

# Who Owns Nature? Rustic Architecture and Class Identity in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Over the course of the eighteenth century, Great Britain produced one of its greatest cultural legacies, the “natural” or English landscape garden. British society’s dramatically shifting constructions of nature—that is, nature filtered through the lenses of religion, landscape aesthetics, natural history, nationalism, property and privilege—created the image of an ideal landscape that still delights and influences us today.

Despite the enduring renown of the English landscape garden, relatively few academics are aware that these gardens once contained a remarkable class of garden buildings that have all but disappeared in the succeeding centuries. Tucked away in the English landscape garden was a new kind of architecture that expressed a radical reconfiguration of nature: the rustic seat, “roothouse,” and “hermitage.”

Rustic is defined here as those designs or motifs that represent self-conscious attempts to create primitive or naturalistic effects by using building materials (such as bark-covered log columns, boulders, branches, twigs and roots) which appear to be only slightly manipulated by human skill. Few modes of representation in the history of architecture have displayed such remarkable freedom, wit, or weirdness. Ironically, these distinctive qualities probably helped obscure the rustic tradition. The difficulty of fitting rustic structures within standard interpretations of Classical or Gothic iconography must have contributed as well. And the reception of rustic buildings as marvelous or uncanny so contradicts the dominant historical construction of a century ruled by balance, refinement, and reason, that perhaps no comfortable fit could be made for rustic designs.

Although they are largely ignored today, when historians do acknowledge rustic buildings, they tend to incorrectly attribute their creation to the famous theoretical conceit of the “primitive hut” promoted by the Abbé Marc-Antoine Laugier and others. But the early development of the rustic tradition is

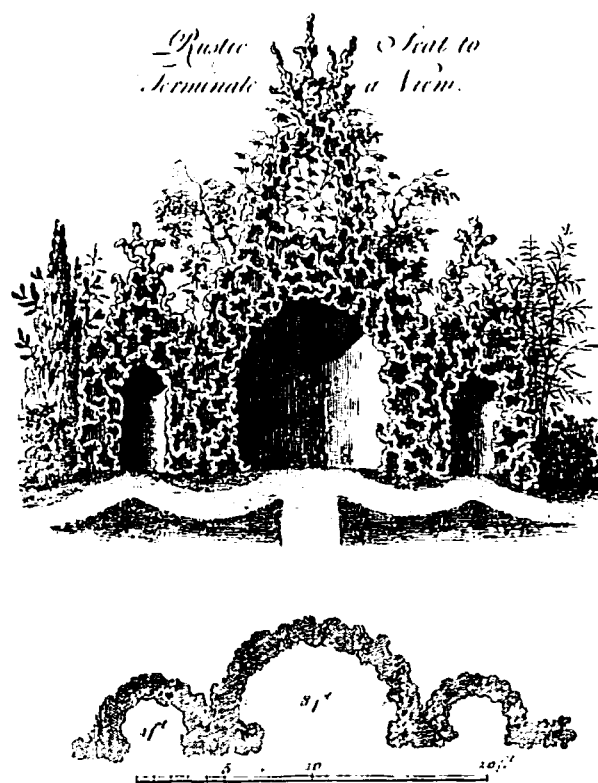


Fig. 1. William, Wrighte “Rustic Seat” from *Grotesque Architecture* . . . 1767.

much more complex and intriguing. The rustic’s tangle of decaying roots and branches expressed a new kind of aesthetic appreciation as well as shifting philosophical and religious conceptions nature. More ominously, it also embodied the “seizure” of nature by the British elite that accompanied the dispossession of the rural poor.<sup>1</sup>

