

# Orpheus and the underworld

*Boughton House, Northamptonshire  
The home of the Duke of Buccleuch*

Andrew Mead gets an exclusive preview of an outstanding new landform created to complement a rare surviving example of a formal early-18th-century landscape

Photographs by Lee Beel

**B**UGHTON House is very much a rarity in Britain. Although this huge, rambling property has a medieval core, its entrance front of the 1690s evokes an opulent French *château*. That French influence continues in the extensive grounds, with their complex formal scheme of pools, canals and earthworks. Left largely untouched since the 1740s, they give this Northamptonshire estate a distinctly different character from the familiar English landscape park, artfully naturalised by Capability Brown or ‘improved’ by Humphry Repton.

Boughton’s present owner, Richard Montagu Douglas Scott, the 10th Duke of Buccleuch, is overseeing a gradual restoration of these Grade I-listed grounds, but he has gone a step further, commissioning a new feature to complement the existing scheme. Designed by the landscape architect Kim Wilkie and given the title *Orpheus*, this new landform in the heart of the historic park is due to be inaugurated on July 29. It will then be part of any visit to Boughton.

The estate owes its French qualities to the time that Ralph, 1st Duke of Montagu, spent as English ambassador to France in the late 1660s, and, presumably, Versailles was in his mind when he began work at Boughton. No architect has been identified for the entrance front, but a Dutchman, Leonard Van de Meulen, laid out the gardens. These were described in detail by the Rev John Morton in his *The Natural History of Northamptonshire* in 1712. Among the features then were a series of parterres, a wilderness and some ‘sumptuous waterworks’, including a 4,500ft canal and ‘a very noble cascade’.

In the 1720s, the 2nd Duke, true to his nickname ‘John the Planter’, devoted himself to the grounds. He did away with the ornamental parterres, but multiplied the avenues of elms and limes that colonised the surrounding countryside and developed the role water played so it structured the whole garden.

To the north-west of the house was a large square pool, the Grand Etang, and a long canal, the Dead Reach, which was linked to the Boat Reach on the south-west by the canalised River Ise. At the centre of the wide avenue that swept down from the West Front of the house, this linking canal expanded



↑ **Fig 1: The Mount and Orpheus are visible in the far distance, looking from the edge of the Lily Pond near Boughton House**

to become another large square pool, the Broad Water—certainly one of Boughton’s grandest features. This layout was recorded in the 1739 volume of *Vitruvius Britannicus* and, in essence, it survives today. Elements of it have been restored by stages since the 1970s, when the 9th Duke dug out the silted-up Broad Water.

Mr Wilkie’s new work springs directly from the Broad Water. The original excavations generated a great deal of spoil that went to make a 23ft-high Mount at the south-west edge of the pool (**Fig 3**). It is to this 18th-century landscape feature that *Orpheus* responds. Somewhat unusually, the Mount is a truncated pyramid, terraced at its base; more often, mounts were rounded, like an upturned bowl. Although the evidence is inconclusive, it is likely that Charles Bridgeman was the designer, as he was in the 2nd Duke’s employment at the time.

Overshadowed by William Kent, Brown and Repton, and with much of his work obliterated, Bridgeman does not get the respect he deserves, thinks Mr Wilkie, who especially appreciates his bold sculptural

treatment of the land: ‘So much of the English landscape is about earth forms, from long barrows on the Wiltshire downs to Bridgeman’s amphitheatre at Claremont.’ It’s an approach reflected in Mr Wilkie’s own projects, such as his fan of grass terraces on the slope behind Heveningham Hall and his formal turf amphitheatre at Great Fosters in Surrey. ‘I love bulldozers,’ he smiles. No doubt, Bridgeman or the Iron Age excavators of such massive earthworks as Dorset’s Maiden Castle would have loved them, too.

As the mention of Heveningham Hall and Great Fosters may suggest, Mr Wilkie does not only have a fondness for sculpting the land, but is also used to working in sensitive historic settings. In 2005, he completed the John Madejski courtyard garden at the V&A, and, for some years, he has been restoring the extensive gardens of Villa la Pietra, the Florentine home of the late Sir Harold Acton.

Invited to make his proposal, Mr Wilkie stood one day with the Duke on top of the Mount looking east across the canal to the area earmarked for the new feature. Perhaps the obvious approach would have been to design another sculpted mound, but, almost at once, he decided against that, saying ‘I’d go down rather than up’. The result is an inverted pyramid (**Fig 2**), as deep as the Mount is high, with a spiralling ramped path descending gently to the pool at its bottom. Flanking the excavation on the east is a York stone rill in the form of a Golden Section spiral, with a 13ft openwork stainless-steel cube (**Fig 6**) at its starting point, containing another pool.

As the plan (**Fig 5**) shows, the square Mount is not quite on an axis with the square Lily Pond away to the east (**Fig 1**), but the cube neatly solves that problem because its north side aligns exactly with the centre of the pond. Punctuating the ground in between will be four new 195ft squares of grass sown with wildflowers, so the figure of the square will come to govern this whole part of the park.

The obligatory dig for archaeological ➤

→ **Fig 2 facing page: A gently sloping path takes visitors down to the pool of water that lies at the bottom of Orpheus. A temporary stage can be erected in the middle of the pool for performances**















remains when the project was under discussion found only some residual terracing in *Orpheus's* vicinity. Negotiations with English Heritage and the local council inevitably took time, but these bodies' main concern was to preserve the view towards the Mount across the Broad Water.

