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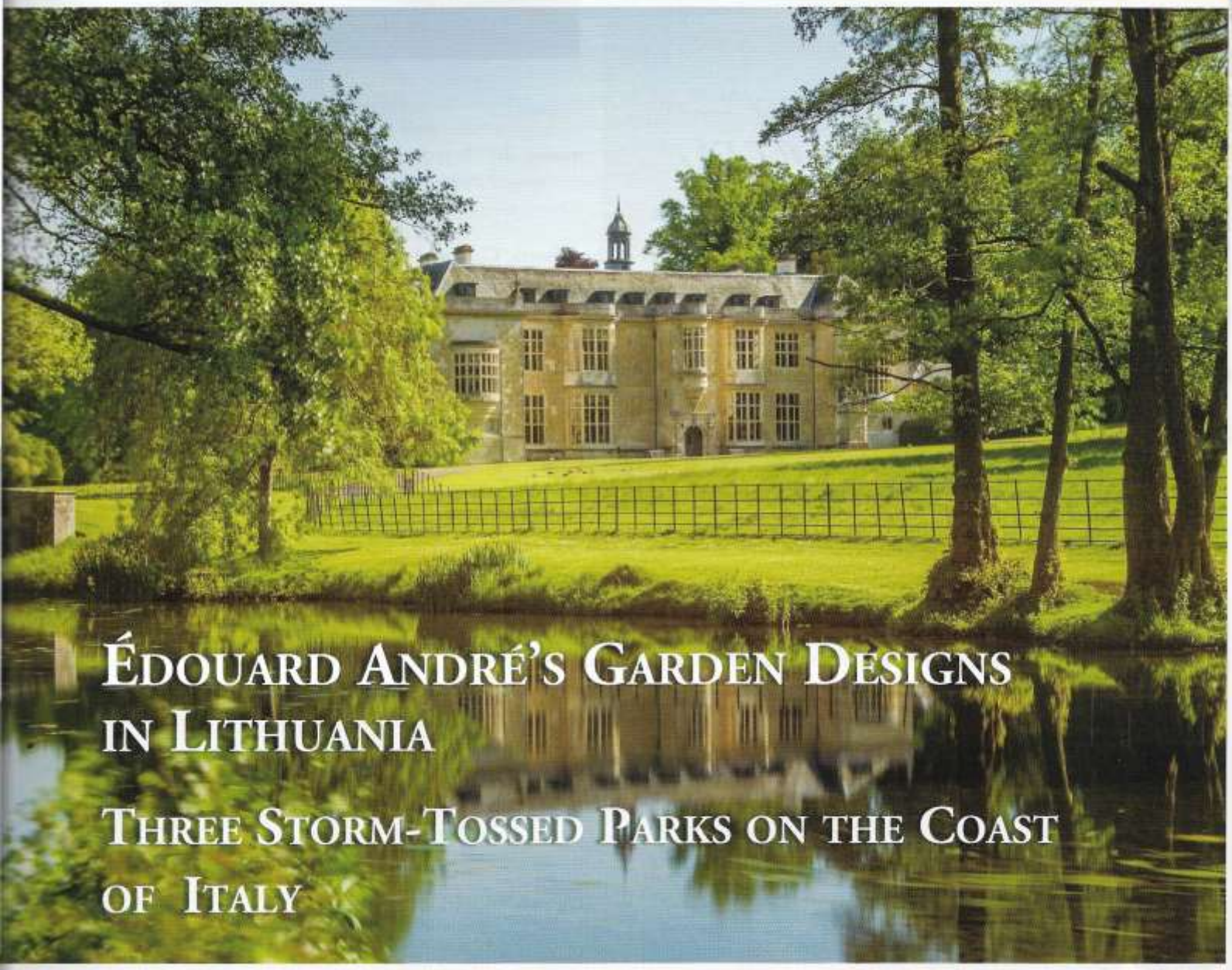
HISTORIC GARDENS Review