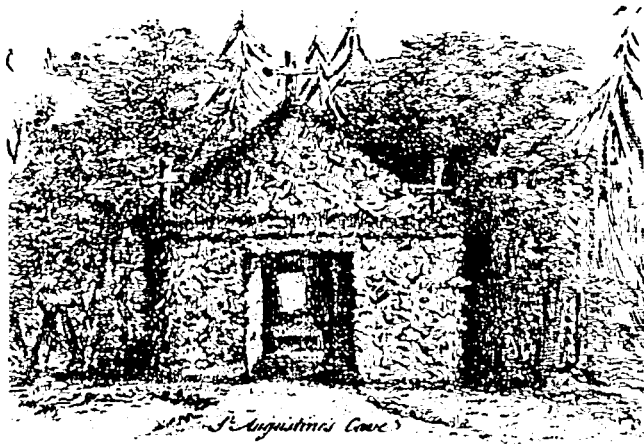


Fig. 2. St. Augustine's Cave at Stowe, Buckinghamshire, c. 1730. Demolished. From George Bickham, *The Beauties of Stowe*, London, 1753.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, British designers and patrons created the first coherent tradition of rustic architecture. A number of wooden rustic buildings erected on influential estates provided the initial appearance of such creations. The earliest known wooden rustic building built in Great Britain decorated the magnificent gardens at Lord Cobham's estate of Stowe in Buckinghamshire, England. Erected around 1730, "St. Augustine's Cave" was hidden from view, set in a thicket on a small path that could easily be overlooked. Constructed of twisted branches, roots and moss, the building was small with a square plan and pyramidal roof. Inside were a straw couch and a wooden chair. The image of St. Augustine's Cave would probably come as a surprise to the viewer familiar with the more substantial Classical and Gothic constructions found at Stowe. It appears to be purposefully homely and cheap and in marked contrast to almost everything else around it.

For some visitors, the building presented the perfect picture of solemn retirement. Samuel Boyse's poem "The Triumphs of Nature," published in 1742, described St. Augustine's Cave as:

A moss-grown cell, with grateful umbrage spread,  
Such blameless hermits held in days of old.  
Ere priest-craft grew – or heav'n was priz'd for gold;  
Plain is the scene – and well befits the heart  
That never stain'd its innocence with art.

Boyse's verse provided a possible rationalization for the erection of buildings with clear Roman Catholic associations in a country with a legacy of militant Protestantism. Yet Boyse's account also left out something of great significance – an aspect of the building that contradicted the serious moral stance he championed. For inscribed on the interior of St. Augustine's Cave were three poems in "Monkish Latin Verse." All dealt with sexual temptation and parody the *Confessions* of St. Augustine of Hippo, famous for his conflicted plea to God to make him chaste, but not just yet. Typical is this couplet:

In what we call the Loins, they say:  
The Devil bears the greatest sway.

Another poem concludes:

Why is't thy Pleasure, Monks should thus rebel,  
Their fleshly Members 'gainst their Laws should swell?  
'Gainst thee now eternal War declare:  
The Lash severe, and Hunger, I prepare:  
With these my Virtue, Chastity to trust,  
But, lest the Part, that's whole, should be infected,  
That Modesty may better be protected,  
Best, once for all, to cut away the Root,  
From which alone our guilty Passions shoot.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, St. Augustine's Cave served as a private, lewd joke for the educated males in Cobham's circle. While the cottage made of roots evoked a hermit's primitive retreat, its naturalistic appearance also suggested an association with earthly desires. The poem's use of the word root carries the wicked inference that this "roothouse" might be seen as a pile of detached phalluses. Certainly, few objects from this era that made so explicit a connection between nature and sexuality.

A number of other rustic hermitages and huts soon graced other British estates, but unlike the example at Stowe, nearly all of them appeared sincere in their attempt to evoke a pious retreat from worldly affairs. Such buildings were meant to illuminate a supposed quality of patron and serve as a model for his guests and children. He needed to pay obeisance to the universally patronized belief that worldly riches were ultimately unimportant to a true Christian.

But for some patrons, the hermitage itself was not enough and accounts survive of landowners amusing themselves by reading in their cell or briefly tending sheep. A few estates even boasted "hermits" hired for their picturesque quality. Surviving accounts relate that such hermits could be required to take a vow of silence and refrain from cutting their hair or nails for years. Naturally, such absurd provisions quickly drove hired hermits from these tableaux vivants.<sup>3</sup> No doubt, the rustic hut was better left unoccupied, the architectural embodiment of the naturalistic garden surrounding it.

Soon after the mid-century, a handful of rustic pattern books provided a visual library of rustic designs that were compelling and useful to builders and potential patrons.<sup>4</sup> The commercial and aesthetic significance of these first rustic buildings and publications was so great that nearly every rustic design produced in the past two hundred and fifty years can be ultimately traced, at least in some way, to these pioneering works.

