

dynamic of the subject and is part of the dialogue between the past and the present. New historic recreations provide the opportunity to study the gardens of the past and to think about our changing ideas of garden history. They are not restorations of existing gardens which are based on detailed archival and archaeological research, such as the Privy Garden at Hampton Court or the restoration of the Nesfield Avenue in Regent's Park. The Geffrye Museum in Hackney stands in a valuable inner-city green space and one of the first capital improvements there since it became a trust was the opening of the Herb Garden in 1992. The furniture collection at the museum is arranged in period rooms and the long term hope is to link these period rooms with period garden rooms running along the rear of the Museum. The first of these, the Knot Garden, has just been laid out with gravel, box hedges and santolina, to a design taken from the decorative parquetry of an oak livery cupboard dating from 1620 in the Elizabethan room. As is appropriate, the Knot Garden is being designed to be seen from above and an excellent view is provided from the windows of the coffee bar in the Museum. Other plans for the future include a seventeenth-century garden room with formal beds and arbours and an eighteenth-century landscape with a vista. Considerable research is already available on nineteenth-century Hackney gardens and this room could display some of the ideas concerning bedding. The final garden room would be a twentieth-century garden, perhaps based upon Digging for Victory which was so widely publicised during the Second World War.

These new developments are just some of the exciting developments that are taking place in London's parks today. The extent to which they represent new thinking on the design and use of our public parks, or new thinking on the history of gardens, will have to wait until the projects are completed.

PRECAUTIONS FOR PRIVACY: *The 'MOLE DUKE'S' SECRET GARDEN at HARCOURT HOUSE, CAVENDISH SQUARE*
By Tim Knox

Perhaps the most private and inaccessible of all London gardens was that which lay behind Harcourt House, a gloomy eighteenth-century *hotel particulier* which occupied almost the entire west side of Cavendish Square until its demolition in 1906. Harcourt House cannot be said to have enjoyed its situation overlooking one of London's grandest and most prestigious squares (fig. 9). Instead it presented to the world a dreary expanse of high brick wall, pierced by a pair of stout panelled gates topped by iron spikes. From behind these fortifications peeped the frowning stucco façade of the mansion itself. No wonder James Ralph described it in *A Critical Review of the Publick Buildings, Statues and Ornaments in, and about, London & Westminster* (1734) as 'one of the most singular pieces of architecture about town ... it is rather like a convent than a residence of a man of quality'.

Harcourt House, originally known as Bingley House, was built for Robert Benson, the 1st and last Lord Bingley, in 1726-27. Baroque features, like the curved screen walls which flanked its entrance, once caused the house to be associated with the architect Thomas Archer, but its design is now generally given to Lord Bingley himself - a well-known architectural amateur. Lord Bingley died in 1731 and the house was occupied by a succession of tenants until 1773 when it was bought by the 1st Earl Harcourt and renamed Harcourt House. In 1825 the lease fell in and it reverted to the ground landlords, the Dukes of Portland, owners of the Harley Saint Marylebone estate, and became their principal London townhouse. Although rechristened 'Portland House', the name never caught on, and it is as Harcourt House that the mansion is generally known to posterity.

Although much remodelled outside and in, Harcourt House was always distinguished by a sombre superannuated stateliness which caused Walpole to christen it 'the Hotel d'Harcourt' and comment upon its 'grand air and a kind of Louis XIV old-fashioned quality that pleases me'. Indeed, by the nineteenth-

century, Harcourt House had become celebrated for its dismal grandeur and for its extreme inaccessibility. Thackeray made it the model for 'Gaunt House' in *Vanity Fair* (1847) and in the 1870s Edward Walford thought it 'a dull, heavy, drowsy-looking house' and remarked upon 'an air of seclusion and privacy almost monastic'.