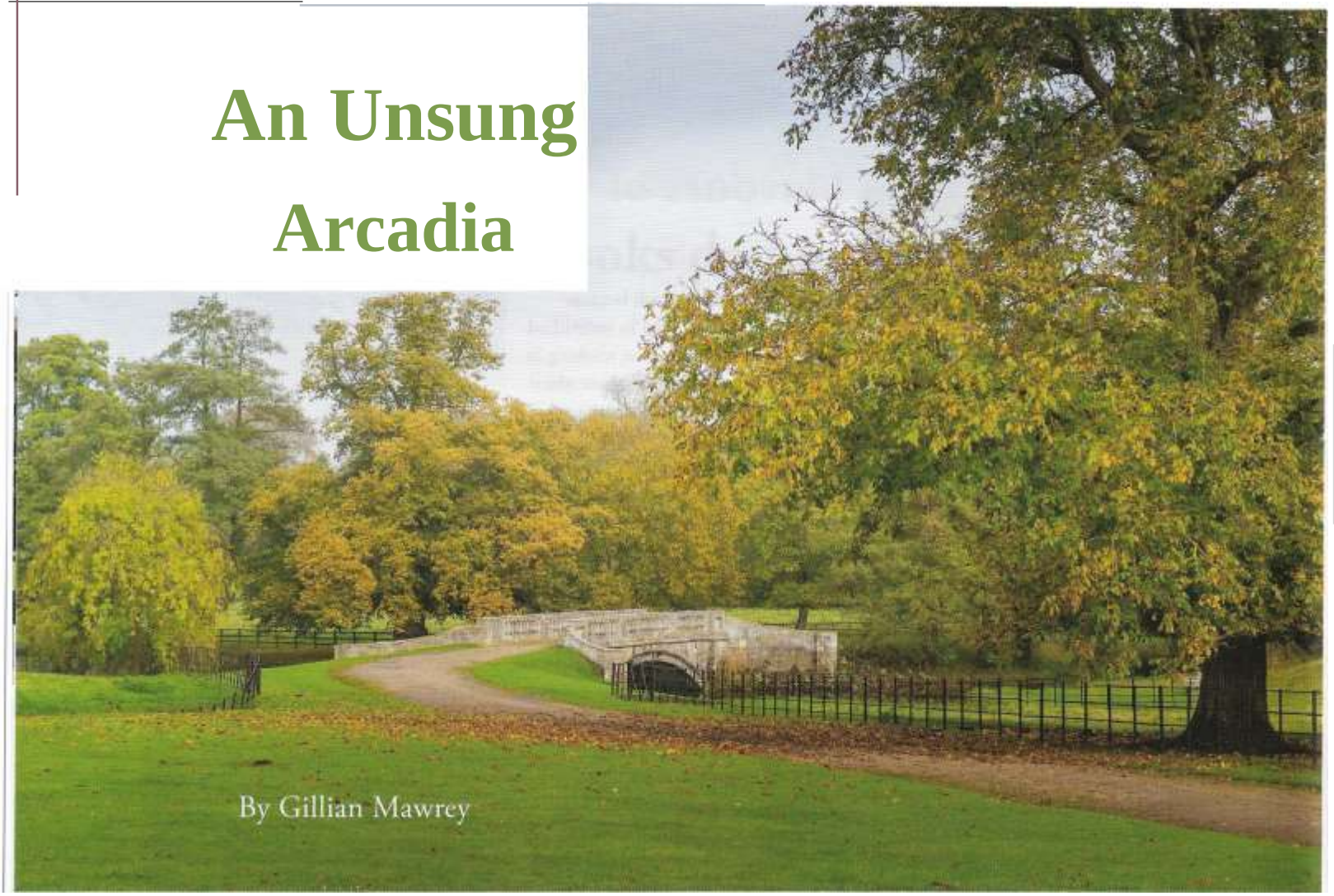


Édouard André's Garden Designs in Lithuania

Three Storm-Tossed Parks on the Coast of Italy

THE VOICE ■ HISTORIC PARKS AND GARDENS WORLDWIDE

An Unsung Arcadia



By Gillian Mawrey

A royal refuge with republican links deserves to be better known.

