



WORDS: Susie White PHOTOS: Susie White and Christina West

NORTHERN SOUL

The son of a cotton weaver, **Thomas Mawson** defied Victorian snobbery to design some of the great gardens of the Lake District – and further afield

According to the records of the Lindley Library, Lawrence Johnston read two gardening books some months before he and his mother went to live at Hidcote Manor. One was by Gertrude Jekyll, the other by Thomas Mawson, entitled *The Art and Craft of Garden Making*. In it Mawson advocated two principles of garden design that may have influenced Johnston. One was that formality close to the house should gradually flow out into a more natural style that linked with the landscape; the other that the garden be divided into a series of compartments so that not all is glimpsed at once.

Thomas Mawson has only recently been given the attention he deserves, thanks to the authoritative book by Janet Waymark.

Born in Lancashire in 1861, he was one of five children in a family struggling to make a living from fruit growing and horticulture. Thomas was sent to London at 18 after his father died so that he could find work in the nursery trade for him and his brothers. Working for a succession of nurseries, he assimilated as much as he could and developed ambitions to become a garden designer. The inherent snobbery at the time made it harder for someone of his background – garden design was an expansion of the role of the architect, a profession of the middle classes.

THE WHOLE PACKAGE

After honeymooning in the Lake District, Mawson saw with canny clarity that, thanks to the railways, the new houses being built by wealthy merchants around Lake Windermere would need good gardens to compliment them. In 1885 he set up the nursery firm of Mawson Brothers with garden design as part of what could be offered to clients. As business grew, Mawson's two brothers ran the nursery and Thomas was able to concentrate on making gardens. With a range of items made for them by Garden Crafts at Staveley, the Mawsons could offer the whole package; their illustrated catalogue advertises pergolas, gates,

summerhouses, fencing, dovecotes and all manner of garden furniture.

This was at a time when architects from the Arts and Crafts movement were fitting out the complete interior of the houses they designed. Similarly, Mawson's brick and tile work, his use of slate in the Lake District and the craftsmanship in wood were all examples of using the local vernacular, together with native trees and plants, though he used non-natives happily as well. It was a time of dissent in the gardening world with a vituperative battle between Reginald Blomfield advocating high formality and William Robinson urging a natural, semi-wild approach. Mawson combined the two with formality moving outwards from the house to the wilder edges of the garden's boundary.

This approach is confidently shown in an early commission at Graythwaite Hall close to Lake Windermere. This important job triggered off further work, as well as collaborations with the architect Dan Gibson. Mawson made formal gardens – a Rose Garden and a Dutch Garden with the clipped yew and box of flower filled parterres. These more intimate areas are to the side of the house and

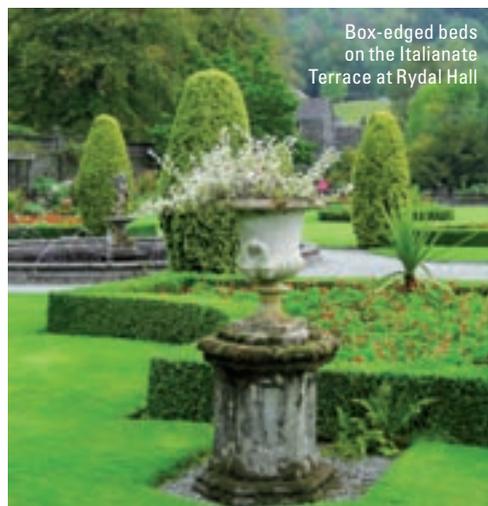
include rather quirky 'mushroom' yews – golden rounded tops grafted on to cupped green bases.

A terrace projects out from the south side of the house with curved steps leading down to undulating lawns flanked by banks of rhododendron and trees filtered through by winding paths. There is simultaneously a sense of openness and enclosure, the tilting greenery of the lawns giving a feeling of spaciousness with embracing woods beyond. Looking back towards the house, the balustraded terrace has the effect of elevating the house, a technique that Mawson would go on to use in many of his designs. He was confident in his remodelling of the land, at the same time as being sensitive to what was already there in the Lakeland landscape. The plan for Graythwaite Hall would be used to illustrate 'The Art and Craft of Garden Making'.

