

# Figures of repose

*To their traditional role as focal points, the antique garden ornaments at White Hall Plantation underscore the landscape's air of tranquility*

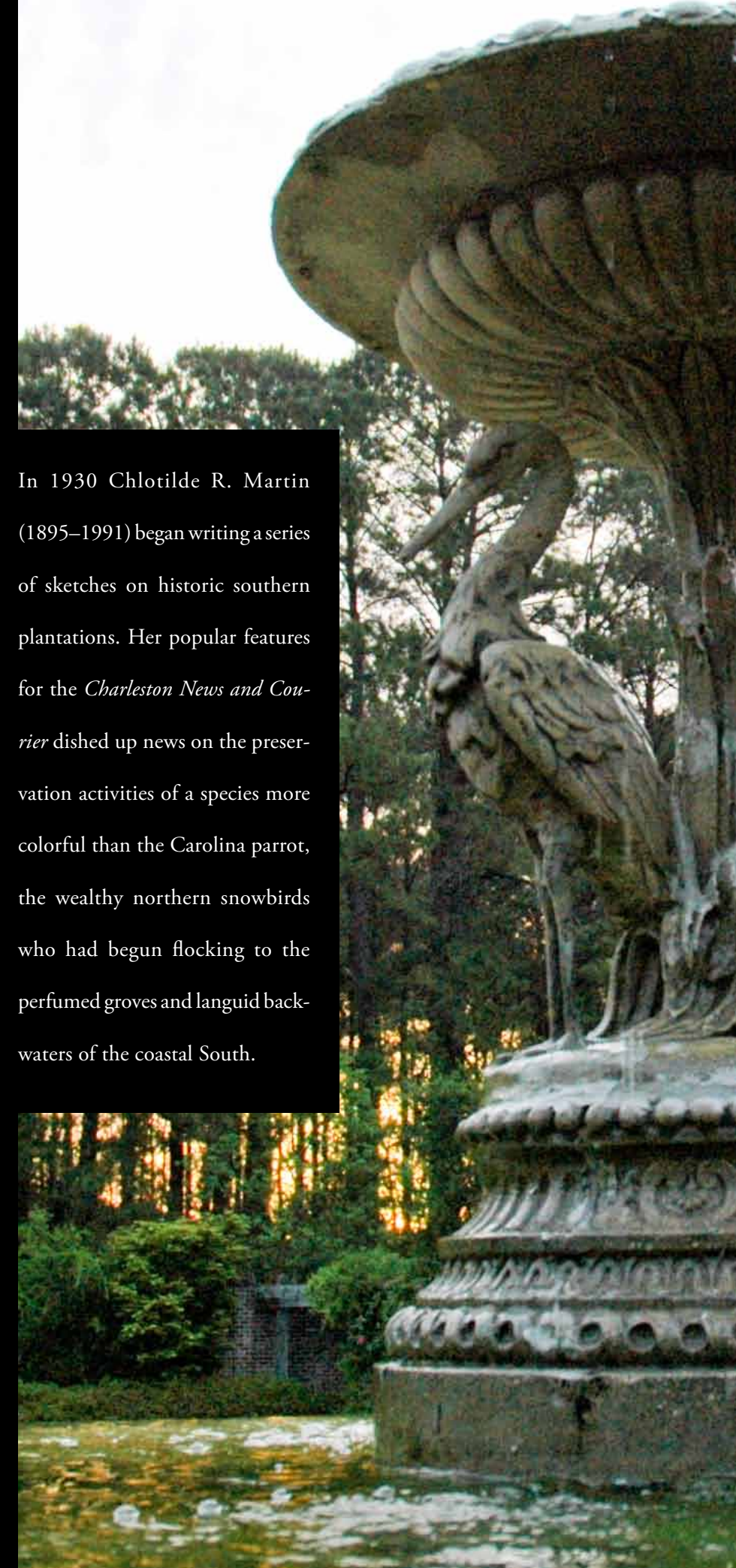
*By Laura Beach*

Photography by Bree Moon



Figs. 1, 1a. Richard L. and Maureen K. Chilton acquired White Hall, a former rice plantation inland from Charleston, in 1997 and have developed the gardens in collaboration with Barbara Israel. The pièce de résistance of the two-acre walled Secret Garden is a tiered, composition-stone fountain ornamented with egrets, a fitting motif for this low country garden. Made in England in the nineteenth century, the six-ton fountain was shipped in three pieces to the port of Charleston, trucked to the spot, and, with great ingenuity, hoisted over the garden wall.

In 1930 Chlotilde R. Martin (1895–1991) began writing a series of sketches on historic southern plantations. Her popular features for the *Charleston News and Courier* dished up news on the preservation activities of a species more colorful than the Carolina parrot, the wealthy northern snowbirds who had begun flocking to the perfumed groves and languid backwaters of the coastal South.





