

The Attributes of the Studley Royal Park including the ruins of Fountains Abbey World Heritage Site

The World Heritage Convention was established to recognise 'sites of Outstanding Universal Value'. This is a cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for all humanity.

Each World Heritage Site has a Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (SOUV). The SOUV for Studley Royal Park, including the ruins of Fountains Abbey World Heritage Site was approved by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in 2012. The following is the brief synthesis taken from the SOUV:

'Situated in North Yorkshire, the 18th century designed landscape of Studley Royal water garden and pleasure grounds, including the ruins of Fountains Abbey, is one harmonious whole of buildings, gardens and landscapes. This landscape of exceptional merit and beauty represents over 800 years of human ambition, design and achievement.

Studley Royal is one of the few great 18th century gardens to survive substantially in its original form and is one of the most spectacular water gardens in England. The landscape garden is an outstanding example of the development of the 'English' garden style throughout the 18th century, which influenced the rest of Europe. With the integration of the River Skell into the water gardens and the use of 'borrowed' vistas from the surrounding countryside, the design and layout of the gardens is determined by the form of the natural landscape, rather than being imposed upon it. The garden contains canals, ponds, cascades, lawns and hedges, with elegant garden buildings, gateways and statues. The Aislabies' vision survives substantially in its original form, most famously in the spectacular view of the ruins of Fountains Abbey itself. The Abbey is not only a key eye catcher in the garden scheme but is of outstanding importance in its own right, being one of the few Cistercian houses to survive from the 12th century and providing an unrivalled picture of a great religious house in all its parts.

The remainder of the estate is no less significant. At the west end of the estate is the transitional Elizabethan/Jacobean Fountains Hall, partially built from reclaimed abbey stone and with its distinctive façade, it is an outstanding example of its period. Located in the extensive deer park is St Mary's Church, a masterpiece of High Victorian Gothic architecture, designed by William Burges in 1871 and considered to be one of his finest works.'

Attributes are the qualities that express the OUV of the World Heritage Site and which contribute to and enhance understanding of the OUV.

The key purpose for identifying attributes is so they can be protected, managed and monitored. They are also needed for assessing the impact of planning applications on the OUV of the WHS and when planning projects or other interventions.

The list of attributes is not intended to be a full description and history of the designed landscape at Studley Royal and Fountains Abbey. There are a whole range of sources for this information including 'The Wonder of the North' by Mark Newman and the description in the registered park and garden entry.

Attributes for Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal World Heritage Site

In 2017 Historic England, the National Trust and Harrogate Borough Council held a workshop to compile a set of attributes of the Outstanding Universal Value for the World Heritage Site. These attributes were approved by the Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal World Heritage Site Steering Group in September 2021.

The following attributes were identified as the qualities that express the OUV of the WHS.

- A landscape garden of exceptional beauty and harmony
- The ruins of Fountains Abbey
- Accretion of designed landscape which enhances the natural landscape
- Immaculately designed views and vistas using the landscape both within and beyond the boundaries of the garden
- Range of buildings illustrating patronage, status and influence

The following is a description of each attribute.

1. A landscape garden of exceptional beauty and harmony

Studley Royal Park is first and foremost an incredibly beautiful designed landscape. Designed by John Aislaby, and his son William in the 18th century, the beauty of the gardens lies in the incredible expanse of the lawns with modelled turf embankments and ramps, the reflective qualities of the water with still ponds, canals and tumbling cascades, the inspiring abbey ruins forming the culmination of the Surprise View and the classically inspired garden buildings. Its breath-taking vistas, formal water features, statuary and temples are immaculately overlaid on the natural topography of the Skell valley and the landscape beyond with consummate skill and mastery.

