



The Belvedere at Claremont, Surrey

How to Read a Designed Landscape

with

John Phibbs

Saturday 16th January – 2.00pm PST/5.00pm EST

The nights are long just now, and here in Gloucestershire we do not see the sun at all until 10 o'clock and it is gone by 3 o'clock in the afternoon. I come down in the morning, light the fires and bring wood in for the evening, and the next moment it seems to be time to make supper. It is just this time of year however, when the leaves are off the trees and the sun casts long low shadows over the irregularities of the ground as it rolls around the edges of the day – just this time of the year when a landscape designed in the English style is most easy to read.

So what is this 'reading' and why do I give it so much importance? These are the two questions that I shall address in this zoom. As for the first, there is a language in the shape and size and choice of trees, and in the form of the ground, from which you may learn of the deep past of the countryside and of the ways in which its structure has been modified over time to make a pleasing landscape for a great house. Then there is the great house itself and its relationship with the landscape, both as a physical presence and as the centre of a web of rural production and connection. After that come the distinguishing features of the place: rivers, the sea, mountains and hills, quarries and ancient woods, villages, towns and cities, windmills and farms and church towers - and as I walk, day after day, all these elements knit together to form a narrative that captures the place, its geography, and the will of its inhabitants.

As for why I place such a high value on reading a landscape: once I understand a place it speaks to me. Just so, I may enjoy the birdsong when I walk to the woods, but if I identify the birds, then their song will tell me what they are doing, then they will sing to me and the woods fill out with my knowledge of their intention; and once or twice – first at the deer park at Moccas and a second time at Croome Court - I knew a kind of ecstasy, as though I were attended by ghosts. As I walked through the landscape I knew with absolute certainty what I was going to find next – I was reading the same landscape, walking the same path, and I believe that I was seeing exactly the same things as the original designer, 250 years ago.