Shortly before its destruction in 1906, E. Beresford Chancellor actually got inside. He recalled in his book, *The Private Palaces of London* (1908), that:

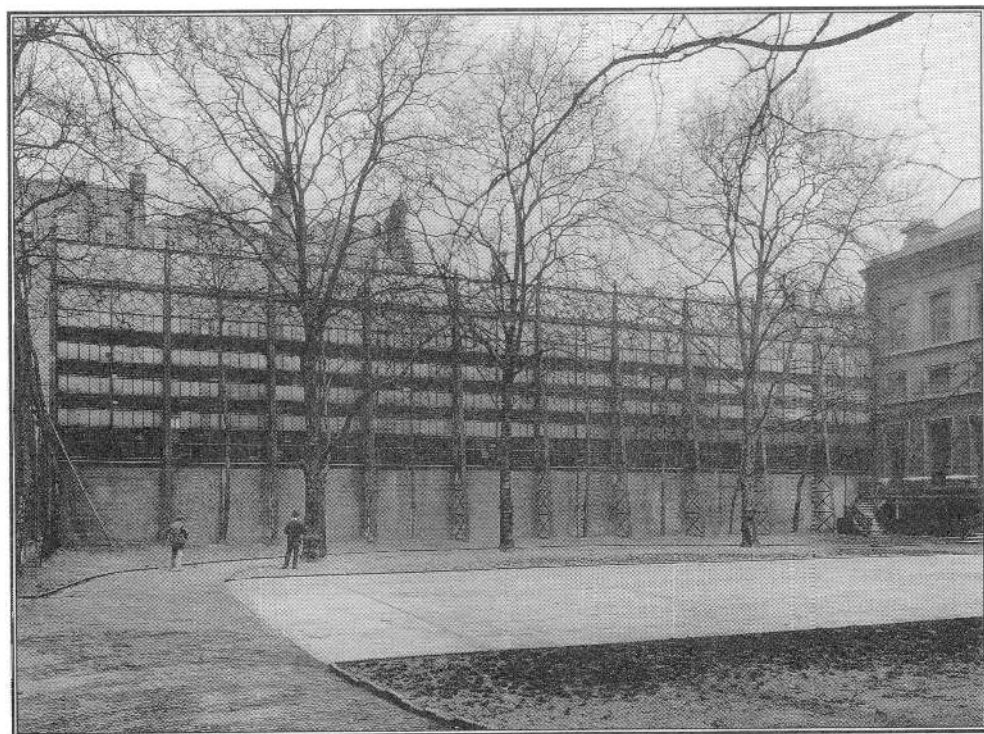
'...nothing could have exceeded the dreariness of its interior, except perhaps the gloom which sat perpetually on its outward walls. The very size of its rooms, and the remains of their former magnificence, with their elaborately carved and moulded cornices; their ceilings painted *en grisaille* and their fine old chimneypieces, added to the sense of desolation which seemed to have irrevocably settled on the whole place.'

If the front of Harcourt House was uninviting, the gardens, which lay to the rear of the mansion, seemed even more determined to repel public curiosity (*fig. 10*). Harcourt House garden was large and extended from the back of the house the whole length of the site to Wimpole Street. John Rocque's *Plan of the Cities of London & Westminster* (1746) shows the mid-eighteenth century gardens of 'Bingley House' as walled and elaborately laid out with formal beds or 'quadrants of turf flanked by lines of trees. At the end of the garden, the portion towards the as yet largely undeveloped Wigmore Street was a semi-circular bow or exedra, also planted with trees. This feature is not shown in Richard Horwood's 1792 map of London and had been replaced by a straight wall running along Wimpole Street. The elaborate beds shown in Rocque's survey had also been considerably simplified and a path ran around the perimeter of the garden. In both maps the flanks of the garden are shown as being planted with a row of trees and these presumably helped to screen the garden from being overlooked by the houses which backed onto the garden to the south and the north. It was the close and unwelcome proximity of the houses fronting Wigmore Street and Henrietta Street - tenants, it should be noted, of the Duke of Portland's Harley estate - that led to the creation of what must be the most singular feature of the garden of Harcourt House.

Although the 4th Duke of Portland and all previous occupants of Harcourt House had relied upon the trees to shield their private garden from the inquisitive residents of Wigmore and Henrietta Streets, this precaution was not enough for the next owner of the house, the eccentric and reclusive 5th Duke of Portland, who succeeded to the title in 1854. Notoriously shy, it was he who, in 1862, ordered the construction of two great iron and glass screens to block out the views from the adjoining houses. As is recorded in old photographs, these extraordinary erections - 80 feet high and 200 feet long - surmounted the walls which separated Harcourt House garden from its immediate neighbours to the south and north. Iron tracery of a vaguely ornamental character enclosed panes of 'Hartley's fluted glass' which enabled light to penetrate, but screened the ducal garden from its neighbours. The lower part of each structure was pierced by four horizontal strips of louvres, presumably to permit the circulation of air, and the parapet was ameliorated by urn finials and fancy curlicues of scroll-work cresting.

