

# Listed landscapes: Twenty post-war sites protected

The Improvement Garden at Stockwood Park, Luton, Bedfordshire

Historic England worked with the Gardens Trust over three years to draw up the list, which includes housing estate grounds and industrial sites.

The trust's president, Dominic Cole, said 20th Century landscapes "have often been overlooked and undervalued".

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1468798>

## Overview

**Heritage Category:** Park and Garden

**Grade:** II\*

**List Entry Number:** 1468798

**Date first listed:** 18-Aug-2020

**Statutory Address:** Stockwood Park, Farley Hill, Luton, Bedfordshire, LU1 4BH

## Map

© Crown Copyright and database right 2020. All rights reserved. Ordnance Survey Licence number 100024900.

© British Crown and SeaZone Solutions Limited 2020. All rights reserved. Licence number 102006.006.

Use of this data is subject to [Terms and Conditions](#).

The above map is for quick reference purposes only and may not be to scale. For a copy of the full scale map, please see the attached PDF - [1468798.pdf\(opens in a new window\)](#)

The PDF will be generated from our live systems and may take a few minutes to download depending on how busy our servers are. We apologise for this delay.

This copy shows the entry on 21-Aug-2020 at 08:31:04.

#### **Location**

**Statutory Address:** Stockwood Park, Farley Hill, Luton, Bedfordshire, LU1 4BH

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

**District:** Luton (Unitary Authority)

**Parish:** Non Civil Parish

**National Grid Reference:** TL0864319661

#### **Summary**

Sculpture Garden opened in 1991, designed collaboratively between Ian Hamilton Finlay who produced the master plan for the sculptures in 1986, and Bob Burgoyne, Master Gardener at Luton Borough Council, who planned the planting scheme with Sue Finlay and executed the design.

#### **Reasons for Designation**

The Improvement Garden is registered at Grade II\* for the following principal reasons:

Historic interest:

- \* it is an extraordinarily ambitious and far-sighted commission from an urban local authority in the mid-1980s, initiated by the Master Gardener Robert Burgoyne as part of a series of formal, high-maintenance gardens rare in public parks during this period;
- \* it is the most important example in England of the work of Finlay, who is widely considered to be the most adventurous and controversial sculptor-cum-landscape designer of the post-war era

in Britain; \* it is a fine example of his collaboration with the sculptors and carvers he used in his later career, and above all with the gifted Bob Burgoyne.

Design interest:

\* a fusion of the C18 landscape park with avant-garde concrete poetry, it provides a concise overview of the themes that dominated Finlay's work, not least the transformative qualities of landscape; \* it is a modern English Arcadia that draws upon longstanding traditions in the same way as the adjoining period gardens but in an imaginative post-modern manner; \* the six sculptures within their secluded glade are intimately related to each other and their setting, integrating poetry, history and nature in an enigmatic and powerful work.

Survival:

\* it has been remarkably well maintained with almost no alteration, except for the loss of Aphrodite's head which has been replaced with a replica.

Group value:

\* it has group value with the C18 stable block, C19 walled gardens and glasshouses, all listed at Grade II, together representing an important ensemble of buildings and garden design that has evolved over almost three hundred years.

## History

The estate of Stockwood Park was developed by the Crawley family from 1708 but it had earlier origins. In 1740 John Crawley married a local heiress, Susannah Vanacker Sambrooke, and built a Palladian mansion to the west of the site of the Improvement Garden, along with stables and a walled kitchen garden to the north-west. After Crawley's death in 1767 the estate was enlarged by his widow and son (another John), and around 1870 the walled gardens were extended to accommodate the construction of greenhouses. By the early C20 the expansion of Luton had almost surrounded Stockwood Park with suburban housing. The Crawley family left in 1939 when the house was converted into the Alexandra Hospital for children with hip disorders and in 1945 the

park was purchased by Luton Borough Council. The walled gardens were used as the borough's flower nursery. The ha-ha was infilled in the early 1950s and the house itself was demolished in 1964 but the stable block was retained and then converted into a craft museum as part of the restoration works undertaken in the mid-1980s. The walled garden was planted as a series of period gardens, and in 1985 Ian Hamilton Finlay (1925-2006) was commissioned to design a contrasting 'modern' sculpture garden.

