

A History of the Garden of Elsfield Manor, Oxford

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SUMMARY

Elsfield Manor Garden was designed by Francis Wise (1695–1767), the first Radcliffe librarian, as an antiquarian's miniature paradise, full of Antique monuments and extravagant water features, and landscaped to provide an artistic frame to the distant views of Oxford. A subsequent owner was the Scots novelist John Buchan (1875–1940), who appreciated and preserved the antiquities and did a considerable amount of new planting, sometimes with rare species. Over the years the garden attracted distinguished visitors, such as Dr Johnson and Lawrence of Arabia.

The image that graces the cover of this journal is the view of Oxford from a hill in the grounds of Elsfield Manor, a prospect equally beloved by its two most important tenants. Francis Wise, inaugural Radcliffe librarian, gardened there first, creating from about 1740 to 1767 a miniaturized antiquarian's paradise, which was visited by Samuel Johnson and both remarked and ridiculed by early Oxford guides. By the time John Buchan – Scottish novelist, Governor General of Canada, and first Baron Lord Tweedsmuir – occupied the house with his family in 1919, only one of Wise's eccentric temples remained. Buchan was purported to use it as a writing pavilion, and his prose expressed an affection for the garden and its encompassing Oxfordshire landscape that echoed Wise's own. Their shared garden view, from the hill through the trees to the spires of Oxford, was first commissioned as an engraving by Wise and then used by Buchan as his personal bookplate, later to be adopted by *Oxoniensia*.

THE FRANCIS WISE GARDEN

Francis Wise (1695–1767), styled by the *Dictionary of National Biography* as an 'antiquarian and librarian',¹ had an ambitious but ultimately second-rate career that was none the less of historic importance and has been reviewed previously in this journal.² He was granted the lease of Elsfield by Francis North, Lord Guildford, to whom he had been a tutor, in early 1726, and in 1738 Wise requested from Lord North 'a little piece of ground, which had formerly been a garden, with two ponds in it', and also 'a marshy bit of ground heretofore a pond, now a spinney, lying at the bottom of Homestead Close'. This piece of the property had previously been leased to a William Morris, but 'it was thought no injury to defalcate' and include it in Wise's lease.³

The exact boundaries of the Wise garden are not known, but it was small – only a few acres (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, he managed to concentrate within it an unusual and personal design, expressive of his interests as an antiquarian and his instincts as a collector.

... he held a small Estate in that Place on a long Lease, upon which he built a commodious little House, where he retired during the last Years of his life; and spent his Time in literary pursuits, and as an Amusement in forming an elegant Garden, which, though a small piece of Ground, was diversified with every object in Miniature that can be found in a larger Scale in the most admired Places of this Kingdom.⁴

¹ 'Wise, Francis (1695–1767)', *ODNB*.

² S. Gibson, 'Francis Wise, B.D., Oxford antiquary, librarian and archivist', *Oxoniensia*, 1 (1936), pp. 173–95.

³ Gibson, 'Francis Wise', p. 11.

⁴ Thomas Hearne, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Hearne* (Oxford, 1772), p. 26.

