CHAPTER SIX

THE ENGLISH GARDEN

Every sphere of the nation's life is influenced by England's position as the western outpost of Europe, receiving through the centuries the last wave of each invading race and each movement of thought which flows across the continent from the East; and the history of English gardens has followed the general pattern. One after another foreign influences have come in, and have each gone through the process of selection and digestion, until from them has emerged something which is typically English.

ROMAN AND MEDIEVAL GARDENS

The gardens attached to the Roman villas were an incident, out of the stream of the country's history. They came, a fully formed tradition from an advanced civilization, and were set down without context in a land which, as far as we know, had no native gardens. As far as design goes it is improbable that they left any mark, but they nevertheless made their contribution by introducing new plants, among them the Sweet Chestnut and the Vine. They also introduced topiary, but whether this tradition survived or was re-introduced is not certain.

The Dark Ages following the Roman withdrawal were hardly conducive to the peaceful arts, and it is not surprising that the next appearance of recognizable gardens was within the shelter of monastery walls. Throughout the centuries of barbarism the monks kept alive learning and the arts, and since the monasteries were self-supporting communities it was natural that husbandry should have been one of their especial concerns. The essential needs were fish-ponds, vines, herbs vegetables for food and medical supplies, flowers for the altar. These suggest a garden of satisfying simplicity, and to its making would be brought a love of good craftsmanship, a sense of unhurried continuity and an atmosphere of meditation. In addition to these happy conditions, the monasteries chose sites in the fertile sheltered valleys and, the Orders being international, were able to draw on the accumulated skill and
knowledge of all Europe. In these gardens we probably have the first foreign influence which was to be drawn into the veins of the English tradition.

Outside the monasteries fenced plots about the Saxons’ cottages started a purely indigenous tradition that has persisted independently of all imported fashions and has developed into the typical cottage garden; differing in size and in diversity of plants from its Saxon ancestor, yet clearly a lineal descendant.

In due course a secular parallel to the monastery garden developed within the defences of the medieval castles. It is easy to imagine what the lady of the castle required of her garden: first, herbs for her simples and fruits for her preserves, but also, and intensely, she must have desired a sweet-smelling place of solitude away from the stench and turmoil of the baronial hall. Above all in that age people craved security. The garden must be small, safe and enclosed. Only gradually, as confidence grew, did it expand and unfold, and each liberating step came as the result of some historic event. After Henry II had brought some sense of peace, the garden crept out from the castle wall and was enclosed by thorn or wattle, still on the defensive but growing in confidence. At the same time, in the increasing wealth and security of the cities, the first town gardens appeared.

The unrest of the Wars of the Roses brought a check and it was not until peace came again that the next step was taken which was to lead on to the typical Tudor garden.

Both monastery gardens and secular medieval gardens followed very much the same lines in England as in France. Simple in outline but not usually symmetrical, they were unrelated to the building and always enclosed, either by a wall or a thorn or wattle fence or, in later years, by trellis or pleached trees. The beds were filled with herbs and flowers; sometimes they were raised and turfed, with flowers growing in the grass, a method of planting not unlike the most modern school of Scandinavian thought.

The idea of using water decoratively was brought back by the Crusaders in very early days and forms a link between the garden of the oasis and the medieval cloister. This usually took the form of a well or fountain used as a central feature at the crossing of the paths. Turf seats were popular, where one could sit in the sun, and so were arbours of trellis and growing plants, to give shade. One of the first signs of a wish to look beyond the strict seclusion of the garden and view the hostile outside world from a safe distance was the formation of mounts. In the early gardens these were very simple affairs, but they were elaborated in Tudor gardens. Bacon in his essay, Of Gardens, describes one thirty feet high, approached by a
bulwarked path up which four could walk abreast and topped by a
banqueting hall complete with chimneys. In some cases these mounts
stood within the gardens, in others they took the form of raised banks at
the sides or ends. An old plan of Montacute, Somerset, shows one within
the garden on the north side of the house, surmounted by a tree, and
examples may still be seen in the gardens of Merton and Corpus Christi
Colleges in Oxford.

Unfortunately, we can judge of the pre-Tudor gardens only from
pictures. But from the examples in Chaucer’s *The Romance of the Rose*,
they must have been delightful places: un-selfconscious, and filling
perfectly the needs of their owners.