Despite these thoughtful ornamental garnishings, some of the residents of Wigmore and Henrietta Streets understandably took objection to the new screens and protested. Amongst the correspondence of the 5th Duke in Nottingham University Library are letters from the disgruntled neighbours. One, a Mr Hugh Sanders, complained that the screen darkened the rooms of his house and sought compensation in the form of a more favourable lease. Another, Dr Radcliffe of Henrietta Street, went so far as to file a Bill in Chancery in May 1862 protesting against the screens and seeking to prevent their completion. The Duke's lawyers, Messrs Bailey, Shaw, Smith & Bailey, consulted expert opinion and the Chief Surveyor of St Pancras himself gave evidence. He told the court that as the screens were made of iron and glass, 'there was no obstruction whatever of a solid character, and that the old boundary walls have not been heightened by a single brick'. Dr Radcliffe withdrew his case and construction proceeded unhindered.

In addition to the screens, the western end of the Duke's secret garden - the bottom of the garden where a brick wall ran along Wimpole Street - was sealed by the construction of yet



9. Harcourt House looking from Cavendish Square, c.1906.

(COURTESY OF WESTMINSTER CITY ARCHIVES, ASHBRIDGE COLLECTION, 160/CAV)

10. Harcourt House: the garden, showing the 3rd Duke of Portland's protective screens, c.1906.

(COURTESY OF WESTMINSTER CITY ARCHIVES, ASHBRIDGE COLLECTION, 160/CAV)

another defensive measure. Although it merely masked a range of low practical structures for the stabling of horses and carriages (built by Samuel Ware in the 1840s), Harcourt House stables presented to Wimpole Street an immense architectural front, towering up to the same height as the glass screens, pierced by functionless 'windows' of ground glass (fig. 11). The short gap between the stable façade and the glass screens bristled with a thicket of prickly ironwork and in the same year a further refinement was introduced with the construction, probably by George Legg of 14 Westbourne Place (who submitted a specification for the work in May 1862), of a tunnel or 'subway' connecting the house to its stables - eliminating the need for any of the staff to cross the garden. Thus did the noble proprietor of Harcourt House render his gardens still more private and secluded.

The creator of the extraordinary arrangements behind Harcourt House was William John Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, 5th Duke of Portland, known as the *Mole Duke* on account of the extraordinary excavations which he undertook beneath Welbeck Abbey, his seat in Nottinghamshire. At Welbeck he constructed a network of huge subterranean rooms, including a ballroom, hunting stables and numerous household offices, as well as a system of tunnels and passages beneath the park. This he surrounded with high walls, and the Duke built over forty lodges to deter entry within its precincts. According to one contemporary, quoted in the Duke's obituary in *The Times*:

'Hundreds of labourers were employed in this and other work on the estate in hand at good wages, but on one condition - no one was to speak to him or salute him. The man who touched his hat was at once discharged. The village doctor and the parson had the same orders. The tenants were informed of the Duke's wishes, and if they met him they were to pass him "as they would a tree".'

