

Manuscript of the Month
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View of Stourhead garden by an unknown artist, 19th century



On June 10th we hired a special train to take the whole of our staff, including porters and domestic servants together with spouses and children, to Gillingham, Dorset, whence they went by motor coach to Stourhead, where they were greeted by Mr and Mrs H P R Hoare. On arrival the house and its contents were inspected followed by lunch, which was provided by Searcey Tansley & Co in the Saloon. Refreshments were provided in the train by Hay's Wharf Travel Agency. It was a lovely day and everybody appeared to enjoy themselves. (Partners' annual report,

1965). Now, nearly fifty years later, Stourhead is getting ready to welcome staff from C Hoare & Co once again. The house and garden, though, have been attracting visitors for over 250 years.

Stourhead was built in the early 1720s by banker Henry Hoare, while its celebrated garden was the brainchild of Henry's son, known as 'Henry the Magnificent'. In 1783 this latter Henry settled Stourhead on his grandson, Richard Colt Hoare, who added two wings to the house. One to showcase the fine paintings amassed by Colt Hoare and his grandfather. The other, furnished by Thomas Chippendale the younger, to house Colt Hoare's extensive library. Out in the garden, meanwhile, a number of new trees and shrubs were introduced, amongst them the latest horticultural novelty: rhododendrons. From the outset, however, Stourhead was more than a family home. Its architecture, its pictures and above all its garden, were always intended to be seen and enjoyed by a much wider audience.

Country house visiting was as popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it is today. Henry Merrik Hoare's wife Sophia noted in her diary that during a tour to the Lakes in c.1817 she visited Kedleston, Hatfield and Burghley, as well as the Buxton caves, a cotton spinning factory and a prison. But while Stourhead remained open all year round, access to other houses could be more restricted, as Sophia discovered on arrival at Woburn: *As it was not the day on which the Duke's fine Place is shewn, we consoled ourselves with taking a very pleasant walk in the Park and viewing the Abbey from a small Eminence adjacent.* Most country house owners, though, were happy to encourage tourists. The more enterprising among them even provided guidebooks, accommodation, teas and picnic sites. And all became used to encountering visitors while going about their daily lives. At Burghley, Sophia recalled, she met Lord Exeter and his family on their way to prayers, while at Hatfield *[as] we were waiting for the Carriage and warming ourselves in the Housekeeper's Room adjoining the Conservatory, Lord & Lady Salisbury came in, not knowing we were there.*

Visitors to Stourhead generally stopped off *en route* to Bath, or made it part of a wider tour encompassing Fonthill, Stonehenge, Longford Castle, Wilton and Longleat. Most stayed at the local inn, built by Henry Hoare (Magnificent) expressly to accommodate tourists. A London barrister noted in 1807: *I had often heard of the inn at Stourhead being delightfully situated, and well conducted; but I found it exceed every expectation that could have been raised...for it looks*

into the most charming part of the gardens and pleasure-grounds, which come up to, and, as it were, mix with the village. Obtaining rooms could be difficult, however, as inveterate traveller Mrs Lybbe Powis, who reached Stourhead in 1776, found to her cost: *We intended laying at the inn at Stourton...but to our great mortification, when we got there at near ten o'clock, it was full, and we oblig'd to go on to Meer [Mere], a shocking little town three miles off.* Comfortable accommodation was scarce and the indignities suffered by travellers – filthy rooms, flea-ridden beds, inedible food and sickly or unobtainable horses – loom large in their diaries and letters.

Once safely ensconced at the inn, visitors could set about seeing Stourhead in earnest. First the housekeeper would conduct them through the principal rooms: the entrance hall, drawing room, music room, library and picture gallery. In the days before public galleries – Dulwich Picture Gallery, England's first purpose built public art gallery, did not open until 1817, while the National Gallery was only established in 1824 – private house visits offered members of the public a rare chance to view collections of art, particularly Old Masters. On show at Stourhead were paintings by Rembrandt, Poussin and Titian, alongside family portraits and contemporary works by the likes of Gainsborough and Angelica Kauffman. For many, however, the highlight was not a painting but a piece of furniture known as the Pope's Cabinet. Mrs Lybbe Powis recorded: *In the third room shown is the so-much-talked-of cabinet that once belong'd to Pope Sixtus, which Mr Hoare purchased at an immense sum, so great that he says he will never declare the sum. It is, indeed, most beautifully ornamented, as well as valuable, for on the outside are many fine gems.* Reputedly made for Pope Sixtus V in the 1580s and bought by Henry Hoare during a visit to Rome in about 1740, the 13ft high cabinet conceals 150 tiny cupboards and drawers behind a *pietra dure* facade shaped like a Baroque church. True to his word, Henry Hoare never revealed how much he paid for his prize possession. Its cost remains a mystery to this day.

After seeing over the house, visitors were free to explore the garden, either in the company of a gardener or under their own steam. For many, the garden and pleasure-grounds were the high point of a country house visit. And most popular of all were landscape gardens. The landscape garden movement, spearheaded by William Kent and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, had swept across Britain during the mid-eighteenth century. Henry Hoare was just one of many landowners who scrambled to tear up his formal garden and replace it with a 'natural' one, complete with lakes, woods and picturesque views. In reality, though, these 'natural' gardens were anything but. The lake at Stourhead was dug out by squads of workmen and vast numbers of trees and shrubs were planted to create the 'natural' look. The numerous grottoes, hermitages and temples that peppered the landscape, meanwhile, belied their evocative names and sometimes tumbledown appearance. All were newly built. Nor could such a garden be described as low maintenance. By the 1770s, a staff of fifty was required to maintain Stourhead's garden and the seven miles of walks and rides that surrounded it. But for visitors, a landscape garden was a joy to behold, offering freedom to roam and beauty at every turn. And those who ventured to Stourhead were universally charmed. Mrs Lybbe Powis declared that 'Capability' Brown himself could not have done better than Henry Hoare, while William Gilpin wrote in 1798: *...we saw many things at the same time which pleased us, particularly the 'line of the lake', in general, along its shores; the woody skreens that environed it; and the effect of some of the buildings in the landscape...especially that of the Pantheon.*

The lake forms the centrepiece of the garden at Stourhead. Situated a small distance from the house at the foot of a gently sloping wooded valley, it is surrounded by winding paths and dotted with a series of small buildings including a copy of the Pantheon, Temples dedicated to Flora and Apollo and a Grotto. The latter, complete with perpetual spring and sleeping nymph, was much admired by visitors in general and by actor David Garrick in particular. So enraptured was Garrick, in fact, that he declared a desire to be buried there and dashed off an impromptu Epitaph to that effect. Those

with a less dramatic turn of mind, meanwhile, were content merely to walk round the lake's rim, stopping off at the Temples to admire the views, or cross over the Palladian style bridge. During the summer months, it was even possible to take to the water aboard a small ferry.

Stourhead passed to the National Trust in 1947. Since then, it has continued to welcome visitors, all eager to follow in the footsteps of their eighteenth and nineteenth century predecessors. For as writer Compton Mackenzie put it in 1951: *...I can imagine no better way to spend a summer's day than wandering through the rhododendrons beside those bespelled lakes, exploring the Grotto and the Temple of the Sun, and stepping from room to room in Stourhead House.*