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INTRODUCTION

Gardens and green spaces in the West Midlands since 1700

Malcolm Dick and Elaine Mitchell

Garden history has been a dimension of historical study since the early twentieth century, but only in recent years has it begun to move away from a focus on the well-known landscape architects, including William Kent and Lancelot ‘Capability’ Brown, and the gardens of the elite, such as Chatsworth and Stowe. There has also been a retreat from a concentration on the aesthetics of design towards seeing gardens and the activity of gardening within wider social, economic, political and cultural contexts. Gardens can be understood as part of the shaping of urban and rural landscapes and are influenced by scientific, technological, industrial, medical and intellectual developments. Social class and gender also affect their creation and development. The role of gardeners and lesser-known designers, how women were involved in the creation of landscapes and the gardens of the working classes deserve rescuing from the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’.¹ Methodologically as well, studying garden history involves a multi-disciplinary approach that includes insights from geology, archaeology and horticulture, art and architectural history, philosophy, poetry and novels, material culture and archival research to throw light on the creation, meaning and impact of green spaces at particular times and in different locations. This combination of approaches has been called the ‘new garden history’ by Tom Williamson.²

This volume explores current research into landscape and gardens in the English West Midlands and builds upon recent published work on the region.³ It contains edited papers delivered at an academic conference, ‘Landscape and Green Spaces: Garden History in the West Midlands’, held at the University of Birmingham in March 2014 under the auspices of the Centre for West Midlands History. The conference deliberately moved away from the ‘great men’ approach to history and avoided an overtly celebratory approach towards individuals and their creations. It showed that much remained to be uncovered, even about

the well-known designers, as the research and exhibitions that accompanied the tercentenary of the birth of ‘Capability’ Brown in 2016 revealed. This is the first regional study to explore analytically the application of the ‘new garden history’ in the West Midlands. As the chapters reveal, it also applies insights from scholars drawn from other disciplines, such as urban, industrial and medical history. Within the contours of the historic counties of Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire the book brings a range of methodological approaches to bear on the region’s landscapes. Boundaries, of course, are porous, especially when exploring intellectual, commercial and cultural networks, and this is reflected by some of the authors. Chronologically the book concentrates on the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but, as the last chapter reveals, the theory and practice of garden history is being applied to the re-creation of an eighteenth-century landscape in the twenty-first century. The contributions recognise the diverse nature of garden history and show that independent scholars as well as academics in universities are contributing to advancing knowledge and understanding.⁴

The West Midlands has been portrayed as a region of significant manufacturing innovation, industrial enlightenment and urbanisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period christened by Maxine Berg as ‘the age of manufactures.’⁵ It was also a site of gardening innovation. The entrepreneur Matthew Boulton was one of the area’s leading players and the landscape garden that he created at Soho, on the outskirts of Birmingham, was laid out not only to project his status as a gentleman but also to provide a classical setting for his manufactory.⁶ Similarly, the region has also come into view as an important centre of Enlightenment thought and practice, investigation focusing on the activities of the group of men who formed the Lunar Society, a network of industrialists, scientists, doctors, inventors and philosophers.⁷ At Lichfield one of the ‘Lunatics’, Dr Erasmus Darwin, created a botanical garden near to his home and wrote about plants and planting in his poem *The Botanic Garden* (1795), while another, Dr William Withering, began to classify native British plants according to the new Linnaean system.⁸ In the nineteenth century the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society enlisted the well-known horticulturalist and garden writer John Claudius Loudon to design Birmingham Botanical Gardens, while Britain’s first municipally owned public park, Derby Arboretum, was also laid out by Loudon.⁹ Innovation in glasshouse design at Chatsworth in Derbyshire by the gardener and architect Joseph Paxton led to his creation of the Crystal Palace in 1851.¹⁰ The contribution of women to landscape design and horticulture has been largely overlooked: increasingly, however, women are being recognised for their creative work in shaping green spaces. Both Ann Shteir (1996) and

Catherine Horwood (2010) have drawn our attention to the contributions of women to gardening: Henrietta Knight (Lady Luxborough) at Barrells in Warwickshire and the writers Maria Jacson in Derbyshire and Birmingham-born Jane Loudon, for example.¹¹ The skills, careers and achievements of a variety of individuals show the interconnection between the advancement of botanical knowledge and the development of gardening practice on the one hand and industrial, scientific and cultural history in the West Midlands on the other. As this volume reveals, there are diverse and multi-faceted garden histories to discover.

The first chapter, by David Whitehead, on the beginnings of picturesque landscaping in Stuart and Georgian Herefordshire, reveals the importance of the intersection of both time and place for understanding how landscapes were created. He explores both visual representations and printed and archival primary sources to build a cultural and intellectual history of the distinctive Herefordshire landscape. Two late eighteenth-century local landowners, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, challenged the accepted canons of the English landscape movement. They attempted to destroy the reputation of ‘Capability’ Brown and his self-proclaimed successor, Humphry Repton. From the 1770s Price and Knight’s estates at Foxley and Downton attracted the attention of the *cognoscenti* interested in prosperous farming with an aesthetic bonus. In place of the Brownian park they recommended a ‘natural’ style of estate management, which epitomised the Picturesque. Whitehead argues that Picturesque ideas were embedded in the distinctive agricultural history of Herefordshire from at least the late seventeenth century. The county emerged from the medieval period with a predominantly enclosed landscape, managed by small tenant farmers who engaged in both industrial and farming activities. In character this landscape had a varied texture of narrow lanes, high hedgerows, small woods and plenty of water, all of which made Herefordshire different from the open-field countryside in other Midland counties. Price and Knight articulated a defence of their vision of a distinctive county landscape that separated Herefordshire from Wales and Midland England beyond the Malvern Hills.

John Hemingway applies a cross-disciplinary approach to an investigation of the origins of an important eighteenth-century landscape garden. At The Leasowes, near Halesowen, then part of Shropshire, the poet William Shenstone (1714–1763) fashioned a *ferme ornée* (ornamental farm) that was seen and described by visitors from Britain and overseas. By making subtle improvements to the natural landscape, erecting classical and medieval features and adding reflections from classical Roman poets and his own verses he conjured up pictures from an imagined past and created an environment that aimed to stimulate the senses. The Leasowes promoted Shenstone’s