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Ashridge House, Little Gaddesden¹

SP 994122²

ASHRIDGE HOUSE AND ITS PARK occupy a magnificent position on the crest of the Chiltern Hills in the far north-west of the county; at the time, the boundary between Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire ran through the pleasure grounds. Humphry Repton was commissioned by the seventh earl of Bridgewater in 1812 to draw up proposals for new gardens. These were to occupy the area to the south of his new house, initially designed by James Wyatt but, following his death in September 1813, completed and extended by his son Benjamin and nephew Jeffry Wyatt, later Sir Jeffry Wyatville, as a vast gothic extravaganza (Figure 5). Repton's *Report Concerning The Gardens of Ashridge* was submitted in March 1813: it is not, in fact, technically a 'Red Book', for it was presented as an unbound folio. As well as a hand-written text and watercolour illustrations, the folio includes a pencil sketch, probably by Repton, of an alcove with fountain, a working drawing of the pleasure ground and handwritten notes to accompany this.

Repton's proposals for Ashridge are very detailed and are of considerable significance because of their innovative nature. Combining open lawns with smaller gardens – both formal and informal in character – in the environs of the mansion, they mark a decisive shift in garden style and the beginning of a return of structure and order to the immediate vicinity of major houses that was to continue and intensify in the course of the nineteenth

century. The proposals thus developed ideas that Repton had already advanced in his designs for the Pavilion at Brighton (1805) and at Woburn Abbey (1804–10), and which he was to further elaborate at Endsleigh in Devon (1814) for the sixth duke of Bedford. Ashridge also features in Repton's last book, *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* of 1816, a publication that brought together descriptions of many of his later works. Repton in fact asked to borrow the proposals for Ashridge in order to refresh his memory of what he had suggested there but was told they had been mislaid. His account is thus written from memory, and includes an important assessment of his achievement:

The novelty of this attempt to collect a number of gardens, differing from each other, may, perhaps excite the critics' censure; but I will hope there is no more absurdity in collecting gardens of different styles, dates, characters and dimensions in the same inclosure, than in placing the works of a Raphael and a Teniers in the same cabinet, or books sacred and profane in the same library.³

The account in *Fragments* also includes a number of illustrations that differ in significant details from those contained in Repton's original design proposals. In addition, Repton prepared a

6 An engraving of the previous house at Ashridge, designed by Henry Holland in the 1760s, appeared in Peacock's *Polite Repository* for 1809, suggesting that Repton may have had an earlier involvement with the place before the erection of the new mansion.

handwritten note to accompany working drawings of the 'Modern Pleasure Ground', the text of which we transcribe below, accompanied by illustrations that we also reproduce.

By the time Repton was commissioned by the earl he was not in good health. The ongoing effects of a carriage accident a few years earlier, combined with a probable heart problem, meant that he may well have been in a wheelchair when he made his three visits to Ashridge between March and June 1813, accompanied by his son John Adey Repton, who worked closely with his father from c.1800 after training as an architect with William Wilkins senior and John Nash – both of whom worked closely with Repton himself, the former at the start of his career, the latter in the mid-late 1790s. The area he was asked to advise on covered only c.15 acres and, although occupying the summit of a hill, was almost level, making access easy and ensuring that the commission, in

Repton's own words, 'suited his declining powers'. It was a work that would become his 'youngest favourite'.

Repton's client had inherited Ashridge from his cousin Francis Egerton, third duke of Bridgewater, in 1803, along with a huge income. The earl immediately set about expanding the estate, enclosing land and improving the management of the property, which extended over nearly 2,300 acres (c. 930 hectares). Ashridge had originated as a monastic community, the College of Bonhommes, and became a royal residence in 1539 following the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The gothic style of the grand new mansion designed by the Wyatts consciously evoked this royal and monastic past: although described as 'Elizabethan Gothic' by Repton, it was more medieval in character and featured prominent statuary representing ecclesiastical and royal figures. Repton also attempted, in his design for the grounds, to create a connection with this romantic past as well as gardens which fitted in well with the style of the mansion. Some areas of the gardens thus have a decidedly antiquarian feel that in part reflects the influence of John Adey, who became a respected antiquary and published extensively on early architecture. But not all of Repton's design was intended to reflect the medieval past. As Stephen Daniels has noted: 'Within the compass of the plans for Ashridge are described deeper and wider historical and geographical worlds, both ancient and modern, retrospective and prospective, traditional and experimental.'⁴

The gardens thus demonstrate, in particular, Repton's awareness of the need to accommodate new styles and new forms of planting. In the early years of the nineteenth century the sheer scale of the influx of new plant species from abroad meant that