COMBINING FORMAL AND NATURAL

Mawson had understood exactly what his clients wanted; a sense of stature as well as a combination of the formal and the apparently natural. Unusually for the time, he would draw in the field, adding notes of his clients' wishes, in a similar way to designers today. He would design the details as part of the whole, using local materials for garden furniture, stone for benches and wood for pergolas, both of which were abundant in the Lake District. It was Mawson's background in horticulture and his knowledge of plants combined with design flair, that led to his early use of the term for his job – 'landscape architect'.

Many of Mawson's designs have been altered with time or are lost. A recently restored garden, dating from 1909, is Rydal Hall near Ambleside. Here the same themes abound; Italianate terraces below the south side of the house which serve to aggrandise the Hall, this strict formality giving way to sweeps of lawn that blend with the valley setting. Rydal is particularly fascinating for Mawson's early use of pre-cast concrete for paving slabs, balustrading, urns, steps and pillars →

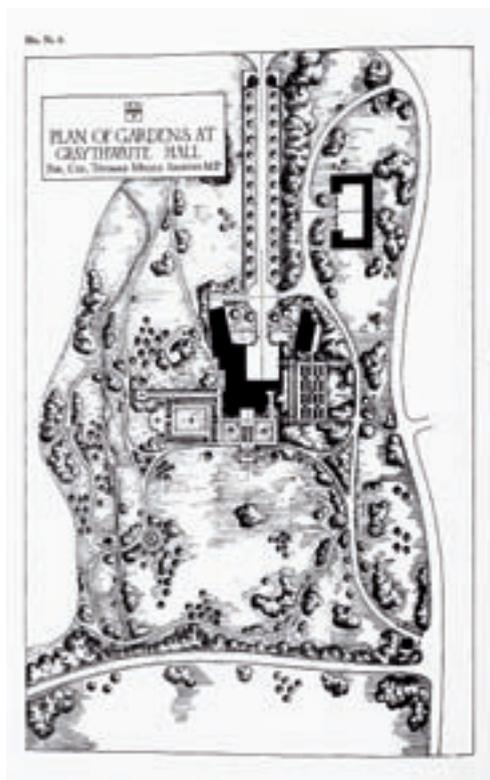


Box-edged beds on the Italianate Terrace at Rydal Hall



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Sundial designed by Dan Gibson in the Dutch Garden at Graythwaite Hall; pergola arbour at Rydal Hall; pots set into Rydal Hall balustrade, Graythwaite Hall; the mushroom yews at Graythwaite; the mushroom yews at Graythwaite; clematis and roses scramble over the pergola at Rydal Hall





to support arbours. Fine gravel taken from Lake Windermere was used in making the concrete, some of the moulds being rediscovered recently in the cellars at Rydal Hall. The hard landscaping was in a very poor state of repair until the restoration work by Paul Grout Associates who carefully matched the original mix and created new moulds. Planting uses the species favoured by Mawson; roses on the arbours, clematis on retaining walls, perennials such as geraniums, irises and daylilies in the borders. These were laid out in blocks, sometimes with taller plants to the fore, in contrast to the drifts and staggered borders of Gertrude Jekyll.

Mawson became much sought after as a designer of Lakeland gardens and his style was distilled into the first edition of *The Art and Craft of Garden Making* published in 1900. Two further editions were published in 1901 and 1907. This helped to widen his network for commissions and by 1910 the family firm had an office in London as well as in Lancaster. Important clients were Lord Leverhulme, Queen Alexandra and Andrew Carnegie; projects that he worked on have familiar names – Skibo Castle, Dyffryn Gardens, Brockhole, Holker Hall, Port Sunlight. Mawson was now designing gardens throughout Britain as well as abroad; in 1908 he had won a prestigious competition to lay out a garden for the Peace Palace at the Hague, and through recommendations he gained work in North America.

