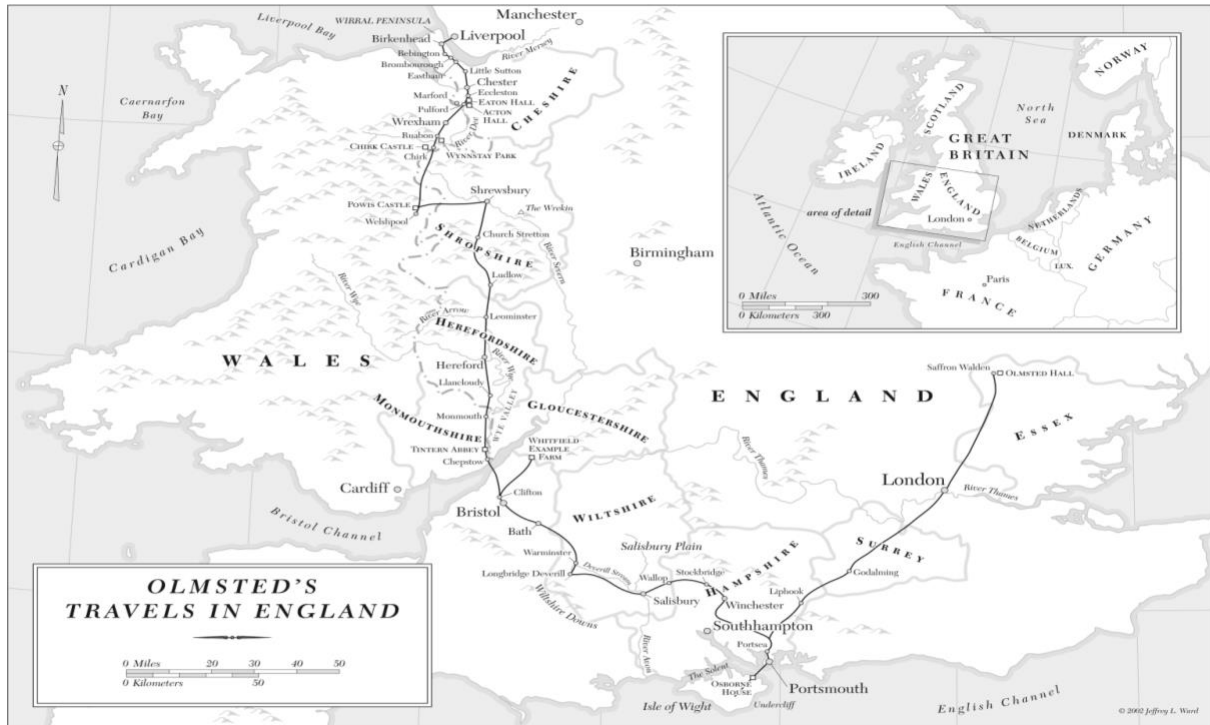


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Retracing Olmsted’s Footsteps



Taken from *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, with thanks to the Library of American Landscape History, published in 2002 and reissued in 2022. All illustrations and page numbers are from the 2002 edition.

“I trust that [readers] will ... come into a warm, good-natured, broad country kitchen fireside relationship with me, and permit me to speak my mind freely ... on all sorts of subjects.” So begins *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* by Frederick Law Olmsted.

Eight years before he won the Central Park design competition and 15 years before he decided to dedicate his life to landscape architecture, a humorous, energetic, outspoken Olmsted set out to see his motherland. And by any definition, the experience was transformative.

Starting at Liverpool and wending his way to the Isle of Wight, Olmsted examined the British country and countryside— farms, parks, castles and churches, politics, boats and drainage, thatch and stonework— learning much and offering an array of opinions that shed light on his evolving thoughts about landscape design and its potential to impact cultural, economic and ecological well-being.

Leaving his Staten Island farm, he traveled for a month with his brother John Hull and friend Charles Loring Brace. At that time, 19th century England and America were facing similar

challenges— rapid population growth, pollution, immigration and urbanization. Landscape design was also a contested area of study as debates about the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime played out on the verdant landscapes of Merry Olde England.

