

# Cast in STONE

*The sculptured lions on the terrace of Wiltshire's Bowood House have witnessed many changes over the centuries, but autumn is still as beautiful as ever in the grounds of one of England's most charming country houses*

**Text and photographs Jane Gifford**

Four stone lions slumber among the last of the summer roses in the terraced gardens to the south of Bowood House. Two of them doze blissfully while the other pair have been startled awake. Their expressions of surprise are probably due to the naked stone lady who lounges proudly on a plinth at the end of the lower terrace.

Bowood, like so many elegant English country houses, looks perfect in autumn. The leaves on the park's ancient lakeside trees have turned to gold and are drifting silently down towards the water; the topiary yews on the terrace cast long, melancholy shadows in the pale sun. On a warm autumn evening, time seems to stand still.

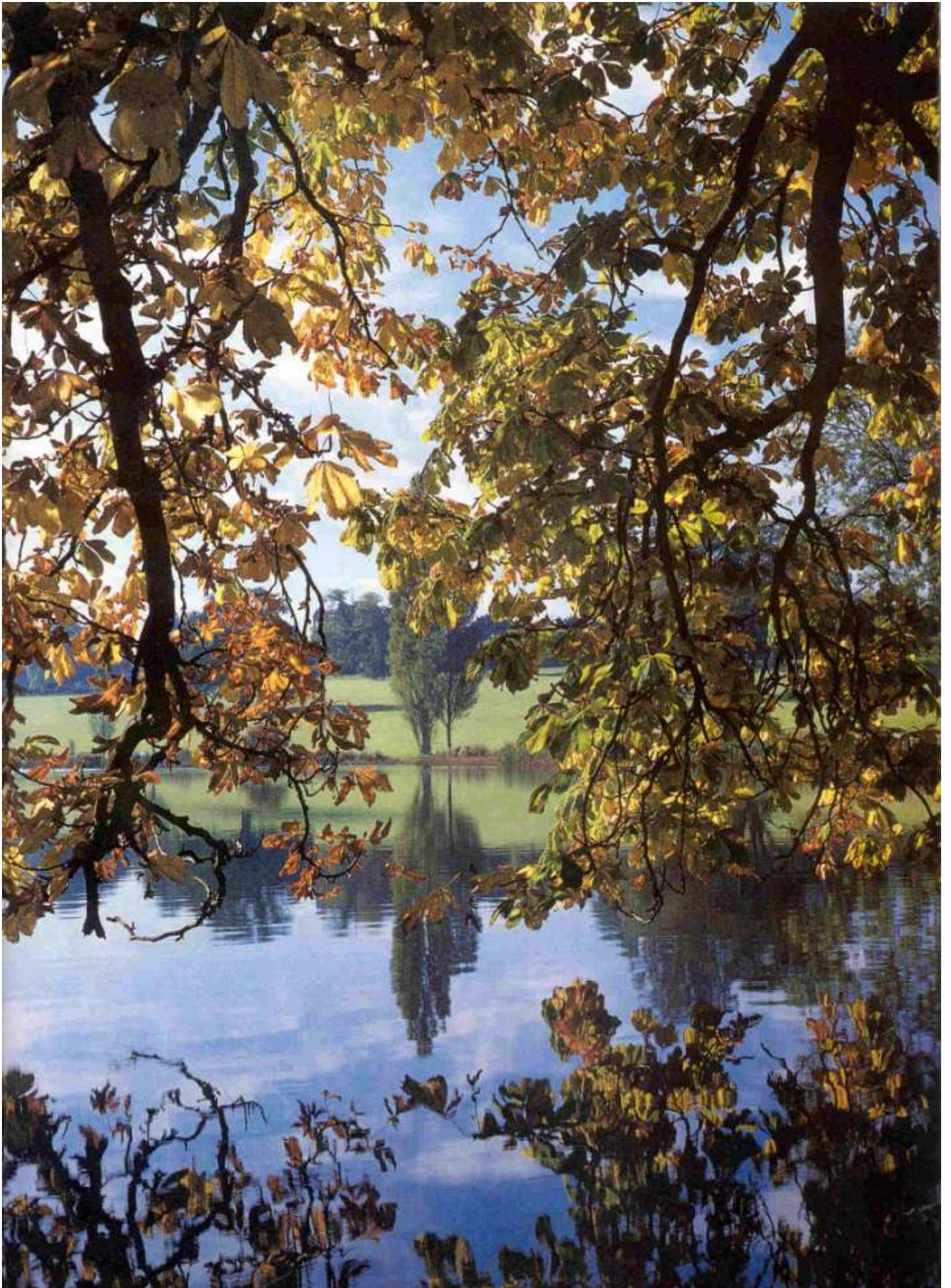
There has been a house at Bowood (the name

