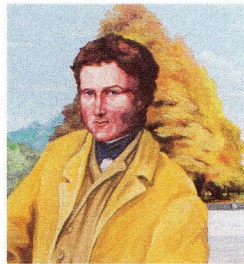


W. A. Nesfield, 1794–1881

THE celebrated W. A. Nesfield had three successive careers in his long life, as a soldier, painter and garden designer. He was successful in each, finally settling on the last as a way of using his considerable skills and experience to establish a prolific business supplying appropriate gardens for gentlemen's revivalist country seats. Indeed, so successful was he in this last venture that, in the mid 19th century, he was the dominant private garden designer in Britain, with more than 200 completed commissions to his name and a train of imitators such as Ninian Niven in Ireland.

Nesfield's style, rooted in the Picturesque ideals of his youth, typically created terraced parterres based on 17th-century French originals, laid out in meticulous scrolls and arabesques of box against a ground of coloured gravels, with statues and topiary providing vertical accents. A key factor in Nesfield's rise was his close relationship with his



Due to his controlled style, Nesfield's reputation is only recently resurgent

brother-in-law, the architect Anthony Salvin, whose Jacobethan piles were designed to overlook just such symmetrical mosaics. Nesfield's polite background provided him with an entrée to society, so that his clients included members of the aristocracy and a wide range of landowners with both old and new money. His career peaked in the mid 19th century with patronage from Prince Albert.

As the roll call of his private projects

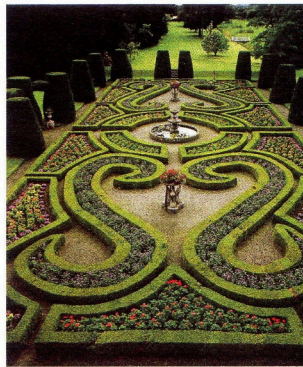
gathered pace—Holkham (pictured, bottom) in 1849, Castle Howard in 1850 and the unwieldy 'monster project' of Witley Court in 1858—Nesfield's name began to appear in connection with major institutions of the day, although he always held himself aloof from the public-park movement. The layout around the Palm House at Kew of the terrace, lake and broad avenues through the arboretum is his, and Nesfield was chosen to design the RHS's new garden at Kensington, opened by Prince Albert in 1861. This

was Nesfield's moment of national glory, but it was short-lived: this was Albert's last public engagement before his death, and the society soon found itself unable to fund the garden adequately. As it declined, Nesfield's style gradually fell from favour. His last great project was Avenue Gardens in Regent's Park, designed jointly with his son Markham in 1863 and now gorgeously restored.

Despite Nesfield's painterly approach, however, in the later part of his career, his work was criticised by the rising generation of plantmen led by William Robinson, who dismissed his precisely controlled style and execution as too inflexibly architectural. Nesfield's reputation is only recently resurgent, so that he is once more acknowledged as the leading British garden designer from 1840 into the 1860s.

Steven Desmond

Right A panel of Nesfield's lost parterre at Eaton Hall (1843), from the COUNTRY LIFE photographic archive: a subtle fusion of plan, levels, planting, statuary and water



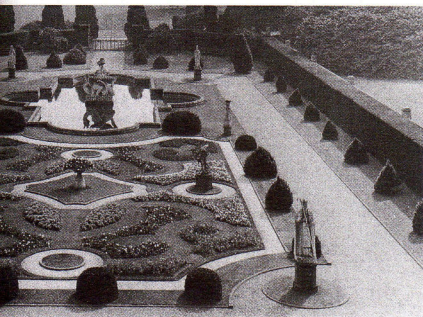
Above Bodryddan Hall's surviving parterre, probably designed by Nesfield in the 1870s, when his son extended the house. Right The south front of Castle Howard. The bones of Nesfield's design (1850) survive, including the north lake and the great parterre

The life and times

1794 William Andrews Nesfield was born the son of a clergyman in Chester-le-Street, Co Durham. He was intended for the Church, but opted for the army, serving at the tail end of the Peninsular War in Spain in 1812, and later in Canada. During his military career, he was taught landscape painting by Thomas Paul Sandby, and also studied engineering. **1818** Reduced to half-pay in 1818, he embarked on a career as a landscape watercolourist in the golden age of that style, and found his work



admired not only by peers such as David Cox, but also by the critic John Ruskin, who considered him second only to Turner in his mastery of waterfalls. Nesfield might have continued in this vein, but a growing family brought a pressing need for more income. **1830s** During the 1830s, he increasingly turned his hand to the more lucrative business of garden design. Nesfield's 'artistic' style (his word) was rooted in his understanding of the Picturesque principles promoted by Uvedale Price, whom he called 'my master',



Broughton Hall

What to look for

The surviving east parterre at Broughton Hall (1855), which is uniquely tilted to suit the view from the drawing room, has lost its coloured gravels, but is otherwise intact.