Taking his cue from books and advice from friends along the way, Olmsted in 1850 (and then on numerous occasions over the next 30 years) visited Birkenhead Park, Chatsworth, Biddulph Old Hall, Trentham, Powis Castle, Chirk Castle, the Isle of Wight and other places. In many cases, these visits elicited pointed observations and clearly shaped his thinking about both landscape design and the role of public spaces in America.

[As part of the Olmsted 200 celebration](#), 12 intrepid pilgrims set out on a trek to retrace Olmsted's footsteps. Using Olmsted's own account— published in 1852 by his good friend George Putnam— we sought to see what Olmsted saw, to understand the various experiences that informed Olmsted's later placemaking. Helping us understand it all were the extraordinary duo of John Phibbs and Gilly Kitching. I'll aim to outline some of the things learned— and the immense joy of our travels— in this blog.

Finding His "Home"



Born and buried in Hartford, CT, Frederick Law Olmsted and the Olmsted family had England in their blood. The family homestead, Olmsted Hall in Essex, "was occupied by the Olmsteds for more than two hundred years before the Puritan emigration," Olmsted wrote. "After that period, I could find nothing of them in England." (432)

On his first glimpse of the English countryside, he could not contain his excitement. He conveyed a deep delight in nature and found that the combined design efforts of man and nature were both beautiful and familiar.

The country— and such a country! — green, dripping glistening, gorgeous! We stood dumb-stricken by its loveliness ... that English May— sunny, leafy, blooming May— in an English lane; with hedges; English hedges, hawthorn hedges, all in blossom; homely old farmhouses, quaint stables, and haystacks; the old church spire over the distant trees; the mild sun beaming through the watery atmosphere, and all so quiet... (98-99)

With few exceptions, the illustrations in the book— all drawn by Olmsted— are of the humble English countryside— homely abodes, churches and quaint cottages made absolutely picturesque, Olmsted wrote, thanks to English ivy: “I think it is one of the most beautiful things God has given us, and the man who can and does not let it beautify his habitation, is sinfully ungrateful.” (219)

When a second and expanded edition of the book was published in 1859, 158 new pages were added, focusing on the countryside and notably reducing Olmsted’s trip to London to half a page. So much for the city!

Fifteen years later, when Olmsted lived in the wilds of California, the English landscape still had a remarkable hold:

No Englishman loves England as I do...I love the landscape of England, better than that of the land where I first saw light....
—The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, *The Civilizing Current in American Society*

Nearly 30 years later in 1891, when Olmsted visited England for the last time, his admiration had not waned.

I am too old for elation, but instead of regarding the elation of my youth ... with surprise, I only wonder that it was not greater— As the result of 45 years of special study of landscape, I have a much higher and more intelligent regard for England. (FLO to Henry Codman, April 21, 1891)

Given his profound love of the English countryside, there can be no doubt about the source of his inspiration for Central Park: “The Park should,” he wrote, “as far as practicable, resemble a charming bit of rural landscape, such as unless produced by art, is never found within the limits of a large town.” —Vol 3, *Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted, Description of the Central Park*, January 1859 (213)

Sheep

As it turns out, another inspiration for Olmsted's landscape design was sheep. In *Walks and Talks*, he explored both practical and picturesque qualities of these beasts, detailing sheep-folding, the practice of enriching the soil through the confinement of sheep, as well as features of the animals themselves. As Olmsted saw it, the sheep were a "large, course-wooled variety" and "not handsome at all (as sheep)" but "of the most value for their effect in the landscape." (148)

Only a few years later, sheep became a regular feature of Olmsted's landscapes— as we can see in this historic photo from Central Park in NYC. If only we could return those sheep today!



Sheep Meadow, Central Park, New York City c. late 19th century



Sheep at Chatsworth

Birkenhead Park—An Ah Hah Moment



"The gateway [at Birkenhead] Is heavy and awkward. There is a sort of grandeur about it that the English are fond of, but which, when it is entirely separate from all other architectural constructions, always strikes me unpleasantly." (90)

It was Olmsted's visit to Birkenhead Park that proved truly transformative. There, across the Mersey River from Liverpool, was the first public park, open to all. This park was designed by the great Joseph Paxton, engineering genius and creator of the Crystal Palace. Working with Edward Kemp, Paxton had transformed 127 acres of marshland into a green oasis with woods, rockeries, a lake with a boathouse, lodges in Norman, Gothic and Italian style, a Swiss Bridge (Olmsted described it as Chinese) and cricket fields.