THE TUDOR GARDEN

There is no hard and fast line between the medieval and the Tudor
garden, but the trend of history after the end of the Wars of the Roses had
produced, by Elizabethan times, a garden very different from the sheltered
enclave of the Middle Ages. The first change, a natural result of internal
peace, was one of expansion and a loosening up of the defensive wall.
Then came increased trade, bringing not only greater wealth but ideas and
craftsmen from abroad. Stone workers from Italy brought a belated ripple
of the Italian renaissance to Tudor England, and the fountains and stone
work took on a new richness. Gardens became more intricate; much use
was made of topiary, and the plain beds gave way to knotts, whose
interlacing geometric patterns were outlined in evergreen, the ground-
work of the pattern being filled in with coloured earth or stones, or
sometimes with simple flowers. These knotts are quite unlike the flowing
parterres of the French garden or the parterres of Italy, and in some the
strap-like interlacing patterns are reminiscent of Celtic design.

While previously all that men asked of their gardens was peace from a
warring world, sweet scents and fruits and flowers, they now had energy
to spare and exercised it in creation. What is left of Henry VIII’s garden
at Hampton Court, supplemented by a contemporary description of it,
gives a very good idea of the stage which gardens had reached at this time.
It was extensive, complicated and ornate. The beds were surrounded with
low wooden fences, painted in the Tudor colours of white and green and
decorated with carved figures of the King’s beasts. There were covered
walks of pleached trees, ponds, knotts and a mount.

Mazes were also a usual feature of the larger Tudor gardens.

But the most important of all changes during Tudor times was the
arrival of the country house as opposed to the defensive habitation
Internal peace was accepted as an established fact, while new wealth and the break-up of the monasteries led to the founding of great country estates. As long as the ground surrounding the castle had to be circumscribed by wall or moat, the garden could not be related symmetrically to the building, but now that the defences were no longer needed the garden became an extension of the house.

We can see in Montacute, with the help of old plans, the essential lines of the typical Elizabethan and early Jacobean gardens. The forecourt is unchanged in outline, although its original use as an entrance court has been changed to that of a garden. The wall and balustrade surrounding this forecourt echoes in decorated form the idea of battlements. The castellations become richly wrought pinnacles, the turrets little temples (Plate 6). The wall itself is surmounted by a balustrade, through which the outer world can be seen. The defensive gate houses are transformed into enchanting gazebos. The whole faces onto open parkland across an intervening bowling green. At a slightly later date, it thrust its influence out into the surroundings with a broad double avenue. Originally the true garden lay to the north of the house and was probably bounded by the present raised terraces. A tree-topped mount and a rectangular pool were centred on the axis of the north door, while at one side was an area with the delicious name of the pig’s wheatie orchard. An orchard formed part of almost all early gardens, and in some cases a grove of forest trees was also included.

The plan is extremely simple: the lines of the house are projected into paths, termed forthrights, while the architecture of the house is extended to embrace the forecourt and terrace. This strong linking of house and garden, and the fearless way in which it opens up to the surrounding country, makes it typical of its age and marks the final break from the medieval tradition of defensive enclosure (Fig. 6).
GARDEN DESIGN

THE FRENCH TRADITION IN ENGLAND

As in all times of unrest, the development of gardens was checked during the Civil War and Protectorate. But with the Restoration of Charles II they received a new impetus, and a strong injection of foreign influence. Not only did it become fashionable to travel in Italy and see the gardens there, but also it was natural that Charles and his court, coming from France, should bring with them news of the great gardens being designed by Le Nôtre. Nor was the French style entirely alien to the existing tradition. Both were descendants of the Anglo-French medieval garden, with an admixture of Italian renaissance. But there were differences; the Italian influence had been far less strong in England, and certain elements of the Le Nôtre tradition—the tree and water allées for instance—were indigenous to France alone. It was, therefore, not surprising that the best results were obtained when the exact imitation was not carried too far, but was modified by the different conditions and traditions of England.

Both the hedged terrace at Polesden Lacey, Surrey, sagging into the trough of the valley as it crosses it, and the long walk at Albury Park, Surrey, attributed to Evelyn, show the happy results of allowing formal features to compromise with the lie of the land.