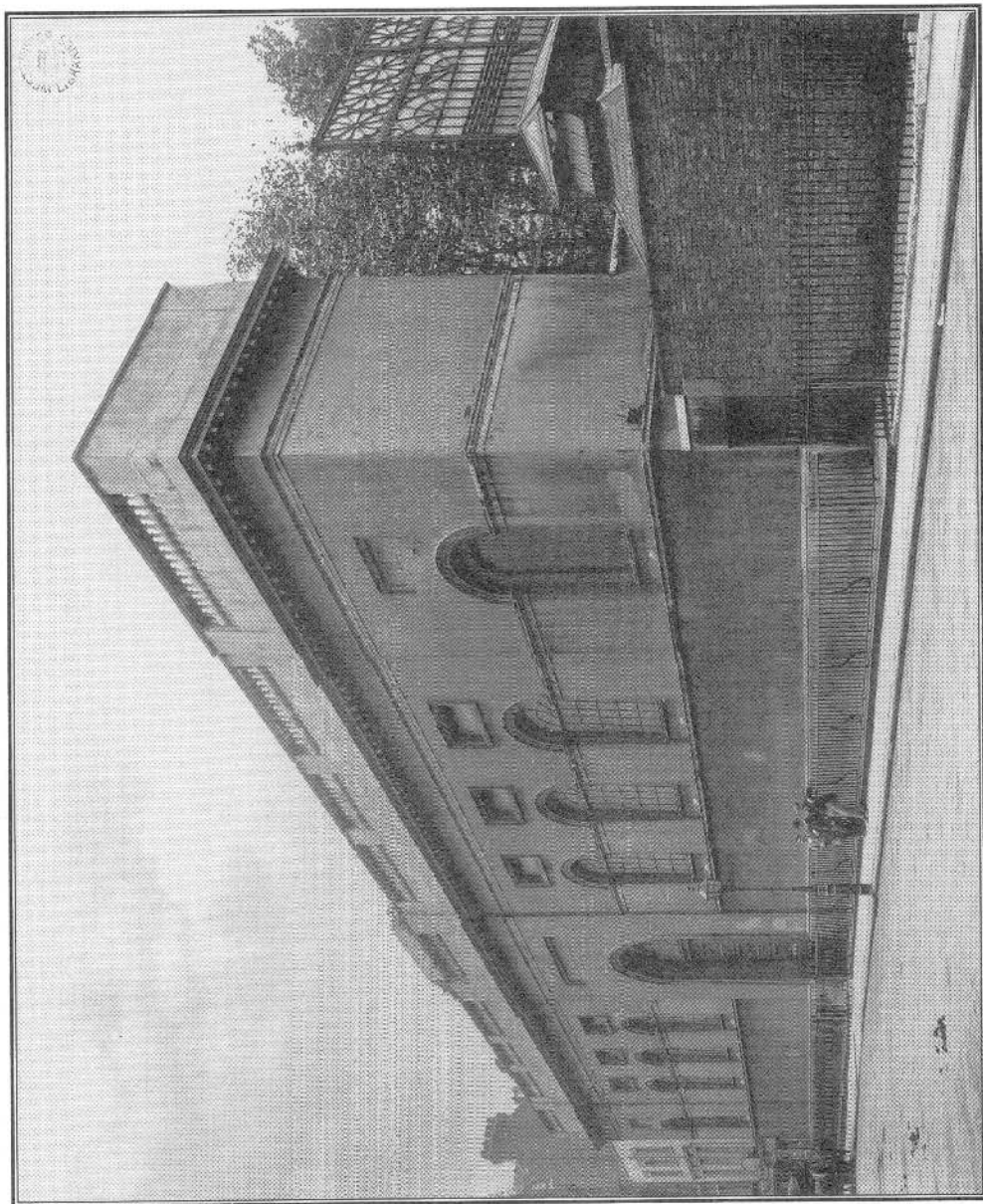
His kinswoman, Lady Ottoline Morrell, wrote in her *Memoirs* (published 1963):

'the old Duke was so absorbed with his vast work of digging-out and building underground rooms and tunnels that he was oblivious of everything else. He pursued this hobby at the cost of every human feeling, and without any idea of beauty, a lonely self-isolated man. It was always thought that his love of tunnels was due to a dislike of being seen.'

The Duke's extreme shyness naturally gave rise to rumours that he was suffering some terrible disfigurement or disease. On his death in 1879, *The Times* discreetly attributed his reclusiveness 'mainly to the state of his health' but it was widely believed that he suffered from a hereditary skin disease of an unusual kind. Cyril Phillips Bryan, author of *Roundabout Harley Street* (1932), asserted that 'naturally of a retiring disposition, the Duke was also extremely sensitive of the presence of a skin eruption on his face', but when Lady Ottoline Morrell questioned his old servants she was assured that he had a 'delicate and lovely' complexion. Whatever the Duke's ailment, when encountered his personal appearance was generally considered to be singular. It was reported in the *Daily Chronicle*, 15 March 1898, that:

'he habitually wore a hat approaching two feet in height, which rested on a long, old-fashioned wig. The Duke never stirred out, wet or fine, without a quaint old umbrella, and no matter how hot the weather might be a loose coat was always slung over his arm. Most curious of all, whether the ground was dry or muddy, he invariably had his trousers tied round a few inches from the bottom with a piece of common string, in precisely the same fashion as a navy at his work.'

