

Under the Hawthorn in the Dale Brief for Poet 2019

The pastoral idyll in the landscape at Stowe

Stowe is looking for a poet with experience of socially engaged practice to hold a residency in the summer of 2019. The successful poet will lead creative writing workshops and develop new work in response to the pastoral idyll as exemplified in Stowe's Grecian Valley.

We are looking for a poet who is able to demonstrate a range of poetic styles, with a track record of working with a range of age groups and backgrounds. Experience of working in a heritage environment and published writing about the outdoors would be an advantage.

The commission will form part of Stowe's annual programme and will help our Transformation project achieve its vision:

Transformation Project Vision: *"Stowe will become a cultural destination where everyone feels welcome. The vast garden will offer a strong connection with the outdoors and the universal themes in its design will spark imagination, ignite creativity and provoke thought, promoting health and wellbeing and a sense of belonging for current and new audiences."*



Above: view of the Grecian Temple (now the Temple of Concord and Victory) by Thomas Medland and right: a shepherdess in the Fane of Pastoral Poetry



Background

Pastoralism was fashionable in eighteenth century elite culture and was expressed through poetry, literature, music and art. The genre celebrated the countryside as a rural idyll, a place inhabited by shepherds and shepherdesses living simply and in harmony with nature. Pastoral imagery is incorporated into the landscape at Stowe through statuary and views of the garden as well as views into the parkland, which provides garden visitors with a glimpse of the simple, rural life of the land. Alongside this, there is also a significant volume of eighteenth century poetry (and other

creative writing) associated with Stowe (by Milton, West, Pope etc.). Some of these poems describe the landscape, and others act as a guide for visitors in the landscape.

The title of the commission – Under the Hawthorn in the Dale - is taken from L'Allegro, a pastoral poem by John Milton, which describes an idyllic landscape where milkmaids sing, mowers scythe and “every shepherd tells his tale under the hawthorn in the dale”.



Above left: view from the Grecian Temple of Cobham's Pillar and the Gothic Temple by JC Nattes and right: the Fane of Pastoral Poetry

Stowe

Stowe is a 250 acre landscape garden outside the town of Buckingham. Commissioned by Lord Cobham and now known as the birthplace of the English Landscape Garden movement, the most prestigious designers, gardeners and architects of the 18th century, including John Vanbrugh, James Gibbs, William Kent, Charles Bridgeman, and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown all worked at Stowe. The New Inn, now our visitor centre, was built by Lord Cobham and began welcoming visitors to Stowe, a very early tourist attraction, in the 1720s.

The Grecian Valley

Laying out of the Grecian Valley began in 1747 towards the end of Lord Cobham's life and during Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's tenure as Head Gardener. The concept of liberty, Britain's status as a trading nation and the fashion for making real an imagined rural, idyll are all illustrated in the design of this part of the landscape.

Though Brown developed the Grecian Valley, it is not known to whose designs he was working; the head gardener may well have been responsible for the idea, but may also have been following plans drawn by his predecessors. Moreover, it is thought that the Grecian Valley, where the shadow of a body of water persists, remains unfinished.

After Lord Cobham's death in 1749, his nephew, Earl Temple, inherited the estate and embarked on his own programme of works in the landscape. Earl Temple continued to develop the Grecian Valley, overwriting some of Lord Cobham's ideas.

The Brief

The project aims to provide the selected poet with the opportunity to become immersed in the landscape of the Grecian Valley to become inspired to produce a contemporary response to the 18th Century rural idyll. The resulting work will be available for visitors to experience as part of a new tour of the Grecian Valley in the autumn of 2019 and as a public performance on National Poetry Day on Thursday 3rd October. The work will also be available in printed format for visitors to buy in the shop.

The poet will lead between four and five workshops at Stowe, encouraging participants to respond to various locations in the Grecian Valley chosen collaboratively by the Stowe team and the poet. The workshops will take place from 10am to 3pm and each will be followed by a short evaluation exercise facilitated by volunteers.

Two of the workshops will be with two selected community groups which aim to deliver mental health and wellbeing benefits to their members. These workshops will be preceded by preparatory sessions delivered offsite by the Stowe Community Engagement Team on the premises of the group in question. The purpose of these offsite introductory sessions will be to provide the group with a less pressured transition into engaging with us creatively and to make them feel more welcome when they come to Stowe.

In addition there will be one ticketed workshop for the general public a workshop for National Trust staff and volunteers. (If there is demand for a further staff workshop this will be negotiated).

The objectives of the workshops are

- To spark people's imagination and ignite their curiosity
- To encourage reflection on the universal themes in the design of the garden
- To help participants connect with nature and the great outdoors
- To give them the confidence to express themselves through poetry
- To make people feel welcome at Stowe and feel a sense of belonging
- To increase sense of wellbeing

The poet will use the outputs from these workshops alongside his/her own work to develop a new poetic response to the Grecian Valley.