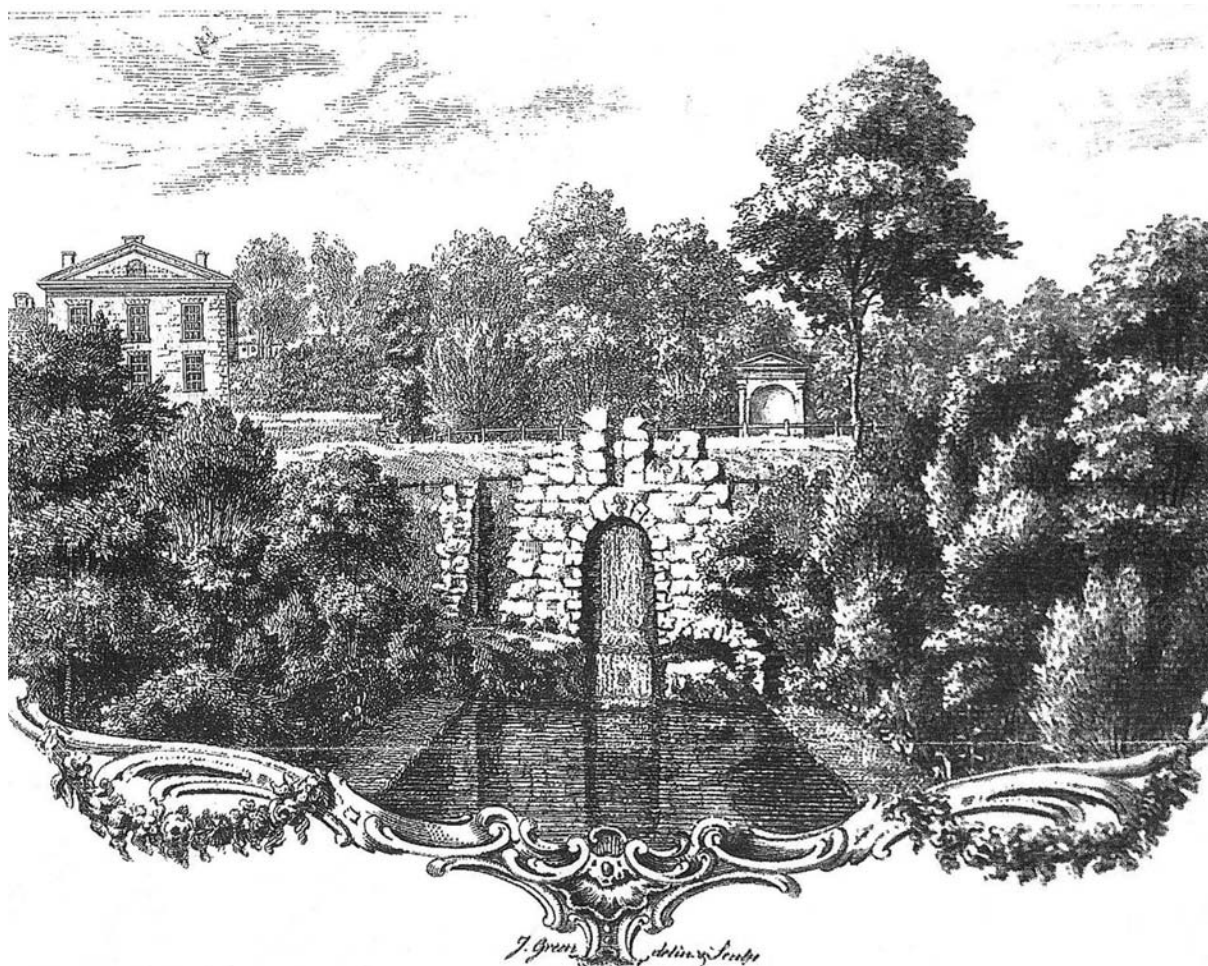


Fig. 1. The house, the lower pond, with a cascade in the style of a ruin, and the upper pond, with a classically pedimented temple.
Engraving by John Green, from Francis Wise, *Nummorum antiquorum scriniis Bodleianis reconditorum catalogus* (Oxford, 1750).

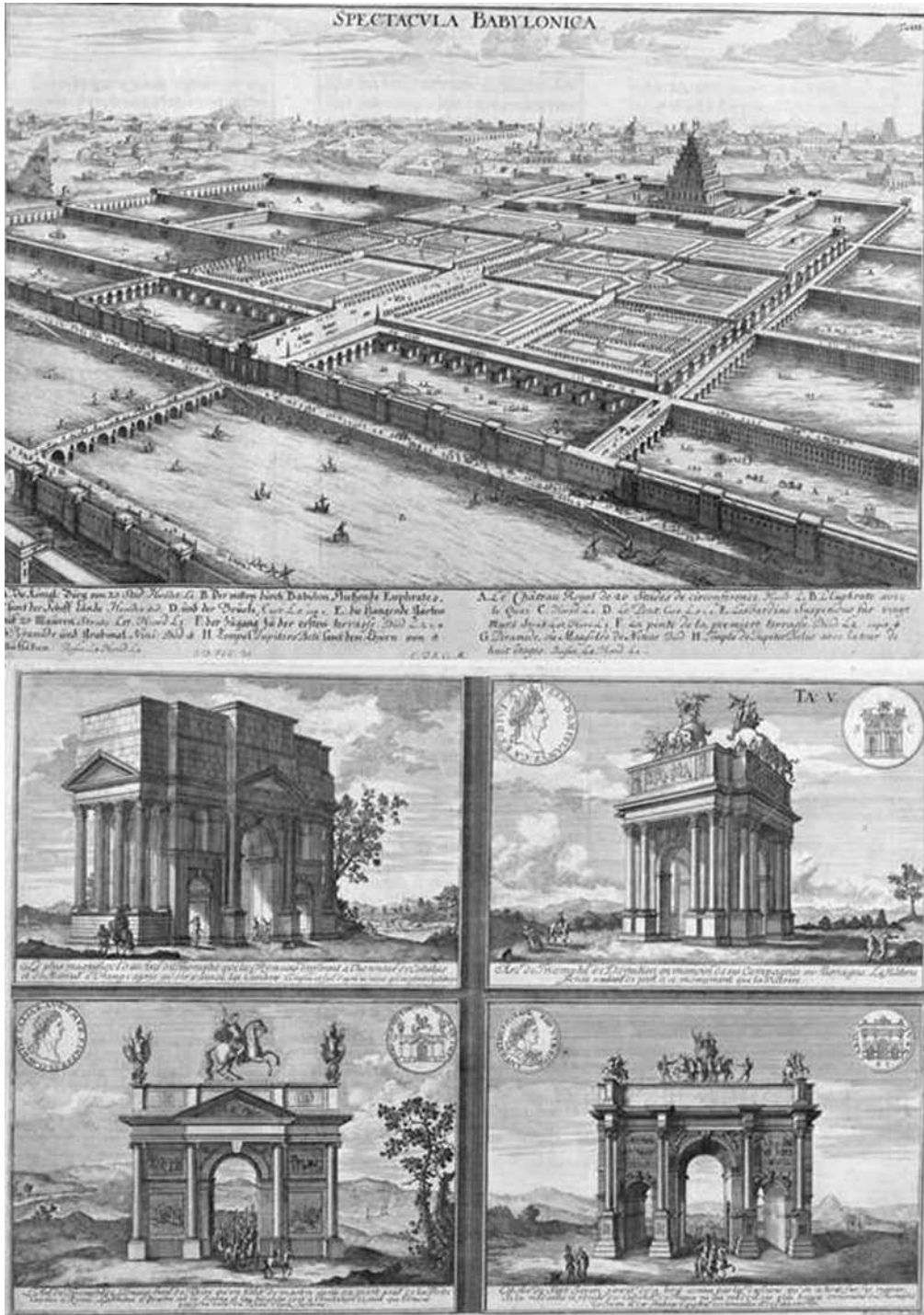


Fig. 2. The Tower of Babel (top) and triumphal arches (bottom), from Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, *Entwurf einer historischen Architektur* (Vienna, 1721). (By courtesy of the University of Heidelberg.)