Never before had I stayed in a hotel where there was a polite sign in the bathroom asking guests not to let the bath overflow because water would damage the 18th-century stucco ceiling in the room below. We were at Hartwell House, in Buckinghamshire, which is a National Trust property- though not in quite the usual way. It is one of three beautiful houses which were saved from dereliction by Richard Broyd to be run as hotels. The other two are Middlethorpe in Yorkshire and Boddysgallen in Wales – and all of them have fine gardens. In 2008 Richard Broyd donated the Historic House Hotels group to the National Trust, which continues to run them as luxury hotels whose profits help to support the organisation's conservation work.

Hartwell's elegant house and rolling park make it a fine example of an English Arcadia – but, strangely, it rarely features in books about 'Great English Historic Gardens'. Look at any index and it always seems to jump from Harewood to Hatfield. Yet the house is Grade I listed and surrounded by 90 acres (36ha) of Grade II* park and garden, which have been the subject of careful research and recent restoration.

As with many ancient properties, over the centuries several gardens have been made at Hartwell, each being 'improved' according to the fashion of the time and the whims and wealth of the owners. Some we know very little about- the mid-17th century gardens are mere smudges on a 1661 plan- bur at least three of them, all made in the 18th century, are of historic interest and are well-documented. The earliest is a formal garden dated 1715-20, which was largely destroyed to make way for a pleasure garden created in 1759-60, to which a flower garden was added in the closing years of the century.

Hartwell's owners, from a natural son ofWilliam the Conqueror back in the 11th century to members of the committed Parliamentarian Hampden family in the 16th and 17th centuries, were always more than simple country squires, preferring to involve themselves with the royal court and national politics rather than local affairs, and receiving a baronetcy as a reward.

When Eleanor Hampden married Sir Thomas Lee in 1570, the property passed to the Lee family, and for centuries the Lees, like the Hampdens, were attached to that

political side, later known as the Whigs, which believed in constitutional rather than absolute monarchy.

One of the ways in which rich men manifested their political allegiance in the 18th century was through their gardens, particularly in their choice of statuary and the naming of their garden buildings. At Stowe, just 20 miles (32km) from Hartwell, for instance, Lord Cobham was making gardens from 1717 whose buildings, such as the Temple of British Worthies, were intended to articulate his Whiggish views. The Lee family knew Cobham and also had close links with Frederick, Prince ofWales, who from 1737 rented Cliveden, again not far- 25 miles (40km) – away. Frederick was notoriously opposed to his father, King George II, and the Tory government- and was therefore supported by the Whigs.

The Lees made their Whiggish leanings clear in the first of the gardens they made at Hartwell in the 18th century. Commissioned by Sir Thomas Lee, the 3rd baronet, and possibly based on formal gardens made by his father in the late 17th century, they are the theme of a laudatory poem by local poet Alexander Merrick and were recorded in eight oil paintings by Balthasar Nebot, a Spanish topographical painter who worked in London. The originals are in the Buckingham shire County Museum in nearby Aylesbury, but there are copies in the house at Hartwell as well as a scale model of how the estate would have looked when they were painted in 1738.

The garden shown in the Nebot paintings was probably designed by James Gibbs (1682-1754), who is best known as an architect, most famously of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London's Trafalgar Square. But he also designed buildings for Stowe and possibly some of its lay-out as well. For Hartwell, which he may have visited as early as 1715, Gibbs laid out a garden with areas oflawn and trees, including a 'wilderness', a long canal, a smaller one, and an octagonal pool.

The most conspicuous element is the extremely tall clipped evergreen hedges, which at one point create an extraordinary exedra and elsewhere radiate out in axial *allies* forming a *patte d'oie*. Each *allee* led to a small building, a statue, an obelisk or a fountain. Amongst the buildings were a menagerie, a pyramid, a Saxon Tower, and an Ionic Temple, while the statues, probably by French sculptor Pierre LeGros, included Whig heroes William III (the first British constitutional monarch) and, of course, Lee's distant relative, John Hampden. And, in true 18th-century fashion, there were also statues relating to the classical world- Juno, Jupiter, Hercules, Marsyas and Emperor Marcus Aurelius.