*Orpheus* duly does this—at a distance, it is barely visible. The polished steel cube is the first thing to catch your eye when you approach from the house; it brings to mind Minimalist sculptures of the 1960s, but, of course, the cube is a Platonic form, deeply rooted in the past. As you follow the spiralling rill—a luminous curved line in a right-angled landscape—the earth begins to open up before you and lure you down with an inviting path.

## 'As you follow the spiralling rill, the earth begins to open up before you and lure you down with an inviting path'

Once you are within the inverted pyramid and start descending towards the water, the atmosphere changes. However breezy it is above, it becomes calm here and the surface of the pool is still (**Fig 4**). Pointing to the clouds reflected in the water, Mr Wilkie mentions the American artist James Turrell, whose chamber-like 'Skyspaces' focus our attention on the heavens. A pool such as this is optically quite complex, fusing surface, depth and reflection; it encourages contemplation. Rising above is the green mass of the Mount, and one must be grateful that a proposed mausoleum on it for the 2nd Duke was never executed, as it might have made any thoughts here distinctly gloomy.

Not that the myth that gives the new feature its name is particularly cheerful: the descent of Orpheus to Hades to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, doomed by his looking back at her as they escaped. But Orpheus's association with the delights of music is entirely apt, because it became apparent during the course of construction that this could be a space for performance, embracing an audience of several hundred on the stepped banks. A temporary stage can be erected in the middle of the pool and there is scope for light and mist effects in the cube and rill. It is also easy to envisage the ramped path as the scene of a slow, ceremonial procession. There is certainly no shortage of appropriate repertoire, as composers from Monteverdi to Sir Harrison Birtwistle have been drawn to Orpheus as a subject.

Yet as well as being a home to performances,



**Fig 3 previous pages: The turfed banks of *Orpheus* echo those of the Mount beyond.**

**↑ Fig 4 above: Ever-changing reflections**

*Orpheus* itself will sometimes 'perform'. For all their solidity and exactness, such earth forms are not static; they change with the seasons and the weather. These turfed banks will sparkle with frost or be cloaked in snow as the pool they contain turns to ice.

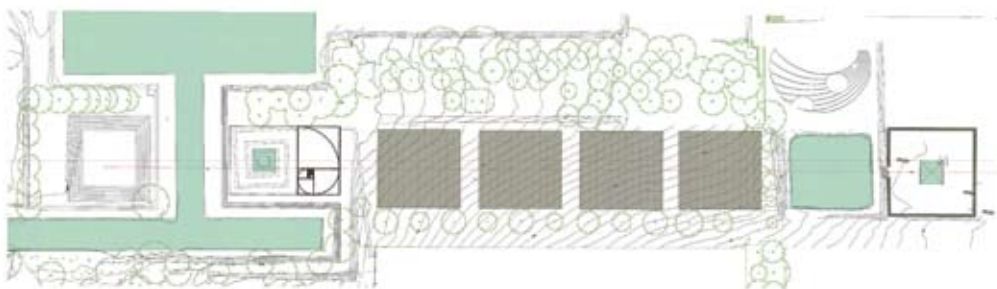
The main technical challenge in realising *Orpheus* has been to keep it free from water in the future. With the River Ise and the Broad Water so close by, this is a serious threat, so the cavity has to function as 'a reservoir in reverse'. By good fortune, there was some suitable blue clay already on the estate to act as a lining. In the long term, the key issue is maintenance, to retain the sharp lines and close-cropped surfaces that it has today.

That need for precision is true of the Boughton landscape overall. Although highly formal schemes can sometimes seem sterile and coercive, that's not the case here; instead, the pervasive geometry sharpens your perceptions. Its ruled lines are a foil to all the less-determined elements in the landscape: the insects darting across the ponds, the grass squares swaying in the breeze, the sheep meandering in the park beyond.

Because so many once-formal landscapes succumbed to the attentions of Brown and Repton, a surviving scheme of Boughton's quality is all the more precious. There are few equivalents in England where water plays such a part: perhaps Bramham Park in Yorkshire, Melbourne Hall in Derbyshire and Wrest Park in Bedfordshire. With their mirror-like canals and sense of order and exactness, they all give visitors an experience that the winding paths and undulating edges of the naturalised garden erase. Yet, as Mr Wilkie says, 'even these Grade-I landscapes weren't meant to stop at a certain point'—they can continue to evolve.

In garden festivals from Chaumont to Chelsea, there is a compulsive quest for novelty today, and the results can date very quickly. By contrast, *Orpheus* appears to be timeless, and its name scarcely matters, because it succeeds as an abstract form. A visitor to Boughton 50 years from now may be surprised to discover the date of its completion, given how seamlessly it sits within the park as a whole. Only the stainless steel will supply a clue. It proves that even so illustrious a landscape can be renewed, not just restored, in an exemplary way.

For opening times, telephone 01536 515731 or visit [www.boughtonhouse.org.uk](http://www.boughtonhouse.org.uk)



**↑ Fig 5 above: Plan with the Mount and *Orpheus* on the left and the Lily Pond on the right.**

**→ Fig 6 facing page: The stainless-steel cube and Golden Section rill leading to *Orpheus***

## Inspiration from James Turrell

'A couple of years ago,' says Kim Wilkie, 'my young niece took me to see the work of James Turrell for the first time. Without any preamble, she sat me down in his Skyspace at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas. I watched her gazing up at a square opening in the top of the concrete bunker and was amazed. The stark boldness of the space frames the sky with such simplicity that you see disembodied clouds, shadows and light with a whole new intensity. In *Orpheus*, I have tried to create a similar fresh intensity—only here, you look down into the sky.'