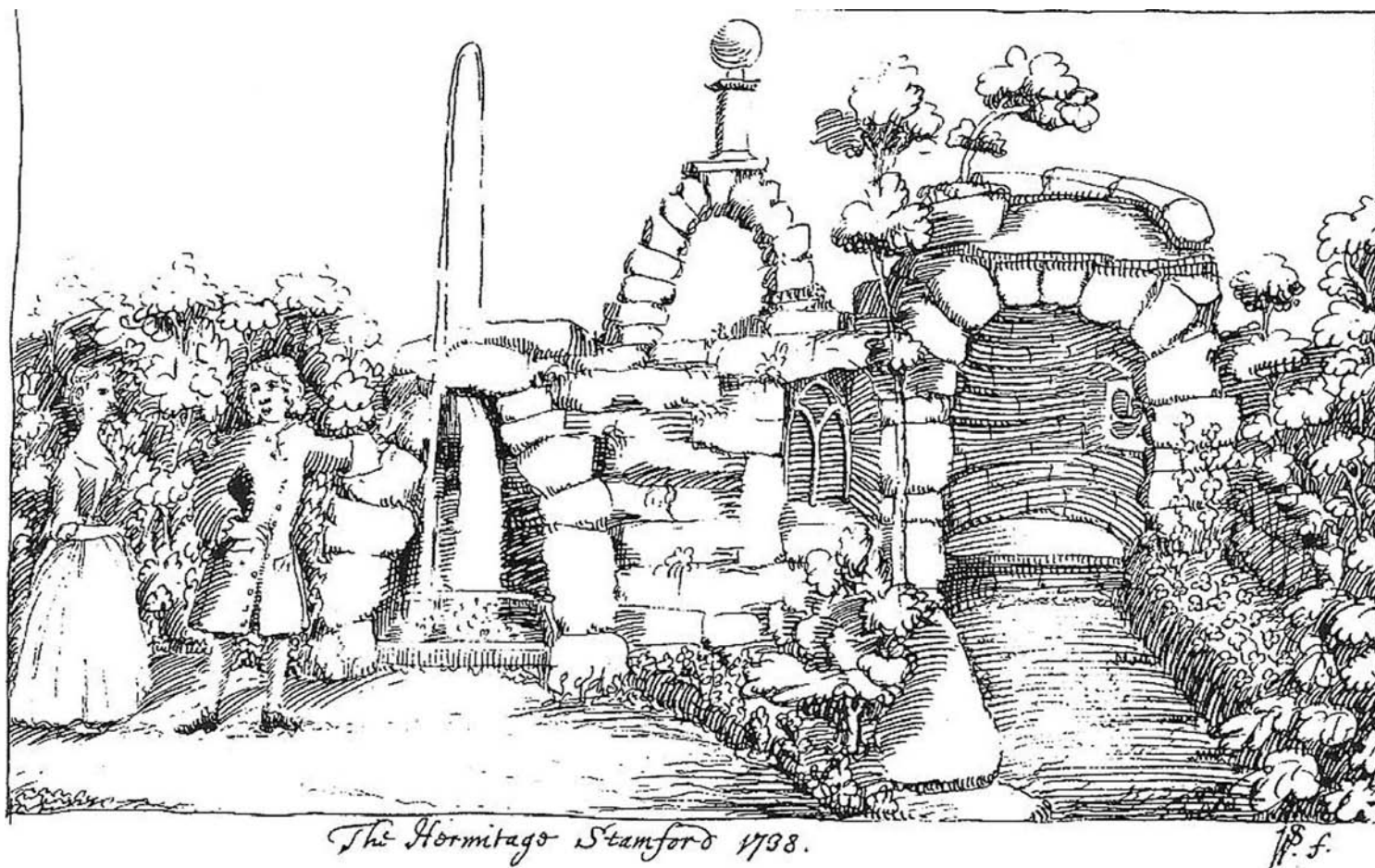


Fig. 3. William Stukeley's drawing of his garden, known as The Hermitage, at Stamford (1738). Bodl. MS Gough maps, 230, fol. 411b. (By permission of the Bodleian Library.)

In 1722 Francis Wise had urged Lord North, then embarking on a journey abroad, to take note of

all the Venerable remains of Antiquity ... as Old Fortifications, Castles, Triumphal Arches, Aqueducts, Theatres and Amphitheatres, Columns, Statues, Busts, &c., Old Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Pagods, Lares, &c., Medals Egyptian, Grecian and Ægyptiaco-Grecian, Roman, &c.⁵

Some years later he embarked upon a recreation of those venerable remains in miniature in his garden:

In this little spot, of a few acres, you was surprized with ponds, cascades, seats, a triumphal arch, the tower of Babel, a Druid temple, and an Egyptian pyramid. Those buildings were designed to resemble the structures of antiquity, were erected in exact scale and measure, to give, as far as miniature would permit, an exact idea of the edifices they were intended to represent.⁶

The exact appearance of these exotic features – the Triumphal Arch, the Tower of Babel, the Egyptian Pyramid, and the Druid temple – is a tantalizing mystery of this lost academic garden. The construction of the buildings ‘in exact scale and measure’ seems to indicate that they were designed with pride by Wise himself, a display of his studied knowledge of ancient monuments, and perhaps an indication of frustrated yearning to see the originals, as his wealthy pupil had.⁷ A possible source for their plans and proportions would have been Austrian baroque architect Johann Bernhard Fischer’s *Entwurff einer historischen Architektur* – *Outline of Historical Architecture* (1721), printed in English as *A Plan of Civil and Historical Architecture* (1730).⁸ The book was highly influential in its day as one of the first documentations of Egyptian, Oriental, and Mesopotamian buildings, and librarian Francis Wise could not have failed to know it. Fisher’s use of numismatic motifs, one of Wise’s own passions, would have been of particular delight. Types of all the buildings listed in Francis Wise’s garden are depicted, and it is reasonable to suppose that the garden structures were modelled at least in part on Fisher’s drawings, executed on a smaller scale (Fig. 2). If so, they would perhaps be the sole documentation of the influence this important architectural work had on eighteenth-century garden design in England.