The gardens were designed by John Aislaby and his son William in the 18th century, coming to embrace every emergent landscape gardening style between 1670 and 1780. They were designed as a deliberately contrived journey through a range of varied landscapes. A complex network of paths and drives exploited views to landmarks both within and beyond the boundaries of the estate. John masterminded an innovative new form of the English landscape garden: his vast act of artistic creation was seamlessly continued and vastly extended (including far beyond the bounds of the present World Heritage Site) after John's death by his son William. William's personal style married the best of his father's more formal set pieces with emerging tastes for naturalistic landscaping and the picturesque. Rather than remodelling his father's gardens he extended the landscape in both directions along the Skell and inspired by another new fashion in garden design created one of the earliest and largest Chinese gardens in England. He also acquired the ruins of Fountains Abbey, successfully drawing them into the Studley Royal gardens.

Designed landscapes were a means of expressing sophistication, wealth and power. Studley Royal was one of the most significant in the country in the 18th century and its fame spread nationally, attracting visitors from the upper and then middle classes. This appeal and readiness to welcome visitors continued throughout the 19th century and on to the present. This long history of visiting is one of the estate's unique characteristics.

Studley Royal gardens are therefore, quite simply, one of the largest, most magnificent and beautiful designed landscapes ever created. Their influence spread far beyond the limits of

the garden as it is seen today. Weaving together so many different types of landscape form, so many different decorative themes, approaches and styles, so many different journeys and experiences and all the while celebrating the landscape and its setting, they are a true masterpiece of human creative genius.

The World Heritage Site boundary only includes part of a greater designed landscape which extends beyond current World Heritage Site boundaries and includes components such as How Hill prospect tower, Spa Gill landscaped carriage drive and Chinese Wood, a large and early Chinese Garden

2. The ruins of Fountains Abbey

The ruins of Fountains Abbey are the most complete and substantial remains of a Cistercian abbey in the country and are amongst the most significant monastic remains in Europe. The monastic precinct was remarkably extensive covering about 29 hectares and enclosed by a massive precinct wall which was built in the first half of the 13th century. Much of the wall still stands today, some of it to its original height. The remains also include the oldest surviving Cistercian water mill, a splendid twelfth century western range and a magnificent tower erected by Abbot Marmaduke Hubby in the sixteenth century.

The abbey was founded in 1132 and was home to a community of Cistercian monks who over the centuries created one of the richest and most successful religious houses in the country. The abbey was at the height of its power throughout the 13th century with land holdings across the North of England, building much of its wealth in the wool trade, and was by far the richest Cistercian house at the time of its closure. When it was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539 it was left to sit empty (preserved from more than initial depredation both by its distance from a market for stone and the convictions of its early owners) until it was purchased by neighbouring landowner William Aislabie in 1767 and incorporated into his spectacular Studley Royal designed landscape.

William swept away the stone walls, landscaped the quarries to the east of the abbey and canalised the river. He consolidated, repaired and rebuilt sections of the abbey ruins, landscaped the interior and the periphery of the ruins and constructed new viewing platforms, even ornamenting the abbey with statuary and planting to present it as a distinct component or experience within his landscape garden. Much of this effect, though, was swept aside by Victorian excavation and presentation of the site as an archaeological monument.

The surviving ruins demonstrate an exceptional scale of architectural achievement and are one of the finest examples of Cistercian architecture. The inspired incorporation of the ruins into the Studley Royal gardens remains quintessential to the character of the site today.

3. Accretion of designed landscape which enhances the natural landscape

One of the most striking characteristics of the 18th century designed landscape at Studley Royal is the way in which the natural geology and topography of the site have been explored and exploited for their expressive possibilities. Eighteenth century landscapers were advised to understand and respond to the *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, when putting together plans for their gardens. This can be seen to great effect at Studley Royal where the contrasts of the estate's physical characteristics provide the foundation for Studley's unique beauty.

The geographical setting of the Studley Royal Park on the fringe of the Pennine Dales, overlooking the Vale of York, as well as the dramatic topography of the estate itself, facilitated the creation of a complex web of paths along the valley bottom and cut into the valley sides, affording varied experiences, highlighted by views, vistas and vantage points. The exposed rock faces were in places exploited to lend character and drama to the designed landscape. This is seen most clearly in the exposed limestone pillars along Seven Bridges and the rough cliff face below the Octagon Tower. The River Skell was manipulated as a central feature of the designed landscape and was heavily engineered to create the canals, cascades and ponds of the water garden.