It was a park for all people whose picturesque nature and accessibility simply overwhelmed Olmsted:

[I]n democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this People's Garden.

...[W]e came to an open field of clean bright greensward, closely mown.... Under which a flock of sheep were reposing...

The site of the park and garden was ... a flat, sterile, clay farm. ... Carriage roads ... and walks varying in width, were first drawn and made. The excavation for a pond was also made, and the earth obtained from these sources used for making mounds and to vary the surface, which has been done with much *naturalness*. ... The whole ground was thoroughly under-drained...By these, sufficient water is obtained to fully supply the pond, or lake, as they call it, which... meanders for a long distance through the garden.

Besides the cricket and an archery ground, large valleys were made verdant, extensive drives arranged – plantations, clumps, and avenues of trees formed, and a large park laid out. And all this magnificent pleasure-ground is entirely, unreservedly, and for ever the people's own. The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen. (92-93)



Birkenhead Park

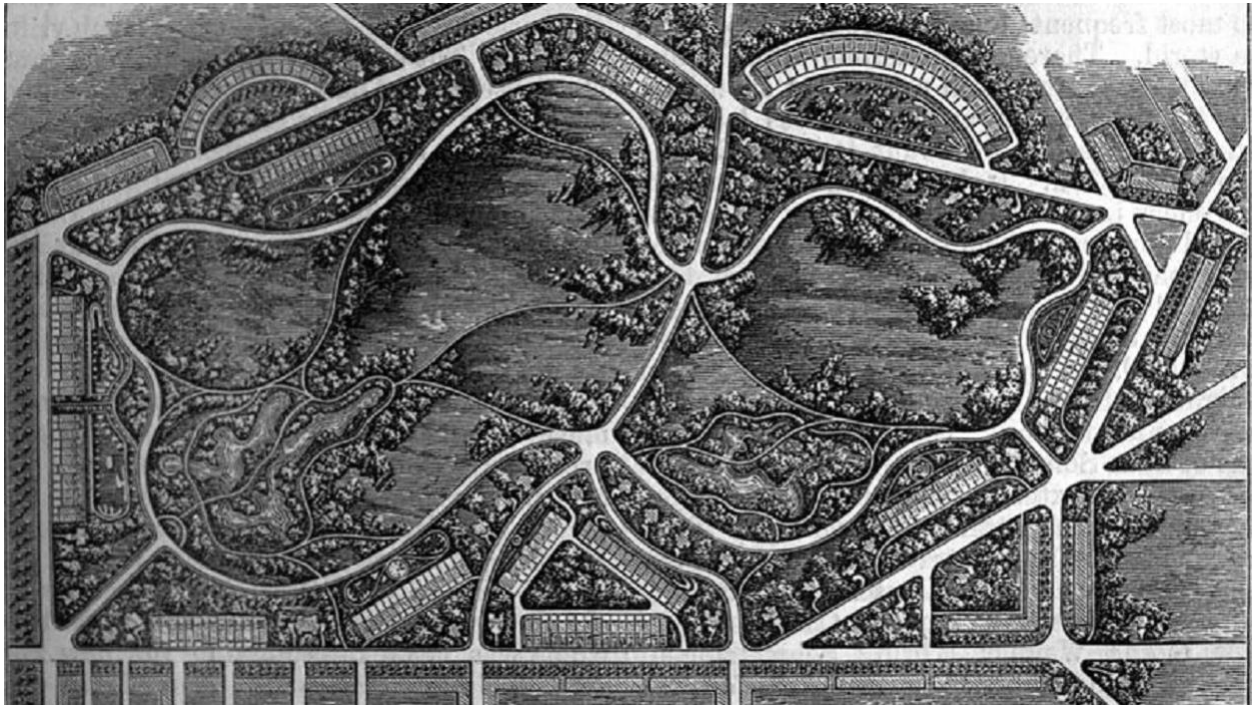
It was none other than Andrew Jackson Downing (to whom Olmsted dedicated *Walks and Talks*) who realized the importance of this English park and Olmsted's observations about it.

