

fig. 1



THE EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF  
GARDENS AND LANDSCAPES

By Min Wood



*Hurrah! At last, a European Institute  
for Gardens and Landscapes*

On 27th May 2013 the European Institute for Gardens and Landscape was inaugurated at the Château de Bénouville, near Caen in the Calvados Department of Lower Normandy [fig.1]. For some years leading members of Gardens Trusts, or their equivalent in Europe, have been



fig. 2

discussing the possibility of establishing a body to promote the heritage value of gardens and landscapes in Europe, to foster co-operation between established organisations in its different countries and to establish a sound database of documents and plans relating to them. The opportunity to create the Institute at Bénouville has been realised because of the availability of facilities in the Château, the support of the Conseil Général du Calvados, academic support from the Université de Caen Basse-Normandie and its Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaine and the not inconsiderable management skills and contacts of the founding members of its Conseil d'Administration.

Didier Wirth, who, with his late wife Barbara, has achieved the remarkable restoration of nearby Chateau de Brécý [fig 2], and who has been the driving force behind the project, has been elected President of the Institute.

The sea which breaks against the cliffs of Dorset, as the English Channel, laps the shores of Normandy, as La Manche. Far from dividing Britain from Europe, this common sea is our link with a Continent with which we share a common heritage. It is across this sea that the Normans came one way in 1066 radically to transform England, and the Allied Armies went the other in 1944 to play their part in the liberation of Europe. In between those dates a constant flow of the rich and the talented came back and forth between Britain and all parts of Europe across its narrow waters. It was the Normans who gave us England's great Gothic Cathedrals and systems of land tenure that, incidentally, see large tracts of England still owned by families of Norman extraction.

English royalty has been, to a great extent bred from, or drawn from, European princely houses, so much so that George III was able to make the point on his Accession that he was English born and actually spoke English. 'British' oratorios like the Messiah came from the German hand of Georg Friedrich Händel. The makers of English landscapes drew inspiration from European masters like Claude and Poussin and borrowed techniques from Le Nôtre and La Quintinieii.

When Britain came to export, or rather when other Europeans came to reinterpret, the 'English Landscape Garden' it represented not an altogether home grown English idea, although political and social conditions in Britain had allowed the early development of the idealised country estate, but a movement founded on ideas drawn from all sorts of sources including the traditions of the Romans and Ancient Greece. It was a Frenchman, Edouard André who, in 1867, provided the driving force behind the design of Sefton Park, Liverpool, that most 'English' of urban parks.

Meanwhile, British gardens continue to be embellished with plants introduced from around the world by plant collectors of many different nationalities, as they have always been given Britain's relatively limited range

of endemic flora. We also borrow with enthusiasm perennial meadows and prairies from a new wave of garden design which can be traced back not to Kew or to Wisley but to gardens in Holland and Germany. All sorts of 'innovations' in the gardens made for the Chelsea Flower Show, from the use of gabions and naturally oxidised ironwork, to vertical gardens, were to be seen sometime before in entries to the Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire conjured up by designers from all over the world.

Why is it then, that there seems to be some reluctance in all the European nations to celebrate our common cultural roots and the techniques and ideas we share in the realms of gardens and landscapes? It rather smacks of sibling rivalry. Pride in nationhood and homeland is all very well, and given the blood-soaked history of the Continent perhaps understandable. But, have our institutions lost that sense of adventure and understanding of the value of honouring the cultures and skills of other countries which was so well understood in the 18th century? The Royal Society had a Foreign Secretary as long ago 1727.

The horticultural 'bear-leaders' of the twenty-first century such as Martin Randall, Clare Whately, James Bolton, Louisa Jones and Helena Attlee do great work in fostering interest in particular kinds of European gardens but this can only be in the fleeting moments offered by modern travel and tight budgets. While gardeners and landscape enthusiasts may glimpse part of the tapestry of European landscapes in this way, these trips cannot reveal the full picture to them.

There have been several attempts to establish some sort of European centre for the study of gardens and landscape but none so far has dented the cold isolationism that seems to grip many national gardening societies and groups. Whilst we shall in Britain trumpet the skills of Lancelot Brown in 2016, there was a depressing lack of interest here in participating in celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Andre Le Nôtre in 2013. Credit must go the European Commission, national governments and

charities who have funded international conferences now and then, and also the work of ICOMOS,<sup>iii</sup> but nowhere before has a centre dedicated to European gardens and landscapes been established with success.

Chance, as they say, is a fine thing, and it is by chance that an opportunity to found this new Institute has come about. Chateau Bénouville, in Calvados is one of a number of large houses in Europe, once saved by coming into the hands of a local authority but now, in the face of austerity measures, needing new occupants. It is a familiar pattern with Hestercombe being the best English example. Bénouville is an exceptional building, being one of the finest surviving examples of the work of Claude-Nicholas Ledoux.

With the support of the Conseil Général of Calvados which, until recently had been using the Château as an accounts office, plans were laid to provide the Institute with a small suite of rooms from which it could be administered by two staff members provided, initially, by the Conseil Général.

