

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

At the heart of the Stourhead Estate sits one of the earliest and finest examples of an eighteenth century English Landscape Garden. Whilst this has developed over centuries, mainly through planting, the genius of Henry Hoare II's original layout is still enjoyed by visitors today. It is the quality of this garden, its importance in garden history and the diverse access that is enjoyed by so many, through its setting alongside house, parkland and wider landscape, that make Stourhead special.

Stourhead is sited in a rich and varied Wiltshire landscape which encompasses the watershed of three rivers on an underlying geology of chalk and greensand, giving the land a rolling beauty. The National Trust's present ownership, once part of a much larger estate, now extends to 1050 hectares (2650 acres) with a mixed land use of forestry and agriculture. The estate includes the rural communities of Stourton and Kilmington, important wildlife habitats and a number of vernacular buildings, including 50 cottages and four farms. The estate also provides important leisure access to open spaces in woodland, downland and farmland. Stourhead is one of the top two most visited pay-for-entry properties of The National Trust, and this large visitor business not only brings vital revenue to the Trust but also contributes to the local economy and provides work for up to 90 people, most of who live locally.

The earliest signs of human settlement date from Neolithic times and these remains have been a source of interest for subsequent inhabitants and visitors. Whitesheet Hill with its 6,000 years of archaeology, including Neolithic meeting places, Bronze Age burial mounds and cross-ridge dykes, an Iron Age hill-fort and Medieval pillow mounds, is of national importance. The land was held from Saxon times by the Stourton family and then purchased in 1717 by Henry Hoare I, a wealthy banker, who christened it 'Stourhead' in recognition of the source of the River Stour at Six Wells Bottom. Hoare's Bank still exists today in Fleet Street, London, as one of the few remaining private banks. Links between the estate, the Hoare family and the Bank remain strong.

The most significant features of the estate lie at its core. Close to the site of the Stourton family's former house, Henry Hoare I built a new Palladian villa to the designs of Colen Campbell. To this, were added by Richard Colt Hoare, his grandson, outstanding examples of a Regency library (1792) and a picture gallery (1802). Despite fire damage in 1902, the house still retains significant collections of furniture, designed by Chippendale the Younger, and of paintings collected by Henry Hoare I and Richard Colt Hoare on their 'Grand Tours'. The house is considered an important example of a prototype English country house of the eighteenth century.

Even more renowned than the house is the world-famous landscape garden, created by Henry Hoare I's son, Henry 'The Magnificent'. Between 1744 and 1770, inspired by the fashionable idea that gardens should be idealised versions of nature, and influenced by the landscape paintings of artists such as Claude, Poussin and Dughet, Henry created one of the finest examples of the English landscape garden and a true living work of art. He dammed medieval fishponds to form the main lake and erected classical buildings, temples and statues with complex historical and allegorical resonances, displayed as a series of composed garden views.

Henry Hoare II extended his design beyond the circuit walk around the lake with a carriage ride that took in other built features, including the Obelisk, King Alfred's Tower (with its unique views over Wiltshire, Dorset and Somerset) and The Convent, thereby incorporating the wider landscape. This historic landscape was augmented by Richard Colt Hoare with the planting of a significant tree collection, a tradition continued by subsequent generations of the Hoare family, and by the addition of other collections, including Rhododendrons and Pelargoniums.

The Stourhead Estate has always been a place where people have lived and worked, and the estate staff, volunteers and local community continue to do so today. Since the 18th century, it has also been a place to which visitors have come for recreation as well as informal learning, with the first guidebook being produced in 1800. Today, many thousands visit from around the world each year to discover for themselves the unique integration of house, garden and wider landscape, and the gradual and explicit evolution of the vision which first created the estate's magnificent core. It is the combination of these elements which give Stourhead its transcendent quality and make it a source of solace and inspiration for all who engage with it.