Finlay was a Scottish poet, writer, artist and gardener, but such a description gives no real impression of this extraordinarily wide-ranging and maverick polymath. He studied for a year at the Glasgow School of Art before war service but then worked as a shepherd. He was living on the Isle of Rousay, Orkney, when he published his first book, *The Sea Bed and Other Stories* in 1958 and broadcast his first series of radio plays. He subsequently turned to poetry and was one of the first to write in a contemporary Glasgow vernacular. His collection in 1963, *Rapel*, introduced 'concrete poetry' in which the typography and layout of the words is a key part of the text. Thence he began to work with short, potent phrases and even single, meaningful words, which he then took from the page and realised as plaques or sculptural forms in the landscape, working with a carefully selected group of artists, craftsmen and architects. The result is a kind of conceptual art that brings together literature, art and landscape on several levels, very different to the free-standing sculpture found in contemporary sculpture parks, which angered Finlay. The relationship of Finlay's inscribed objects to their planted environment forms a distinctive contradictory approach that he regarded as an antidote to contemporary exhibition practice.

In 1964 he married Sue Macdonald-Lockhart, his second wife, whose parents bought them the derelict Scottish hill farm, Stonypath, in 1966, soon after Finlay had begun to think about combining his concrete poetry with landscape. The Finlays began work on the garden in early 1967, with Sue taking charge of the planting, though much of it dates from the 1980s. In 1980 he renamed the farm 'Little Sparta', a counter to nearby Edinburgh, the so-called 'Athens of the North' as well as a reflection of the rugged environment, the hard lives led by the Finlays and his own bleak world view. In 1987 Little Sparta was registered by Historic Environment Scotland at Grade A (the equivalent of Grade I).

Finlay's work slowly became noticed, above all thanks to two temporary European exhibitions: a group of inscribed tree column bases, Sacred Grove, at the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands (1982), and a series of tree plaques (ie, oval plaques attached to trees at a good height for reading) exhibited at the Domaine de Kerghuennec in Brittany (1986). Both informed similar pieces at his Improvement Garden at Stockwood Park. Finlay did not travel but he did design a number of temporary exhibition gardens and undertook a few public commissions, including eight benches for the Serpentine Gallery in London (1998), and a series of sculptures for three terraces in the deconsecrated churchyard of St George, Bristol (2002). Other schemes for public works were never realised.

As part of the commissioning process at Stockwood Park, Bob Burgoyne – Senior Parks Officer and Master Gardener at Luton Borough Council – had visited Little Sparta with his colleagues. The council desired a contemporary interpretation of the green landscape garden of the C18 through modern sculpture, and Finlay duly produced variations on the arcadian idyll. His master plan, 'Six Proposals for the Improvement of Stockwood Park' (1986) included lithographs by Gary Hincks which are now at Tate Britain. Like the period gardens, Finlay's ideas and themes came from earlier cultures but he used them to give contemporary messages on art and society. He drew upon the work of older artists, particularly the *Liber Veritatis* (1649) by Claude Lorraine who was a key influence on the development of the English landscape garden in the early C18, but his specific source was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Finlay used the word to symbolise his transformations of the landscape and to reflect on both the importance of gardens to Roman culture and the significance of Roman culture to the western garden tradition. Ovid's work had previously informed Renaissance gardens such as the Villa d'Este at Tivoli which featured plaques of his quotations amid the fountains, sculpture and landscape; a tradition that Finlay advanced into modern times.

The Improvement Garden follows Finlay's original design closely. In a letter of 12 February 1986 he wrote that 'as much of the landscaping as possible should be done by Mr Bob Burgoyne and his staff. What is needed is a collaborative effort, in the classical tradition, with outside people involved only where stone carving and lettering need special skills.' Finlay never actually visited the site as he was suffering from agoraphobia by the 1980s and

rarely left home. The work was supervised instead by Bob Burgoyne whose ideas influenced the planting scheme and whose overall expertise proved invaluable. His excellent working relationship with Finlay and his commitment to the project were crucial to its overall success. Sue Finlay was also involved in the project which was regarded as a three-way collaboration between her, Bob and Finlay. The sculptures were executed by four stone-carvers: Nicholas Sloan, who had worked extensively with Finlay since 1976, was responsible for the Flock, Herm and Tree-Plaque; John Sellman for the Buried Capital; Keith Bailey for the Double Tree-Column Base; and Caroline Webb for the Errata of Ovid. The original intention was for one work to be funded each year. On 6 December 1987, Finlay wrote to his friend and biographer Stephen Bann that '2 of the Luton works are now in place, the tree-plaque [...] and 'flock'; they talk of wanting a third work to be completed by June'. Funding from the Henry Moore Foundation enabled the simultaneous installation of the remaining works, and the complete sequence of six sculptures was formally opened in April 1991 by Sir Roy Strong. It was the first public garden completed by Finlay in Britain.

## Details

Sculpture Garden opened in 1991, designed collaboratively between Ian Hamilton Finlay who produced the master plan for the sculptures in 1986, and Bob Burgoyne, Master Gardener at Luton Borough Council, who planned the planting scheme with Sue Finlay and executed the design.