- 1 A pattern of low box scrollwork
- 2 A 'plate-bande' or frame of turf
- 3 A presiding statue of Flora
- 4 Topiary in yew as a vertical accent
- 5 A background of gravel

at the beginning of the 19th century. By 1840, the Picturesque had evolved into a heavy-handed antiquarianism, which launched many architects on careers building country houses in 'period' styles for a generation of landowners brought up on the novels of Sir Walter Scott. One of these architects was Anthony Salvin (*right*), Nesfield's brother-in-law. Nesfield and Salvin had shared offices as early as 1826, and the two families continued to live in each other's pockets for many years.



1838 When the prominent horticulturist J.C. Loudon (*left*) visited their joint home at Fortis Green, Muswell Hill, designed by Salvin with gardens by Nesfield, for an article in the *Gardener's Magazine* in 1838, he was thrilled by what he saw. A curvaceous drive led through carefully framed shrubberies to the garden front, where a delicate parterre lay on a shallow terrace under the windows. Loudon enthused that Nesfield had 'lately directed his attention to landscape gardening, and that with so much success, that his

opinion is now sought for by gentlemen of taste in every part of the country'.

1840s-1860s Nesfield led the field of country-house garden designers from 1840 until the mid 1860s. An early triumph was the garden for the Marquess of Westminster's Cheshire seat, Eaton Hall, for which, in 1843, Nesfield designed a precisely terraced double parterre on a ground of white gravel, featuring his characteristic graceful arabesques of box, on this occasion woven into a heraldic-looking 'W'.

GENIUS OF THE PATTERN

by SHIRLEY EVANS

The discovery of archive material relating to the landscape designs of William Andrews Nesfield has thrown new light on the work of this great designer of parterres.

THE extent and variety of the landscape design work carried out by William Andrews Nesfield (1794–1881) has never been fully appreciated or understood, and until fairly recently the primary sources of material available to researchers has been very limited. It is now becoming increasingly clear that he worked at far more estates, and was infinitely more versatile, than has hitherto been realised.

Nesfield was a fine watercolourist, and he pursued this profession for nearly 30 years, exhibiting at The Old Watercolour Society's Pall Mall Galleries regularly between 1823 and 1852. This talent was appreciated by his clients. For instance, when John, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, and his Countess realised that they needed to thin out the trees on their estate at Alton Towers in Staffordshire, but did not have the expertise to decide which should go, they agreed to call in Nesfield and abide by his decision: "This gentleman was peculiarly fitted for such a task, being a Landscape painter, as he could strike off at a heat the thing as it then was—and the resemblance to the original was always marvellously like, and then, in glowing colours could show, in like manner, what the landscape from a given point ought to be."

The Shrewsburys made extensive use of Nesfield's expertise at Alton Towers, so confident were they in his abilities, and the intimate parterre he designed for the Countess's private garden is still in situ, although in need of restoration.

While Nesfield's artistic abilities were an important facet of his work, his other skills, as a mapmaker and engineer—gained when he was a gentleman cadet at the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich—were equally important. He was able to extend the range of his work far wider than simply advising his clients about the artistic look of their estates. Indeed, he undertook various engineering commissions, both in England and Ireland, early in his career.

He also advised on the siting of houses. Mentmore in Buckinghamshire, the home of Baron Meyer Amschel Rothschild, is a case in point. And the ever-versatile Nesfield advised on the moving and repositioning of large trees at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park in 1852, when old timber wagons were used to haul the trunks up on chains with the help of horses. He was also responsible for the building of at least two mazes, one at Somerleyton Hall in Suffolk, for Sir Morton Peto, and another at Worden Hall in Lancashire, for James Howell Farington.

Nesfield worked on a variety of estates in his capacity as an engineer when the railways began to encroach. As early as 1844, when Railway Mania was at its



1—The recently restored formal gardens at Welcombe Hall, Warwickshire



2—The new (behind) and original stone edgings in the parterre at Welcombe Hall

height, he sent a report to the solicitor of Lord Gainsborough, of Barham Court in Kent, on the "artificial injury" done to his estate by the railway. Although many of these reports were connected with estates in the south of England, there is at least one in the North—on the effect that a viaduct would have on the estate at Kirklees Park in Yorkshire. Today it is motorways that disturb landowners, but during the 19th century the railways caused great concern. Had it not been for the enticement of large sums of money in compensation, and the fact landowners had, in many cases, what was virtually their own private railway station, they would no doubt have put up even more of a fight.