Downing printed Olmsted's account in *The Horticulturist*— the first mention of this "democratic space" in America.

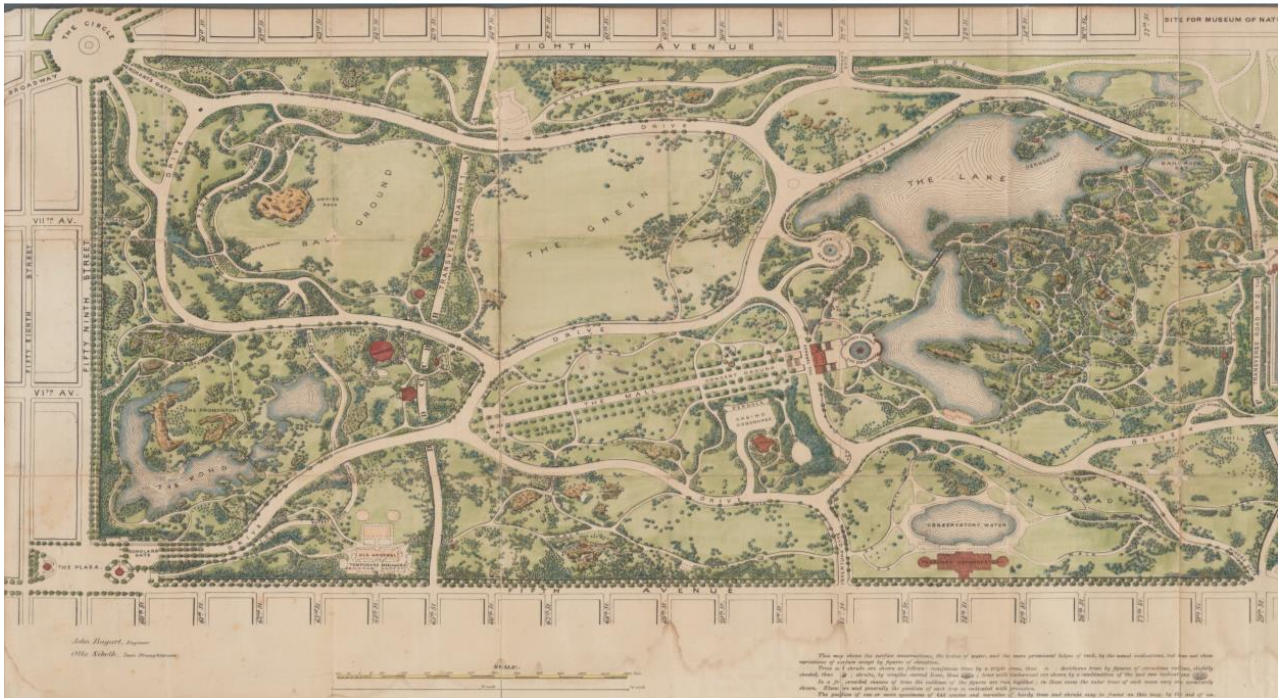
The lasting impact of Olmsted's visit can surely be seen by looking at the Birkenhead and Olmsted & Vaux Greensward plans.

Now, nearly 200 years later, appreciation is growing. Birkenhead Park has recently been listed in the UK as eligible for UNESCO World Heritage Status as a "pioneering People's Park" (echoes of Olmsted's phrase in *Walks and Talks*), "the first public park ever created by a municipal authority inspiring the development and creation of parks across the world."

On our exploration, we were honored to meet with Birkenhead Park leaders Rob Belcher; Marie Ledevhat; Graham Arnold, the Chair of Friends of Birkenhead Park; and Fraser Robertson, the descendant of John Robertson— the architect who designed Birkenhead's lodges.



Birkenhead Park Plan



Central Park Greensward Plan

Rocks, Rocks and More Rocks!

