

## LONDON CALLING - PAINSHILL PARK

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Posted by Tony Grant

<http://general-southerner.blogspot.co.uk/2013/05/painshill-park-surrey.html>

The Honourable Charles Hamilton was born in 1704, the ninth son and one of fourteen children of the Earl of Abercorn. The 6th Earl, Charles's father, was at his accession an Irish baronet, "of Dunalong in the County of Tyrone, and of Nenagh in the County of Tipperary." He was additionally created Baron Mountcastle and Viscount Strabane, in the Peerage of Ireland, on 2 September 1701. The 7th Earl, Charles's oldest brother, became the first of the Earls of Abercorn to be invested a Privy Counsellor, having been appointed to both the English and Irish Privy Councils. Charles, being the ninth son, was somewhat down the pecking order as far as inheritance went. However, his father did provide him with the very best education which should have honed his talents and provided him with substantial opportunities to be successful, and indeed he had great imagination and boundless ambition. Charles Hamilton went to Westminster School and then on to Oxford University.



Charles Hamilton

His father enabled Charles to go on two tours of Europe, which was always regarded as the finishing touch to an excellent education. Charles was inspired by the landscapes and exotic vegetation of the Mediterranean. He was especially inspired by the landscapes of Italy. He was also inspired by the landscape paintings of Pousin, Claude Lorraine and Salvatore Rosa.



Salvator Rosa (self portrait The National Gallery)

In 1738, arriving back in England from his two tours of Europe, he acquired land near Cobham in Surrey, which included a stretch of the River Mole, which, incidentally, reaches the River Thames beside Hampton Court. It was here that Charles Hamilton decided to put into practice his love of natural landscape and deep interest in the varied flora found around the world. He became a member of parliament and was on the staff of Frederick, Prince of Wales.

He had some well paid jobs which enabled him to get started on his Painshill project but he also borrowed heavily. For the next thirty five years he dedicated his life to creating a vision of beautiful and emotional landscapes. Charles Hamilton had one of the qualities most prized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is probably a quality prized today. He had, "taste."





Painshill Park Lake

Nicolas Poussin (15 June 1594 – 19 November 1665) was the leading painter of the classical French Baroque style. It is quite something to think of Poussin as an influence on Charles Hamilton's ideas for Painshill Park. Many of Poussin's rural pictures show shepherds and sheep within vast landscapes of rocks, rivers and beautiful trees placed in such a way that they look natural occurrences but reveal shimmering close and distant views. You can also see this same depiction of landscape in the pictures of Claude Lorrain (c.1600 – 23 November 1682) also a French painter of the baroque period. However one of the main differences between Poussin and Claude Lorrain is that Poussin painted many nude portraits of beautiful women and nude, goat like, dark complexioned men leaning over them and admiring their most intimate parts. The ladies themselves are often asleep leaning backwards over pregnant mounds of grass with legs wide apart inviting scrutiny. Perhaps Charles Hamilton had other ambitions apart from the effects of landscape at Painshill? The follies he created are a series of moods and situations set within these Poussin and Lorrain style landscapes. Perhaps some of the parties he held in his grounds did lead to debauched tableaux too. Charles Hamilton, some money in his pocket, bright, intelligent, well educated, travelling throughout Europe, experiencing all the different cultures and situations he came across; one can well imagine.

Salvator Rosa's landscapes are very similar to those of Poussin and Lorrain except that they portray Italian scenes. It was Italy that ultimately influenced Hamilton in his positioning of his, "ruins." There is a self-portrait of Salvator Rosa in the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square. It is one of the most striking self-portraits you will ever see. It shows a young man dressed in a black cloak and wearing a black tricorne hat jauntily angled on his head. The face is of a young man but one full of concerns, frowning and deep in concentration. He is intelligent and brooding. You cannot but help engage with this portrait. I can imagine Charles Hamilton being as deeply thoughtful, intelligent and fighting his demons as Salvatore Rosa portrays himself.



Landscape by Salvatore Rosa

Charles Hamilton arrived at Painshill in 1738 and he set about his ambitious venture. He wanted plants from all over the world to give variety of texture, shape, size and colour to his garden and I should imagine scent too. The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought about a period of plant mania. Wealthy aristocrats prized seeds and plants from all over the growing British Empire. The Tradescants, father and son, in the early 1600's, had already explored Virginia in America and various other locations to obtain plant specimens. Phillip Millar at Chelsea Physic Garden published the "Gardner's Dictionary" in 1731 and we know that Charles Hamilton had a copy of it. Plants and seeds came from Europe, Asia, the Far East, South Africa and North and South America. The gardens at Kew received a lot of these plants and seeds and its botanical reputation began to develop too. Christopher Gray, the gardener for the Bishop of London at Fulham Palace bought plants from around the world and advised Charles Hamilton on his purchases. Hamilton also corresponded with the Abbe Nolan who was a gardening adviser to Louis XV's gardener at Versailles.