As early as 1838, Nesfield prepared a plan for a 10-gun battery at Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire for the Duke of Newcastle. Indeed, in the early days, much of his work was concerned with the engineering side of landscape design—as when

he supervised the cutting through of rock to facilitate an approach to the forecourt at Dunira, Tayside, for Sir David Dundas. In 1848 Nesfield was at Bourne Park in Kent, damming up a stream for a lake and designing a Classical bridge with pierced parapets for Matthew Bell.

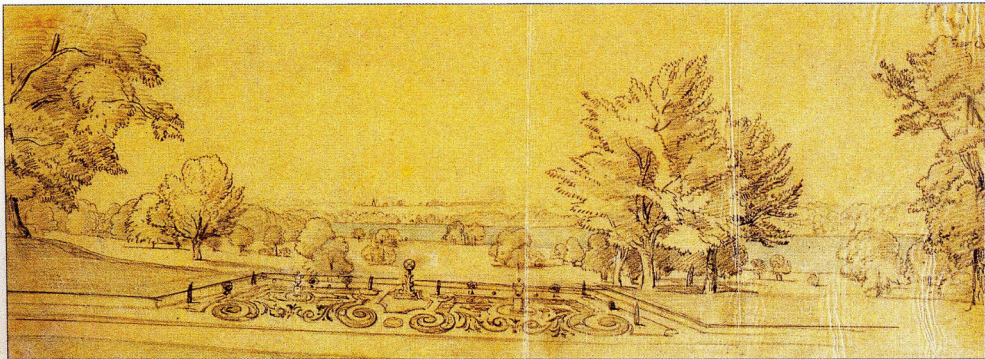
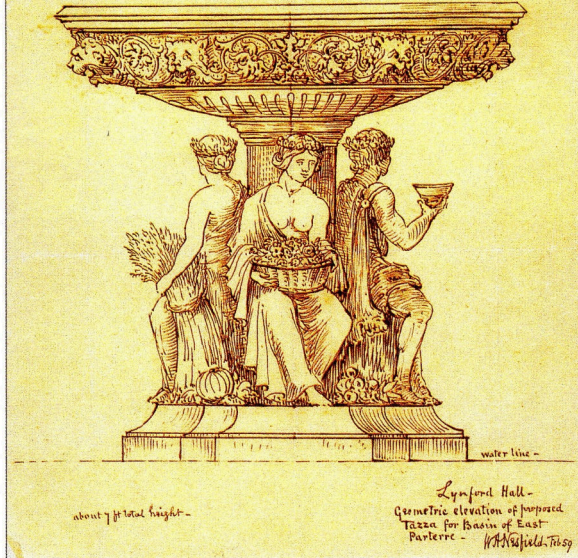
Nesfield could, in fact, turn his hand to any of the specialist jobs which were necessary if his clients' estates were to take on an appearance that would please his "artistic eye". He advised on the siting of entrance gates, coach-houses and lodges, carriage drives and sweeps. He re-routed and altered stretches of water. He built terraces and balustrades. He designed arboretums, rosariums, heatheries, pomariums, kitchen gardens, shrubberies and garden statuary (Fig 4), including the impressive fountains at Castle Howard in Yorkshire, Witley Court in Worcestershire and Holkham Hall in Norfolk.

The development of Nesfield's parterre designs, for which he is best known today, occurred almost by accident. When his brother-in-law, Anthony Salvin—the Gothic revivalist architect, whom Nesfield called "a great schemer"—persuaded him to design intricate parterres to accompany the houses he was building from the 1830s onwards, he did so because he admired Nesfield's draughtsmanship.