The paintings, however much the artist exaggerated some features, are interesting not just as a record of a lost garden, and of its owner's status and beliefs, but because Nebot included so many figures of humans and animals. One, for instance, portrays Sir Thomas Lee and his brothers playing bowls with a figure wearing the star of the Order of the Garter, who is probably Frederick, Prince ofWales; another shows the family riding out. Unusually for topographical art of the period, Nebot also showed those who worked on the estate, particularly gardeners clipping hedges and scything or rolling the grass.

Whatever class they are from, and however oppressive it looks to modern eyes, the people in this highly formal garden do not appear intimidated by its high hedges and rigid angles. Yet, by 1744, only six years later, Sir Thomas

Opposite page: An 18th-century road bridge, originally at Kew, sits perfectly in Hartwell's landscape today.
Below: Two paintings by Balthasar Nebot from the Buckingham shire County Museum Collections.
Left: Sir Thomas Lee playing bowls, probably with his brothers. The figure wearing the star of the Order of the Garter may be Frederick, Prince of Wales.
Right: Gardeners scything the lawn in front of the house. A statue of William III can be seen at the end of the central *a/lee* and one of John Hampden to the right. The left-hand axis leads to the menagerie.

An UnsungArcadia

Left: The entrance front of Harrwell House with John Cheere's equestrian statue of Frederick, Prince ofWales. *Right:* Plan of the gardens showing important items that survive, sometimes resited, from earlier gardens as well as current points of interest.

had started to change this highly formal garden to a much less rigid lay-out.

Thomas died in 1749 and was succeeded by his son William, who became the 4th baronet. In 1751 the Prince of Wales also died unexpectedly (one of the many princes of Wales who never ascended the throne) and in 1757 Sir William commissioned an equestrian statue of the prince from the most important garden sculptor of the day, John Cheere. This was placed to the south-west of the house, but soon after, in 1759, William ordered a pleasure garden which would tone down Hartwell's Whiggish idiom and allow the family and their friends to wander along newly sinuous paths and admire a greater range of trees, shrubs and flowers in a more relaxed and less political setting.

He called in Richard Woods (1715-93), one of the best-known designers of the day, much sought-after by families who wanted a park or garden on a more human scale than the rolling acres laid out by 'Capability' Brown. (It's worth noting that Brown seems not to have worked at Hartwell, although some older books and even one current website claim that he did.)

Woods's design involved filling in the long canal and creating an L-shaped lake. He included several new small buildings and there were also an unusual combined kitchen and flower garden, a greenhouse and a pinery for growing pineapples. These were situated in a new area on the other side of the road to Lower Hartwell village and accessed by a 'triumphal arch' which led under the road. The more contentious items of statuary were also resited- and the statue of William III was not just moved but tactfully renamed as George II.

Woods was probably a nurseryman as well as a landscaper and we know what shrubs and trees he chose for Hartwell because the invoice survives. For the bones of his design he needed 300 Laurels (costing £3.15s*), 200 beech (£2), and 200 hornbeam (£1.10s). Other more exotic trees, such as Virginian Cypress, came in pairs at 5s. There were fruit trees, too, and "Succession Pineapple plants" which cost a hefty 2s 6d each, making 50 of them come to £7.1Os. Flowers included 100 roses – 50 "American" and 50 "Second Best Sons" – and 100 honeysuckles "in Sorts" at £1.5s.

As well as listing plants, the invoice gives Woods's rates of pay: 12 guineas (£12.12s) for the design and one guinea (£1.1s) a day on journeys. Labourers were paid 1Od a day- though more disagreeable jobs earned a bonus of beer.

Sir William Lee's wife was Lady Elizabeth Harcourt, sister of George, 2nd Earl Harcourt, who owned Nuneham Courtnay, 20 miles (30km) away in Oxfordshire. At Nuneham the earl had employed the gardener-poet William Mason to make a flower garden and this inspired his sister to create a similar flower garden at Hartwell. Sixteen plans illustrating the lay-out and plantings of this garden were discovered in Oxford's Bodleian Library by Mavis Batey and have been analysed by specialists in 18th-century flower gardens, particularly Mark Laird.

If the plans were really ever carried out (one sheet is dated 1799, the year Sir William died and Lady Elizabeth moved to London) her garden must have been very beautiful – and extremely labour-intensive. The beds, circular, oval or kidney-shaped, were planted with as many as 36 different

**There were 12d (pence) in each shilling and 20s in a pound.*

flowers, rhe tallest in the cenrre, planned ro bloom from spring ro autumn. There were even beans and tomatoes to give height, but few shrubs.

