

# Blenheim Palace Gardens

Woodstock, Oxfordshire, UK

Photographs by Alan Ward 2007, 2014

# Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Most of England's significant gardens, parks and other designed landscapes have been installed, modified and reworked for generations by owners and designers. Layers of design evident at sites like Blenheim make these landscapes a composite of different eras; the pure example is rare. Each landscape demonstrates a dialogue between the generations addressing the fundamental questions of continuity and change. To experience these sites is to be immersed in a collage of eras. As landscapes such as Blenheim were reused or altered, they still have visible traces of an earlier form.

Blenheim Palace, designed by John Vanbrugh assisted by Nicholas Hawksmoor, was built from 1705 to 1722 on the site of an earlier palace and deer park, as well as a Roman and Medieval landscape.\* Henry Wise designed a vast garden beginning in 1705 with radiating walks and parterres south of the house. To the north, a central axis extended more than three kilometers, crossing over an immense bridge designed by Vanbrugh that spanned three channelized streams of the River Glyme.

Lancelot 'Capability' Brown overlaid a design beginning in 1764, transforming the site into a more flowing pastoral landscape modeled after the English countryside. He replaced the parterres with lawns extending to the palace. Brown made a serpentine lake by adding a weir to raise the water level which covered much of Vanbrugh's oversized bridge, establishing better proportions to the view of the structure (3,4), while a

portion of the former elevated topography was left to create an island in the lake (2,5). Grades were adjusted to be more undulating and new plantings of beech, cedars of Lebanon, and horse-chestnut trees are in groups positioned for views of the lake and palace from carriage drives.

The Column of Victory was located on high ground by Vanbrugh just over halfway along the north axis from the palace. Brown retained both the north axis and column, but naturalized the surroundings (6,8,9). As the taste for more axial and symmetrically ordered designs returned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, classically inspired gardens were reintroduced at Blenheim (19-24). The Italian Garden on the east side has parterres at two levels with hedges of yew and box, recalling the earlier designs by Wise and Vanbrugh (18-23).

I aimed to show the multiple layers of design at Blenheim, including Lancelot Brown's transformation that expresses the spirit of the English rural landscape. In recalling an agrarian and pastoral ideal, Brown's sweeping lawns and clusters of trees are rather subtle designs that tend to blend and merge with the surroundings. I stayed in the village of Woodstock at the northern edge of the property, like generations of earlier visitors to the palace. Walking out of the Woodstock west gate (1) to the garden one evening, I was stunned by the harmonious composition Brown made for visitors approaching Blenheim - a panoramic view of the English countryside with a lake, island and bridge (4).\*\*

# List of Photographs

1. Woodstock west gate, 2014
2. Early morning view of lake, island and Vanbrugh bridge, 2007
3. Lake with Vanbrugh bridge, 2014
4. Palace, lake and bridge, 2007
5. Island in lake and Woodstock west gate beyond, 2007
6. North axis from palace to Victory Column, 2007
7. View south to palace from Vanbrugh bridge, 2007
8. Paths flanking Victory Column, 2007
9. Victory Column and groups of trees, 2007
10. Downstream along the River Glyme, 2007
11. Hillside path to cottage, 2014
12. Cedars of Lebanon and palace, 2007
13. West side of bridge and palace, 2007
14. Beech grove along lake, 2014
15. Aged oaks, 2007
16. Groves on south side of palace, 2014
17. South side of palace and lawn, 2014
18. Italian Garden on east side of palace, 2007
19. Panoramic view of Italian Garden, 2007
20. Water Terrace fountain, 2007
21. Water Terrace and River Glyme, 2007
22. View north of Water Terrace, 2007













































# Notes

\* Blenheim Palace, UNESCO listing

\*\* For the history of the Blenheim site including historical drawings and plans, see the book by the archival researcher at Blenheim, *The Finest View in England: The Landscape and Gardens at Blenheim Palace* by Jeri Bapasola, Blenheim Estate Office, 2010.