

Views of Hartwell House gardens by Balthasar Nebot, 1738 (downloadable pdf)

This series of eight paintings by Balthasar Nebot shows the spectacular garden landscape of Hartwell House, just outside Aylesbury, in 1738. The formal green architecture of topiary hedges, with classical stone temples and statues of gods and goddesses, was balanced by informal views towards the town.

Sir Thomas Lee (1687-1749) of Hartwell commissioned them from Balthasar Nebot, a little-known Spanish painter, based in Covent Garden. They provide a unique record of a country estate and garden landscape at this time. The people of Hartwell – family, visitors, household and estate staff and, especially the gardeners – are also portrayed in great detail.

The Paintings:



This scene recalls the 18th century ideal of the countryside as an idyllic place, where peasants lived a purer, happier life than city dwellers. Notice the ha-ha, a clever arrangement of a wall set in a ditch that kept the animals out, whilst at the same time not interrupting the view of the landscape. The bowling green can be seen in front of the house and the topiary arcade to the right.



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Topiary has been used to great effect in order to create dramatic architectural forms. The central avenue leads up to the column with the William III statue, the right-hand one reveals a bust of John Hampden, and the left-hand leads to the menagerie. To the left can be seen part of the front of the house with an angel above the window.



A game of bowls is taking place on the green in front of the house. The most prominent character in the group is a Knight of the Garter, possibly Frederick, Prince of Wales, who visited nearby Stowe in 1737. He gestures up the topiary avenue that leads to the column with the statue of William III. William became king in 1689, which was a turning point in the political fortunes of the Whig landowners.



This view looks out from the octagon pavilion and across the octagon pond to Aylesbury. The tower of St Mary's church can be clearly seen rising above the cluster of houses. Gentry are dressed to go riding whilst others stroll through the topiary arcades or around the long canal. The house can be seen to the right. The view sets the grounds at Hartwell and their leisured occupants in the context of a well-managed and productive agricultural landscape.



The dominant feature of this painting is the extraordinary topiary exhedra, an amazing structure created by carefully training and clipping evergreens to form pieces of green architecture. It is believed to have been without parallel at the time. In the centre is possibly Frederick, Prince of Wales, with Sir Thomas Lee to the left.



By slightly distorting the perspective in the picture, Nebot reveals in one sweep several of the monuments in the gardens; a statue of Hercules, a glimpse through an opening to the long canal, the William III column and the menagerie, the tower of the medieval parish church, an arcaded pavilion, a Gothic tower, a pyramid and finally a statue of the satyr Marsyas.



Gardeners Scything in the Wilderness This view looks north through the wilderness to the countryside beyond, where farm hands are haymaking. Aylesbury and the tower of St Mary's church can just be seen in the distance. In the wilderness the gardeners are cutting the grass with scythes whilst the servants are chatting.



This view was painted from the steps in front of the menagerie looking down towards the long canal. The topiary arcades create views down to the long canal and Aylesbury beyond, the rusticated arch with a view through to the medieval church of Stoke Mandeville to the right and a glimpse of the octagon pond to the left.

Overview:

The paintings may originally have hung around a room in Lee's London house. Similar sets of views of country houses were a standard artistic commission in the 1700s, but this set is especially interesting, as the Hartwell they show lasted only a few years. In the 1750s Sir

William Lee remodelled Hartwell House and its garden in the more 'natural' style of Capability Brown.

The Lees were an old Buckinghamshire family, who had acquired Hartwell a hundred years earlier by marriage into the family of John Hampden. Hampden, a local landowner and MP, had opposed Charles I in the Civil War of the 1640s. The Lees were Whig landowners; part of a grouping of opposition MPs centred in the 1730s around Frederick, Prince of Wales. In the early 1700s the Whig connection in Buckinghamshire included Lee of Hartwell, Lord Wharton of Winchendon House, the neighbouring estate, and Viscount Cobham of Stowe.

Sir Thomas Lee married a wealthy heiress, Elizabeth Sandys, in 1720 and set about the transformation of the Hartwell gardens. He brought in the architect James Gibbs to build an Egyptian obelisk and pyramid, classical temples inspired by Greece and Rome, columns, statues, a menagerie and Gothic tower.

All these structures expressed Whig political ideas about Liberty, which they believed had been inherited from ancient Egypt through the Greek and Roman world of classical antiquity and transmitted to Northern Europe by the Anglo-Saxons (or 'Goths') at the end of the Roman Empire. A bust of John Hampden linked the Whig landowner of the 1730s to the Civil War Parliamentarian of the 1640s.

Sir Thomas's garden design was also an expression of his taste and cultural influences. In many ways Hartwell in the 1730s was like a small-scale Roman villa estate or the villas designed by the architect Palladio for Venetian landowners in the 1500s. Lee was in touch with Lord Burlington, whose villa at Chiswick introduced Palladian design for English country houses and parks. The formal pleasure gardens for walking, playing bowls or viewing from a carriage are visually linked to the surrounding farmland of the estate.

The paintings were given to the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society by Ernest Cook, the last private owner of Hartwell, in 1955 via the National Art Collections Fund.