Kip's views give a remarkable record of the gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it is interesting to compare them with de Cerceaux's views of French gardens of the previous century, to which they are analogous.

In Kip's views one can see some of the reasons why the style was not fundamentally so well suited to England as to France. Often the great patterns of radiating avenues are superimposed on the undulating English landscape in such a way that the pattern is distorted; in other cases, an unreal plain is shown covering the extent of the design and suddenly changing to the normal landscape (Plate 5). A further difference is that in most cases the surrounding landscape is one of open agriculture instead of hunting forests, with the result that the pattern of avenues becomes one of thin lines drawn on an open space, instead of the more solid French pattern of avenues cut out of the solid. This linear quality of avenues can be effective if it leads up strongly to a sufficiently important terminal, such as the main façade of the house, but repeated as a pattern, only held together by minor focal points, it lacks strength and character. Probably the most successful surviving garden of this period is Bramham Hall, Yorkshire, where the thickly wooded surroundings bring it nearer to normal French conditions.
5. One of Kip’s views. The seventeenth-century gardens show the French style imposed on the English countryside, with its open undulating country in place of the thick forests of France.

6. Montacute, Somerset. Defensive battlements, no longer needed, are transmuted into decorative balustrades and gazebos.
7. The English lake. Water, which in Italy catches sunlight against dark shadows and in France gives precise reflections in a clean-cut frame, in England fades gently away into the mist and trees.

8. Stowe Park. The English version of the link between house and landscape. In its final stage of informality Stowe keeps its proportions of open and closed, its contrasts and its rhythm.
THE ENGLISH GARDEN

The greatest value which the tradition conferred on English gardens and landscape was its immense breadth of outlook. No English landscape architect has ever equalled Le Nôtre in courage, sense of proportion and certainty of purpose. But the works of de Caux, for instance, at Badminton were on a scale which widened the horizon of landscape architecture to a point where it was possible to lead on to the conception of using it for the planning of town and countryside.

The garden had indeed travelled far from the first tentative opening up of the Tudors. It had also changed radically in feeling. The Tudor garden was very much the simple extension of the house into the open air, the provision of extra rooms, furnished for one's individual enjoyment. The new gardens of the French tradition were both too big and too rigid to be comfortable to live in. They were rather places for the exercise of the intellect over the forces of nature. So much was this the case that often a hidden giardino segreto was introduced to give the intimacy and seclusion which the garden as a whole lacked, while a 'wilderness' supplied the touch of untrammelled nature which was not allowed elsewhere.

In matters of detail there were parallel changes. The knotts, which had been small patterns on the floors of intimate rooms, became flowing parterres which were themselves part of the grand design, and the fountains forgot their ancestry in the Crusader's dipping wells and widened to the French tank and water allée. From this time dates the emergence of professional landscape architects, such as London and Wise, who laid out, among other gardens, the parterre and avenues at Hampton Court. (See Gardener to Queen Anne.)

But many of the gardens were laid out by the architect of the buildings, as the original gardens of Castle Howard, Yorkshire, and Blenheim, Oxfordshire, were by Vanbrugh. The preoccupation of landowners of this period with their gardens and estates is made wonderfully vivid in John Evelyn's diary (1640-1706). There we have a picture of an aristocracy intensely interested in 'new and curious things,' resembling their French counterparts in recognizing no bounds to the human intellect, but differing from them in their concentration on their own estates rather than on the court.

Plantations, great hedges of yew and holly, and terraces figure in these descriptions. For the first time we see the extension of gardening into the surrounding countryside. Not only was this so in the rather crude form of driving avenues across the landscape, but in the more constructive guise of Evelyn's advice on planting trees and woods to embellish gentlemen's estates and in his detailed instructions for setting thorn hedges to form the boundaries of newly-enclosed fields. Here was the seed which later was
to turn all England into a garden, and it marks a turning point in the relation between landscape and garden, and in man's attitude to his surroundings.