One of the especially remarkable features of Birkenhead is the Paxton rockery. One moves from a beautiful lake immediately to a forbidding landscape with massive boulders and an otherworldly feel. This architectural use of rock was something Paxton relished. And it is evident even more at Chatsworth where Paxton “let loose” and created both a Disneyland space of gigantic rocks as well as a beautiful, understated rock display in the woods.

Returning to America, Olmsted surely took these massive boulder structures to heart. Central Park’s ramble looks and feels like parts of Birkenhead. And Olmsted’s later collaboration with architect Henry Hobson Richardson assertively utilized rocks aesthetically to tie buildings to landscape in memorable ways.



Paxton rockery at Chatsworth

English Castles and Democratic Places: Olmsted's Evolving World View

Visits to two castles— Powis and Chirk— informed Olmsted’s evolving vision of “parks for all people.”



Dog Cemetery at Powis Castle

Powis Castle—

While Olmsted did not see Powis Castle, he had a memorable encounter with a mastiff. Here is one of many delightfully sardonic passages in *Walks and Talks*. Yes, Olmsted can be quite a wit!

The only object of interest that I remember was “Powis Castle,” the seat of a nobleman, finely situated in a picturesque mountain-side park... I had toiled up to within about ten feet of the edge of the plateau upon which it stands, when I heard a low deep growl, and looking up saw above me a great dog asking me, with bristling back, curling fangs, and fierce grinning teeth, what business I had to be there. Considering that I had no right to be visiting the residence of a gentleman who was a stranger to me unless I had some business with him, and concluding upon short reflection that indeed I had none, I determined upon a retrograde movement, and taking care not to attempt even to apologize to his dogship for the

intrusion until I had brought a few trees between us, I found that he *backed down* just about as fast as I did, so that at a distance of half a dozen rods he appeared a handsome, smooth, generous-natured mastiff, and I began to consider whether the earl would not probably be pleased to have an intelligent stranger see the beauty of his castle; but the moment I stopped, the dog’s lips began to part and his back to rise again, and I concluded that whatever the earl’s wishes might be, I could not make it convenient just then to accommodate him in that way, and returned forthwith to the village. (222-223)

We travelers DID see the park, walking with the head gardener and marveling at the yew hedge and grand vistas. As luck would have it, we also came upon the dog cemetery. Could Blucher (whose headstone is noted above) have been Olmsted’s dogship?



Powis Castle

Chirk Castle—

Olmsted found no dogship at Chirk but did find voice for his profound ambivalence about the British class system. In an extended passage, he noted with admiration the beauty of the landscape but questioned the aristocracy that produced it:

The castle is on high ground, in the midst of the finest park and largest trees we have seen...

I liked it, liked to be in it, and thought that if I had come honestly to the inheritance of it, I could abandon myself to a few months living in the way of it with a good deal of heart. But in the first breath of this day-dreaming, I was interrupted by the question, Is it right and best that this should be for the few, the very few of us, when for many of the rest of us there must be but bare walls, tile floors and everything besides harshly screaming, scabble for life? This question, again, was immediately shoved aside, unanswered by another: whether in this nineteenth century of the carpenter's son, and first of vulgar, whistling, snorting, roaring locomotives, new world steamers, and submarine electric

telegraphs; penny newspapers, state free-schools, and mechanic's lyceums, this still soft atmosphere of elegant longevity was exactly the most favourable for the ... growth of the right sort of legislators and lawgivers for the people.

It seems certainly that it would be hard for a man whose mind has been mainly formed and habited in the midst of this abundance of quiet, and beauty ... to rightly understand and judiciously work for the wants of those whose "native air" is as different from this as is that of another planet. (224-226)

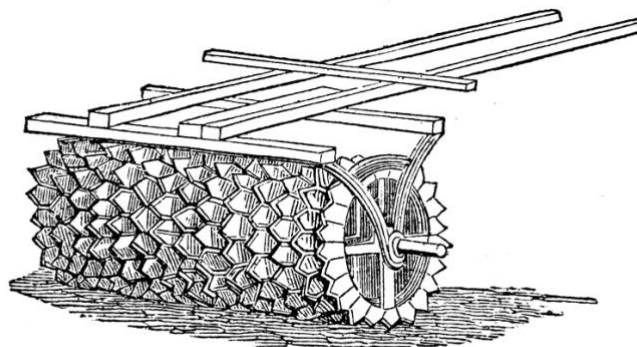
Given his visceral distaste for the closed elite society, it is not surprising that— upon returning to America— Olmsted found himself thinking about the "democratic" need for access to nature and the opportunity to bring people, of all backgrounds and classes, together through public spaces.

