Woodland Trust and is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) The fantasy architecture and faux ruins known as the Rustic Temple, Fisher's Hall, Mowbray Point, The Grotto and Mowbray Castle have all been restored to their former glory and given Grade II listing.¹⁰

As I hope I have conveyed, the talk was full of information to send you on your own trail both in researching further to find out more, and in fact, walking through the woods and discovering their magic for yourselves. Portraits of the Aislabies hang in Ripon Town Hall and should also be on the Public Catalogue Foundation's website.¹¹

¹www.winpennypr.co.uk Two new books by David Winpenny - 'Up to a Point - in search of pyramids in Britain and Ireland' and '50 Walks in North Yorkshire' - fully revised edition - have been published.

² The woods are now owned by the Woodland Trust and in the care of the Hackfall Trust, and considerable work has been done since 2002 to recover this 'lost landscape' and to preserve the historic buildings and improve access. Hackfall is now a Grade 1 registered landscape garden and a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). The recent restoration work has been made possible due to a grant of almost £1 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund and further grants from the Nidderdale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Yorventure.

³ Horace Walpole re William Kent : At that moment appeared Kent, painter enough to taste the charms of landscape, bold and opinionative enough to dare and to dictate, and born with a genius to strike out a great system from the twilight of imperfect essays. He leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden. He felt the delicious contrast of hill and valley changing imperceptibly into each other, tasted the beauty of the gentle swell, or concave scoop, and remarked how loose groves crowned an easy eminence with happy ornament, and while they called in the distant view between their graceful stems, removed and extended the perspective by delusive comparison.

However Kent's interest was more in seeing landscape as pictures than as plans. 'The great principles on which he worked were perspective, and light and shade', but as with the other landscape painters of his time the landscape which really interested him was the landscape of antiquity. The gardens designed by Kent and Bridgeman were redolent of ancient times, replete with statuary, temples, grottos, and hermit's caves.

⁴ Claude Lorrain *The Judgement of Paris with the ruined Temple of Sibyl at Tivoli* 1633 at The Ashmolean in Oxford

⁵ Poem dedicated to Castle Howard: Simon Schama *Landscape and Memory* (Harper Perrenial 2004) page 539. Attributed to Christopher Hussey *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View*. (Hamden, Conn. 1967)

⁶ Simon Schama *Landscape & Memory* (Harper Perrenial 2004)

⁷ Nicolas Poussin: *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* 1648 National Gallery.



⁸ William Turner Hackfall Wood in The Wallace Collection
www.wallacecollection.org/thecollection

⁹ www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/

Wedgwood & Bentley's Imperial Russian Service



Commissioned in by Empress Catherine the Great of Russia for one of her palaces and was made in 1773-4.

¹⁰ www.davidrodway.org.uk

¹¹ www.thepcf.org.uk

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