

## Introduction

The Victorian age was a long one. It lasted from 1837, when Queen Victoria came to the throne, until 1901, the year of her death, and inevitably during that time there were many changes. The field of the arts was no exception. During the middle years of the Victorian era, the Nesfields (father and son) produced horticultural and architectural designs for some of the wealthiest and most influential landowners in the British Isles. Although they never formed a partnership, each pursuing his own career (Nesfield Snr as a landscape gardener and Eden Nesfield as an architect), the commissions that gave them the most pleasure were on estates where they were able to work alongside each other. In such cases, Nesfield Snr constructed the gardens, sometimes with the help of his second son Arthur Markham Nesfield (1841-1874), and turned the estate lands into what he considered perfect pictures. His first son, Eden Nesfield, delighted in designing intimate little buildings around the estates. He also restored and designed manor houses and renovated churches.



William Andrews Nesfield, pencil by James Duffield Harding, c. 1840.



William Eden Nesfield, pencil by  
Jacques Emile Edouard Brandon in the style of  
Hans Holbein, 1858.

William Nesfield Snr was born in 1794, and was a product of the Georgian age. Society at that time was arranged in a paternalistic, hierarchical manner, with a small landed elite at the top of the pyramid and the majority, consisting of the labouring poor, at the bottom. He was successively an army officer and a watercolour painter of rural, picturesque scenery before taking up landscape design. The skills he learned from these earlier professions were to stand him in good stead when he began to develop the landscapes of his wealthy clients. Eden Nesfield was born and died during Victoria's reign, but was a true Edwardian in his lifestyle and outlook, as were his friends and colleagues: bohemian and free-thinking, they forged their own ideas. Eden's social and professional circles included architects, craftsmen, painters, writers and poets, who formed the vanguard of the Aesthetic and Arts and Crafts Movements in London.

Eden was strongly influenced, however, by the art and design he had encountered in the family home, where his father designed strictly formal gardens that often included as a centrepiece a *parterre-de-broderie* (embroidered garden) reminiscent of those developed by André le Nôtre for the Sun King, Louis XIV, at Versailles. These influences helped fuel his desire to become an architect, and he was to remain enraptured by rich ornamentation of all styles, from the Gothic to the Japanese. It might appear that the philosophies of father and son were very different; William was concerned with overall effect, ensuring that the strictly artificial features in the environs of the house corresponded with its man-made architecture and led the eye towards the informal landscape beyond. Eden, on the other hand, was concerned with more minute detail. His affinity was with the early Arts and Crafts Movement. However, they are actually a good example of how two seemingly opposite ideologies can happily co-exist. In their case, their love of the picturesque scenery that could be found in the countryside of the British Isles, which they painted and sketched throughout their lives, brought them together. This interest, together with a shared romanticized view of the past, made their contribution to British landscape gardening and architecture unique.