In planning their gardens, *the Chiltons took inspiration from the horticultural delights of England and the American south—landscapes like Charleston’s Middleton Place*

*Top:* Figs. 3, 4. Live oaks draped with silvery Spanish moss are a signal feature of White Hall and a horticultural favorite of Richard Chilton, who, posterity in mind, has added roughly 130 of the stately trees. The house, rebuilt after the Civil War, dates to around 1880 with additions by twentieth-century owners.

Fig. 5. In the mid-twentieth century landscape architect Robert Marvin of Walterboro, South Carolina, designed the red-brick suntrap to stay warm during the winter months.

Fig. 6. This English composition stone figure of a boy playing a horn was the first piece the Chiltons acquired from Barbara Israel. Dating from c. 1900 and attributed to London’s Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts, the 48-inch-tall sculpture is a focal point of the suntrap garden.

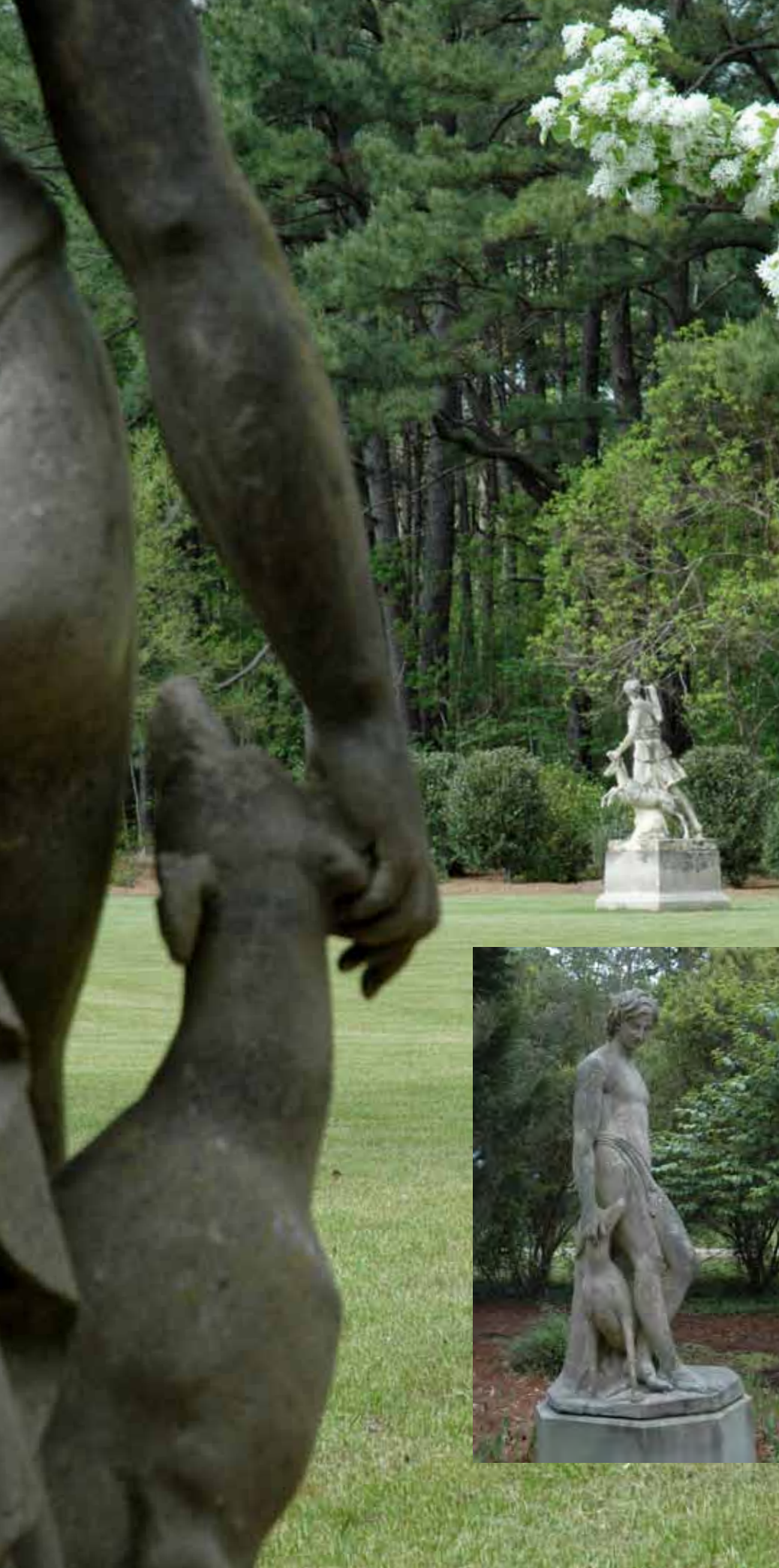
Martin’s column focused on the families of means —Doubleday, DuPont, Guggenheim, Hutton, Vanderbilt, and Whitney among them—who were buying up derelict southern plantations, hundreds or even thousands of acres at a time, and restoring them for use as seasonal sporting retreats. “Wall Street planters,” some called them.