Despite his mania for seclusion, this bizarre personage spent a considerable amount of time at Harcourt House, travelling between Welbeck and London in a closed carriage, its green silk blinds tightly drawn, borne on a railway truck at the end of a train. As at Welbeck, the high walls, screens and tunnels at Harcourt House ensured that the Duke remained unseen and undisturbed. According to Bryan, 'even his exercise he took in his own grounds, driving round and round the gardens of Portland House'. Inspection of the first edition *Ordnance Survey* map of the area (c.1862) would seem to confirm this claim; a broad path is shown circling the perimeter of the garden, its central area planted with trees and the borders given over to shrubberies. This is corroborated by the few extant photographs of the garden, taken shortly before its demolition and now in Westminster City Archives, which show the wide brick path edged with terracotta borders. However, apart from a few blackened trees, the garden is virtually devoid of plants. Starved patches of sooty grass emerge here and there from the central plat, but even this is largely cemented over. It looks exactly like a



11. Harcourt House: façade of the stables to Wimpole Street
- a low range of one-storey buildings lay behind it, c.1906.
(COURTESY OF WESTMINSTER CITY ARCHIVES, ASHBIDGE COLLECTION, 160/CAV)

prison exercise yard - which, in a sense, was precisely what it was.

Although the screens which surrounded the garden at Harcourt House are recorded in photographs and were the source of much local gossip and speculation, little is known about who was responsible for their design and construction. The London papers of the Dukes of Portland are in the course of being catalogued and until then remain largely inaccessible in the Manuscripts Department of Nottingham University Library. However, accounts and estimates for works carried out at Welbeck Abbey and elsewhere for the Duke by the architect Charles J. Neale in the years 1854-67 may provide a clue as to the authorship of the screens. Despite the claims of the Nottingham correspondent of the *Daily Chronicle* (15 March 1898) that 'all plans and models of buildings [at Welbeck] were prepared by [the Duke] himself', it is clear that Neale was largely responsible for putting his patron's eccentric architectural ideas into practice. The extensive use of glass at Welbeck - the underground rooms with top-lighting, a glazed corridor for statues and a ballroom lined with mirrors - invites parallels with the glazed screens erected in London and it is highly possible that they were all carried out under the supervision of the same architect. Neale was certainly involved with the construction of buildings of this type; in the spring of 1860 he charged for 'many conferences with Messrs Turner of London, the Butterley Company and Messrs Hill and Smith' (well known manufacturers of iron and glass conservatories) in connection with the glass roof of 'the new Riding House' at Welbeck and in 1862 he submitted a bill for preparing and altering a 'cardboard model for the new conservatories' in the 'new garden'. Perhaps, then, Neale was responsible for the screens at Harcourt House, after the idea of his ducal master?

The 5th Duke of Portland died at Harcourt House on the 6th of December 1879 at the advanced age of 79 and it seems ironic that after his death his lifestyle, which he had so assiduously sought to shroud in secrecy, became the subject of intense public interest and speculation. In 1896 a celebrated legal battle known as the Druce-Portland case - described as being 'striking proof of the

unfathomable depths of human credulity' and 'equal in its enormity to the Tichborne case' - dragged Harcourt House - long so carefully screened from the vulgar gaze - into the remorseless glare of public attention. For eleven years the courts considered the extraordinary claims of Mrs Annie Maria Druce, a middle-aged widow who asserted that her father-in-law, the late Thomas Charles Druce, the wealthy proprietor of a well-known furniture shop in Baker Street, and the 5th Duke of Portland were one and the same person. During the proceedings, which are amply chronicled in Theodore Besterman's *The Druce-Portland Case* (1935) and involved the exhumation of the corpse of Mr Druce, which drove the plaintiff into a mental home and culminated in the prosecution for perjury of the witnesses, much was naturally made of the strange habits of the 5th Duke. Prominent amongst the evidence laid before the court concerning the Duke's supposed double life were the screens and tunnels in the garden at Harcourt House and his mysterious comings and goings in the vicinity.