A FAMILY BUSINESS

One of Mawson's strengths was his family. Of his nine children, two of his sons joined him

in the business and his wife, Anna, worked as a midwife to help financially. In time, Mawson's work shifted towards civic projects, town planning and homes for disabled soldiers after the First World War. He believed in the positive effect on morale of beneficial surroundings, and his unrealised plans for cities are visionary and make full use of green spaces. His design for the centre of Calgary, had it been built, would have been a city of the City Beautiful movement and he advised King Constantine of Greece on the remodelling of Athens, the palace gardens, housing for workers and the shanty town area below the Acropolis.

Fewer large country house gardens were commissioned after the war, and Mawson worked more on urban projects and parks. He became president of the Town Planning Institute as well as the Institute of Landscape Architects. In 1927 Mawson's autobiography *The Life and Work of an English Landscape Architect* was published. Parkinson's disease affected the latter part of his life, though he continued as long as possible to plan gardens with the help of his son, before his death in 1933.

Mawson forged a career in garden design against the odds. From his working class Lancashire origins, he gained an international reputation as a newly termed 'landscape architect'. He worked hard, combining his understanding of the needs of plants, his strong design sense and his appreciation for what his clients wanted. He was in that sense a very modern designer. ○

SOURCES

– Many of Mawson's plans and drawings are held at the Cumbria Archive Service in Kendal.

www.cumbria.gov.uk/archives

– **Thomas Mawson: Life, Gardens & Landscapes** by Janet Waymark, Frances Lincoln 2009

– **The Life of Thomas Hayton Mawson Landscape Architect 1861-1933** by Elizabeth Kissack – Elizabeth Kissack 2006

Thomas Mawson Gardens

– Brockhole, Windermere, Cumbria

www.brockhole.co.uk

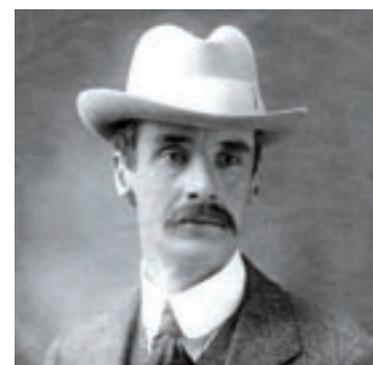
– Graythwaite Hall, Ulverston, Cumbria

www.graythwaitehall.co.uk

– Dyffryn Gardens, St Nicholas, Vale of Glamorgan www.dyffryngardens.org.uk

– The Hill, Hampstead, London

www.gardenvisit.com/garden/the_hill_garden



ABOUT THOMAS H MAWSON AND SON

Thomas H Mawson established his active landscape architecture practice in 1886. It became the pre-eminent firm in the late Victorian and Edwardian period both in the UK and abroad, undertaking a broad range of commissions for Royalty, wealthy land owners, industrialists and emerging local authorities.

The practice continued to flourish after his death in 1933 under the direction of firstly his son Edward Prentice Mawson and latterly his grandson, Thomas Prentice Mawson until it ceased in 1978.

In order to respond to the interest and awareness of the work of the firm, and the historical importance of Thomas H Mawson as a pioneer of the profession, the practice was re-established in 2011 by Derek Woolerton, the last landscape architect employed by the original practice, and Sue Dodwell

As Partners of Thomas H Mawson and Son, they are intent on continuing their work in collating and expanding the Mawson Archive which brings together the disparate historical resources on garden, estate, public open space and civic design and by offering their service to advise on the restoration, management and reuse of Thomas H Mawson schemes in the UK, Europe, USA and Canada. Thomas Prentice Mawson, grandson of THM, also takes an active interest in the re-established practice.

For further information contact Derek Woolerton, director. d.woolerton@thomasmawson.co.uk