

 **Stowe Gardens**



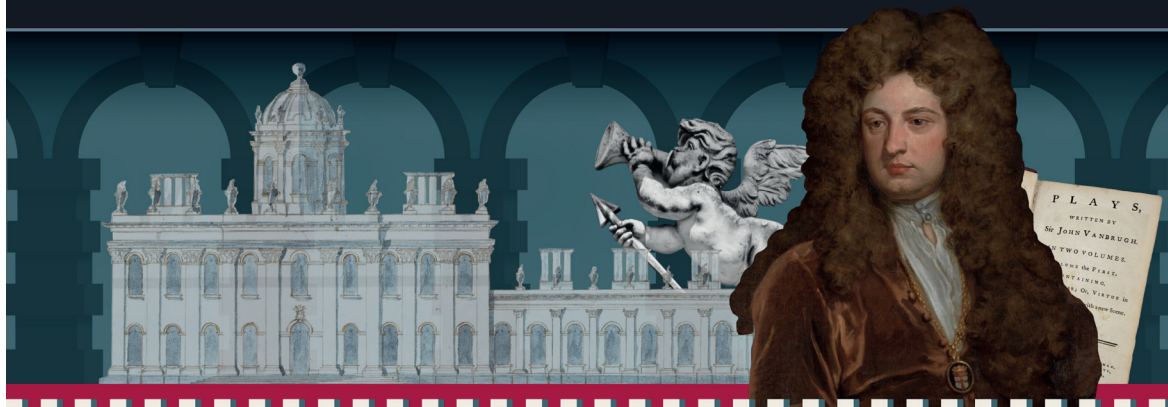
VANBRUGH300

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Discover a **Baroque** **Trailblazer**

Sir John Vanbrugh—often called “the rockstar of the English Baroque”—was one of England’s boldest architects and most colourful characters. Famous for his daring plays and even bolder buildings, he helped shape the dramatic early look of Stowe.

This trail guides you through the places where Vanbrugh’s ideas first took root. Along the way, you’ll uncover how his theatrical style and imaginative structures helped transform Stowe into a landscape of grandeur and surprise.

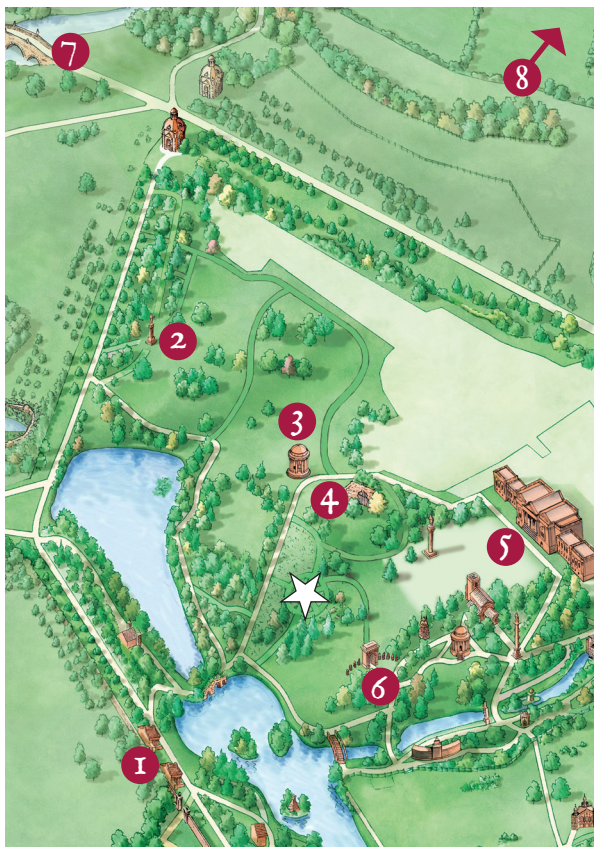


Vanbrugh's path to architecture was anything but ordinary. Born in London and raised in Chester, he served the Whigs, supported the Glorious Revolution, and even spent four years imprisoned in France—an experience that later influenced his architectural style.

After success as a playwright, he turned to building design with no formal training, partnering with Nicholas Hawksmoor to create iconic works such as Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace.

Vanbrugh arrived at Stowe in 1719, working alongside garden designer Charles Bridgeman and commissioned by Lord Cobham, who had just begun developing the estate after years abroad.

