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# GARDEN DESIGN JOURNAL

## GOING, GOING... GONE?

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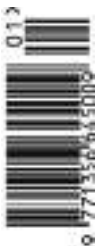
SOCIETY OF  
GARDEN +  
LANDSCAPE  
DESIGNERS



UK DESIGN  
ROUSHAM: A LANDSCAPE  
UNDER THREAT

PROFESSIONAL SKILLS  
TAKING A  
CAREER BREAK

LEGACY DESIGN  
THE TIME FOR *TABULA*  
RASA HAS PASSED



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Above: the view from the seven-arched colonnade known as the Praeneste, looking across the River Cherwell towards the old airfield at Upper Heyford, where a development of some 13,000 or more houses is planned. Right: Peter Scheemakers' statue of *Lion Attacking a Horse* at the end of the Bowling Green with, beyond it, the Cuttle mill and beyond that, William Kent's Eyecatcher, perched on a hill. Below: Sheemakers' *The Dying Gladiator*, situated in the Upper Garden, the balustrade of which is in fact the roof of the Praeneste.



#### YANIV KORMAN

is a London-based landscape researcher and designer specialising in the archaeology, restoration, and interpretation of historic gardens. He is Heritage Landscape Manager at Tom Stuart-Smith Studio and lead landscape architect for the Casa della Regina Carolina restoration at Pompeii. His research and illustrations can be found at the research institute Dumbarton Oaks, on the landscape architecture platform *Landezine*, in the fine art news magazine *Art & Object*, and in academic journals.

# DEVELOPMENT MUST NOT SILENCE HERITAGE

The landscape garden at Rousham in Oxfordshire is no enclosed paradise. An essential feature of William Kent's vision is that the garden merges seamlessly with the natural beauty of the surrounding countryside, for all to enjoy. Now, however, a vast swathe of that nature and Kent's vistas are under threat from a great spread of speculative housing. **Yaniv Korman** puts the case against

Even the December rain could not obscure the views at Rousham. William Kent's sham ruin, known as the Eyecatcher, and the medieval Heyford Bridge and its causeway drew my eye across the bucolic fields and mist-wreathed dells. As I wandered among mossy trunks and slick garden paths, the wider countryside withdrew and reappeared at carefully chosen moments, each framed with its own particular grace. The landscape became an interlocutor, offering fresh understanding with every encounter.

That experience is now in real danger, I was told by Rousham's Head Gardener, Ann Starling, whose family has lived and worked on the estate for four generations in a legacy of devoted stewardship rather than ownership. She spoke bluntly as the rain fell like tears. A development proposed for the former RAF Upper Heyford base nearby threatens what Kent designed.

Potentially, 13,000 homes, commercial buildings, and large wind turbines are intended to be built, positioned directly within Rousham's borrowed views.

Britain needs housing but as Ann explains, 'without proper infrastructure, all that is being created is another commuter settlement that depends entirely on cars'.

Going through the documentation that has been submitted as part of the application to the planning department at Cherwell District Council, it is difficult to judge the true scale of what this new development would mean for Rousham.

To understand what stands to be lost, though, one must experience how Rousham unfolds. Garden historian Tim Richardson describes the upper garden as 'a kind of PTSD landscape' that was shaped by the emotional aftershocks of its owner General James Dormer's military life, a career scarred by wounds, periods of captivity and the searing memory of watching his brother fall beside him in battle.

The statuary one encounters on arrival at Rousham reinforces this impression. The Bowling Green holds 'an absolutely horrendous image of a screaming stallion in the jaws of a lion', one that is followed by a vision of *The Dying Gladiator* surveying his battle-scarred terrain from the Praeneste. The Upper Garden is made grotesque, visceral, and unforgettable.

As one descends through the wooded landscape beyond, the tone shifts from violence to myth. Venus and Pan appear in clearings, Antinous stands across the Cherwell, and the Temple of Echo emerges under a large cedar. The Lower Garden blends pastoral charm with playfulness. As landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan explains, 'Kent has an underlying sense of fun. Rousham is a bold and imaginative garden that draws us in and compels us to move. Here every garden visitor is an actor on an ingenious garden stage. Here every viewpoint, from the Praeneste to the cascades, the Cold Bath and the Temple of Echo, frames a multiplicity of views, creating a continuous sequence of discovery.'

This interlocking system of views has a classical precedent. Longstaffe-Gowan compares the layout of the gardens to the layout of ancient Greek and Roman theatres, where the open backdrop allowed the surrounding landscape to complete the scene. At Rousham, the borrowed horizon is not merely decorative; it is structural, shaping the garden as a sequence of unfolding spaces.