Scientific Farming and the Importance of Good Drainage

At least nominally, farming was the cause for Olmsted's trip to England. He had, of course, left his own farm behind (thanks to his ever-indulgent father), pledging he would learn about scientific farming practices in England. In his introduction, he thus made clear that helping American farmers was one of his aims.

So it is that Olmsted included extended passages (many of them, to be honest, quite turgid) on farming and farming practices in both America and England. These ranged from the English use of ground bone in soil (185), the wages of farm servants (202) and their consumption of beer (353), to the comparative value of piped sewage and raw manure. (378, 396)

He dedicated two chapters to fruit and vegetable farming practices; talked readily with an array of local farmers (a skill that he surely refined when he traveled later to the South for the New York Daily Times) and examined British farm implements, offering some wonderful illustrations of what he saw.



CROSSKILL'S PATENT CLOD-CRUSHER ROLLER.

On many occasions, Olmsted found American farming practices superior to British ones. Indeed, he noted with concern the impoverished state of British farmers, reporting that there were few “yeomen” who owned the land they tilled, independent of their landlords. (433)

But in one area — drainage— he was especially impressed by the English ways. He credited England’s enlightened drainage as “the most important agricultural improvement ever made” (216) and nothing short of saving them “from Revolution.”

Upon his return to Staten Island, he put improved drainage immediately into practice. He imported British tiles for draining his own farm. And in his later service as first Executive Secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission, he pursued good drainage as a way to forestall disease on the battlefield. Attention to sanitation, in fact, became a key feature of all Olmsted’s landscape designs. Work in Buffalo, Central Park and the Capitol Grounds (to name only a few) began with massive under drainage— a clear outcome of Olmsted’s trip to England.

Independence, Slavery and the British View

As an American traveler, Olmsted was especially attentive to British thoughts about his home country. It was, after all, a mere 40 years since the Brits burned the White House. And it was not so distant from the time Olmsted as a boy remembered that “the ‘enemy’ and ‘the British’ came to me from my fighting grandfather as synonymous terms.” (230)

So, Olmsted wondered as he traveled, what did the English think about Americans? Did they resent the War of Independence? And what did they know about the current state of affairs?

What he found was NOT what he anticipated:

There is a certain class of the English, conservative whigs more than tories, as I met them, that look upon the United States people as a nation of vulgar, blustering, impertinent, rowdy radicals... But the great mass of the educated classes regard us very differently; not with unqualified respect and unalloyed admiration, but much as we of the Atlantic States regard our own California— a wild, dare-devil younger brother, with some most dangerous and reprehensible habits, and some most noble qualities, a capital fellow, in fact, if he would but have done sowing his wild oats...

[T]hough I met and conversed freely with all classes, except the noble, while I was in England, [I never did] encounter the first man who did not think that we did exactly right, or who was sorry that we succeeded, as we did in declaring and maintaining our independence. (228-29)

Of greater surprise to Olmsted was the British understanding of American slavery:

On slavery they are usually greatly misinformed, and view it only as an unmitigated and wholly inexcusable wrong, injustice, and barbarous tyranny for which all Americans are equally responsible, and all equally condemnable, ...and everlastingly to be scolded at (except a few martyrs, called abolitionists, that obtain a precarious livelihood through their contributions.)... I wish especially [to] ... make them comprehend how it is that we at the north have nothing to do with their peculiar institution, and are not to be expected to carry pistols and bowie-knives and fight every body that chooses to attack it all over the world... There is, in truth, a hundred times more hard feeling in England towards America from this cause than all others.... (232-33)

Of course, it was only a matter of months until Olmsted was enlisted to report on slavery for the New York Times— an assignment which did, at last, provide him with a vehicle for explaining slavery and for developing and refining his own views of slavery as well as democratic spaces.