A drawing of Stonehenge is also contained in Fisher, but according to other eighteenth-century accounts, Wise’s temple was modelled on the more accurate illustrations of Stukeley, and so was likely to have been an accurate scale model of the actual monument. William Stukeley had published exhaustive sketches and descriptions of Stonehenge in the 1740s,⁹ and Wise was aware of Stukeley’s work, for he speaks of him as ‘very learned and celebrated’ in his own publications.¹⁰ There are stylistic similarities between Wise’s ruined arch with cascade at Elsfield (Fig. 1) and Stukeley’s 1738 drawing of a mock ruin created in his own garden at Stamford, Lincolnshire (Fig. 3), and it would not have been unreasonable for the two antiquarians to have been personally acquainted. The presence of a megalithic stone circle in the landscape at Elsfield by about 1760

⁵ Gibson, ‘Francis Wise’, p. 1.

⁶ From the correspondence of William Huddesford to Andrew Coltée Ducarel: John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols (London, 1817–58); repr. (London, 1966), 4, p. 479.

⁷ It should be noted that contemporary observers would never have mistaken these models for the real thing; they were known to be ‘modern’. Descriptions of Elsfield indicate that none of the structures listed were true antiquities and neither were they intended to be taken as such.

⁸ The Ashmolean retains an early German edition of Fischer’s work: Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, *Entwurff einer historischen Architektur* (Leipzig, 1725) [ASH Hope Coll. Fol. A. 43].

⁹ William Stukeley, *Stonehenge, a Temple Restor’d to the British Druids* (London, 1740).

¹⁰ Stuart Piggott, *William Stukeley, an Eighteenth-century Antiquary* (London, 1985), p. 13.

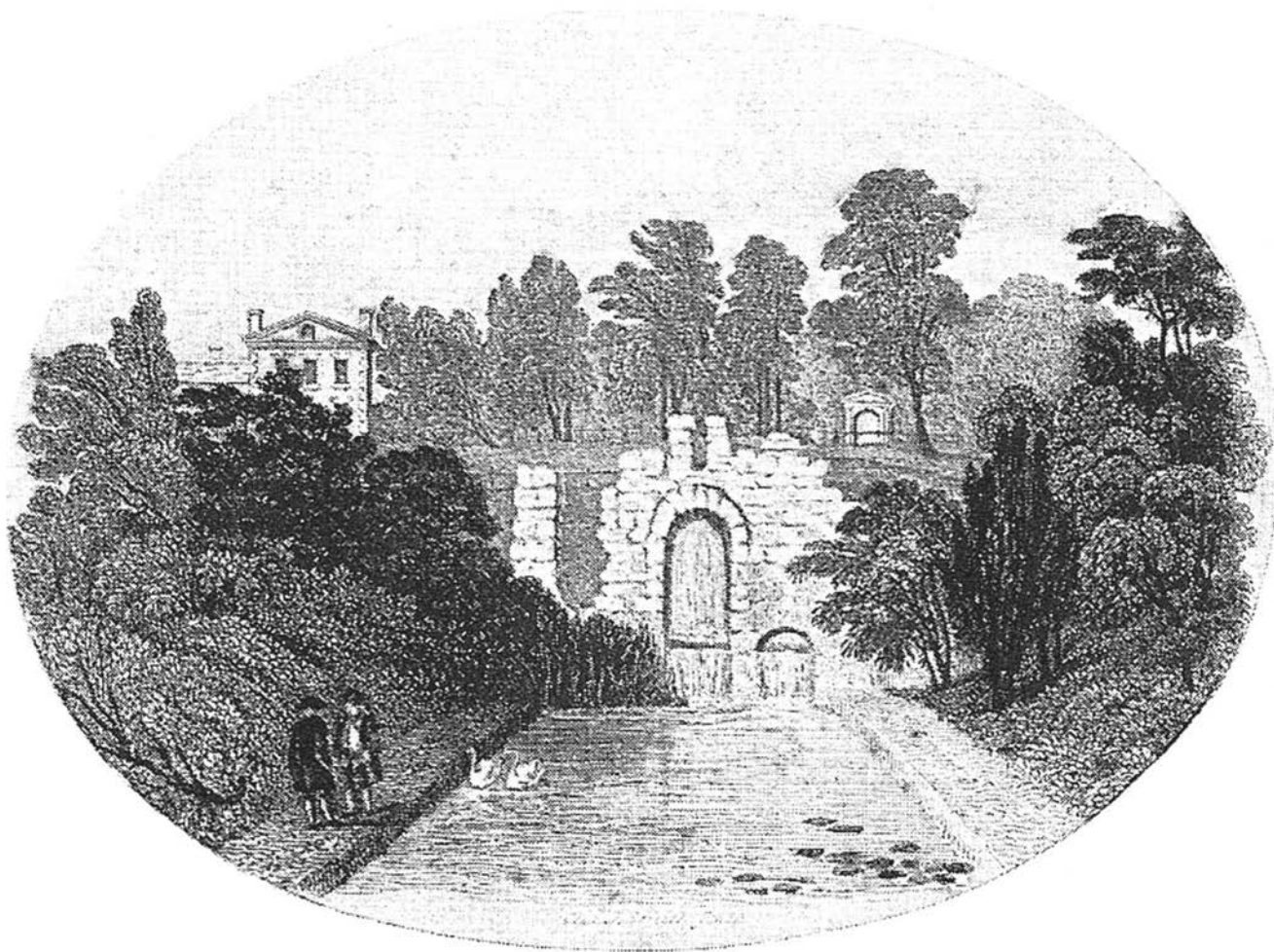


Fig. 4. C. J. Smith's redrawing of the cascade and lower pool at Elsfield, from John Murray, *Graphic Illustrations of the Life and Times of Samuel Johnson* (London, 1835). The cascade appears to have two waterfalls – the large one in the centre and a smaller one in the arch to the right.

would make it one of the first such garden edifices, along with the Earl of Pembroke's model at Wilton House, near Salisbury, which was commissioned by Stukeley himself.¹¹

The garden at Elsfeld was recommended to Oxford visitors in a guidebook published in 1761, which neatly summarized its prominent features.