### LOCATION, SETTING, LANDFORM, BOUNDARIES AND AREA

Stockwood Park is a former country estate, now a public park, situated a mile south-west of Luton town centre, on a flat hilltop some 537ft (163.68m) above sea level. At its centre are the C18 stables and walled kitchen gardens which were remodelled as period gardens in the 1980s and rebranded as the Discovery Centre with an exhibition hall, visitor centre and café on their eastern flank in 2008. The Improvement Garden is a green glade that runs south-east from the C19 kitchen gardens, comprising around five acres. From north to south, the ground slopes down to a central ha-ha and rises again slightly towards the south. It is bounded to the north by a path and cut hedges of *leylandii*, and on the remaining three boundaries by fencing, trees and coniferous shrubs. Finlay did not specify any instructions for the

perimeter planting which was partly determined by existing trees and further defined by the hedges planted by Bob Burgoyne.

**ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES** An early suggested route started from the cedar tree over the ha-ha through the birch grove and up to the lime spinney before turning back to the mulberry where it was proposed to fix the plaque before its position on the ash tree was confirmed.

The entrance was later changed by Bob Burgoyne to an opening between hedges from the Dutch Garden (one of the period gardens to the north-east), embellished by two large stone urns on plinths. These are replicas of those designed by William Kent for Alexander Pope's garden at Twickenham and the Wilderness Garden at Great Linford Manor, acting as a prelude to the Improvement Garden by associating it with Kent who, like Finlay, was not primarily a landscape designer but a painter.

A second entrance has since been created slightly to the south-west along a path flanked by laurel hedges.

**PRINCIPAL BUILDING** The Palladian Stockwood House (1740) was demolished in 1964. The Grade II listed mid-C18 stable block, to the south-west of the Improvement Garden, is a two-storey, five-bay building of brick with later wings and a cupola. It was restored as a gallery by Buttress Architects in 2008. The walled kitchen gardens and C19 glasshouses to the north are separately listed at Grade II.

**GARDEN AND SCULPTURES** The Improvement Garden is rooted in C18 garden theory, which in turn took inspiration from the classical arcadian visions of C17 artists, presenting a place in which planting, inscription and carvings all work in harmony. It comprises six sculptures set apart from each other by carefully conceived vistas and views across a green glade running roughly north-west to south-east.

From the entrance through the hedge of the Dutch Garden, the first sculpture to be seen is the **TREE PLAQUE**. This is attached to a pre-existing tree, an extraordinarily knotted ash which is unfortunately dying. Affixed to the tree is a rectangular stone plaque carved with the words **I SING FOR THE MUSES AND MYSELF**, taken from the following words by the Emperor Julian: 'I often say to myself, like Ismenias [ ] - for though my talents are

not equal to his, I have a similar independence of the soul – I sing for the Muses and myself.’ In a letter of 1 November 1985, Finlay explains that the sense is changed by the setting: ‘it is now the tree which (as it were) speaks, and obviously “sings” now refers to the sound of the wind in the tree and not to an act of “composing”. He explains that the tree-plaque differs from modern sculpture ‘since the actual tree is made, via the plaque, into an element of the work. At the same time, the natural integrity [...] of the tree is not violated; it remains part of “nature” and its surroundings.’ The semicircular clipped hedge around the back of the tree, which evokes a temple setting in a landscape park, was planted by Bob Burgoyne, as was the screen just beyond to the north-east, formed by a long clipped hedge incorporating two semicircles.

An open meadow leads southwards toward FLOCK OF STONES which is adjacent to one of two specially excavated sections of the ha-ha, thus re-integrating this essential feature of an C18 garden. The group of stones is suggestive of a flock of sheep in which, compositionally, each is precisely positioned to replace the sheep in Claude’s Pastoral Landscape (1645). The largest stone carries the inscription: ‘FLOCK, n. a number of a kind, an amplitude. The Pythagoreans regarded men as the property of the gods, as a sort of FLOCK, which may not leave its fold without the consent of the gods. -Zeller.’ (The quotation comes from Eduard Zeller’s C19 Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy, concise edition 1955). Finlay deliberately placed the stone ‘flock’ within the ha-ha, intended to keep them out, so that they are committing an error of convention. He also meant them as places to sit on for picnics. Part of the wall of the ha-ha was rebuilt when it was excavated and the earth was used to create the mound behind. The bridge and hedge were later put in, as was the cherry laurel which was not part of the original planting. The stump to the right is that of a mulberry bush that died. A group of trees situated between the ha-ha and the tree plaque consists of variegated holly, maple and Persian ironwood.