Olmsted and Capability Brown



Chatsworth



Knowsley

In *Walks and Talks*, Olmsted made no specific mention of the great 18th century landscape architect, Capability Brown, about whom our fearless leader John Phibbs is the world's greatest expert. Olmsted focused largely on the 19th century.

However, he visited and saw Brown's landscapes during his travels— going to Chatsworth, Charlecote, Trentham (which had a Brown pond) and Eaton Hall to name only a few.

When he arrived in England, Olmsted was well versed in the theories of

Uvedale Price, William Gilpin and Sir Humphrey Repton, whose books were prized by Olmsted's father and read by Olmsted. Price was dedicated to attacking Brown for his landscapes, so there is no doubt that Olmsted had imbibed some of this criticism before he arrived in England.

However, there also can be no doubt that Olmsted was immensely influenced by the beautiful "naturalistic" and pastoral landscapes that Brown designed and that Repton (whom Olmsted admired) pursued later. Indeed, Olmsted noted in *Walks and Talks* the great appeal of Brown's Eaton Park with its "gracefully, irregular, gently undulating surface" of land and "herds of fallow-deer, fawns, cattle, sheep and lambs quietly feeding near us." (147)

In a letter to William Hooker (29 November 1859, 232), Olmsted, in fact, outlined his growing dislike for reigning Victorian fashions after a visit to Biddulph Grange. Biddulph was a place recommended to Olmsted as "exhibiting the art of landscape gardening in higher perfection than any other in England." He confessed, however, that "the simplicity without refinement of art,... of Stoneleigh and Charlecourt" give him "much greater pleasure" than Biddulph.

It has seemed [to] me that the great addition to the resources of art in gardening which botanic adventure has recently secured, together with the reaction from the old simple formal fashion of gardening, ... Is just now resulting in a style of gardening in which the peculiar landscape beauty of old English places, & in which England excels all the world, is sacrificed to botanic beauty and variety and the interest of frequent contrasts & surprises.

Rural Beauty and the Isle of Wight

Olmsted's visit to the Isle of Wight helped crystallize his growing appreciation for the English rural landscape. It was there that he found mesmerizing picturesque vistas towards the sea as

well as wonderful marine villas— known as cottage ornees— which offered a winsome understated contrast to the vast manor houses he had previously visited.



Wrote Olmsted:

The greater part of the Isle of Wight is more dreary, desolate and monotonous than any equal extent of landscape I probably ever saw in America— would be, rather, if it were not that you are rarely out of sight of the sea.... But on the south shore it is rocky, craggy; and... you come gradually to the majesty of vastness, peculiar to the downs and the ocean. (408)

We were most honored to visit a remarkable place known as Puckaster Cottage in the undercliff. The extraordinary house, designed by architect Robert Lugar [Lugar, Plans and Views of Buildings (1811)], looks out on the sea and is largely intact nearly 200 years after it was formed. The overall villa complex included partially walled kitchen gardens, glass houses, a pond, vast walks and terraced seating.

The house features memorable tree-trunk pillars and a charming room facing the water. The undulating terrain is exquisitely beautiful -- as outlined in the photos -- and its owner, Linda Breaks, is as charming as the house and landscape.

This visit was especially poignant since very few of these marine villas— which Olmsted saw and illustrated in his book— remain, as we learned from the English expert Dr. Kate Felus, who joined us on the trip. (See Dr. Felus' report on marine villas [here](#) and [here](#).)



Puckaster Cottage, Isle of Wight



Puckaster Cottage, Isle of Wight

Victorian Likes and Dislikes

Osborne and the Royal Yacht—



Scene from the Gardens at Osborne

Olmsted was not alone in loving the Isle of Wight. It was here that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert established their own summer home, Osborne, where they enjoyed family life without distraction. There, Prince Albert developed terraced gardens looking towards the sea and a walled garden of fruits and vegetables. The parterres – even today – require 20,000 plants and more than a month of labor to complete. Their fussy designs and reliance on colorful annuals and often exotic plants were absolute anathema to Olmsted who believed that landscape should restore rather than excite and distract. Indeed, in a letter to William Robinson (26 August, 1892, 564), Olmsted noted with some pride that “[t]here has never been a square-yard of bedding out on any ground under my direction.”

