

## A Brief History of Studley Royal

The perfect compliment to the Abbey is Studley Royal Water Garden, a Georgian masterpiece of an ornamental green garden adorned with Classical statues and follies. Once wild and wooded, the valley of the river Skell was transformed into one of England's most spectacular Georgian water gardens by the Aislabie family.

John Aislabie inherited the Studley Royal estate in 1693. A socially and politically ambitious man, he first became the Tory Member of Parliament for Ripon in 1695 and in 1718 became Chancellor of the Exchequer. In 1720 disaster struck his career; disgraced by his part in the South Sea Bubble financial scandal, he was expelled from Parliament and disqualified for life from public office. Aislabie returned to Yorkshire and devoted himself to creating a landscape of breathtaking and ground breaking vision. After his death in 1742, his son William continued his father's work and purchased the Abbey ruins in 1767 to complete the garden.

Between them these two gifted amateurs created what is arguably the most important 18<sup>th</sup> century water garden in England. The garden stands today much as it was first conceived.

The Water Garden, with its formal, geometric design and its extraordinary vistas, was inspired by the work of the great French landscape gardeners but is entirely individual in character. Studley was also influenced by the work of Queen Anne's gardeners, George London and Henry Wise. Their designs were characterised by mirror like stretches of water in which garden buildings and follies would appear reflected.

The Temple of Piety, the subject of one of the most photographed vistas in the Water Garden, was probably started in 1729-30 as a dedication to Hercules. It is a perfect example of neo-Classicism and was designed as cool garden house on the shady side of the valley. It was later re-designed as a symbol of filial piety by William Aislabie soon after his father's death in 1742.

The climax of the garden is known as "The Surprise View" or Anne Boleyn's Seat. So called because paintings show that there was a decapitated statue on this spot before the acquisition of the abbey by Aislabie in 1768. It was during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that the statue acquired the name Anne Boleyn when a link was seen between the decapitated state of the statue, Henry VIII's second queen and the dissolution of the monasteries. The statue was restored to its original position in 2001. But the name "Surprise View" is more apt - there is an astonishing view of the abbey ruins in the distance. The sight was designed to cause a sharp intake of breath, especially when the building's sliding doors (no longer extant) were in place.