On March 15, 1931, Martin published her impressions of White Hall, a former rice plantation on Cuckolds Creek in Colleton County, about an hour inland from Charleston on the old road to Savannah. Like nearly everyone before or since, she was mesmerized by what she saw. Ancient live oaks, their crooked limbs draped with wispy sleeves of silvery Spanish moss, arched across the long drive in a cathedral-like embrace of the small, white house, almost saintly in its modest, upright posture.

“Engine Designer Plays in Colleton,” Martin wrote, identifying White Hall’s new owner as Charles Lanier Lawrance (1882–1950), a Long Island, New York, engineer newly celebrated for creating the motor that powered Charles Lindbergh’s Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic. Owned by South Carolina’s Heyward family for much of the nineteenth century, the property was acquired by Richard L. Chilton Jr. and his wife, Maureen, in 1997. “It was a spectacular day in January and we were visiting the area with our children. It was just the best way to spend a winter day with our family. White Hall is one of those special places. A weight lifts every time we arrive,” Maureen Chilton says.

Connecticut residents, the Chiltons restored and furnished the house, the core of which dates to the 1880s, working with New York designer Thomas Jayne to maintain the interior’s relaxed, Anglo-American mien. Over time they added several outbuildings—among them, a stable, playhouse, and pavilion—and began developing a series of formal and woodland





**Figs. 7, 7a, 7b.** Two monumental figures anchor the Diana Garden. The composition stone figure of Adonis, a greyhound at his side, is attributed to the English firm Austin and Seeley and dates to c. 1860. The French limestone *Diane Chasseresse* of c. 1900 is a replica of the Roman marble version of the figure now at the Louvre, which is known to have been at the Palace of Fontainebleau by 1586.

