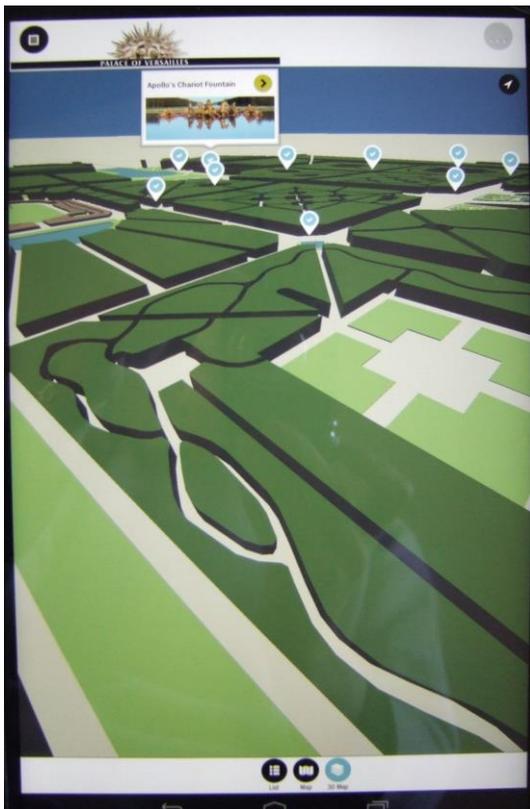


The 'visitor experience' at historic parks and gardens

On leaving the chateau by the entrance to the marble courtyard, you will be on the terrace: you should stop on the top of the steps to consider the position of the parterres, water features and the fountains of the 'cabinets'. You should then go straight to the Latona fountain and stop to contemplate Latona, the 'lesars', slopes, statues, the royal allée, Apollo, the canal and turn around to see the parterre and the chateau.

This is the start to a version of the *Manière de montrer les jardins de Versailles* (Way of showing the gardens of Versailles), a guide written by King Louis XIV first in 1689 and subsequently revised up to 1705 as the gardens were developed. As with all matters relating to Louis' creation, it was a political statement about the size and complexity of the garden that required a guide, though it did have a practical purpose to stop visitors getting lost! I am sure Louis would have approved that over three hundred years later, there is now an app for your smartphone or tablet to do a similar thing (see www.chateauversailles.fr) with a whizzy 3D map (Figure 1). Whatever the technology used, these visitor guides seek to show and explain the designed landscape. Louis' original version was highly prescriptive as this absolutist monarch wanted to control what the visitor saw and, more crucially, what they experienced.



In Britain, those creating gardens in the early 18th century took a more *laissez-faire* attitude, often in keeping with their politics. This extended to their visitors and how they experienced the gardens. Many garden layouts had oblique references in the garden buildings or their design that only those 'in the know', usually their acquaintances or relatives, would appreciate. As the fame of these gardens spread, visitors unconnected with the owners started to come. The first specific garden guidebook in Britain was probably the one written for Stowe in 1744 by Benton Seeley (Figure 2). Other guides followed for popular gardens such as the Leasowes, Hagley and Blenheim Palace.

Traditionally though most visitors were accompanied by the head gardener of an estate, until mass tourism took off in the mid nineteenth century with the arrival of the railway network.

A
DESCRIPTION
OF THE
GARDENS
OF
Lord Viscount COBHAM,
AT
STOW in BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

*Here Order in Variety you see,
Where all Things differ, --- yet where all agree!*
A. POPE.



NORTHAMPTON:
Printed by W. DICKY; and sold by B. Seeley, Writing-Master,
in Buckingham, and George Norris, Peruke-Maker, in Newport-
Pagnell, Bucks. M.DCC.XLIV.

The popularity of garden visiting remains undimmed. In 2012, there were 44 million visits to gardens in UK versus 26 million visits to historic houses¹. Furthermore, 42% of British adults say they visited an historic park or garden in 2010². So why the enthusiasm for historic parks and gardens? The main reason given for visiting them³ is personal enjoyment or satisfaction (46% versus 38% for historic buildings). 21% said the reason was to accompany children, probably as it was an outdoor space but let's hope that it was also to inspire the younger generation. However only 13% of respondents went to an historic landscape as a result of a recommendation to visit, as opposed to 25% for historic house visitors. Last year a third of the UK population visited a heritage website⁴, with half wanting to 'learn about history or historic environment' and just under a fifth taking a virtual tour of a historical site.

So today do we still 'absorb' or experience these historic parks and gardens in the same way, through printed guidebooks, leaflets and maps and, if we are lucky, a personal tour? Is this enough to enthuse the next generation of historic garden advocates (and potential YGT members), who may be used to more dynamic presentations? This is the area that I have been exploring over the last year, in trying to determine the answers to these questions.

