In the first half of the eighteenth century it became fashionable for a country house to stand within its own grounds and in lofty isolation from any community. If cottages or even whole villages stood in the way they could be removed and rebuilt in a less conspicuous location. Eight villages were relocated to accommodate the designs of William Kent and Capability Brown at Stowe. William Mason, in The English Garden published in 1772, marked a move away from this style when he advised landscapers to incorporate all aspects of the working countryside. In this view sylvan glades became part of an all-embracing rustic tableau. An image of a timeless and contented countryside, however artificially contrived, asserted the morality and naturalness of the existing order.

Throughout the eighteenth century landowners in fact tightened their control over the landscape. Legislation was sought to limit the customary rights of forest communities to harvest underwood, in effect turning communal woodlands into private domains. The Black Act of 1723 restricted woodland access, in particular where estate tenants could be forbidden from felling trees for timber. Access to the woods could be carefully controlled on an estate and could be turned to the owner's advantage to help cement the social hierarchy. At the well-wooded Sheringham estate in Norfolk in 1812, Humphry Repton recommended that the poor be admitted to the estate woods on perhaps one day a month under the watchful eye of the keeper, to collect dead wood. It would, he argued, prevent the unauthorized lopping of trees for firewood. Likewise the organization of coursing matches would reduce illegal poaching.7 Social unrest made landowners twitchy, and in the dangerous times of the 1790s made them think harder about their relationship with the lower orders. Landscape gardens where the cottages had been swept away left the gentry looking aloof and vulnerable, bul a park that integrated the cottages pictorially cemented the community. During the same period the ironmaster and landowner Richard Reynolds laid out woodland walks for his workmen at the (loalbrookdale ironworks in Shropshire. Known as Sabbath Walks, they led to a Doric Temple and a Rotunda. Although these people already had access to the woodlands, their purpose was a moral and practical one: to keep the workmen out of the public houses on their day off in .1 broadei strategy to engender workplace discipline.

Sir Uvedale Price (1747-1829), to whom the art of improving an estate consisted essentially 'in the arrangement and management of trees', was acutely aware of the social management required of the estate improver. In the Annals of Agriculture of 1786 he advocated laws to restrict the right of wanton tenants and woodmen to crop oak and elm for firewood, a practice that affected the economic and pictorial value of estates. But in 1797, not long after the French landing in Wales, he published Thoughts on the Defence of Property that took a more subtle line. Social stability rested upon recognizing the importance of the local community, and that community sense should be integrated into planned improvements. Price argued that his family's tolerance of villagers, allowing them to walk through the estate, had been repaid with respect and loyalty, and that such a tactic would be a better weapon against democratic aspirations than an armed militia.
Changing social attitudes paralleled changing aesthetic approaches to the idealized landscape. The Picturesque movement of the late eighteenth century saw trees and people as essential

elements of the landscape, well represented in the work of one its main influences, Thomas Gainsborough. In later life Gainsborough claimed that one of his earlier woodland landscapes - known variously as Cornard Wood and Gainsborough Forest - was begun as a child and was the means by which his father got him apprenticed to an artist in London. All of his woodland paintings, however stylized, betray a familiarity with real woodlands where the bare dead branches are intermixed with the greenery. His interest in woodland was innate, but his art was shaped by the market. Gainsborough assimilated the lessons of Claude and the French painter Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), but he was also influenced by Dutch 'landskips', a popular if not highly regarded art form.

Woodland was not a popular subject with eighteenth-century landscape painters. The ideal landscapes of Claude were all prospects. The painter was looking at a landscape while the painter of woodland needed to be in a landscape. But woodland did have one advantage as a subject: its lack of a specific geography. A sense of place is antithetical to a landscape ideal with strict compositional rules. Gainsborough must have experienced a sharp contrast between the flat Suffolk landscapes and the undulating and woody landscapes of the west of England, but a sense of place did not become a subject in its own right.

In his native Suffolk Gainsborough had made a living as a painter of the local gentry and their property, but it was his move to Bath in 1759 and the visits to estates in western Britain that' derived from it that turned him into a serious landscape painter. His acquaintance with Uvedale Tomkyns Price led him to visit to his estate at Foxley in Herefordshire, famous for its beech woods. Here began Gainsborough's friendship with Tomkyns Price's grandson, Sir Uvedale Price, the theorist of the Picturesque.

Gainsborough probably influenced Price's Essays on the Picturesque, published between 1794 and 1798. At Foxley, the character of which was described as 'fine trees forming a woody amphitheatre around the mansion', he drew one of his earlier mature landscapes, a highly finished sketch of a beech tree.8 Gainsborough did not throw off the rules of genre art entirely, as the distant church tower provides a prospect in the prescribed manner, as well as introducing a moral tone to the picture. Hut its focus on a single tree was to become a characteristic of the Picturesque movement. It drew the eye to the foreground and the closeness of nature, not the distant horizon. The finished sketch was used by him to paint a more recognizably genre scene by adding a woodcutter and a mounted peasant. A landscape painting, as opposed to a drawing from nature, was not finished until it had been humanized with contented rustics. These were not, therefore, images of nature but highly politicized images that paralleled the fashion for incorporating cottages on estates. They left no room for the complaints of the oppressed rural poor, living as they were the kind of simple life that men oi means dreamed about. Many of Gainsborough's important woodland paintings were commissioned or purchased by landowners to meet their preconceptions of a sylvan Arcadia on their own estates, paintings like Peasants Returning from Market through a Wood, painted for Lord Shelburne and hung at Bowood in Wiltshire. None of these paintings can be regarded as representing a specific place. Even when he painted for exhibition at the newly-formed Royal Academy, Gainsborough's images remained

imbued with stereotypes. His Wooded Landscape with (ciiilf was described approvingly by the Reverend Henry Bate as 'rep-resenting a woodland scene, a sequestered cottage, cattle, peasants and their children before the cottage, a woodman and his dog ... returning from labour; the whole heightened by a water and sky that would have done honour to the most brilliant Claude Lorrain'.9 Gainsborough's woodland pictures therefore are a long way from studies of nature or topography as later artists like Constable would have understood them.