**Fig. 8.** The house overlooks the former rice pond.

**Fig. 9.** In the Secret Garden, a c. 1860 English stoneware figure attributed to John Marriot Blashfield (active 1858–1875) stands on a stoneware plinth stamped “J.M. BLASHFIELD. STAMFORD.” The English composition stone bench in the Etruscan style dates to c. 1940.



gardens on the roughly eighty-five-hundred-acre estate, managed professionally in the family's absence for timber and wildlife conservation.

Spectacular in scale and meticulous in design and execution, the gardens might be considered an afterthought were it not for the abiding passion for landscape and horticulture that Maureen Chilton, chairman of the board of managers of the New York Botanical Garden, shares with her husband. Out walking one day with his wife, Richard Chilton asked, “What shall we do when we are too old to ride and shoot?” “I suppose we will just putter around in the garden,” she replied. A nearby cornfield, they agreed, was the place to begin cultivating their future.

In planning their gardens, the well-traveled couple took inspiration from the horticultural delights of England and the American South; landscapes like Charleston's Middleton Place, luxurious with flowering azaleas, kalmia, magnolias, crepe myrtle, and roses. But her chief desire, Maureen Chilton says, was not to re-create the past but to locate something precious and fleeting in the present. “It began with a feeling. I wanted our children to walk down a path and discover a thing of beauty, whether a statue or a shrub; to meander and take time, to enjoy the moment. This millennial generation keeps moving, moving, moving. I like the idea of coming into a place and finding peace, of discovering something in a quiet way,” she says.

In keeping with their love of historical art, architecture, and design, the couple is forming an important collection of antique garden ornament. Quite by chance, they found the perfect partner for their pursuit: the specialist New York dealer Barbara Israel. The foremost expert in the field is, coincidentally, the granddaughter of White Hall's former owner Charles Lawrance, a fact stumbled upon by the Chiltons during a chance conversation with Israel at the Winter Antiques Show.



Overseen by estate manager Ray Jacobs and head gardener Barbara Degraw, the sprawling plan begins with a cozy suntrap garden, a mid-twentieth-century addition off the rear of the house (Fig. 5). Facing the former rice pond, the red brick enclosure—a signature design by landscape architect Robert E. Marvin of Walterboro, South Carolina—remains inviting through the winter months. A focal point in the suntrap garden is the first sculpture the couple bought from Israel, a composition figure of a seated boy of about 1900 attributed to England's Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts (Fig. 6).

Across the pond, now dammed to maintain the vista, and beyond the stables is the Diana Garden, designed around two monumental figures (Figs. 7-7b). At the far end of a broad, unadorned lawn ringed by a mixed border of perennials and flowering shrubs, the composition stone figure of Adonis of about 1860, probably by the London firm Austin and Seeley and formerly at Gosfield Hall in Essex, stands eyes down-



Fig. 10 Carved marble allegorical figures of the continents anchor two of the corners of the Secret Garden. Seen here are Europe, wearing a crown and leaning on a horse, and a turbaned Asia with her camel.

Fig. 11. Spring flowering shrubs make a dramatic showing in the Secret Garden.

Figs. 12a–12d. The figures of America and Africa are Italian, c. 1860; Asia and Europe are Italian, late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Identical figures are at Rosedown Plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana.

“The Chiltons are entirely responsible for the placement of the pieces. They have done it extremely well, which isn’t easy” — Barbara Israel

cast, no match in vigor for the armed and assertive *Diane Chasseresse* of about 1900 realized by a French maker working in limestone. “The Chiltons are entirely responsible for the placement of the pieces. They have done it extremely well, which isn’t easy,” Israel says of this and other juxtapositions.

At the heart of the series of garden rooms are two densely planted acres entirely enclosed by an eight-foot-tall wall, a monumental project incorporating 144,000 bricks. The architectural feature is common, along with crumbling ruins, to great English gardens such as that at the early manor house in Kent, Hever Castle.