Thomas Wright's *Universal Architecture* . . . (published in two volumes in 1755 and 1758) was the first publication dedicated

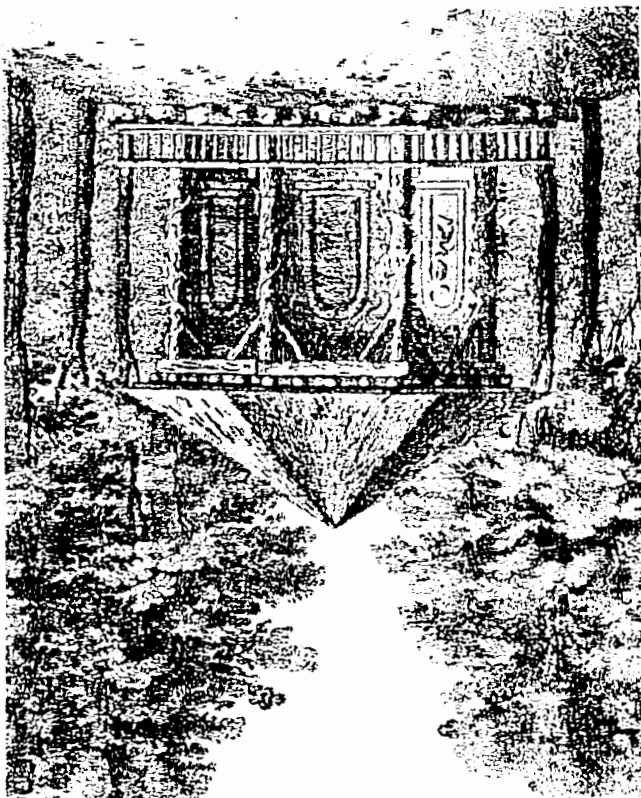


Fig. 3. Thomas Wright, *Plate C*, from *Six Original Designs of Arbours*, 1735.

to rustic design. The designs vary greatly, and some are described as “druidic” which reflects Wright’s desire to create architecture reflective of Britain’s prehistoric national identity.<sup>1</sup> (One Wright design, a modest polygonal gazebo or summer house constructed of logs, should be familiar to most modern viewers given the long line of imitators it inspired. A similar unpublished Wright design now at the Avery Library depicts a small, circular pavilion created from twelve saplings that support a conical roof.) The saplings appear to have grown in place for this express purpose. Although the pavilion has a kind of rustic entablature, the classical references have been almost totally removed. It is delicate and transparent, not unlike a stand of young trees, and it is obvious that Wright sought to invoke living nature with this design.

Thomas Wright’s one surviving wooden rustic building is found at the estate of Badminton in southwest England. Dark, misshapen and disorienting (like the “gouty” elm it is made of), the structure seems to be a part of the earth itself. Like an intriguing but vaguely sinister animal crouched between the trees, would any real refuse go to such lengths assembling such an extravagant collection of branches and roots? (Obviously not – the building would more reasonably be the habitation of a hobgoblin or woodland sprite.



Fig. 4. “Hermit’s Cell” or roothouse in Badminton, Avon, c. 1750.

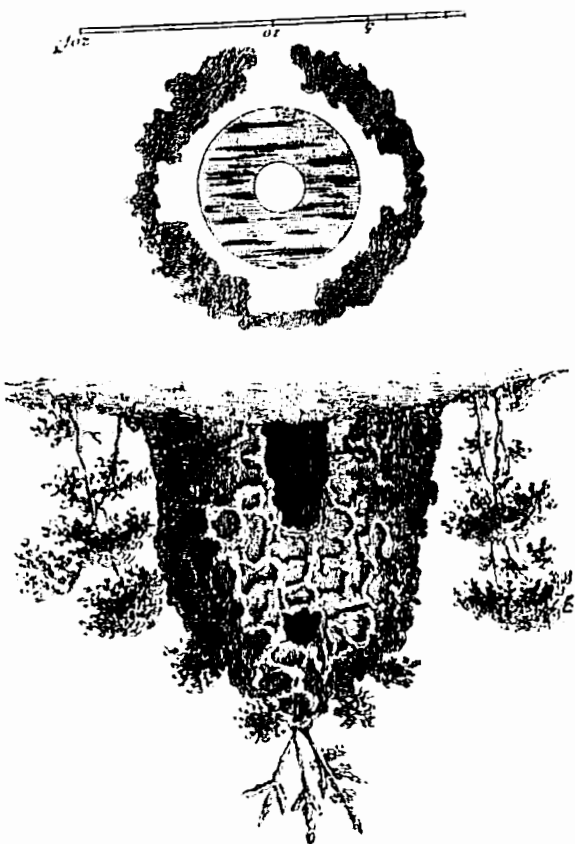


Fig. 5. William Wright, “Rural Bath,” from *Croquis Architecture*, . . . 1767.