The gothic temple



One of Charles Hamilton's greatest sources of new seeds was the businessman Peter Collinson (1694-1768) who was the London dealer for John Bartram (1699-1777). Bartram and Collinson had a trading relationship for over forty years. John Bartram was born in Pennsylvania and became a self-taught botanist. Peter Collinson was a cloth merchant and passionate plantsman but he was also a Quaker. His Quaker connections gave him links to the Quakers in the emerging states on the East Coast of America. He met and associated with John Bartram who was a Quaker too. Bartram felt a great affinity with nature and flowers and plants. He roamed the whole of the east coast of America from the Mountains of Pennsylvania, the coast of New Jersey, Lake Ontario, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and down as far as Florida. He travelled in the autumn when the harvest had been gathered and trees, plants and shrubs were ready to drop their seeds. He often travelled with indigenous Indian guides and on more than one occasion his life was in danger. He had to contend with rattle snakes, bad weather, rough and treacherous terrain and Native American and French raiding parties against the English settlements. His native guides were able to show him the best places to obtain seeds as well as guide him on his journeys. He was a true scientific explorer.



John Bartram







Bartram's boxes and barrel for transporting seeds.

There was a great problem in getting plants back to Britain from America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was a dangerous enterprise. England was at war with France and there was always the chance that trading ships might be captured. Also there was a matter of storing and packaging the seeds and plants. Plants needed to be watered and cared for on a trip that might take three months. Bartram invented a box system for live plants which kept them safe from damage and allowed them to be watered regularly. He also designed a barrel with different sections for storing loose seeds. The partitions would be layered with moss. Rare seeds might be wrapped individually.



The ruined abbey at Painshill Park

Hamilton had problems with money. He borrowed extensively and eventually in 1773 his debts became too much and he had to sell Painshill Park. Painshill then had a succession of owners who took care of Hamilton's original design and garden plan. The gardens survived into the twentieth century unchanged from their original form. However from 1949 it suffered neglect. Parts of the estate were sold off for farming and it became dilapidated and overgrown. Some of Hamilton's original structures collapsed or disappeared. Elmbridge Borough Council bought the estate in the 1970's. In 1981 the Painshill Park Trust was incorporated and the council granted the land to the trust on a 99 year lease. It was thought that the grounds could not be salvaged and restored but with great efforts it has been returned to its former glory and is still being developed and restored.



The Grotto

Last Sunday during our May Bank Holiday weekend, Marilyn, my wife, myself and Abigail our youngest daughter visited Painshill Park and spent a few glorious hours walking around the grounds and enjoying the beautiful scenic vistas and experiencing the scenes and moods that Hamilton created with his original park layout. We stood within the Gothic temple on a hill looking out over the lake with its low arched stone bridge spanning one end, with the great Turkish tent positioned high on an opposing hill. We walked around the lake and crossed the Chinese bridge.

We walked into the magical limestone constructed lakeside grotto with its ceilings dripping in crystals. 18<sup>th</sup> century night time frolicking's within a candlelit grotto literally sparkling like a mystical dream must have been the height of the exotic and maybe the erotic. We wandered past the "ruined abbey," beside the lake with an expansive vineyard stretching high above the lake up to an escarpment along the top of one of the high points.

Some of the original trees planted by Hamilton are still there. Europe's tallest Cedar of Lebanon stands majestically viewed from many parts of the estate. There is a Spanish cork tree, rugged and tatty propped up these days like an old man using a walking stick close to the entwined figures of a copy of the statue of The Rape of the Sabines.





The Chinese Bridge



The Turkish Tent





The Cedar of Lebanon

Many of today's shrubs, trees and plants are the same species and types Hamilton originally planted. The restoration not only includes the views that helped create the English Landscape Movement, Hamilton's series of "Living Paintings," as he liked to call the views but the trustees are remaining loyal to Hamilton's seed catalogue and planting scheme.

The John Bartram Association in the United States has been integral in helping the trust in their pursuit of authenticity. There is indeed a John Bartram Association in the City of Philadelphia to this day. They have a 45 acre garden and preserve the name of John Bartram.

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#### Sources

[Http://www.fainshill.co.uk](http://www.fainshill.co.uk)

[Http://www.bartramsgarden.org](http://www.bartramsgarden.org)

*(NB: due to lack of space the image of the Grotto crystal ceiling was not included)*