To the south-west, in the undulating lawn near the edge of the garden, protrudes the BURIED CAPITAL, the abacus and volute of a seemingly enormous Corinthian capital. This intimates the presence of the former C18 Palladian mansion, although its size and richness introduces a sense of awe at the scale of the suggested ruins that might lie beneath, which could easily be an ancient temple as a Palladian house. In his proposal for the

sculpture, Finlay alludes to the Classical system of architecture in which, to quote Quatremère de Quincy, 'the least part of an elevation has the ability to make the whole known'. The buried column was the last item to be installed.

To the north of the capital, a meandering line of silver birches leads southwards from the ha-ha. This was adapted from an existing line of trees planted in the 1970s to mark the boundary between the tree nursery and adjacent golf course. In their midst is set THE HERM OF APRODITE (the goddess of love), indicating that the garden is 'a lovely place' and 'a place for loving'. A plain, tapering stone pedestal supports the bronze head which is a cast from a British Museum cast of a Roman copy of a Greek original by an unknown artist. As Patrick Eyres comments, 'this earnest whimsy states Finlay's desire to articulate a tradition rather than a self.' The head is a facsimile of the original which was stolen. The front face of the pedestal is inscribed with a concrete poem, each of the three lines forming an anagram of Aphrodite's name: 'I HARD POET / HOT DIP EAR / O DIRE PATH'. At the end of the line of birch trees is an old circle of lime trees present in the parkland on the first edition Ordnance Survey map of 1889.

From here, the visitor begins to wander back, coming across the DOUBLE TREE-COLUMN BASE towards the northern end of the birch trees. This consists of two moulded stone column bases on a red brick plinth laid in English bond, out of which grow two silver birch trees which become the columns themselves. It evokes Vitruvius's idea that classical temples were originally built by supporting beams on living trees. The double column base has the same proportions as those of Perrault's Louvre East Wing. Its brick plinth bears two stone plaques inscribed 'BETULA PENDULA' and 'SILVER BIRCH', echoing the identification labels seen in arboretums. The sculpture also suggests another transformation, albeit counter to those in Ovid (where people are turned into trees), whereby the landscape is turned into a built structure, creating a fusion of nature and culture. It has a backdrop of box.

Beyond, to the east, lies the THE ERRATA OF OVID, the focal emblem of the grove. This curving wall is the largest and most central piece in the garden, owing much to the Temple of British Worthies at Stowe. Constructed by a master builder, it is of red and plum brick laid in English bond with flat stone coping and a stone string course across the lower half. The eight inscribed stone wall plaques use the convention for addressing printed

typographical errors (or errata) that inadvertently change the meaning of a text through accidental metamorphoses. The first plaque, is inscribed THE ERRATA OF OVID, followed by seven in which Finlay suggests possible typographic errors in Ovid's Metamorphoses. Through these he proposes five corrections that lead from the names of nymphs and humans into landscape features: 'for DAPHNE read LAUREL; for PHILOMENA read NIGHTINGALE; for CYANE read FOUNTAIN; for ATYS read PINE; for ADONIS read ANENOME'. The other two lead from classical allusion into concrete poetics: 'for NARCISSUS read NARCISSUS; for ECHO read echo'. In the Metamorphoses these are characters suffering from unrequited or self-love. The dark laurel grove forming a backdrop to the wall is particularly appropriate given its association with Daphne.

In the north-west corner of the garden is a magnificent cedar tree retained from the parkland, and a small winter garden planted by Bob Burgoyne in 1990s.

## Sources

### Books and journals

Abrious, Yves , Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer , (1992)  
Dixon Hunt, John , Nature Over Again, The Garden Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay, (2008)

### Websites

Little Sparta, accessed 12 December 2018  
from <https://www.littlesparta.org.uk/a-peoples-arcadia-the-public-gardens-of-ian-hamilton-finlay-in-relation-to-little-sparta/>

Oxford Dictionary of national Biography, accessed 28 December 2018

from <http://www.oxforddnb.com.ezproxy2.londonlibrary.co.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-97737?rskey=YzuBiY&result=1>

The Guardian, accessed 19 December 2018

from <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/mar/29/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>

### Other

Architecture Today, no.28, special handbook (supplement), July 2008, pp.20-23

Patrick Eyres, 'A People's Arcadia: The Ian Hamilton Finlay Sculpture Garden, Stockwood Park, Luton', New Arcadian Journal, No. 33/34, pp. 61-103

Stephen Bann, 'A Luton Arcadia: Ian Hamilton Finlay's contribution to the English neo-classical tradition', *Journal of Garden History*, vol.13, nos.1-2, January-June 1993, pp.104-12

### **Legal**

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.