

# Visiting the Nuneham Estate

by Richard Mayou and Joanna Matthews

The core of the Nuneham estate has been owned since 1948 by Oxford University. It is of exceptional importance in the history of British landscape and horticulture and is very well documented, most especially in the very extensive Harcourt archive in the Bodleian library. Despite sales of land and buildings, serious decay in the 20th century, and a line of massive electricity pylons that Pevsner described “as one of the most deplorable acts of vandalism by any local authority”, much remains. Access is very limited (so keep off the farmland) but enough elsewhere to allow very worthwhile exploration.

## The Most Beautiful Place In The World

The estate was bought in 1712 by Sir Simon Harcourt of Stanton Harcourt. His grandson, Simon, 1st Earl Harcourt, inherited at the age of 13. After a Grand Tour he became an enthusiast for classical culture including the Palladian concept of villas set within landscape. He moved from the family seats at Stanton Harcourt and Cokethorpe to a new house built to take advantage of a remarkable site, described

by Horace Walpole in 1780 as “the most beautiful in the world”. Several generations of Harcourts developed and redeveloped the house and gardens with their views over the river and towards the spires of Oxford.

### Simon Harcourt, 1st Earl Harcourt: Palladian villa and classical garden, 1760 - 77

Simon Harcourt demolished a low-lying manor house and built a new house within a park and enclosed the medieval strips

into fields. The Palladian villa of 1757 was designed by Stiff Leadbetter, an Eton architect who was also responsible for the Radcliffe Infirmary. The landscape around the house was cleared and planted to create an idealised Arcadian landscape in the style of the Claude and Poussin paintings within the house. The artist Paul Sandby spent long periods at the new house painting oils and watercolours making prints of the improvements and teaching the Earl’s children, all talented artists. The old main road passing the house was taken over as the main drive running to a lodge on the Abingdon Road at Culham. The new vistas required the demolition in the 1760s of the nearby old village and the building of a new village a mile away along the Oxford to Henley turnpike road. This occasioned Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Deserted Village*. With help from James “Athenian Stuart”, Harcourt designed a new church to replace the old parish church, with a grand portico from which to admire the



Figure 1. A view from Nuneham House towards Oxford as landscaped by the 1st Lord Harcourt. 1793. Aquatint by J C Stadler after Joseph Farington.

vistas. The village duck pond, augmented by pumping from the Thames, became a lake. There were four large new farmhouses: Nineveh, Upper, Lower and Home Farm. Whilst staking out further tree planting in 1777, the Earl drowned trying to rescue a pet spaniel that had fallen down an old village well.

**George Simon, 2nd Earl Lord Harcourt: the extended house, Mason’s flower garden and landscaping by Capability Brown, 1777 - 1809**

George Simon was a very different man from his father. At first of republican sympathies and much influenced by J J Rousseau (whom he invited to Nuneham), he later became close to King George III and Queen Charlotte, entertaining them on many occasions. In 1771 he planted a new flower garden within his father’s landscape to designs by the poet gardener William Mason. In contrast to the then usual geometric designs, Mason’s garden was informal with irregular beds interspersed with inscribed busts of poets and urns and with a Temple of Flora. The Earl and Countess, who were accomplished in art and poetry, entertained many prominent poets, writers and artists. The Earl wrote



Figure 3. The Carfax Conduit with Nuneham House in the background. C1790 Aquatint and etching by Charles Catton after Daniel Harris.

a guidebook to his house and gardens and Lady Harcourt wrote poems she hung about the statuary. Mason himself wrote:

*So here did Art arrange her flowery groups,  
Irregular, yet not in patches quaint,  
But interposed between the wandering lines  
Of shaven turf which twisted to the path,  
Leading the eye to many a sculptured bust.*

Between 1779 and 1782 Capability Brown enlarged the house and landscaped the Park, including rebuilding the Carfax Conduit (removed from the centre of Oxford for road widening) on a hill, Brown’s walk with trees and interrupted river views along the hillside and a riverside walk.

**Archbishop Harcourt: The Pinetum and new landscaping, 1830 - 1847**

Edward Vernon Harcourt, Archbishop of York (a descendant of the first Earl’s sister) was already aged over 70 when he inherited in 1830. He had eleven children and built a large new wing to the house to designs by Sir Robert Smirke. He vigorously restored the estate, which had declined during the ownership of the Third Earl, and commissioned many garden improvements from William Sawrey Gilpin, nephew of Reverend William Gilpin who was a pioneer of the “picturesque” landscape. The flower garden was largely returned to grass. A balustraded terrace was added along the river-front of the house and estate cottages built on the site of the deserted old village. Brown’s landscape plantings were greatly modified and there was also a new drive to the Oxford Road with gates and a porticoed lodge by Sir Robert Smirke. The purchase of extra land along the Oxford turnpike enabled Gilpin to lay out a “pinetum” with a serpentine ride between the new drive and the main Culham drive.