Poetic content from the commission will be used in a new tour of the Grecian Valley focused on pastoralism. The aim of the tour is to give visitors a sense of Stowe as a retreat from urban life while bearing in mind that eighteenth century rural life was probably not, in fact, all rosy. It will afford visitors supported exploration of this area, ensuring they see its most significant (and sometimes hidden) parts and that they can access its different meanings. It will allow visitors to read these meanings in the landscape, and to connect the space and its meanings to their everyday lives.

This tour will allow visitors to experience, explore and understand the boundary between rural, natural and designed landscapes, a key feature of the fashion for the rural idyll. In another sense,

the tour will allow today's visitors space to consider and explore simplicity and nature in their own lives.

The commissioned poet will always keep in mind Stowe's Spirit of Place.

Stowe's spirit of place:

"Gardening on the grandest scale"

Stowe is truly a garden of international significance where the art form of landscape gardening was pioneered and developed. Originally created in the 18th century as a consequence of wealth and privilege, full of meaning and shaped by political rivalries and influence, its intriguing history is interwoven with stories of its creation, extravagance, revival and restoration. Considered to be the epitome of good taste, Stowe inspired the foremost innovative, intellectual and creative minds of the time, indeed the 'gardening glitterati'. As one of the earliest tourist attractions Stowe became a cultural point of reference commanding much attention and visitors today continue to walk in the footsteps of the many early tourists who stayed at New Inn to marvel at the wonder of this monumental landscape.

Lord Cobham and Earl Temple's gardens were designed to make a statement, on approach, the glimpse of splendour and opulence which reveals itself through the imposing Corinthian Arch continues to excite and surprise. The Grecian Valley and the Parkland are amongst Lancelot 'Capability' Brown's most influential pieces of work with Bridgeman's early layout and Kent's Rococo scenery and with its majestic architectural features; Stowe today provides a fascinating combination that can be found in no other single place.

There are many different layers of Stowe to unwrap from being overwhelmed by its awe inspiring splendour and scale to delving into the intriguing journey of its history, its meaning and the people who have influenced and shaped this grandest of gardens.

Phase 1: May - June 2019

The aim of the first phase is to offer a poet development time and space to

- develop an understanding of the history and meanings of the Grecian Valley – especially with regard to the pastoral idyll
- to develop an understanding (with NT staff) of the framework of the new tour and the parts which require poetic input
- to prepare for the workshops in July
- to work on his/her own poetic response to the Grecian Valley, drawing inspiration from its buildings and statues, as well its wildlife, views and planting.

Phase 2: July –August 2019

The aim of the second phase is the delivery of:

- Between four and five workshops in the Grecian Valley in the first half of July
 - 1 x public workshops in the Grecian Valley
 - 1 x staff and volunteer workshop

- 2 x workshops with two selected community groups
- The completion of a new work combining outputs from the workshops and the poet's own response
- The introduction of poetic content into the new Grecian Valley Tour (poet to be involved in an advisory capacity and possibly for voice recordings)
- The design and printing of a booklet for sale in the shop at Stowe (poet to be involved in an advisory capacity)

Phase 3: September –October 2019

A performance of work arising from the residency on National Poetry Day on Thursday 3rd October (possibly involving community group)

Things to consider:

- As part of the Grecian Valley programme we are hoping to hold a series of talks about the fashion for pastoral in the 18th Century and its relevance to Stowe. The poet need not be involved but should be aware.
- Part of the legacy of this project will be ongoing poetry workshops run by volunteers. The poet should therefore be prepared to work with Stowe volunteers during the residency to prepare them for this role.
- The poet will be required to provide input into marketing materials e.g. interviews for social media
- The Stowe team will also explore opportunities to take some of the produced content or performances offsite to reach audiences in our surrounding communities.

Audiences

We anticipate that the commission, through its contribution to the new Grecian Valley tours, will attract new audiences to this part of the gardens, which is currently experienced by only 25-30% of our visitors.

We hope to reach a variety of audiences, both new and established, through different tour formats, in particular

- People who appreciate culture and heritage and enjoy learning new things
- Families with teenagers who enjoy exploring in the great outdoors and getting in touch with nature
- Urban audiences from our target areas of Northampton, Milton Keynes. Banbury and Aylesbury

Our chosen community groups are likely to comprise people from an urban area whom we would like to encourage to access nature and the outdoors at Stowe, particularly for mental health purposes.

Fee

£250 a day + expenses up to £50 a day

Total fee and expenses to be no more than £5k

Key Dates

Friday 3rd May 2019	Deadline for submission of proposals
Friday 10th May 2019	Poet appointed
11th May-June 2018	Phase 1 - development
July – August 2018	Phase 2 –workshops and delivery of new poetry and poetic input into Grecian Valley tours
Thursday 3rd October 2019	Performance for National Poetry Day

How to apply

If you are interested in being considered for this role please send us the following

- A CV or biographical statement
- A response to the brief /expression of interest (max 500 words + relevant examples)
- A proposed working pattern and budget breakdown

If you would like a guided tour Grecian Valley, please let us know and we can arrange for a volunteer to take you round.

Email to: anne.french@nationaltrust.org.uk

Closing date: Friday 3rd May 2019