Despite the numerous 'restorations' and 'recreations' of historic designed landscapes, it is still hard sometimes to fully appreciate what is there to see without some interpretation. Historic views are often hidden and modern day conveniences can intrude. *V & A - An ace cafe with quite a nice museum attached* was the slogan for an advertising campaign run by the museum in 1988 and I wonder whether this may be applicable to many of our historic landscapes who strive to become a popular leisure destination. The amount of information given to visitors on the history of such sites is patchy and not always correct...It is hard at times for visitors to understand why these designed landscapes were created in the first place. Though muddled presentations, they can often merge

¹ Day Visits 2012 Survey, Visit England

² *Taking Part*: The National Survey of Culture, Leisure and Sport Adult and Child Report 2009/2010, DCMS

³ *Attending heritage sites*, Centre for Economics and Business Research Ltd, 2007 (for English Heritage)

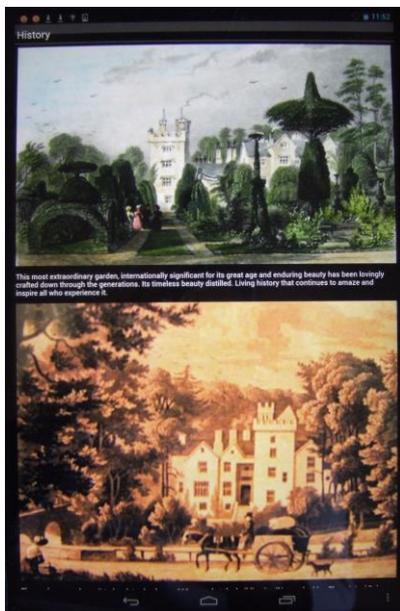
⁴ *Taking Part 2012/13 Quarter 1*, DCMS

into one and lose their identity. This then is a problem for the owner who struggles to attract sufficient visitors and income to support the running costs.

Some interesting work done by Tony Conway and Debra Leighton⁵ at the University of Salford has demonstrated a relationship between what they call '**Substantial Staging**' (or what is there to experience or see) and '**Communicative Staging**' (or what story can be told) at historic visitor attractions. They argue that only when both are at a high level, will the visitor be 'fully immersed' and get the most out of their visit. Clearly when relating this to historic gardens, the immediate problem is what can be physically seen now on the ground. This is where technology comes in. Visitors can now use their phone or tablet to see historic views from original paintings, photographs or computer generated recreations in situ. Old maps and plans can be superimposed on their modern counterparts to highlight historic routes. Features in the landscape can be explained in as much detail as the visitor wants. There is also scope for a personal audio tour.

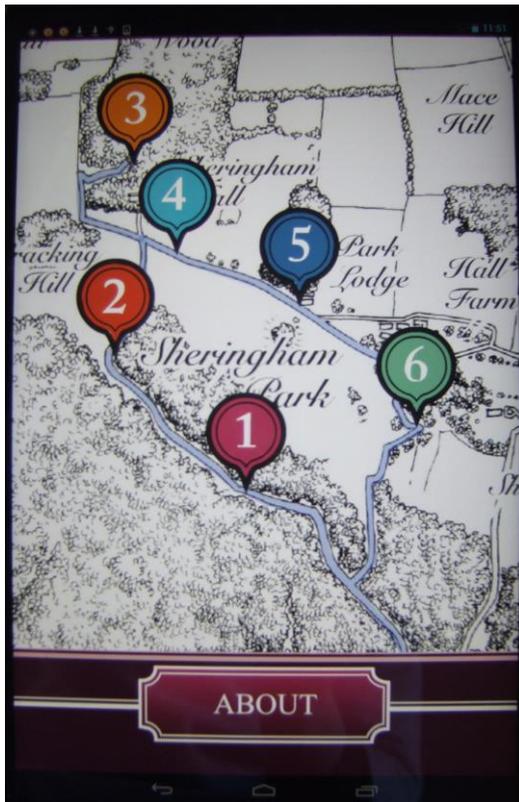
However this is not enough. There needs to be a coherent (and factually accurate as possible) story or narrative, charting the development of the garden by its owners, designers and hands-on gardeners. The best technology in the world will not make up for a poor telling of a story. Two examples of what I see as missed opportunities are the apps for Levens Hall (www.levenshall.co.uk/levens-hall-gardens-historic-topiary-in-cumbria/levensgarden-the-app.html) and a Repton walk at Sheringham Park, Norfolk (<http://www.uglystudios.com/reptonwalk/>).

The Levens app for Android (Figure 3), while full of beautiful (modern) photos, is largely taken from the website. The history section has both old images of the garden and text, though the former is not always related to the latter! The map provided is not interactive and you have to flip between that and the descriptions of various parts of the garden. There is also no indication of a route in the main gardens, although one is provided for the park. I am though assured by Chris Crowder, the head gardener at Levens and its creator, that the app is fully interactive on i-Phones and i-Pads...



⁵ "Staging the past, enacting the present" Experiential marketing in the performing arts and heritage sectors', *Arts Marketing: An International Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012, pp. 35-51

The app for Sheringham Park (Figure 4) is quite simple, based around a map of the site and six points of interest along a trail. If you are on site, then your GPS should tell you where you are (though I have not tried this!). At each point is a view taken from Repton's Red Book. However this is where it fails as the picture quality is poor when viewed on anything larger than a smartphone screen. Repton's beautiful drawings in particular suffer from this. I would have thought that it was possible to get good quality reproductions, given the National Trust own the original book. The text to accompany the pictures is a bit limited but you are directed to the NT website to find out more about Sheringham's history. It is a pity that, as with many other NT properties, the historical information on the website is practically non-existent.



I would be interested to know of any good garden guide apps (historic or otherwise) or indeed any others for heritage sites that you think are innovative. This is a new area but one I feel could be incredibly valuable in promoting interest in our historic designed landscapes. I would also welcome your comments and any suggestions you have for sites that you think would particularly benefit from this new technology.

You can either email me at info@wickhamconsulting.co.uk or if you prefer, phone me on 01977 663471.

Louise Wickham