The first gardens were places of refuge from a world where not only man was hostile, but also nature, in the guise of wolf-infested forest. Gradually nature was tamed, the forest reduced and the garden pushed its way outwards in the wake of the cultivated land. Now in the seventeenth century, the forest had almost disappeared and the land was wholly tamed. Men could not only look out from their gardens without fear of their surroundings, but they began to see the need to shape the whole landscape. At that moment in history they saw no reason to doubt that they could create a better landscape than nature's original. Doubt came later. For the moment man was in the full flush of creation.

The reign of the grand formal garden continued through the seventeenth and on into the beginning of the eighteenth century. The accession of William of Orange brought in certain Dutch features, but the influence showed itself as one of detail rather than of fundamentals. The long water canal, with its obvious derivation from the Dutch canals, the more extensive use of topiary and of clipped bays and oranges in tubs, brought, if anything, an increased stiffness to the gardens. Many orangeries date from this time, the most famous among them being that at Kensington Palace. There is a feeling of domesticity in the Dutch tradition as opposed to the greater breadth and magnificence of the French, but in its adherence to the formal and symmetrical it carried on the main stream of the classic tradition.

THE ENGLISH LANDSCAPE GARDEN

There can be no doubt that the years between Elizabeth and Anne produced in England some magnificent gardens; yet it is doubtful if they ever reached the status of a genuinely indigenous style, such as was attained by the corresponding gardens of France. It remained for England to develop her own garden, which should be as inevitable to her land, climate and spirit, as the gardens of Le Nôtre had been to those of France. But there was this great difference. Le Nôtre’s garden had been the culmination of a steadily advancing tradition, while the English garden appeared as a complete break from anything which had gone before.

The Palladian Villa Rotunda, seated on its hill, with the magnificent yet humanized landscape of the Veneto flowing up to it, inspired the siting of the English eighteenth century mansion set in its own quieter landscape, but the strongest alien influence on the garden which developed round these country houses came, curiously enough, from China. From there the
news of an ancient tradition of gardens based on natural landscape had come through in a fragmentary form and was referred to in the writings of Sir William Temple in 1685. Even before this, a precursor of the new trend is to be found in Francis Bacon’s essay on gardens, in which he deplored the artificial extravagance of the gardens of his day and, among the attractions of his ideal garden, described a ‘sweet wilderness.’ Wilder-
nesses were in fact often included in gardens from Elizabethan times onwards; there is still one in being at Hampton Court.

These were the first indications that man, having tamed nature, might crave to have her back again. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries many men of letters wrote of the natural garden as their ideal. But although there is no doubt that the writings of Milton, Steele, Pope, Addison and Rousseau had a considerable influence on the changing fashion, it is probably truer to accept them as the voices of a force which was already there, rather than a prime cause of the movement. It was one of those moments in history when forces move from all directions towards a common objective and are manifested in every art. In the realm of painting, Claude Lorraine, Poussin and Salvator Rosa were undoubtedly the inspiration for many English parks, but they, too, had their roots in the same instincts which were responsible for the decline of the formal garden.

The old tradition had reached its final perfection and man’s creative genius had to turn in a new direction. Moreover, the eternal struggle against nature appeared (deceptively) to have reached a point where nature was subdued and regulated; and, with the perversity of man, he proceeded to en throne her as a goddess. In England these tendencies were reinforced by an obstinate individualism which disapproved of excessive regimentation in any form and saw a moral significance in imposing absolute rule even over plants. It was an illogical point of view, for in the ‘natural garden’ the designer imposes his will just as much as in the more formal. Rousseau had the heart of the matter when, in La Nouvelle Héloïse, de Wolmar says, ‘It is true that nature has done it all, but under my direction—there is nothing which I have not ordained.’ The garden which strives to appear as an idealized landscape is more sophisticated than frank formality, which is man’s first and natural treatment of his enclosed plot.

But, as in many English peculiarities, the apparent illogicality was based on a truth felt only instinctively, namely that Nature should be co-operated with rather than coerced; and the type of garden developed by the landscape school not only allowed for, but relied on, nature’s collaboration. It was not a finite design, but one which grew slowly to perfection. There was every reason, historically and physically, why this type of
GARDEN DESIGN

garden should have grown on English soil. The slow growth to perfection was in tune with the English tradition whose very laws and constitution have grown in the same slow way, as opposed to the clear-cut code of Napoleon and the American constitution.