Studley Royal is therefore one of the earliest, most multi-phase and most exceptional examples of a designed landscape responding fully and successfully to the 'genius of the place' as created by its underlying natural landforms.

4. Immaculately designed views and vistas using the landscape both within and beyond the boundaries of the garden

In 18th century designed landscapes, the design of views, prospects, panoramas and vantage points was of central importance. The Studley Royal designed landscape is incredibly successful in the way it takes advantage of the visual opportunities of the landscape both within and beyond the boundaries of the garden. Views and vistas were designed to allow the exploration of the relationships between individual features of the landscape and embrace features of the wider setting to produce a spectrum of visual and aesthetic effects.

The earliest eye-catcher built by John Aislabie was at How Hill. This tower was designed to be viewed from within the gardens and paired with the alignment of the main canal, echoing the relationship between the park's main avenue and Ripon Minster. It is also a prospect tower, from which to oversee the Studley estate and historic features in the vast landscape beyond. The tower was inspired by the works of John's close acquaintance Sir John Vanbrugh. There was significant interchange of views between the garden's other follies as well as to and from natural features. Planting was often designed to frame deliberately chosen views across or into the landscape. One of the most successful and iconic of these views is the Surprise View of the abbey ruins from Anne Boleyn's Seat on the High Ride. In contrast to these identifiable static set piece views, other parts of the design exploited kinetic visual experiences of contrast and change in the course of a circuit of the grounds.

The Aislabies also 'borrowed' vistas from the surrounding countryside. The most spectacular is the vista down the main deer park avenue to Ripon Cathedral and beyond to Blois Hall Farm. This farm was owned by the Aislabies and is the last known building of the designed landscape which when built in 1779 took the length of the vista to eight miles. The view is framed from within the park by an avenue of limes. The use of distant buildings gave perspective to an avenue and was widely used in English landscape gardens in the 18th century. Panoramic views are also available across Ripon and to the North York Moors beyond from Gillet Hill, an area of parkland on the eastern edge of the estate. These views extend across agricultural countryside and this agrarian setting was also a key component of the overall garden design.

5. Range of buildings illustrating patronage, status and influence

The Studley Royal gardens include a suite of buildings of outstanding significance which together illuminate successive episodes of the taste and ambitions of landowners over many different centuries. These buildings have each been immaculately located or conserved within the designed landscape at Studley Royal and are of the highest architectural quality.

After the abbey, one of the earliest of these buildings is Fountains Hall, built between 1597 and 1604 and located in the north-west corner of the monastic precinct. The Hall is an idiosyncratic reflection of the late 16th and early 17th century architectural tastes with a distinctive Elizabethan façade. Tucked away in the valley bottom, it was for almost 200 years the main house for the Fountains estate before its purchase by William Aislabie in 1767 and incorporation into the wider Studley Royal estate.

During the 18th century, under the ownership of the Aislabies, a whole range of ornamental buildings were designed as part of the development of the Studley Royal designed landscape to the east of the abbey. Gothic and Palladian styles of architecture are juxtaposed throughout the gardens and the influence of the Orient could be seen at the Chinese Temple (only the plinth now remains). Both John and William had links socially, through kinship and direct employment with some of the leading thinkers and architects of the day including Lord Burlington, William Benson, Colen Campbell and Castle Howard's architects Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor. The architectural thinking of the day heavily influenced the development of the garden buildings although what was created remains unique to Studley Royal.

The latest addition to the landscape was St Mary's Church, a 19th century masterpiece of High Victorian Gothic architecture by William Burges and commissioned by the First Marquis of Ripon as one of a pair of churches (the second is in the nearby village of Skelton). St Mary's is considered to be one of Burges' finest works and was carefully sited at the head of the Lime Avenue to be a prominent feature in the landscape.

Over a period of 800 years a diverse range of buildings were built across the estate. The designed landscape at Studley Royal successfully combines all of these buildings into one harmonious whole.