[Elsfield] enjoys a most delightful and extensive prospect of Oxford, and most of the Noblemen's and Gentlemen's seats above mentioned; has several canals and fishponds, and is adorned by its learned Owner with many modern Antiquities of various Kinds and Countries.¹²

But some observers found the garden adornments more pretentious than pleasing, and a spoof of the standard Oxford guidebook, ostensibly penned by one Gerardus Higgenbroccius in 1762, is openly mocking:

I shall add, that one of the modern antiquities here hinted at, is a Druidical Temple, lately erected on the plan of Dr. Stukely. This Temple may be properly stiled a modern Antiquity, on more accounts than one: it is undoubtedly a true Specimen of Druidical Architecture, but it is most unluckily shaded by a Walnut-tree instead of an Oak. I cannot help mentioning with some concern, that such an Innovation in the Garden of a real Antiquarian is a bad precedent, and may be attended with pernicious Consequences; although I have been informed, that, to palliate the matter, the learned Owner has more than once inoculated this Walnut Tree with a slip of genuine Welch Mistletoe, but without Effect. As then they are incompatible together, I would advise him either to destroy the Temple or the Tree: and by this means, in vindication of his character, the real truth would appear to the world, whether he loves Wallnuts or Antiquity best.¹³

Unfortunately no trace of the walnut tree, which might have been useful in determining the site of the temple, has been found in the garden. The Wise monuments could have been constructed of stone, but their apparently complete demise may indicate that they were made of cheaper materials, like wood and plaster decorated to imitate stone, a common technique for garden-makers of limited means.¹⁴

To place all of these dramatic features in the landscape and still retain their 'surprise' would have required a clever use of planned viewpoints, incorporating screening foliage, changing levels, and winding paths, all of which can still be found in the garden today. In keeping with contemporary fashion, the features would have been backed by evergreens to show them off to best effect, and the grounds of Elsfeld are still dotted with old yews and hollies which represent likely spots for its monuments to have been located.

Under one such yew stands a small stone column, its inscriptions long since eroded away.

Mr. Wise, who loved talking and displayed his treasures with the zest of the owner of a raree-show, would have us visit, before going, a Roman altar which, he said, had lately been unearthed on his estate. Johnson viewed it peevishly, and pointed out certain letters in the inscription which seemed fresher than the rest. Mr Wise confessed that he had himself re-cut these letters, in conformity, as he believed, with the purpose of the original. This threw Johnson into a transport of wrath. 'Sir,' he said, 'the man who would tamper with an ancient monument, with whatever intentions, is capable of defiling his father's tomb.'¹⁵

¹¹ Sam Smiles, *The Image of Antiquity: Ancient Britain and the Romantic Imagination* (New Haven, CT, 1994), p. 203.

¹² *A Pocket Companion for Oxford* (Oxford, 1761), p. 137.

¹³ Thomas Warton, *A Companion to the Guide and a Guide to the Companion* (London, 1762), pp. 43–4.

¹⁴ Geophysical examination of the site could potentially locate foundations for the Wise garden features.

¹⁵ John Buchan, *Midwinter: Certain Travellers in Old England* (London, 1924), preface.



Fig. 5. The upper pool and the remains of the temple seat, November 2006. (*Photograph by author.*)

The supposed artefact was not ancient; it was considered by no less an authority than Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903) to be a forgery.¹⁶

The description of Dr Johnson's reaction to the monument is a fictionalization by John Buchan, one of several based upon features of the Elsfeld Manor garden. But Dr Samuel Johnson did in fact make the three-mile walk from town on foot several times to visit Francis Wise, who had encouraged the University of Oxford to confer an M.A. on Johnson in 1754, and with whom he was in general 'much pleased'.¹⁷ In describing one visit, Boswell notes that Wise had fitted up the garden 'in a singular manner, but with great taste',¹⁸ a phrasing that seems too carefully polite. One of two garden engravings Francis Wise had originally commissioned for his 1750 catalogue of the coins in the Bodleian Library was altered for publication in an 1836 volume of Samuel Johnson's life to show two gentlemen, presumably Wise and Johnson, enjoying the landscape around the cascade and the lower pool (Fig. 4).¹⁹

John Buchan knew of Johnson's visits and expanded on them in his historical novel *Midwinter* in 1923. The account is fictional, but the description of the landscape is clearly inspired by the reality of the Elsfeld grounds.

We assembled for tea in an arbour, constructed after the fashion of a Roman temple, on the edge of a clear pool. Beyond the water there was a sharp declivity, which had been utilised to make a cascade from the pool's overflow. This descended to a stone tank like an ancient bath and on each side of the small ravine lines of beeches had been planted. Through the avenue of the trees there was a long vista of meadows in the valley below, extending to the wooded eminence of the Duke of Marlborough's palace of Blenheim, and beyond to the Cotswold hills. The sun was declining over these hills, and, since the arbour looked to the west, the pool and the cascade were dappled with gold, and pleasant beams escaped through the shade to our refuge.²⁰

The arbour in the fashion of a Roman temple was Buchan's own writing pavilion, the last substantial vestige of the garden that Wise created and Johnson visited (Fig. 5). The sharp declivity still exists, but the rocks of the spring-fed cascade have fallen. The sham ruin is now a real one, and heavy overgrowth obscures any remains of the stone tank.