This is why landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith FSGLD describes Rousham as 'a demotic garden. Kent intended it to be inclusive. He imagined farmers wandering through. It is a landscape open to everyone! That openness remains tangible today. Visitors enter via an honesty box system – there is neither a tearoom, nor a gift shop, nor barriers. Unlike many 18th-century estates, it was conceived to borrow the surrounding countryside, using distant fields as part of its spatial language. Altering the horizon would disrupt the very mechanism through which the garden works.

Despite this, the heritage assessment submitted as part of the planning application concedes that any screening will work best during summer months, meaning that winter will expose the full impact of any development.

Visual studies omit important viewpoints, and there is no night-time assessment addressing the effects of lighting on wildlife or on the garden's quiet character.

Francis Hamel, a painter and local resident, sees the conflict in starker terms. 'This debate is not about socialist housing policy versus landowners. It is about the greed of property developers against the generosity of a place that is open all the time and believes in sharing with a very broad demographic of people.' →

The original village plan, proposed by the developer, has grown to potentially 13,000 homes, which means at least 26,000 extra cars and industrial lorries, most of them crossing the medieval Heyford Bridge and causeway that appears throughout Kent's views. The legacy of lorries arriving during construction rarely vanishes: such routes become permanent fixtures on navigation systems, creating lasting damage to historic infrastructure and village life.

The developer's transport plan assumes residents will cycle to an enlarged Heyford Station, but Hamel is doubtful. He argues the station should remain modest, acting as a natural bottleneck while directing residents towards Bicester's existing infrastructure. 'We do not know where [the plans] will stop,' Ann echoes.

What troubles Hamel most is the piecemeal approach to assessment. An historic theme park, a rail freight interchange, a new town, massive logistics centres – each application evaluated separately. 'No one is really looking at the cumulative effect,' he says, even though the National Planning Policy Framework requires exactly that.

Yet Hamel's concern is not primarily procedural. It is about what kind of country we are building. 'Rousham could have done the same thing: converted the barns, put in bouncy castles, enlarged the car park, and done what every other garden seems keen to do, turning itself into a way of taking money from people. Instead, it has remained committed to an aesthetic and generous principle: sharing an unspoiled place.'

This principle has galvanised a broad heritage response. Designers, historians, archaeologists, ecologists, local residents, and national advisers have all raised the alarm. The Friends of Rousham have created a website gathering testimonials, a petition has been written, and responses are being submitted to Cherwell District Council. Among those who have joined the effort is garden historian Advolly Richmond, who wrote about the threat in the Garden Collective, arguing that those who care for places like Rousham are 'keeping it for the nation, for future generations'. Her promise is simple: 'Not on our watch.'

If Upper Heyford is designated a new town, the decision-making will shift to national level, likely involving Historic England and the housing ministry. The message from the Friends of Rousham is clear: development must begin with the landscape; it must not be treated as an afterthought. Height, massing, transport patterns, ecology, and the distinctive creative vision that has survived for nearly three centuries must all be respected.

Ascending from the Cherwell, towards the Bowling Green last weekend, the rain finally stopped. Sunlight broke through, igniting the washed fields in pale gold. I paused to photograph the Lion and Horse, trying to hold Kent's Eyecatcher in frame – an attempt to capture what cannot quite be contained. What struck me was not grandeur but intimacy: centuries of quiet care preserved in moss and stone and sightline.

Kent understood landscape as dialogue, not decree. A living exchange between past and present, between what we inherit and what we choose to protect. The question now is whether that dialogue continues or ends. Development need not silence heritage if we recognise that places such as Rousham are invitations to progress, not obstacles. A nation's future is deepened, not diminished, by honouring what came before.



Above: the early 18th-century lead figure of Mercury, probably by John Van Nost, one of three statues that stand in what remains of Charles Bridgeman's 1720s layout of an amphitheatre, overlooking the Cherwell. Left: the 16th-century Heyford Bridge, which crosses the Cherwell, is a Grade II-listed structure.

## KENT UNDERSTOOD LANDSCAPE AS DIALOGUE, NOT DECREE. A LIVING EXCHANGE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT.

The Dorchester Group, the property developer behind the Upper Heyford scheme, did not respond to requests for comment. A spokesperson for Cherwell District Council said: 'Consideration of the application and the potential impacts of the proposed development, including whether or not there would be any adverse effects on Rousham House, Rousham Gardens, and Rousham Conservation Area, along with all other relevant heritage assets, is ongoing. The conclusions will be reported to the council's planning committee in due course.' ●

**At the time of publication, the planning committee had met in December, but the timeline for a final decision remains unclear.**

*Those wishing to support the campaign can sign the petition at [c.org/GQjbqz24gd](https://c.org/GQjbqz24gd), follow the Friends of Rousham on Instagram, or visit the website, [friendsofrousham.co.uk/get-in-touch](https://friendsofrousham.co.uk/get-in-touch).*

*Readers can also share their views at [gdj@jamespembroke.com](mailto:gdj@jamespembroke.com).*