Filling their books with dramatic and seductive images, the authors of the earliest rustic pattern books attempted a remarkable metamorphosis of nature into architecture. These rustic compositions thus reveal a significant shift in British tastes as they express an appreciation for nature at its most raw. Such forms are certainly at odds with the century’s stereotypical preferences for polish and over-refinement. Perhaps, the buildings provided a welcome (maybe even necessary) respite

from the self-conscious perfection and seriousness of Palladianism and Neoclassicism.

Intriguing, theatrical, and grotesque, it is hard not to be enchanted by these rustic follies. The buildings were rehearsals, playhouses for preparing society for a closer relationship with nature. And to our modern eyes, they seem to be the very essence of whimsy, spontaneity, and harmless fun. Like the lovely gardens they ornamented, the rustic represented a vision of nature and design that was difficult to resist.

While the British pastoral world was, on its surface, a celebration of unaffected country life, one must admit that sensibility and privilege created an artificial habitat that was totally inaccessible to the rural or urban poor. Certainly the aesthetic appreciation for the self-consciously primitive promoted by these elites would also seem completely perverse to those forced to endure real poverty. As anthropologist Mark Leone observed, gardens often contain features that “appear to have little or no adaptive and utilitarian function, but when taken as manifestations of ideology, may be seen to function in a way that they reproduce unequal distribution of resources, while masking this process in actions taken as given.”<sup>9</sup> Created by patrons who also determined the structure of modern British society, rustic buildings were an important prop for the social postures and divisions of the eighteenth century.

The English landscape garden and its rustic accouterments emerged during the same period that the traditional landowner/peasant dynamics were being destroyed in Britain. The Enclosure Acts essentially allowed landowners to increase their holdings by legally negating the ancient access rights of laborers to arable land and commons, thus displacing those at the bottom of the rural economy.<sup>9</sup> What had formerly been shared, became exclusively private property. In 1762, the writer Oliver Goldsmith complained that “Wherever the traveler turns, while he sees one part of the inhabitants of the country becoming immensely rich, he sees the other growing miserable poor.”<sup>10</sup> Such conditions were further exacerbated by the notoriously brutal Black Act of 1723, which provided the death penalty for the theft of timber as well as poaching. Nature became the tenure of the elites as lower classes were proscribed from foraging on what was once common land. The appreciation or communion with nature often attributed to the landscaped park (and its rustic buildings) might be more appropriately interpreted as a strict and sometimes ruthless dominion.

The cruelty of these conditions is no better demonstrated than at Stowe. According to a local tradition, in 1748 Lord Cobham (the patron of St. Augustine’s Cave) ignored pleas of clemency from the wives of two men who had been caught poaching deer from his park. Cobham delivered the corpses to the wives and in a heartless gesture, erected a statue on his grounds of the two men carrying a dead deer.<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 6. P. Decker, “Hermitage” from *Gothic Architecture Decorated . . .* 1759.

Although rustic hermitages and roothouses could be intended to evoke the simple or impoverished, paradoxically they did so with materials that were increasingly restricted and precious, as much a part of the aristocratic patrimony as the country house. Isolated, and transformed into something valuable like silver or porcelain, rustic designs were as exclusive as any other objects favored by the patrons of the era. It is not an exaggeration to say that almost the entire material world – from varnished Chippendale settees down to the unpeeled logs and twigs of rustic huts – was in the hands of the comfortable classes.

Even more insidious was the belief that those living closest to nature – the peasants – were incapable of really understanding or appreciating it. As art historian Ann Bermingham has observed, “nature, with its various representations in painting, poetry, letters, manners, dress, philosophy and science, became a supreme social value and was called upon to clarify and justify social change.”<sup>12</sup> Thus the cachet of the natural world, as well as the most basic elements in it – wild animals, trees, and rocks – were exclusively reserved for the pleasures of the propertied.