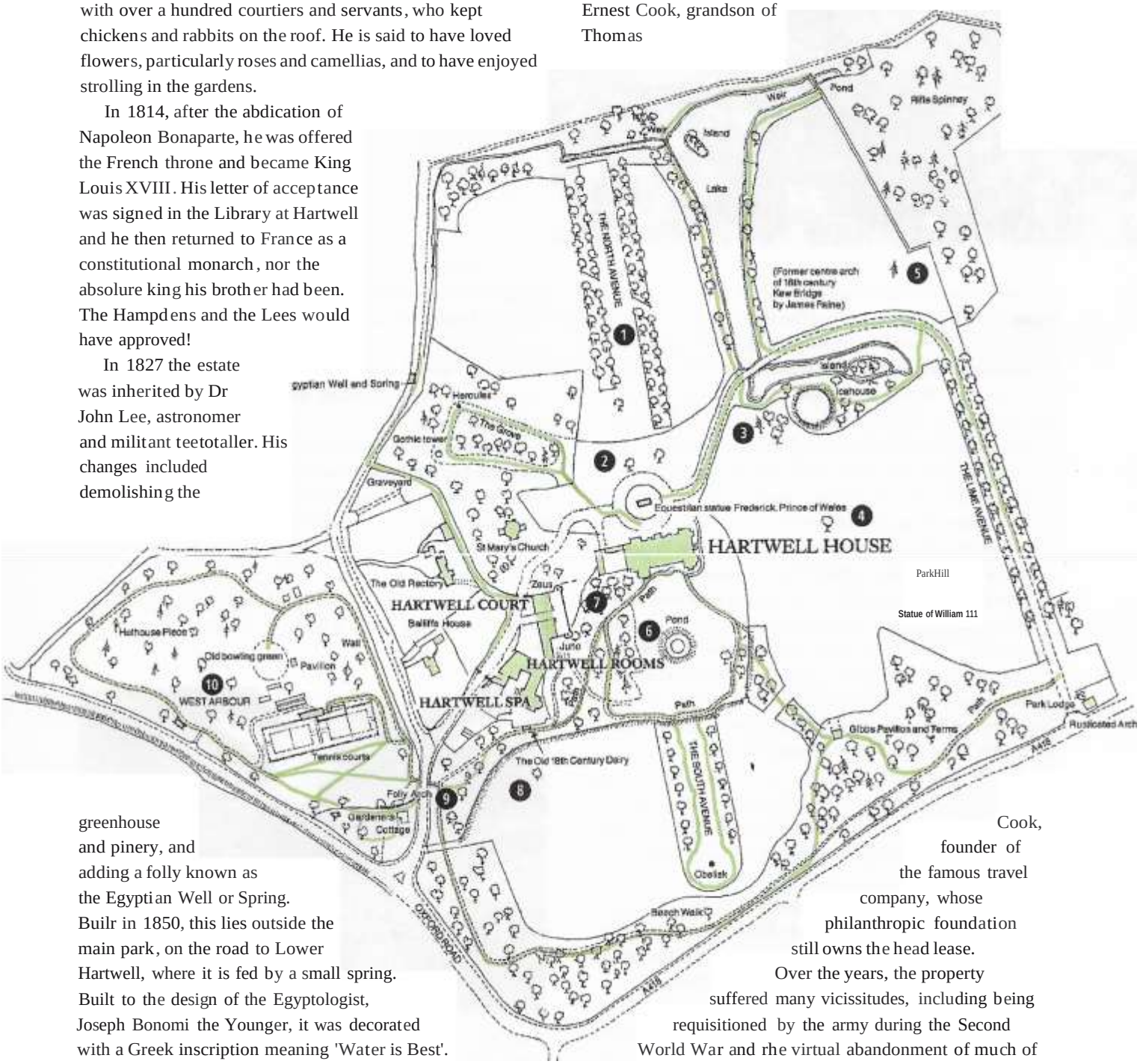
In 1801 Hartwell was inherited by William and Elizabeth's second son, the Rev. Sir George Lee, who rented the estate for £500 a year to the Count of Provence, exiled brother of the guillotined French king, Louis XVI. For five years from 1809 he and his wife, Marie Josephine of Savoy, lived there in a combination of great state and total chaos, with over a hundred courtiers and servants, who kept chickens and rabbits on the roof. He is said to have loved flowers, particularly roses and camellias, and to have enjoyed strolling in the gardens.