THE JOHN BUCHAN GARDEN

By his own account, the First World War left John Buchan 'with an intense craving for a country life',²¹ which led to the purchase of Elsfeld in 1919 and a turn of mind from philosophy to antiquity, citing Francis Wise as his predecessor in coming 'under the spell which makes men local antiquaries'.²² Buchan, too, was visited by eminences, most famously by Lawrence of Arabia a few weeks before his death.²³

¹⁶ *Haverfield Archaeological Journal*, 49, no. 89 (1892), pp. 187–8, notes the entire inscription and Mommsen's confirmation of it as a forgery, saying 'I suspect it was forged by or palmed off on Francis Wise ... about 1754 ... I have vainly endeavoured, however, to find any reference to it in Wise's books and MSS in the Bodleian and British Museum.' John Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (London, 1940), p. 190, mentions the supposed altar and also that Wise had 'a gardener's cottage in the style of a mediaeval chantry'. *VCH Oxon*, 5, p. 117, notes that Wise built 'a stable in imitation of a Norman religious structure'. It could be that these refer to the same structure, the building now called the stable and renovated for human rather than equine occupation. Wise's successor removed from the stable a cross that must surely have seemed inappropriately placed, and placed it over the porch of the church.

¹⁷ James Boswell, 'The Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D.', ed. Percy Fitzgerald (London, 1910), p. 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Francis Wise, *Nummorum antiquorum scriniis Bodleianis reconditorum catalogus* (Oxford, 1750).

²⁰ Buchan, *Midwinter*, preface.

²¹ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, p. 182.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 217–18.

Importantly for the garden, the Buchans seem to have valued its antecedent attachment to Francis Wise and not to have made significant alterations to the landscape beyond new plantings. A 1927 account of the village says of the Manor that ‘among the tall elms about the grounds there can still be traced [Wise’s] ornamental ponds and groves, and his artificial foreground for the view of Oxford’.²⁴ Mrs Buchan writes that ‘the garden, laid out in the eighteenth century by Francis Wise, was beautiful’.

I realize now how spread out the two gardens are; the kitchen garden on the one side being separated by acres of lawn from the other flower garden where we also grow vegetables. ‘Who laid out this garden, I should like to know?’ our one surviving gardener asked me bitterly the other day. When I explained that it had been laid out in the magnificent eighteenth century days he merely grunted in disapproval.²⁵

This may be the gardener who had ‘fought through the East African campaign and nearly died of fever’.²⁶ Some details of the new plantings he installed for the Buchans can be found in old photographs, and especially in the written memoirs of this family of authors. Comparative views of the south side of the house from 1929 and some from an unrecorded later date show an additional formal Edwardian-style garden, with evergreens and a pathway running alongside, now absent, but whose marks can still be seen in the garden. This garden apparently included a mixture of both flowers and vegetables: ‘In summer it was delightful to stroll in the garden, where asparagus beds coexisted with peonies, potatoes with roses and where Mr. Wise’s temple still stood.’²⁷

Buchan’s eldest son, the second Lord Tweedsmuir, spoke of the garden as well:

When we first came to Elsfield there was no view. For, in the midst of the lawn stood a gigantic Wellingtonia, and beside it an ilex whose branches reached down to the ground. The latter had the silhouette of a tea-cosy, and must have been of great age.²⁸

Given its size, the ilex would almost certainly have been from the garden of Francis Wise, and would probably have marked the spot of one of his garden features, highlighting it with an evergreen background, as was typical for the period. The Wellingtonia would have been planted much later, after the 1853 introduction of the plant to England by the Veitch plant-collectors. It was removed by the Buchans to open the view, and the ilex came down in the great storm of 1929.²⁹

... on the right hand of the lawn was the tall yew hedge that my father had planted the year before the great drought of 1921, and replanted, the year after, because of it. In the Crow Wood on the left, the curtains of green leaf on the tall chestnuts and elms rose up to foreshorten the sky. They contrasted with the copper beech that he had planted in the year that I went to Oxford ... the little rounded grove of oaks at the bottom of the hay field was planted for Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee. The oaks in the leafy oblongs of Long Wood and Little Wood, away and beyond on the fringes, would have been growing at the time of Waterloo. The tall trees in the Crow Wood were there when Prince Charlie turned back at Derby. Over in Pond Close was a stubby giant of an oak. Cromwell’s soldiers may well have sheltered beneath it, when Pond Close was his gun post for the siege of Oxford.³⁰

²⁴ George Norman Clark, *The Manor of Elsfield* (privately printed, Oxford, 1927), p. 15.

²⁵ Susan Buchan, *John Buchan by his Wife and Friends* (London, 1947), p. 91.

²⁶ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, p. 188.

²⁷ Janet Adam Smith, *John Buchan and his World* (London, 1979), p. 71.

²⁸ John Norman Stuart Buchan, *Always a Countryman* (London, 1953), pp. 34–5.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19.



Fig. 6. Engraving by John Green. View of Oxford, with the Elsfeld Manor pond in the foreground. From Francis Wise, *Nummorum antiquorum scriniis Bodleianis reconditorum catalogus* (Oxford, 1750). Note the simple boundary fence (like that in Fig. 1 above) and the intentional clearing of trees to open the view.

Pond Close is marked on the Ordnance Survey map of 1920, along with the two ponds, and the spring that was one of Francis Wise's initial attractions to the property. Long Wood and Little Wood are not part of the Buchan's property, but the Buchans were closely connected with the people of Elsfeld, and so their remarks upon historic sites probably represent the collective remembrance of its inhabitants.

The unique ecological nature of Elsfeld is frequently mentioned in Buchan's writings as well:

... the flora was notably rich; three hundred years ago Mr. Gerard of the *Herball* botanized in Stowood. To the bird-lover the place was a paradise, a pair of peregrines, pied grey and yellow wagtails, a hobby, golden orioles, bitterns, cranes, storks and a hoopoe were observed.³¹

Buchan's wife records an incident when Claridge Druce, an eminent botanist whose herbarium remains at Oxford, brought her a rare orchid specimen found nearby, but whose exact location he refused to divulge to prevent its disturbance.³²

³¹ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, p. 189.