Vanbrugh's role was to bring architectural drama to the grounds and help unify the existing house. Although many of his structures were later altered or replaced, his creative flair marked the beginning of Stowe's transformation into one of Britain's great 18th-century estates.



For further information about Vanbrugh 300 events, visit vanbrugh300.co.uk

Vanbrugh in the garden

1. Lake Pavilions

The view from the Octagon Lake to the distant Corinthian Arch is framed by the two Lakeside Pavilions, pedimented temples with fluted Doric columns. Originally closer together, they were moved apart in 1764 to suit the enlarged garden and open up the view.



2. Queen Caroline's Monument

Wife of King George II, the monument was originally sited closer to George's own monument near the south front of the House. The statue is thought to be by the famous Flemish sculptor, Michael Rysbrack, who also carved 8 of the 16 busts in the Temple of British Worthies.



3. The Rotunda

The Rotunda houses a gilded statue of Venus, goddess of love and patron of gardens. Originally built with a more prominent semi-spherical dome, it was altered by Borra in the 1760s to a gentler segmental profile to harmonise with the surrounding landscape.



4. Dido's Cave

Just north of the Rotunda, partly hidden by laurel, lies Dido's Cave, built in the 1720s. Originally a small classical temple by Vanbrugh, later alterations added a painted scene of Dido and Aeneas, traces of which survive. In 1812 Lady Buckingham transformed it into a naturalistic cave with tufa. The touching inscription above the entrance, "Beloved Mother, Farewell!", was added by her son in her memory.



5. Stowe House

Stowe House evolved under many architects, but it is thought that Vanbrugh created the North Front Portico, two office wings, and the Orangery, possibly adding four corner turrets on the central pavilion and the low curved North Front walls. Later changes mean little of Vanbrugh's original work survives today.



6. The Doric Arch

The Doric Arch is one of Stowe's most attractive small buildings, named for its fluted Doric pilasters and inscribed to Princess Amelia in 1768. So pleased with it, she is said to have visited the arch four or five times a day during her stay in July 1770.



Vanbrugh in the parkland

7. Oxford Bridge

The Oxford Bridge constructed in 1761 has four grotesque urns on its lower parapets which were salvaged from Vanbrugh's Temple of Sleep which was demolished at that time.



8. Guglio/Wolfe's Obelisk

The 50-foot fountain, known as Guglio, was built in 1722 for the centre of Octagon Lake, with internal pipes designed to push water up and cascade down its sides. Low water pressure meant it never achieved the grandeur intended, and in 1754 it was removed and repurposed as the centrepiece of Wolfe's Obelisk, relocated to the highest point of Stowe's Deer Park.



Vanbrugh's lost temples

Temple of Sleep

Built in 1725 the temple's interior was decorated with paintings of festoons and Roman emperors. It was demolished in 1760 but the four corner urns were reused on the Oxford Bridge. You can still see the foundations in the Sleeping Wood (star point on the map).



The Cold Bath

South-west of the Octagon Lake was the original Cold Bath, designed by Vanbrugh in about 1723. In 1735 it was described as four feet deep and lined with blue tiles. By 1761 this building must have been removed and replaced by the New Cold Bath installed in the Temple of Contemplation, which was also demolished sometime around 1777.



Nelson's Seat

At the end of Nelson's Walk once stood Nelson's Seat, named after the foreman who built it. It began with Ionic columns and a balustraded roof topped by large urns, later gaining altered niches and painted interior scenes inspired by Roman reliefs. In 1773 it was rebuilt with a Roman Doric portico, but before the century was out it was demolished when the front drive was realigned.



The Witch House

Near the Doric Arch used to be the curious Witch House. It may have been a wooden structure and was possibly designed by Vanbrugh before 1726 since his widow later had a plan of it. By 1735 the inside had been very poorly painted to suit its name by Thomas Ferrand. It was probably removed about 1768.



The Temple of Bacchus

Designed in 1719 and originally known as the Brick Temple, it was later stuccoed, given a tiled floor, and renamed after Bacchus—thanks to the lively, somewhat crude ceiling paintings by Francesco Sletier completed before 1731. By 1926 the building had deteriorated so badly that it was demolished and replaced by the Stowe School chapel.



Vanbrugh's Pyramid

The 60-foot pyramid was Sir John Vanbrugh's final design at Stowe, completed shortly before his death in March 1726. After Vanbrugh's death, Lord Cobham turned the pyramid into a memorial, adding a Latin inscription dedicating it to the architect's memory. The structure was demolished in 1797.