In 1814, after the abdication of Napoleon Bonaparte, he was offered the French throne and became King Louis XVIII. His letter of acceptance was signed in the Library at Hartwell and he then returned to France as a constitutional monarch, nor the absolure king his brother had been. The Hampdens and the Lees would have approved!

In 1827 the estate was inherited by Dr John Lee, astronomer and militant teetotaller. His changes included demolishing the greenhouse and pinery, and adding a folly known as the Egyptian Well or Spring. Builr in 1850, this lies outside the main park, on the road to Lower Hartwell, where it is fed by a small spring. Built to the design of the Egyptologist, Joseph Bonomi the Younger, it was decorated with a Greek inscription meaning 'Water is Best'.

After John Lee's death in 1866, small changes continued to be made, most notably in 1900, when the boot-shaped lake was divided at its ankle by the central arch of a salvaged 18th century stone bridge. Designed by James Paine, it had been the road crossing over the Thames at Kew from the 1780s until increasing traffic required a wider bridge. Today, it looks as though it had always been intended for Hartwell.

In 1938 the estate, including the house and its contents, were put up for sale. It was bought by Ernest Cook, grandson of Thomas Cook, founder of the famous travel company, whose philanthropic foundation still owns the head lease.



Over the years, the property suffered many vicissitudes, including being requisitioned by the army during the Second World War and rhe virtual abandonment of much of

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Gillian and Richard Mawrey were the guests of Historic House Hotels. Although the National Trust has a lease of the property, Hartwell is run as a hotel and restaurant, and the grounds are reserved for people staying or eating there. It is not open to NT members and the general public in the same way as most other NT properties, but the head gardener rakes wonderfully informative tours of the gardens, which can be booked via the website.

the garden in the years following, when it became a girls' school. There was also a serious fire in 1963.

But after Richard Broyd took over in 1986 a programme of restoration was undertaken. For the house he worked with architect, Eric Throssell, who also researched the history of the buildings in the grounds and then of the garden itself.

For the garden, Broyd also consulted Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe but not all of the great landscaper's suggestions were implemented. His main change was the creation of a turning circle in front of the entrance to the house, in the middle of which he sited the equestrian statue of Frederick, Prince of Wales, which had been languishing in a shrubbery.

The double avenue of limes was largely replanted in the 1990s and more recent improvements include the clearing of the island, so that the ice-house is now visible. A formal hedged area has been created behind the coach house, which allows the statues of Jupiter and Juno to be displayed, and there are two new box-edged beds in front of it which are pleasantly filled with lilac, roses and peonies.

Another flower garden has been made near what was once the dairy, the orchard of old fruit varieties has been re-established, and thousands of snowdrops and daffodils have been planted so that the hotel's surroundings are now worth a visit in all seasons.

Most importantly, the triumphal arch under the Lower Hartwell road, which leads to Lady Elizabeth's garden, has been restored, and work has begun on recreating the garden itself, though the site has been truncated by changes in a main road which runs along its edge.

Of course, an estate of this size is not without problems. Mercifully, box blight has been kept at bay, but many of the mature trees are suffering from ferocious squirrels as well as drought. New developments in nearby Aylesbury have put pressure on the perimeter of the park, and today it faces a new threat. Work has started on HS2, the high-speed railway from London to Birmingham, whose route will cut across the northern edge.

Much research and restoration are still to be done at Hartwell, but this beautiful and multi-layered landscape is one of the most important in the care of the National Trust, so we must hope that the impetus that has carried so much forward in recent years will not be lost in the future.

The author would like to thank Richard Jones, Charles Boot and Rosemary Jury for their help.

Above left: Ten thousand daffodils light up the park in spring.
Above: The new garden in front of the coach house.