Toward the end of his life Gainsborough chose grander historical and mythological settings for his paintings on the basis that great art is made from great subjects, which surely went against the grain of his own instincts. In Diana and Actaeon of c. 1785 a well-known tale from Ovid was imported into an English woodland setting as an appropriate classical subject for educated tastes. An earlier painting, The Mall of 1783, is ostensibly a painting of St James's Park in London and shows a bustling town scene. The painting has been praised for its painterly qualities as an Anglicised recreation of the French rococo style where the lessons of Watteau have been well learned. The scene is of ladies promenading, in the midst of which is a solitary male figure, perhaps the artist, but it is the setting that is important and takes it beyond a mere genre painting. Far from being a townscape, the ladies walk in a sylvan glade that serves to turn them into goddesses parading in an English woodland paradise.

The Picturesque movement owed much to Gainsborough and Salvator Rosa, whose landscape work was characterized by the drama and roughness of nature. An aspect of eighteenth-century primitivism, it was a reaction against an increasingly scientific and rationalist (and one could also add commercial) civilization. Its leading exponent, William Gilpin (1724-1804), was not a gardener but a commentator upon scenery. As its name suggests, the Picturesque was a pictorial approach that continued to treat nature as a commodity that could be improved upon. Gilpin focused upon individual objects within the landscape - typically things like a blasted tree - and framed his views around it. Woods that in a Claude painting were on the fringe were now moved centre stage. Nature was rugged and asymmetrical and there was a distinction between wild and cultivated nature. The theory was enacted in the country house setting by two notable planters, Sir Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, both of whom were noted authors.

The landscapes of Price and his near neighbour Knight contrasted with the rigid order of Capability Brown, where the humbler trees were cut down and where conifers were fashionable. Brown was criticized for disrupting the organic growth of woodlands in order to impose a new structure that favoured fast-growing trees. In his later work Humphry Repton modified his tendency to impose a preconceived order on the landscape by attempting to harmonize or improve upon the genius loci. Thus at Luscombe, in Devon, the terrain demanded a house in the castellated style, designed by John Nash and built in 1800, for which Repton planted a thickly wooded backdrop. Repton's later preference for deciduous trees chimed well with Price's opinion. To Uvedale Price an avenue of oaks was a 'grand Gothic aisle' while the canopy of its leaves was the vaulted roof. Knight too disliked conifers and exhorted his readers to grow elm and oak to 'banish the fir's unsocial shade'. But as society needed to be ordered, so did nature. The Picturesque style never claimed to be unadulterated nature.

At Downton in Herefordshire Richard Payne Knight shared many of Price's concerns. He was a connoisseur of landscape who could boast a large number of Claude Lorrain's pictures in his collection. Woodland walks were created along River Teme in order to appreciate the drama of the natural gorge, in keeping with a love of wildness and untamed natural forces that was best expressed in his poem The Landscape, first published in 1794. Originally he had intended the poem to accompany Price's Essay on the Picturesque, which he had encouraged Price to publish. In it Knight mocked improvers like Capability Brown by using two contrasting illustrations of a country house by Thomas Hearne. The Brown-style landscape is all mown lawn and neatly trimmed trees, in the midst of which a Palladian mansion sits coolly isolated in both time and space. This is contrasted with an unimproved landscape viewed from the edge of an 'ancient forest', which immediately gives it a dimension that Brown's landscape lacked. The house is an older Elizabethan pile, the unkempt trees grow out of a rampant undergrowth of ferns and thorns. Nature is allowed to express itself. Elsewhere Knight suggests that it has an innate hierarchy that paralleled the social hierarchy:

Some [trees], tow'ring upwards, spread their arms in state; And others, bending low, appear'd to wait: While scatter'd thorns, brows'd by the goat and deer, Rose all around, and let no lines appear.

Knight also had a radical political streak, remaining in sympathy with the aims of the French Revolution. The undressing of a Brownian landscape, allowing a forest to regenerate naturally and for a release of primordial nature, resembled the liberation of the oppressed. Political revolution was expressed in the terms of chaos leading to eventual better order by analogy with nature:

So when rebellion breaks the despot's chain, First wasteful ruin marks the rabble's reign; Till tir'd their fury, and their vengeance spent, One common int'rest bids their hearts relent; Then temp'rate order from confusion springs, And, fann'd by freedom, genius spreads its wings."

Jacobin sympathies were spotted by Horace Walpole and others, who were as horrified by Knight's view of nature as they were by his politics. To leave nature to its own devices was the road to ruin. Knight retreated from the association between the Picturesque landscape and radical politics in the second edition of the poem. But he remained a Whig and a believer in free trade, understandably so because the wealth that sustained Downton was not derived from the fruits of rural labour. The Knights were prominent midland ironmasters and had amassed their fortune in trade. Richard Payne Knight made a healthy profit from coppices that supplied charcoal to the family's ironworks, and in 1815 he extended his grounds at Downton by cancelling the lease of nearby Bringewood Furnace and Forge and converting their reservoirs to lakes with waterfalls. A bachelor, Knight also followed another trend of spending more time in his London house than he did on his country estate. But rural life meant one thing to men like Knight, who could escape to the metropolis when they got bored of rustic simplicity, and something quite different to those rural dwellers whose whole lives were fixed there.

Richard Hayman (2003) Trees Woodlands and Western Civilization Hambledon and London