Land and climate were equally sympathetic. The small scale of the landscape with its gentle hills and little woods, the perfection to which trees would grow, the wonderful texture and colour of the grassland make it easy to see the whole land as an extension of the park. The climate with its misty lights and the infinite changes of the seasons gives interest and mystery to compositions which would appear dull and flat in a hard clear light. Water, which in Italy catches the bright sunlight against the black shadows, and in France gives precise reflections in a clear-cut frame, in England fades gently away into the mist and trees, blurring the reflections in opal tints (Plate 7).

Finally, the landed aristocracy were in a position to give full expression to their ideas. They were wealthy, their estates were large, and for the most part they had a strong attachment to their lands. The tradition which is revealed in John Evelyn’s diary persisted in full force through the eighteenth century, and the improvement and embellishment of their estates was the first interest of many noblemen. In addition, many were men of cultivated taste. It was the age of the grand tour, when the young heir travelled Europe and saw the works of art of France and Italy. They came back enthralled with Palladian architecture and seeing visions of Claude’s ideal landscapes in their own domains, where they proceeded to create an Elysium, their interpretation of the age-old ideal of the paradise garden.

The essence of the Landscape style was an idealized natural landscape, seen as a union of the Palladian architecture, which had so fired the English imagination, with the park-like countryside. It was intensely pictorial in conception and Sir Kenneth Clarke’s analysis of Poussin and Claude’s paintings makes it clear how closely the tenets of these two artists were translated back into the medium whence they derived. Poussin’s carefully constructed compositions of verticals and horizontals, based on the Golden Section, are reflected in the placing of Kent’s temples and obelisks against the horizontal of the landscape view. Equally, Claude’s atmospheric views of the landscape of the Golden Age, where man and nature dwelt in perfect harmony, are the very essence of the calm and gentle eighteenth century Elysiums of Kent, Brown and Repton. The elements in these compositions were land-form, water, trees and architecture, arranged with the utmost regard for pictorial composition. In them the genius of the

1 Landscape into Art.
place was more respected than in any other garden tradition, except perhaps the Chinese. But this did not inhibit the most majestic schemes for local alteration to the land-form and the formation of great lakes and rivers from the smallest rivulets.

The breadth and freedom, which marked these compositions at their zenith, was not immediately achieved. The first departure from the formal garden was a tentative breaking down of the symmetrical plan into irregular gardens. Superficially, these bear little relation to the sweeping landscape parks which appeared later in the century, but they showed the way by substituting balance and a painter's composition for mathematical symmetry, and they paid due regard to the irregularities of the site and the genius of the place. Vanbrugh was an early exponent of this departure from the strictly formal and was responsible for the magnificent grounds at Castle Howard, a composed landscape on the grand scale with a strong architectural bias.

One of the first irregular gardens was at Chiswick House, Middlesex, where Lord Burlington, a man of taste and a patron of the arts, had drawn together a coterie of gifted men. His friends Pope and Gray gave the weight of their writings to the new idea, and indeed it owed much to literary inspiration, relying on association and poetic allusion to re-enforce the visual approach. Charles Bridgeman and William Kent laid out the gardens to the Palladian villa. Irregular paths wandered through the plantations between the still formal lines of the main vistas and the water took a slight meandering wave.

William Kent was destined to go further than his colleague in pursuit of a free style. He was both an architect and a painter, and although in the latter art he lacked technical skill, he turned his painter's eye to good account, and composed his ideal landscapes in trees, land-form and water, setting in them his architectural focal points of temples and bridges. The breadth and strength of his compositions can still be seen at Stowe, Rousham and Holkham.

His tradition was carried on by Lancelot ('Capability') Brown, who had been a gardener at Stowe, Buckinghamshire, while Kent was working there. He lacked Kent's architectural background and, at least subconsciously, this may have influenced him in abandoning the last vestiges of formality in favour of the natural shapes of water, land-form and tree groups, although he too made use of buildings as focal points in his compositions and even designed houses. But in his compositions terraces were swept away and avenues broken up into groups. It is probable that he destroyed where he should have respected older work, yet there is no doubt that he left a legacy of superbly composed parks and that his skill
in land-shaping and the management of water came very near genius. His setting for Vanbrugh’s bridge at the entrance to Blenheim is one of the great landscape compositions of the world.

