

REVIEW

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Georgian Arcadia: architecture for the park and garden. By ROGER WHITE. 280mm. Pp 352, 326 figs, mostly col. Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2023. ISBN 97803002499358. £40 (hbk).

Roger White was for many years secretary of the Georgian Group. He is therefore very well placed to chronicle the buildings that populated the great estates in this country. His is the first book to consider in detail all of the myriad buildings constructed in parkland settings. He does so without getting distracted by the history of the great houses these buildings served, by landscape design or by landscape painting. Scholarly focus on these star items had led to a gap in academic coverage of what was an important building type, or types (he itemises more than twenty).

Many of these buildings will, in fairness, already be familiar to art and architectural historians through surveys and monographs. Many readers of this journal will know of the Palladian Bridge at Wilton House in Wiltshire, the Rotunda and Gothic Temple at Stowe, the Darnley Mausoleum at Cobham Hall in Kent. The greater number of the hundreds of buildings that appear in *Georgian Arcadia* are, however, not known either individually or collectively within their type.

The gap in coverage that Mr White's book addresses has, in the experience of this reviewer, led to a practical problem for their conservation. Many buildings in parks and gardens are in pretty poor condition, overlooked, languishing in overgrown parts of estates that are themselves slowly being reabsorbed into nature. To this point probably the only way to get sense of them as a group was through the images in the national register that Historic England maintains of buildings at risk.

It is not an easy thing, given the enormous variety and patchy documentation, to break the link between these buildings and their country house context. The author does this by considering the function of each to give us a history of

'park-and-garden building' types. To give some sense of order, Mr White groups these many types into three categories: buildings for relaxation and entertainment; buildings of sensibility; buildings of utility. The first is self-explanatory. The second comprises all things that relate to aesthetics, from grottoes to ruins, obelisks to mausolea. The third category, 'utility', is something of a hybrid. It comprises farm buildings (though pretty grand ones) and greenhouses (also pretty grand). These are structures that have a clear purpose in estate or parkland and garden management. This category also, perhaps surprisingly, includes chapels and churches. This is not a criticism at all. Where else is one meant to put them? Their utility is spiritual, and their patrons probably did see them as serving an estate purpose. Anyway, this great collection of ancillary buildings is quite varied and architectural history is not a strict Linnean exercise.

Mr White would, I think, bridle just a little at my use just now of the word 'ancillary'. He would or might say that this term unfairly relegates many of these structures to the lower leagues. He would be right. Many of these structures are full bodied architectural works. Filling the photographic frame as forcefully as many do, they hardly appear subservient. Many are full of architectural ambition, experiments bending the language of Palladianism. Probably the best illustration of this is what was probably one of the last of William Kent's works, the lodge at Badminton in Worcestershire, completed under the direction of the architect's assistant, Stephen Wright, who was responsible for the drawings (but the author gives it firmly to Kent). This building was together a lodge, a gate and a banqueting house. The latter is lifted high in the air, where it appears as a kind of disembodied Chiswick House in miniature. Below is a stout, rusticated base flanked by smaller structures finishing in pyramidal roofs. Leaving architectural piety to one side, this building is a mad, fevered architectural fantasy, the kind of wild building normally found in sketches for stage sets. The Carrmire Gate to Castle Howard (in the chapter 'Arches') is also

remarkable, but, instead of soaring, its proportions are squashed flat, leaving politeness to one side or undermining it. This structure is a kind of joke that reminded this reviewer of Velazquez's portraits of court jesters.

Often a history done by building type provides a lot of potential for cultural, social, economic and historical context. This in turn allows a deeper understanding of building form and expression. *Georgian Arcadia* is a history of types that sit within a larger cultural type (the great house in its landscape). The author takes the reader's knowledge of that for granted, and that is fair enough because this book will be one that will sit on the shelf next to the great surveys of country house architecture, as a kind of coda.

As for the look and feel of the book, it is nicely produced, weighty and copiously illustrated with photographs, most in colour and of good quality. The chapters are short and well written. It is a pleasure to read, particularly in a garden over the course of several warm summer evenings. A nicely verdant town garden, even one in central London, will do and in fact provided this reviewer with the perfect spot to

enjoy it and reflect on its fascinating subject matter.

Finally, there is one other practical purpose of this book beyond promoting the conservation of these lively, beautiful structures. *Georgian Arcadia* will be of interest to the designers of new garden buildings in historic parkland or in modern estates. As many readers will be aware, the last fifteen or so years have seen a new generation of extreme wealth moving onto historic estates in decline. New owners of considerable means are restoring and modernising great houses, building new ones, enhancing and replanting landscapes, implementing sustainable farming and introducing biodiversity net gains. Alongside that, they are commonly building new buildings for the twenty-first-century arcadia they are seeking to create. And so this book will also find a place in the libraries of the professionals who are working in this market. Their clients will likely draw inspiration from it too, as they contemplate how to perfect their estates.

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