Called the Secret Garden, its centerpiece is a magnificent, six-ton fountain that was shipped in three sections from England to the port of Charles-

ton, trucked to the estate, and, with great difficulty, hoisted over the garden wall. From a manor house in Bath, England, and dating to the nineteenth century, the composition stone fountain decorated with egrets seems perfect for this tidal setting (see Figs. 1, 1a).

Anchoring two of the four corners of the Secret Garden, whose meandering perimeter path yields a series of arresting vignettes, are four allegorical figures of the Continents—Africa, America, Asia, and Europe—all Italian and carved of marble between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries (Figs. 10,12).

*Psyche*, a mid-nineteenth-century sculpture by Mark Henry Blanchard, a London stoneware manufacturer active between 1839 and 1870, is one of Mau-



Figs. 13, 14. In the Secret Garden, winged sphinxes form the base of an Italian carved Istrian stone bench of c. 1920 that was formerly at Knole, an estate in Old Westbury, Long Island, New York, designed by Carrère and Hastings. From Tattlingstone Place in Suffolk, England, the rare lead figures of Venus, and Bacchus, are attributed to John Cheere (1709–1787), and date to the eighteenth century.



reen Chilton's favorite pieces (see Fig. 18). "It is beautiful when the Japanese apricots are out in February," she says. She is likewise drawn to the rare eighteenth-century lead figures of Bacchus and Venus attributed to John Cheere (Figs. 13, 14), once installed at Tattlingstone Place in Suffolk. "They sit there quietly until the pyracanthas bloom and make a dazzling display."

Majestic presences inspiring near druidical reverence, the live oaks are a special interest of Richard Chilton. Visitors come from afar to admire White Hall's gentle giant, a behemoth more-than-twenty-six-feet-around by the rice pond. When injured and infirm oaks succumb, they are replaced. Richard Chilton has planted approximately 130 of the trees—including fifty each to mark the fiftieth birthdays of husband and wife and another twenty to restore the viewscape along the stately approach to the house.

Adjacent to the Secret Garden, the Meditation Garden is mildly Italian in its geometric rigor (see Fig. 15). It seems fitting that the last of the garden enclosures is an oblique homage to the oaks, the old souls that are the very essence of White Hall. Amidst an orderly grove of the newly planted trees, a promise to future generations, stands a late nineteenth-century French cast-iron figure of a hamadryad, a wood nymph in Greek mythology.

The affection the Chiltons feel for the unspoiled beauty of their low country home manifests itself in their latest project for White Hall, their understated planting of its wooded groves with native bulbs and azaleas, ferns, and wild orchids.

White Hall is many miles and several worlds away from the New York Botanical Garden, but Maureen Chilton sees in each an oasis—a beautiful place, set apart from the everyday, to be loved and shared. "That in itself is a great gift," she says.



Fig. 15. Crisscrossed with gravel paths for strolling, the Meditation Garden has at its center a cast-iron figure of a hamadryad, or wood nymph, made by the French foundry J.J. Duclé et Fils of Paris, 1858–1877. Retaining old white paint, it rests on a modern cast-iron plinth. The original 1709 marble statue by Antoine Coysevox (1640–1720), made for the Château de Marly, is today at the Louvre. Against the brick wall is an English carved stone bench, c. 1820, in the Etruscan style.

Below, from left:

Fig. 16. The French cast-iron figure *Amour*, c. 1880, is marked "VAL D'OSNE" and is modeled after *Cupid Playing with a Butterfly* by Denis-Antoine Chaudet (1763–1810), now at the Louvre.

Fig. 17. *Antique Faun with Pipes*, French, mid-nineteenth century, is after a Roman marble copy of a Greek bronze. The marble was acquired by Napoleon Bonaparte and is today at the Louvre.

Fig. 18. A stoneware figure of a winged Psyche by Mark H. Blanchard (active 1839–1870), London, mid-nineteenth century, stands on an octagonal stoneware pedestal attributed to James Pulham and Son, Hertfordshire and London, c. 1880.