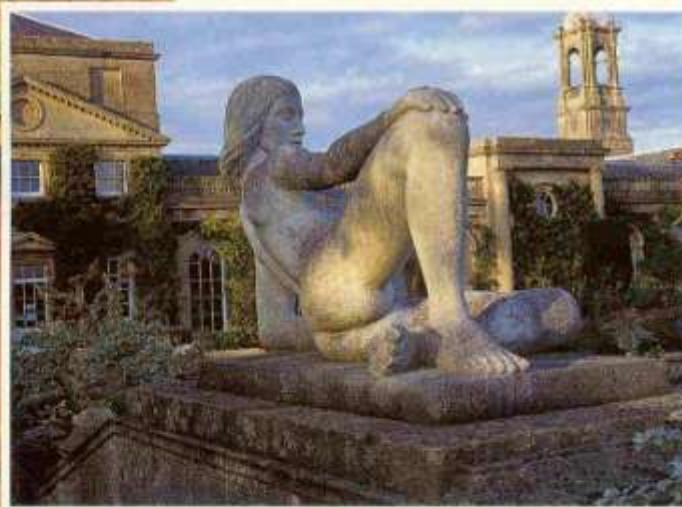
means "beautiful wood") since around 1720. It was bought by the 1st Earl of Shelburne in 1754 and has been in the family ever since. Robert Adam was engaged to redesign much of the interior in the late 18th century by the far-sighted 2nd Earl, who also enlisted the services of Capability Brown to work on Bowood's extensive parkland. As well as making adjustments to the area known as the Pleasure Grounds, in which the owners indulged their passion for

exotic trees, Brown also created Bowood's Great Park, where a huge lake, sweeping grass-scapes and rounded knolls crowned with trees give an exhilarating sense of freedom. The house's original imposing front portico, designed by Henry Keene in 1754,



**Left:** one of Bowood's "surprised" stone lions. **Right:** the lake is a picture of autumnal tranquillity.





**Far left and above:** Bowood's unique collection of ancient trees provides visitors to the house with a wealth of rich colour. **Left:** the most recent addition to the lower terrace is David Wynne's reclining nude, created in 1976. **Right:** Bowood House as seen from the upper terrace.

faced south towards the lake and Brown's design clearly took this into account. Needless to say, the lake is particularly enchanting on balmy autumn evenings when the still surface reflects the beautiful colours of the changing leaves.

Planting in the Great Park and Pleasure Grounds incorporated every kind of foreign tree that could be procured. Many specimens, particularly the conifers, are consequently remarkable for their size and age, and some species were among the first of their kind to be cultivated in England.

Bowood's Pinetum, situated in the Pleasure Grounds, was begun in 1848. In his proposals to the 3rd Marquess of Lansdowne, who

owned Bowood at the time, head gardener John Spencer suggested it should be planted in geographical groupings, "so that the particular species of any country or countries may be examined and compared with facility". Today, birches shimmer among the pines, and maples dazzle you afresh with the intensity of their autumn colours. The *Guide to Bowood Trees and Shrubs*, available from Bowood's garden centre, will lead you around the major specimens on the estate.

Sadly, many of Bowood's trees were badly damaged during the hurricane of January 1990. A few massive stumps of those that fell still remain, ringed in autumn with strange blooms of fungus. Toadstools also hide





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among the fallen leaves that form transient mosaics at your feet.

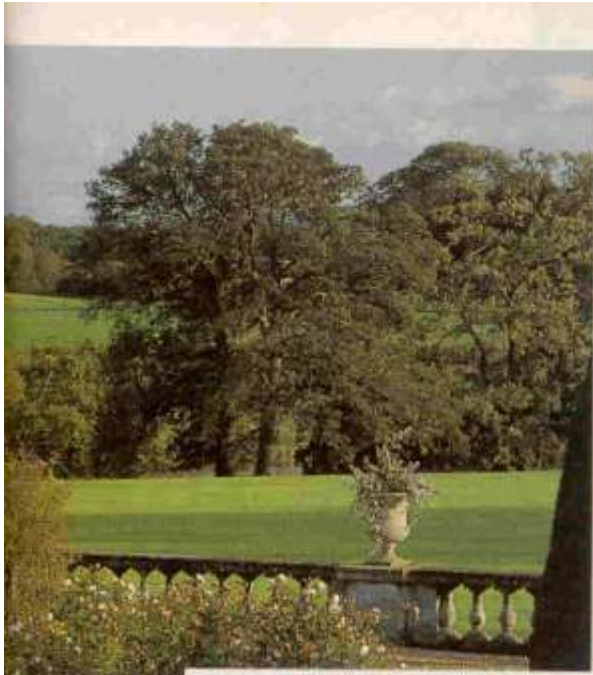
After structural changes to the house in the 1950s, brought about by financial considerations, the present Bowood House doesn't face the lake in the way Capability Brown intended, yet harmony has been re-established by sympathetic restoration and the beauty of the Great Park is as stunning as ever, especially in the glow of an Indian summer's evening, when the Bath stone warms to a honeyed gold.

The big cats on the terrace, meanwhile, have seen it all before. After all, they've been there for over 100 years, since their

creation by George Kennedy, only joined by David Wynne's reclining nude in 1976. It's somehow reassuring to know that though seasons may come and go, the startled expression on the faces of two of Bowood's four lions never varies...and the other two just carry on snoozing. ■

#### INFORMATION

*Bowood House, Bowood, Calne, Wiltshire SN11 0LZ, (01249) 812102. The gardens are open daily from April until the last Sunday in October, 11 am-6 pm. Admission £4-70; concessions £4; children £2-50.*



**Left:** Bowood's lower terrace, with its striking topiary yew trees and formal flowerbeds.

**Below:** one of two stone sphinxes, possibly imported from abroad, gazes towards the lake from the east terrace.