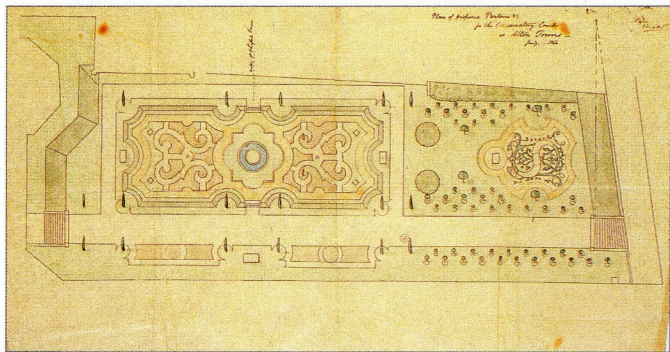
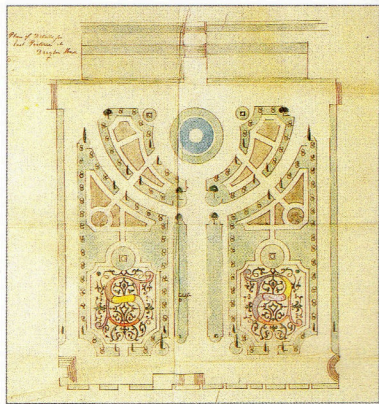
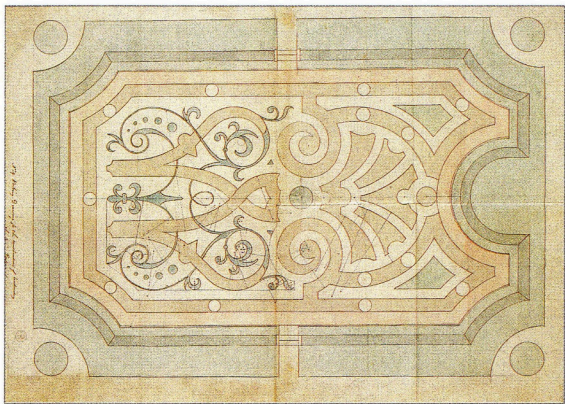
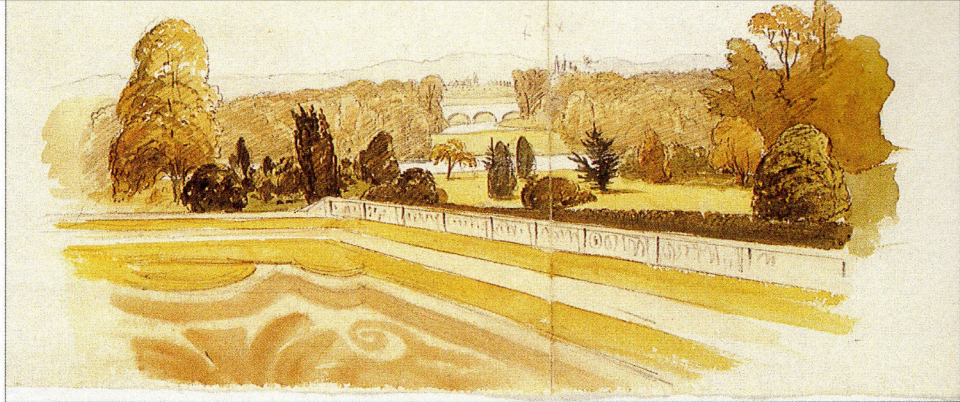
Simple knot gardens had been the mode in Tudor times, but by the latter half of the 17th century the *parterre de broderie* (garden of embroidery), far more complicated and sophisticated, had superseded it. It was to this style that Nesfield turned his attention, incorporating monograms (Figs 8, 9 and 10) and heraldic devices in his parterre designs. This not only enabled him to indulge his skills as a draughtsman, but also meant that he could hold true to his philosophy that the outlying landscape, as well as the area within the environs of the house, should take on the form of a "picture" and thus be in unity with the house, which he considered the most important feature of the scene. To help his clients visualise how the work would look when finished, he drew before-and-after drawings for them—as at Aquale Hall in Staffordshire, the home of Sir Thomas Fletcher Fenton (Figs 5 and 6).

When Nesfield was travelling round the country, he sometimes made use of county maps, marking on them the name of his client and their estate. In some cases, this is the only clue we have to the fact that he was ever there. One contract tended to lead to another, and where there is evidence that Nesfield worked for a client at one place, he would frequently work on another for the same client in a different part of the country—for example, Nesfield worked for Lord Leigh at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire, and





(Top) 4—Nesfield's design for a 7ft-high Classical tazza to complement the east parterre at Lynford Hall, Norfolk. (Middle and above) 5 and 6—Before-and-after drawings presented by Nesfield to his client at Aqualate Hall, Staffordshire, in 1854. He removed trees obstructing the view of the lake from the house, and constructed a formal parterre surrounded by clipped evergreens



(Top) 7—Parterre at Eaton Hall, Cheshire, in a watercolour by Nesfield. The outlying picturesque landscape was an integral part of his compositions. (Middle left) 8—W monogram for the 2nd Marquess of Westminster at Eaton Hall. (Middle right) 9—Double S monogram, for Mrs Stopville Sackville at Drayton House, Northamptonshire. (Above) 10—Single S for Lord Shrewsbury at Alton Towers, Staffordshire



11—Broughton Hall, Yorkshire, for which Nesfield designed several parterres in 1855

also at Adlestrop near Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire.