³² Buchan, *John Buchan*, pp. 93–4.



Fig. 7. View of Oxford from Elsfield, November 2006. (*Photograph by author.*)

After the Buchans' occupation Elsfield Manor was owned by Mrs Lane, a member of the Rothschild family. By the time the Manor was purchased communally by five families in the 1970s, its grounds were 'little more than a wilderness', but reported to contain an 'ornamental garden full of box trees', a swimming pool, a fish pond, and an old folly, probably the temple by the pond.³³ Once again the 'wilderness' nature of the plot would seem to indicate that the garden had been little altered while it was owned by Mrs Lane, and benign neglect has hopefully led to the layers of the Wise/Buchan garden lying in undisturbed peace until the present day.

THE VIEWS FROM ELSFIELD

Francis Wise and John Buchan were nowhere so united as in their common appreciation of the views from Elsfield. They remain one of the most important, and most vulnerable, features of the garden.³⁴ Wise deliberately adorned the view towards Oxford by either creating or improving a pond to serve as an artistic foreground. It must have been one of the greatest charms of the site for him, providing as it did a distant prospect of his beloved Radcliffe Camera. The engraving he commissioned of the scene took artistic licence with the actual distances and showed the silhouette of the spires closer than they really were (Fig. 6), perhaps to make more prominent the dome that was such a source of pride for its keeper. The pond has an oval edge, naturalistic but probably not entirely natural, and then, as now, the woodland setting of the pond would have required intentional management to keep the view clear (Fig. 7). In the engraving it appears that the natural growth of the wood has been intentionally pared down to three mature trees, two of which frame the view.

John Buchan described the same setting in 1926:

... the only view of Oxford which is the same as that of our grandfathers ... the grey stone spires and turrets rise over woods and meadows within their cincture of mild hills just as they appeared to Dr. Johnson when he came this way of an afternoon. To a dweller on this ridge, the city is seen not as an unrelated vision at the end of a railway journey, but in the natural setting which first gave it significance.³⁵

He adopted a modern woodcut of this view as his personal bookplate, later to be used as the cover image of this journal.

A still further adornment, less a part of the natural setting, may have been added to this view by Francis Wise. Another garden engraving shows the addition of an island to the pond, with a tea-house in the style of a Chinese pagoda on it, but its history is uncertain. It is known that the two original engravings of the garden by Green for Francis Wise (1759)³⁶ (Figs 1 and 6) were later copied by C. J. Smith, with some alterations, and one was published in 1835 (Fig. 4). The published image follows the original closely. The other, however, is significantly different: the pond with the view of Oxford is larger, missing the three mature trees previously seen there, and has the addition of a formal hard landscape edging, which makes it look very similar to the upper pool near the house. It shows a Chinese pagoda hung with bells, on an island joined by a barely visible bridge to the opposite bank, where formal hedges have been planted (Fig. 8). Though this confusing view has been attributed to Smith, the image itself is credited to Green.³⁷ If the Chinese pagoda tea-house was indeed a feature of the Francis Wise garden, it must have been one of the last features to be installed. Both of the original engravings and the known descriptions

³³ 'Five-way split in a stately home', *Oxford Mail* (OxS, c.1970).

³⁴ The views from Elsfield are now protected by the Pilgrim Trust and the Oxford Preservation Trust: *VCH Oxon*, 5, p. 120.

³⁵ John Buchan, 'Thoughts on a distant prospect of Oxford', *Blackwood Magazine* (July–Dec. 1923).

³⁶ Francis Wise, *Nummorum antiquorum*.

³⁷ Gibson, 'Francis Wise', p. 10, n. 8.