With that infrastructure in place the next task before launching the Institute was to clarify its aims and objectives. Within a regional context it was easy to see what some of these might be. Regular meetings, open to the public, with influential speakers on horticultural and landscape topics, plant fairs, the development of a local archive, the creation of a horticultural museum and work with schools on landscape and the environment can all be valuable in a part of France which is rich in good horticulture but has lacked a regional horticultural hub. However, to lay claim to being an European Institute it would need to be able to speak with authority on the international stage. Discussions with the University of Caen led to an agreement to collaborate on the development of a cross referenced international database of European Parks and Gardens to provide a basis for future pan-European activities.

The University of Caen was established in 1432 by John of Lancaster, 1st Duke of



fig. 3

Bedford, son of Henry IV and Governor of Normandy, another good example of the interlocking cultural ties in Europe. Its ancient buildings were totally destroyed by carpet bombing in 1944. It was rebuilt in a campus style between 1948 and 1957, with, suitably, the stamp of anti-fascist Bauhaus architecture about it. With a student population of about 25,000 it is also home to the MRSH, (La Maison de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines) which is able to provide the necessary technical expertise to develop the database. The participation of the University offers the opportunity for the Institute to reach the highest possible academic standards in its work.

Right from the start, in addition to an Administrative Council which oversees the day to day work of the Institute, an International Scientific Committee was established led by the distinguished Portuguese landscape architect and author Cristina Castel-Branco [fig. 3]. She says,

Our key aim is to create a data base with a software language that allows a high degree of compatibility with others used elsewhere in Europe so that information drawn from all over the Continent can be accessed with ease. In December 2013, a Portuguese team from the University of Lisbon, working with the MRSH and with the help of colleagues from Italy, Germany, Belgium and the UK, settled on the basic framework necessary for this. We have given special attention to the need for there to be a glossary to make sure descriptions and ideas are not lost in translation. A particular challenge has been to ensure that the original language of references can be retrieved, as far as possible, through the common database. We are now ready to begin practical trials by in-putting materials from national databases to make sure that the systems we have devised are working properly. I know this sounds rather dry and technical, but we need to get these details right so that the database becomes, as we want it to be, of real practical use for all those involved in making and maintaining gardens and landscapes.

The British representative on the Scientific Committee is Peter Goodchild who set up the Centre for the Conservation of Historic Parks and Gardens at the University of York in 1982. He is a Vice-President of the Yorkshire Gardens Trust and is widely known throughout Europe for his enthusiasm for cross-border cooperation in heritage matters. He is a member of the International Conservation Board for the Muskauer-Park-Muzakowski World Heritage Site. The Muskauer Park situated either side of the River Neisse, which today marks the German Polish border, was once the home of the Prussian Prince Puekler-Muskauiv. His eclectic internationalism is stamped all over the landscape he created there, and at Branitz, another estate to which he moved after the money ran out at Muskau. It is, therefore, appropriate for the conservation work on those estates to be carried out under the eye of an international body. Goodchild's experience and breadth of vision will be a great asset to the Committee.v

At first blush the City of Caen may seem to be an out of centre location for an Institute of this kind, however, the city has good transport links. There is an excellent TGV service from Paris (2 hours from the Gare St Lazare) and for the British, there are three sailings a day from Portsmouth to Caen operated by Brittany Ferries. The Château is only 6 km from the ferry port at Ouistreham.

Whilst the Institute may take some time to find its feet on the international stage, its lectures at Chateau Bénouville are already well attended and a programme of events with the participation of different European nations is being planned. This new Institute deserves our enthusiastic support. It is likely to offer the best shot at giving our common heritage of garden and landscape art a proper home.

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A website will be available later in 2014, meanwhile lectures at the Institute are posted on [www.infocale.fr/benouville\\_14060](http://www.infocale.fr/benouville_14060).

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# Chateau de Brécy

By Min Wood

The Chateau de Brécy itself was another survivor of the Battle for Normandy, the Allies having swept past it in the early hours after the invasion. However whilst the basic structure of the garden remained more or less intact, the post-war years were not ones which encouraged fine horticulture.

For some, Formal Gardens have a bad name. Categorisation is difficult because over time Renaissance and Baroque traditions merge and intertwine and have been reinvented. The Duchenes at Villandry in the Loire Valley and Blenheim in England in the late 19th century showed how formality could be developed and carried forward. In early 20th century England, Reginald Blomfield, Inigo Trigs and Harold Peto advocated classical principles rather than the kind of wild gardening promoted by William Robinson. Classical principles of design may be worked and reworked in successive generations. However fine geometry is not enough; without a high quality of maintenance and sensitive, incidental planting, formal gardens can become no more than a threadbare canvas with none of the delights they were once intended to offer. For example the garden of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, in Italy, nowadays hardly deserves the name, fine though its waterworks may be. There are, however, notable exceptions which remind us today why, such gardens have been highly regarded in the past. The central core of the Gardens at Schwetzingen near Mannheim and the Corsini Garden in Florence are both gardened with the sensitivity necessary to bring their charms to life.