Gloucestershire was a county where Nesfield worked quite extensively. His map shows that he was at Highgrove, then owned by Mr W. Hamilton Yatman; and in 1858 he was paid £57 18s by James and Emma Dent of Sudeley Castle for his advice on the restoration of the Queen's Garden to its original pattern.

Another important commission was for Cliveden in Buckinghamshire, where the Dowager Duchess of Sutherland called him in. Although no plans have come to light to link him with the great parterre there, Nesfield certainly worked in the area for other clients, notably at Taplow Court, for Mr Greville.

It appears he was not a favourite of the 2nd Duke of Sutherland, who inherited in 1861. As a cryptic note by his second son, Arthur Markham Nesfield, testifies: "At the Duke of Sutherland's was a wood on a hill—which my lady was not very fond of—add to it said my father—you must not take it away. So some hanging woods were staked out to get some antaguerstic lines—it was done but with deer in the park they were obliged to enclose all the new plantations with large hurdles—when the bill came into the Duke he kicked up a thundering row with the Duchess about the expense and after explanations my father got his conge and has never been there since."

Nesfield undertook a little-known but interesting commission for Mark Phillips of Snitterfield Hall in Warwickshire. Phillips had a new Jacobean-style mansion, Welcombe Hall (Fig 1), built in 1869 on the outskirts of Stratford-upon-Avon. Nesfield was called in to design gardens in keeping with the style of the house—possibly because Phillips knew his work at nearby Hampton-in-Arden for Sir

Frederick Peel. Three Nesfields may have worked at Welcombe. There is evidence to suggest that Arthur Markham Nesfield, who joined his father in the business and, until his untimely death in a riding accident, was set to make a great name for himself in landscape design, worked alongside Nesfield senior at Welcombe Hall; and by 1873 his eldest son, William Eden Nesfield, an architect famous in his day for the buildings he designed in the Old English and Queen Anne revivalist styles, was also there.

At Welcombe and elsewhere, Nesfield used clipped evergreens to surround his formal designs, leading down to the open aspects which he thought were essential if the whole scene—formal in the environs of the house, naturalistic in the distance (Fig 7)—were to make a picturesque view from the principal rooms of the mansion.

The gardens at Welcombe have recently been restored by the designer and architectural consultant Christopher Hobson for Orient Express Hotels, which now manages the property. Mr Hobson has laid out terraced formal gardens to the rear of the house (Fig 3), leaving many of the original features in place, such as statuary, tazzas, terracing and steps (Fig 2). These have survived from Nesfield's original designs, as has the Italian Garden.

This is almost certainly due to the fact that whenever possible Nesfield persuaded his clients to let him substitute stone kerbs for the usual box to outline the formal beds. He told his patrons that this would save them money in the long run. At Oxon Hoath in Kent, where he worked for Sir William Geary, Bt, in the 1840s, Nesfield designed a parterre and rosarium; a plan of May 1847 shows that the scheme was revised to incorporate stone kerbs instead of the usual box edging.

There are still many gaps in our

knowledge of the career of this most industrious of men, and question marks hang over how much work he undertook. One of the most intriguing questions is whether he was involved with the gardens at Bodryddan Hall in North Wales (Fig 12), where his eldest son, William Eden Nesfield, was called in during the early 1870s to design a Queen Anne wing to the house for Capt. Conwy Greville Hercules Rowley-Conwy. The parterre is still *in situ* and beautifully maintained. The question is, did William Andrews Nesfield or his son Eden design it, or was it a combination of both men's talents?

It has been assumed that few of Nesfield's designs remained intact, the main survival being that at Broughton Hall in Yorkshire (Fig 11). But there is now evidence to suggest that he could have been involved with more than 260 estates in Britain, and one wonders how many more examples there are, waiting to be discovered.

I was told a story of how one of Nesfield's friends once asked him how he could continue making so many fresh plans, each one with a different design. He produced a large book filled with his designs, and said: "Look friend, when I have exhausted and adapted all these to suit my purposes, I should by that time be a very old man." The communicator of this story added: "As Mr. Nesfield passed away years ago, I have often wondered to whom he bequeathed that famous book."

Photographs: Mark Fienes.

There is a bicentenary conference on W. A. Nesfield in York on July 29–31 (details: Nesfield Bicentenary Conference, Centre for the Conservation of Historic Parks and Gardens, The King's Manor, York). An exhibition on Nesfield will be held in Durham University Library from August 8 to October 29; and copies of his watercolours will go on permanent display at Willey Court, Worcestershire, in June.



12—Elegant, scroll-design parterre with a central fountain surrounded by clipped evergreens at Bodryddan Hall in North Wales. This was designed to complement the Queen Anne wing on the south side of the house, designed by William Eden Nesfield in the 1870s