In great contrast to the loud and showy gardens of Osborne, the quiet green and picturesque landscapes of the Isle of Wight moved Olmsted in extraordinary ways. These spaces provided an immersive experience that Olmsted found tender and personally restorative in subconscious ways:

Nature treats me so strangely; it's past my speaking sensibly of... At times I seem myself to be her favorite, and she brings me to my knees in deep feeling. (407)

Gradually and silently the charm comes over us; the beauty has entered our souls, we know not exactly when or how, but going away we remember it with a tender, subdued, filial-like joy. (407)

Because of these reactions, he began to understand and explore the ways landscape design could and should address fundamental social, physical, and psychological needs. "So long as considerations of utility are neglected or overridden by considerations of ornament," he later explained, "there will be no true Art."

Royal Yacht Squadron—



Image from Victoria & Albert Museum

In *Walks and Talks*, landscape was not the only cynosure of Olmsted's eyes. So too were boats, especially the Royal Yacht Squadron which to this day makes its home on the Isle of Wight. "In crossing the Solent," Olmsted reported, "we saw the Queen's Yacht, and passed through a squadron of the Royal Yacht-Club yachts." (411)

For nearly two pages, he examined the royal yacht's features— noting the plate glass ports, the seamen's uniforms, the paint color and deck arrangements. And he couldn't resist mentioning America's recent victory in what is now known as the America's Cup. Pushing back against conventional wisdom, Olmsted argued that America's superior sailing was due "more to her peculiarities of rig, the cut and material of her sails, and to seamanship, than to the model of the hull." (412)

As part of our trip, we travelers were honored to dine at the Royal Yacht Squadron. This club literally helped create the sport of sailing, and, there, we saw the America's Cup binnacle and a vast array of marvelous prizes won by the club over many years. The Clubhouse, Cowes Castle, was built in 1539 as part of Henry VIII's chain of coastal defenses and has been home to the Squadron for over 160 years.

Our knowledgeable host (and Commodore) advised that Olmsted likely saw either *Victoria & Albert* or *Fairy*. *V & A* was the biggest of the royal yachts at the time and was the first of three *V & As*. *Fairy* was her tender and featured a large oak-colored deckhouse as described by Olmsted but no plate glass ports. The painting above from the Victoria and Albert Museum illustrates *V & A*.

Boats were to remain a fascination throughout Olmsted's life – and even become critical to some of his landscape designs. What better example than, in 1893, at the World's Columbian Exposition, when Olmsted insisted on supplying canopied electric launches and gondolas to enhance visitors' experiences on the lagoons.

Final Thoughts

The National Association for Olmsted Parks, now the Olmsted Network, was honored to serve as managing partner of the Olmsted 200 bicentennial. How exciting it was at the end of this great celebration to travel back to the beginning—to see, in many respects, where Olmsted's enduring work "began" and to enter into the mind of this remarkable man who has, in so many ways, designed the America that we know and love.

Retracing Olmsted's footsteps proved informative, fun, fascinating and inspiring. It also brought together 14 wonderful new friends. I hope this blog conveys the joy of this memorable excursion in the footsteps of FLO. If you would be interested in retracing Olmsted's footsteps in 2024, please be in touch: info@olmsted.org.

Appendix— A Visit to Biddulph Grange

Don't miss this great garden!

While Frederick Law Olmsted rejected the overall approach of Biddulph Grange, he aptly described the garden as having a “great deal of botanic and arboricultural beauty, quaintly arranged” – a description that barely does justice to this delightful and whimsical garden. I've included many photos from this unique garden where visitors are treated to an array of Victorian adventures, including passage through a vast and amazing stumpery, as well as 19th century “time travel” entering a British cottage and emerging in Egypt and China!



Biddulph Grange



Biddulph Grange