# Château Bénouville



fig. 4

Château Bénouville is a fine example of the work of Claude-Nicholas Ledoux (1736-1804) who remodelled an earlier house between 1770 and 1780 for the Marquis of Livry. It is 10 km from Caen and within a few hundred yards of 'Pegasus Bridge' over the Orne Canal which was of such vital importance to the success of the Normandy Landings. [fig. 4] The bridge has now been replaced and the original repositioned at the Pegasus Bridge Museum nearby as a memorial to the assault by the 6th Airborne Division which secured the canal crossing shortly after midnight on D Day. The Château survived the battle, despite, at one stage, the Germans using the roof to observe the attackers, not only because it was being used as a maternity hospital but also because the staff, in particular Mme Vion the Directrice, had played a key part in supporting the Resistance and briefing London on the military situation in Normandy before the invasion.

Ledoux was that rare kind of being, an architect who could also design. That explains why he was able to extend architectural convention into new forms without losing his audience. Educated in the grammar of Greek and Roman rhetoric from an early age he knew that the best way to create new forms is to obey the old rules. He discovered the work of Palladio not in Italy, but while travelling in England. In time his new forms were to become breath-takingly original. First, however, he had to make his

way in a pre-revolutionary world. His bread and butter came from working for the aristocracy including his work at Bénouville. Rejecting the then fashionable Mansard roof, Ledoux applied a strict order of architecture softened by sculptured emblems reflecting the Marquis's rank and military profession. In a stroke of genius he installed a grand stairway, taking up the centre of the ground floor. This has been described as 'the most beautiful space by Ledoux still in existence' vi.

Royal Patronage followed and in 1775 he was instructed to design new buildings for the Salt Works at Arc-et-Senans, in south west France. Here, in addition to the factory buildings that were built, he proposed an idealised new city in the adjacent forest of Chauvigny and while that was never realised Ledoux would refine his ideas for such a place throughout his life. The audacity of his ideas for this can be viewed on-line but as a taster [fig. 5] shows a modern realisation of



fig. 5

his proposal for a cooper's workshop in the city, built in 1998 at a motorway rest-area on the A 39 in the Jura region of France. This, now, would surely be a contender for an architectural award in competition with the most avant-garde of modern architects.

As the ancien-regime drew to a close in 1785-1788 Ledoux was engaged in designing some fifty toll gates on the barrier which surrounded Paris, not to defend it, but for the collection of highly unpopular taxes. Although the hated barrier was an early

target for the Revolutionaries, subsequent French administrations found it a remarkably efficient way of raising revenue and so it was still in place in 1830's and one gate, the Barrière d'Enfer, at dawn, was thus chosen by Puccini as the setting for the third act of *La Bohème*. It is no surprise therefore that, come the Revolution, Ledoux found himself imprisoned, along with many of his private clients most of whom duly lost their heads. He was not, in fact, arrested until

1794. His release came when he explained that his work for the ancient-regime was in a search for ideal architectural forms for the greater good of all men, telling the authorities. 'A citizen who worked to enlighten his fellow citizens in the domain he knew best served his country better than by occupying positions he did not know how to fulfil.'<sup>vii</sup> He would have been entitled to add 'and serve the World better'.

- i Le Nôtre, 1613 - 1700 is not known to have described his work in writing himself. However, Antoine-Joseph Dezallier d'Argenville, 1680 – 1765 is generally credited with having correctly set down the principles followed by him in the 1709 edition of his *'La Théorie et Pratique du Jardinage'*. This was graced with drawings by Le Blond, 1679 – 1719 who had worked with Le Nôtre and who went on to be Chief Architect in St Petersburg for Peter the Great. This work took over a hundred years to appear in English but it eventually did so in 1712 in a translation by the architect John James called *'The Theory and Practice of Gardening'*; just in time to influence those who were to develop the English Landscape Garden..
- ii Jean-Baptiste de La Quintinye, 1626 – 1688, a lawyer by training, became obsessed with the growing of fruit and vegetables after visiting Italy. His experiments with growing fruit and vegetables out of season came to the attention of Louis XIV who engaged him in the late 1660's to get to grips with the Potager at Versailles. He pioneered many horticultural techniques and these he described in his book *'Instruction Pour Les Jardins Fruitiers Et Potagers'* which was translated by John Evelyn, 1620 – 1706, as *'The Complete Gard'ner'* and was published in England in 1693.
- iii ICOMOS is the International Council on Monuments & Sites, the official adviser to UNESCO on cultural World Heritage Sites.
- iv Author of *'Hints of Landscape Gardening'* published in German in 1834, translated in an American edition in 1917.
- v Peter Goodchild may be contacted at [peter.goodchild@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:peter.goodchild@yahoo.co.uk)
- vi Michel Gallet Ledoux 1980.
- vii *Demandes en liberte*. Archives Nationales F4 4774. 11