His successor was Humphry Repton. He was a less drastic man than Brown and was prepared to compromise with the convenience of his clients and permit them to retain the house terraces which Brown had banished in favour of a sweep of grass up to the house walls. He produced a series of little Red Books each containing his report to a client on the remodelling of his estate, illustrated with sketches and over-lays showing how they would appear after his improvements were effected. Fortunately a great number of these books are still in existence.

But perhaps his most far-reaching contribution was the tradition of bringing the principles of landscape into the urban scene. He worked in conjunction with Nash in the creation of Regents Park and their collaboration also resulted in some of the first tree-planted squares in London, considered by some to be our greatest contribution to civic design.

The legacy which the landscape park left has not only affected park and garden design in this country ever since, but its repercussions have been felt all over the world. Sometimes this has been in the rather unfortunate guise of the jardin anglais, but also, more profitably, in America and northern Europe it has been the inspiration for new and indigenous developments.

Nevertheless, in its original form it lasted a comparatively short time in full perfection.

Repton was its last great exponent and in his later years he was already trying to find a compromise with the forces which were eventually to destroy it. One of these was the desire for more flowers and more variety, and his solution for this was to conceal a series of gardens, for different kinds of flowers, within the belts of trees and shrubberies which gave the form to his main design. But at Nuneham Park, Oxfordshire, the poet Mason took the bolder but less successful step of including beds of flowers in the main body of his landscape garden, a forerunner of the decadent form of landscape garden which was to bedevil parks and gardens for the next century.

The reasons why the landscape garden could not digest beds of bright flowers are not hard to find. First, if the garden was an idealization of a natural landscape, flowers could only be introduced on a pattern recognized by nature, as, for instance, the daffodils are introduced at Stourhead, Wiltshire, or the Martagon lilies in the wilderness at St. John’s College, Cambridge; flowers which are either native to the particular landscape or, by their type, arrangement and colouring, give the appearance that
THE ENGLISH GARDEN

they might be so. Secondly, the soft tone of the English landscape was one of the bases of the landscape garden and to disrupt the tone scale with violent colour is to destroy the picture. Thirdly, the floor of the landscape park is formed by the unbroken carpet of softly-textured sward and to cut this with beds is to check the smooth flow of the design.

But while the landscape style was at its zenith, it had already been under attack from another quarter. Exponents of the picturesque, represented by Uvedale Price and Payne Knight, attacked Brown for the insipid smoothness of his ground work and the serpentine outline of his lakes, preferring the rugged bank and gnarled tree trunk to the smooth turf and well-groomed trees. Repton, with some justice, defended Brown’s precepts.

The desire to create a landscape which was picturesque, in the sense that it was akin to a picture, was part of the whole conception of the landscape style, but the strength behind the landscape school was the idealisation of the normal in nature, while the picturesque and romantic movement seized upon the happy accident and the interest of deformity, which is an unsure basis for any art. There was a tendency throughout the landscape school to express this love of the picturesque in a fondness for sham ruins and even for sham hermits to dwell in them. From this cult can be traced a descent in decadence through sham bark and rustic work to the gnome-haunted rockeries of to-day.

But perhaps most potent force of all in the gradual disintegration of the landscape tradition was a general lowering of taste or, more fairly, the widening of wealth beyond the little coterie of gifted amateurs and their professional advisers. Formerly, it had been a closed society of men who admired the same pictures, read the same poetry and were steeped in the tradition of the countryside. Now, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, gardens were also required by the wealthy manufacturers, to whom Elysiums meant less than nothing. Fortunately, there are still examples of the great landscape parks sufficiently unspoilt to enable us to study them at first hand.

Stowe. (Plate 8 and Fig. 7). Of all the landscape parks of England, Stowe is perhaps the most typical of the tradition which it represents. Stourhead may vie with it as the perfectly composed landscape, but it lacks the relationship with house and countryside which was an essential part of the concept of the Palladian mansion set in an Elysian landscape and merging imperceptibly into the surrounding country. At Blenheim, Vanbrugh’s bridge, set in Brown’s landscape, is the supreme tableau, the stage-set which exemplifies all the magnificence and sense of form and