

Holywells Park – a Turning Point

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Punctuated by a few spires, the wooded hilly landscape of East Anglia stretches far to the horizon. Our eye is guided by a group of eight ponds, six round, two rectangular, forming a curving line that leads from the right far into the middle-ground. These ponds, commissioned by the Ipswich local John Cobbold provided clean water for his brewery on the outskirts of the town. Dark clouds cover most of the sky – a little island of sunlight in the far distance is reflected in the pools and heightens the contrast to the dark green colour of the shaded lawn. A seated man in the foreground enjoys the same view as we do, reminding us of our position as observers.

Gainsborough's beautiful early landscapes are literal essays in the Dutch style – his admiration of Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan Wijnants among others is well documented. Occasionally working for the painting trade Gainsborough knew Dutch works intimately as a restorer and some times as a painter of additional figures. *Holywells Park*, painted right after Gainsborough had moved back from London to

Sudbury, is probably the first landscape that is artistically independent and entirely his own. Some elements, such as the lower right-hand corner or the line of trees, still give away his Dutch models, but Gainsborough has now become a true painter of the eighteenth-century interested in brushwork, colour and atmosphere. Light is an independent, no longer a descriptive factor – the reflection on the ponds is the artistic subject of the painting. The landscape is rendered in loose brushstrokes with a Rococo palette of greens, blues and pale violets. A similarly informal, painterly view of landscape had been developed in Paris by painters like Jean-Baptiste Oudry whose works Gainsborough knew.

Holywells Park shows an existing place and belongs to the tradition of topographical views, the so-called *Vedute*. Gainsborough only practised them for a short period of time beginning in 1748. The reason for his interest must have been Canaletto's arrival in England in 1746 who demonstrated to the English public that *Vedute* could be an artistically ambitious genre.

Gainsborough took the



genre and the ambition from his Italian contemporary, but he stayed otherwise independent. Only once, Canaletto created a similarly dramatic lighting situation in his English paintings – his *Walton Bridge* in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, painted roughly five

years later. For Gainsborough, *Holywells Park* was a turning point. He had now left the orbit of Dutch landscape painting and developed an increasingly personal style with a strong emphasis on colour, texture and surface. The beautiful and dramatic

reflections in Holywells Park are a first perfect example of his increasingly painterly works. With its strong sense of colour, texture and surface it became the starting point of a development leading to paintings such as the *Harvest Wagon* or the *Watering Place*.

Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88),
HOLYWELLS PARK, IPSWICH,
c.1759
Oil on canvas
Colchester and Ipswich Museums,
Ipswich Borough Collection, R.1992–5