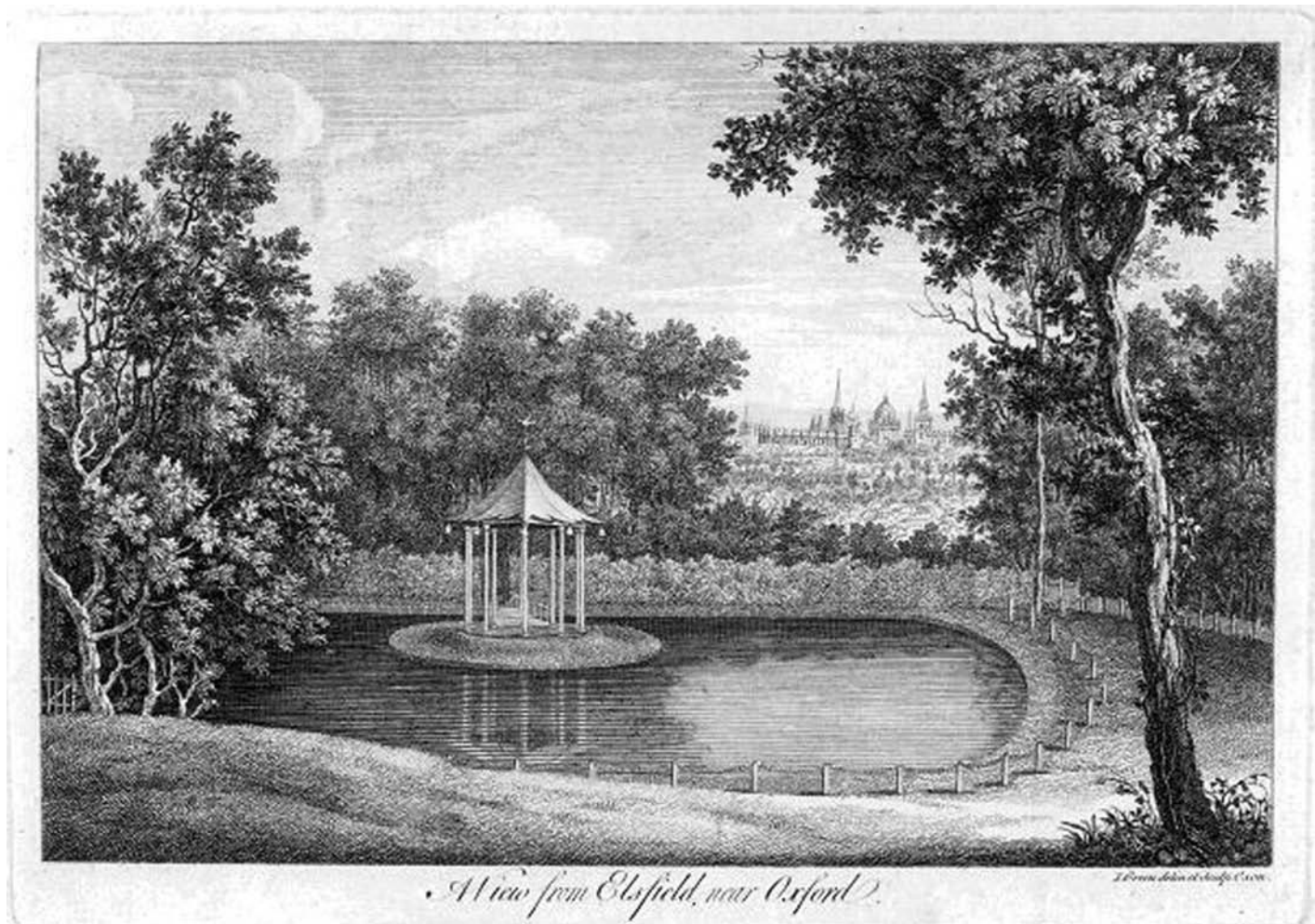


Fig. 8. Amended engraving of John Green's view of Oxford, showing an improved pond and the mysterious Chinese tea-house.
Bodl. MS Gough maps, 26, fol. 65v. (By permission of the Bodleian Library.)

of the garden – none of which mentions a pagoda – are prior to 1763. Wise was known to have continued in the garden even when, ‘reduced to the condition of a snail’ by ill health and old age, he could only crawl about in the summertime, until his death in 1767.³⁸

Chinese structures are among those shown in Fisher von Erlach’s engravings, but, more importantly, Wise’s patron, Francis Lord North, had installed a Chinese temple at his seat at Wroxton about 1740, and Wise’s tea-house may have been modelled on that of his friend. Archaeological investigation could solve the mystery by showing the remains of an island in the pond.

Though less adorned, the view from the back of the manor house was no less significant, and the 1761 Oxford guide alleged that it had views of all the surrounding noble seats.³⁹ But the tongue-in-cheek Gerardus Higgenbroccius once again demurred:

The Pocket Companion, in describing the Garden at Elsfield, affirms with great confidence that most of the Seats in Oxfordshire may be seen from this delightful Spot. The Prospect, I confess is extensive, various, and beautiful, But ... I cannot apprehend that Sherborne-Castle, the Seat of Lord Macclesfield, or Lord Harcourt’s at Newnham, are visible in the clearest Day. Nor is it agreed on all hands that Mr. Whorwood’s at Holton, and Mr. Schutz’s at Shotover, are discernible, even with the help of a telescope.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the manor house did have a wide view of the Cotswolds from the garden windows.

Its back view was superb, covering the Cherwell Valley and all the western Cotswolds ... from my lawn I looked over some thirty miles of woods and meadows to the dim ridges about Stow-on-the-Wold.⁴¹

John Buchan’s son refers to it as ‘one of the finest views in England’.

In those days the view was one of green pastures ... with the Cotswolds lost in the haze beyond. To the right one looked down over the top of two little woods of oaks. Now, most of those fields are ploughed.⁴²

These views have been compromised by the addition, probably in the 1930s, of a forest of poplars, whose geometric layout and purposeless presence in what was previously meadow land interferes with an appreciation of both the views and the landscape’s natural descent to the water meadows below.

The garden of Elsfield manor, as conceived by Francis Wise, represents a significant example of a non-aristocratic garden of the rococo era. It is one of the only examples of the garden of an academic of the eighteenth century, and it records a distinctive example of the antiquarian impulse as expressed in the landscape. That two notable figures actively gardened there, and other significant personalities visited the garden, adds to both its appeal and scholarly importance.

Serpentine paths wind through the landscape of Elsfield Manor today, around ancient yews and aged hollies and the discredited Roman altar. They skirt the upper pool with its Roman temple or writing pavilion on the bank, and can be faintly traced on the way up to the pond still anchoring the foreground of a glimpse through heavy tree cover towards the spires of Oxford. The benign neglect of the garden has protected it from the ravages of renovations, and these paths are probably the same that Francis Wise and Dr Johnson, John Buchan and Lawrence of Arabia, passed over as they traversed it. Though its miniature antiquities are long since gone, its heralded views remain – a legacy from Francis Wise through John Buchan to the present day.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁹ *A Pocket Companion for Oxford* (Oxford, 1761), p. 137.

⁴⁰ Warton, *Companion to the Guide*, pp. 43–4.

⁴¹ Buchan, *Memory Hold-the-Door*, pp. 188–9.

⁴² Buchan, *Always a Countryman*, p. 35.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is dedicated to the memory of Mr Ted Darrah, for a long time head gardener of Christ Church, Oxford, and also gardener at Elsfield Manor. His interest in the history of the grounds and hope for their renovation belied his age. Also providing invaluable assistance were Professor David Charles, who resides on the property, and Professor Timothy Mowl, who first told me about Elsfield Manor, and to whose guidance my work is always indebted.