The rustic hermitage and roothouse were amazing conceits. They represented modesty or poverty in the midst of extensive property and the appearance of simplicity and repose in a landscape that required a tremendous expenditure of labor. And while contemporaries sometimes noted such incongruities, this did little to stem the growing enthusiasm for rustic designs.

I would suggest that the representation of the primitive implicit in the rustic was also a way of neutralizing the actual conditions of poverty outside the garden’s boundaries. A life of simplicity and denial would not be so unattractive if viewed through the door of a hermitage on a great estate. Rustic architecture was carried out a self-serving dissimulation of the lives of an increasingly marginalized peasantry.

While it is entirely appropriate to view rustic designs as part of the growing aesthetic appreciation of unaffected nature, one cannot ignore the fact that such buildings embody ideas about status and self-interest, as well as humanity's place in nature. The rural poor had been metaphorically (and in many cases literally) disinherited from any claims on the land. Spiritually, socially, and psychologically, nature was seen as the rightful domain of the elites.

Following their emergence in Britain, rustic designs quickly spread to other parts of Europe and the United States. Here again, rustic designs tended to confirm the identities and social status of upper class, although such enthusiasms were also adopted by the expanding middle classes. By the end of nineteenth century, however, rustic forms were appropriated to represent the virtues and strengths of the American people as a whole. Grandiose rustic buildings erected at state and national parks and expositions incarnated the belief that the sublime (if increasingly tamed) American landscape was crucial to the formation of the national character. America had been given "men to match" her mountains and these great rustic lodges metaphorically sheltered them. By this time, the rustic tradition had been somewhat democratized, and nature became identified with an entire nation, not just the propertied few.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This paper was derived from the author's Ph.D. dissertation entitled *The Nature of Architecture: The Origins of the Rustic Tradition in Eighteenth-century British Architecture* (University of California, Berkeley, 1999). Copies of the dissertation are available from UMI dissertation services, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> George Bickham, *The Beauties of Stowe*, (London: George Bickham, 1753), pp. 7-10.

<sup>3</sup> More detailed accounts of "hired hermits" can be found in Barbara Jones, *Follies and Grottoes* (London: Constable and Company, 1974), pp. 181, 180-7; Anne Campbell Dixon, "Hermits for Hire," *Country Life*, (2 June 1988), pp. 160-162; and Eileen Harris, "Hunting for Hermits," *Country Life*, (20 May 1988), pp. 180-189.

<sup>4</sup> These books were Thomas Wright's *Universal Architecture* . . . published in two volumes (London: n.p., 1755, 1758); Charles Oker's *Ornamental Architecture in the Gothic, Chinese and Modern Taste* . . . (London: Robert Sayer, 1758); P. Decker's *Gothic Architecture Decorated* . . . 1759; and William Wright's *Grotesque Architecture* . . . (London: Henry Webley, 1767).

<sup>5</sup> The leading authority on Thomas Wright, Eileen Harris, reproduced with commentary, these two volumes in a single edition published by the Scholar Press in London in 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Wright, manuscript sketchbook (# AA 543 W93 W 933) at the Avery Library, Columbia University, New York City.



Fig. 7. Charles Saunders and George Lawton, Interior view of the Forestry Building at the Alaska-Yukon Exposition, Seattle, Washington, 1908. Demolished.

<sup>7</sup> Harris discovered that Wright had been a guest at Badminton between 1748 and 1750, which would provide the most likely dates for the structure's erection. See Harris, introduction to *Universal Architecture*, *Universal Architecture*, n. pag.

<sup>8</sup> Mark P. Leone, "Interpreting Ideology in Historical Archaeology: Using the Rules of Perspective in the William Paca Garden in Annapolis, Maryland," in *Ideology, Power and Prehistory*, ed. Daniel Miller and Christopher Tilley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Between 1700 and 1750 there were 115 parliamentary enclosure acts, from 1750 to 1810, there were 2,903. The decades with the highest number of Enclosure Acts were: 1760-1770 (424), 1770-780 (642), 1790-1800 (506), and 1800-1910 (906). See J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950, 1981), p. 82. See also Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 208-213.

<sup>10</sup> Oliver Goldsmith quoted in Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters: The Origin of the Black Act* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), p. 223.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1710-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 1.