Figure 2. Plan of Mason’s Garden. 1772. By permission of the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford (MS. DD. Harcourt a.1)



Figure 4. Mason's Garden showing the temple of Flora and the Greenhouse on the right. An engraving after a watercolour by Paul Sandby 1777. By permission Images and Voices, Centre for Oxfordshire Studies.

### Rev William Vernon Harcourt: New plant introductions, 1861 - 1871

The archbishop's younger son who inherited in 1861 was a Fellow of the Royal Society and founder Secretary of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a close friend and colleague of Charles Daubeny, Sherardian Professor of Botany and Keeper of the Oxford Botanic Garden. It seems probable that they, together with the Garden Superintendent William Baxter, planned the new plantings near the house, in the park and in the arboretum. The nineteenth century also saw extensive planting of woods and coverts for shooting and hunting. The river and woods became a popular excursion from Oxford and Abingdon described by Lewis Carroll and many others. The next two family members to inherit the estate played no part in its development.

### Lewis Harcourt, 1st Viscount Harcourt: Twentieth century revival, 1904 - 1922

The title was recreated for William Vernon's grandson, Lewis, 1st Viscount. He was a friend of Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson and he extended the gardens with a woodland dell inspired by Robinson's Wild Garden, an Italian water garden (now lost) in front of the South Wing and herbaceous borders below the terrace. He had also been Colonial Secretary, a post that resulted in him keeping wallabies and emus in the deer park.

### Visiting Nuneham

The estate has been broken up. The park largely belongs to the University, who have let the farmland on agricultural tenancies and leased the house to the Global Retreat Centre. Much can be seen from the Harcourt Arboretum and from rights of way such as roads and there are occasional opportunities for visits

to private areas. The present landscape combines the remains of Gilpin's designs, later woodland and sporting plantings and post war agriculture. The Ordnance Survey Explorer map or the excellent new CPRE booklet on The Oxford Greenbelt Way are useful.

### Nuneham Village

Semi-detached 18th century cottages together with a former Curate's house, forge, school and The Harcourt Arms.

### The Harcourt Arboretum

The present continuing revival of the Arboretum is based on a historically based landscape plan by Kim Wilkie. It is entered by Sir Robert Smirke's gate with the Archbishop's drive remaining as a path leading beyond Palmers Leys direct to the house. Gilpin's serpentine drive has been restored with much new planting but ends in a locked gate to privately owned Knowle plantation.

## The drive to the house from Nuneham village

The mile long drive from the model village of Nuneham Courtenay is a right of way. Driving or walking towards the house one sees on the right in succession: the 1872 parish church of All Saints (now also redundant and used by the University as a store), a drive to The Old Rectory, Old Town House (once the agent's house) and cottages; the lake (now reduced to the size of the old village duckpond) and Home Farm. On the left, at a bend in the drive there is a gateway to a farm track, which was the Archbishop's 1834 drive towards the Arboretum and its gate.

## The House and surroundings

At the gates to the house, the old main Culham drive (a right of way) leads to the left past the car park. On the right, the remains of the 18th century stables,

walled kitchen garden and dairy (It is possible to walk to the house and to borrow the church key at reception.

Requests to walk in the gardens around the house are usually granted). From the once graveled forecourt of the house Leadbetter's villa is encompassed by Brown's enlargement with Smirke's large wing to the right. Walking through the gateway on the right and around the house are the terraces. It is occasionally possible to walk right round and along part of Brown's walk towards the Conduit.

## Mason's Garden and All Saints Church

On the left of the walk to the church there are lawns. Mason's garden is on the right. It has been restored to resemble Gilpin's replanting with informal rhododendron and shrubs. There is the Temple of Flora, a dangerously ruined grotto and a few pieces of statuary (mainly added by Lewis Harcourt).

At the far end, the back of the Home Farm buildings and a view to Robert Smirke's Old Town House.

The fine church, with an impressive portico is now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust. The interior, which was designed to be elegant rather than to be a village church, has late nineteenth century fittings.

From the portico on the far side, vistas towards the remains of statuary. Ahead and below is the Robinsonian woodland dell.

## The views from the towpath

Walking from Culham or Radley on the opposite side of the river, there are fine views of the house, the church and of Brown's walk towards the Conduit and of his riverside walk.

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*Richard Mayou is Chairman of the Friends and Joanna Matthews is a member of the Friends*



Figure 5. The River Thames with the cottage ornee and bridge designed by Capability Brown. Photograph by Henry Taunt 1895. By permission Images and Voices, Centre for Oxfordshire Studies.