The last hearing of the Druce-Portland case was held on the 6th January 1908 but by this time Harcourt House, together with its screens and tunnels, had been destroyed, like Mrs Druce's preposterous claim to the title and fortune of the Dukes of Portland. Sold after the 5th Duke's death, Harcourt House was briefly occupied by the Earl of Breadalbane but the valuable site of the great house and its large garden soon attracted the attention of speculative developers. In August 1906 a reporter for *The People* considered its prospects and observed that:

'the Post Office authorities had cast eyes on that portion of the property which abuts on Wimpole St. The work of the Vere St Post Office has of late grown enormously, owing to the activity of the great drapery houses in the neighbourhood and the Post Office has bought the whole of the garden of Harcourt House, including the stables and the screens. The entrance will be in Wimpole Street. The major portion of the house & the large courtyard facing Cavendish Sq is now on the market ... and Harcourt House, long one of the glories of London, will soon be but a memory of the past. It is reported that a large association of foreign manufacturers connected with the motor industry has purchased it and will rear up immense showrooms, warehouses and offices.'

His predictions proved true and Harcourt House was demolished later that year. But before it fell to the demolition contractor's pickaxe, we can be thankful that a photographer strayed through its deserted precincts, already marked for the wreckers and stripped of anything of value, making a last, poignant record of the mysterious and secret elysium of the *Mole Duke*.

THE SURVEY of LONDON
PUBLIC PARKS and GARDENS

By David Lambert

Between February 1995 and March 1996, consultants worked for the London Historic Parks and Gardens Trust on a survey of public parks, gardens, squares, cemeteries and churchyards in Greater London, funded with the help of a generous grant from English Heritage London Division. The survey looked at over fifteen hundred sites, and has produced both a group of about seventy potential candidates for the *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England*, and a draft inventory of some 1,280 sites of local historic importance. It has also thrown up some interesting questions about the nature of historic gardens, and the approach to county-wide surveys.

The survey includes a huge range of sites, and pushes out what Chuck Yeager would have called the *envelope* of definition. In addition to what is instantly recognisable as a park or garden, we found ourselves considering, and usually including, the designed landscape around a Victorian waterworks, converted burial grounds, the grounds of LCC public housing projects, hospital and asylum grounds, a children's miniature road layout complete with clipped and dwarf planting, commons, gardens of remembrance, an Edwardian school botanic garden, public walks, garden suburb landscaping, and a 1920s industrial research centre. We applied English Heritage's thirty-year rule, which disbars probably the most extensive major landscaping of recent times, that associated with large commercial and business developments.

Churchyards, which the brief specifically included, are largely a new type, although Painswick churchyard in Gloucestershire is a registered site. Criteria include the quality of

tree-planting, path-layouts, monuments, architectural elements such as railings, walls and lychgates, the importance of the church and the role of the site in its urban setting. In the City however, where tree-planting was problematic, and the yards were often paved, the criteria need to be subtler: many such sites, converted to gardens by the Metropolitan Public Garden Association (MPGA) in the late nineteenth century, are of significant historic interest without fulfilling such requirements.

The whole question of architectural setting is particularly important in London, and by implication in other major cities. It seems worthwhile to ask what role a space has in street patterns and as the foil to surrounding buildings in such a context. Of course, many such sites are perhaps better designated as part of Conservation Areas than as historic gardens on an inventory, but the planned layout of suburbs such as Ruislip with its magnificent spine of landscaped roundabouts (what price a Register of Roundabouts?) or the dense arrangement of garden spaces in Rayners Lane, let alone the inter-related squares of Westminster, arguably deserve recognition as historic landscapes under some heading or another.

We have had to reconsider too the most basic criterion, that of design. Blackheath for example has no design element in itself, unless you count the siting of the Victorian picturesque All Saints Church on line with the Blackheath avenue in Greenwich Park, but it could be argued that the heath was left open by design and for historical reasons, and its openness was critical in the development around it, which all capitalised on the environment it created. How do you assess commons, such as Clapham, Ealing or Plumstead, for the inventory? There is often a significant element of design in the perimeter planting and path layout and architectural elements such as bandstands, but they are neither parks nor gardens in any conventional sense.

In looking at many late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century public parks, we have come to question the basic matrix of condition and age: at present, the later the site the more important a criterion becomes its condition. But the condition of public parks has so widely suffered in the last fifteen years, that neglect seems insufficient reason in itself to