



Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

News LETTER

The Year so far...

The summer programme provided members with three contrasting visits to sites all of which tell in their different ways a heart-warming story of a commitment to the preservation of the region's historic heritage:

Baggeridge Country Park

In May, a party visited Baggeridge Country Park, at Sedgley, between Wolverhampton and Dudley. Left derelict after the closure in 1968 of what had been the world's most modern and largest pit, the land was bought and reclaimed by South Staffordshire District Council and is now a country park dedicated to providing leisure amenities for the Black Country.

Since it was opened by The Princess Royal in 1983, it has attracted thousands of visitors each year; indeed, its popularity is now so great that the management must address the familiar problem of finding sufficient accommodation for the growing number of cars in which an increasing number of visitors arrive! Its popularity is not surprising, given the range of leisure opportunities it offers: a varied programme of activities and events includes guided country walks, classic car rallies, do-it-yourself nature trails and bird watching for beginners. These combine with a miniature railway and a bandstand to offer the attractions of both a municipal park and a nature reserve.

So successful has the management of this country park been that it has received the Green Flag Award for no fewer than five successive years.

But, above all, the management deserves great credit for its commitment to educating children living in an industrialised environment in the joys of the countryside through a variety of activities such as bug-hunting, pond-dipping and elementary tree identification,

though, sadly, the little lad who set off enthusiastically in search of a hippopotamus was probably disappointed! Led by Stephen Gallis, the Country Park Manager, and accompanied by Alan Taylor and David Wright, whose professional expertise added to the interest and enjoyment of the visit, the party was able to understand the underlying philosophy of a well-managed country park as well as enjoying its rural attractions.

Middleton Hall, near Tamworth

The story of Middleton Hall over the past twenty-five years is an extraordinary one of dedication by a group of volunteers committed to restoring and adapting to contemporary use a unique range of historic buildings dating from medieval through to Georgian times. Over the last quarter of a century, derelict buildings have been painstakingly reclaimed from the ruinous state in which they had been left by time and vandalism and their survival ensured. The eighteenth-century walled garden, once famous for its lilies - in demand as table decoration and for Jewish funerals -, which we found bright with late spring and early summer flowers is maintained by a rota of just seven volunteer gardeners, all ladies!

The home of the Willoughby family for several centuries, the Hall and grounds are now leased by the Middleton Hall Trust, which finances its management through civil weddings, conferences, exhibitions and concerts. On display in the

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Still to come

In addition to the visit to Witley Court on September 9th, two talks have also been arranged as part of the Autumn 2006 programme.

On Wednesday, October 18th, Richard Kemp, General Manager at Shugborough, will take time off from a busy work schedule to give us a talk on "Managing an Historic Estate" (he also managed Castle Howard).

In his talk, which will take place at Rodbaston College and will start at 7.30pm., the speaker will refer to the recent restoration of The Walled Garden and to the theme of "From Fork to Fork" being developed at Shugborough, which follows the food eaten by the household from kitchen garden to dining-room.

There will be an admission charge of £3.00 for members, family and friends (£4.00 for non-members).

On Wednesday, 15th November, the speaker will be Chris Edwards, who was until recently, Conservation officer with East Staffordshire District Council. He now works as a consultant with Brownhill Hayward Brown, of Lichfield, a firm which specializes in conservation projects and has recently been involved in restoration work at Trentham Gardens.

The speaker is also a part-time lecturer at Derby University, specializing in conservation and countryside management, and in his talk he will be drawing on his considerable experience of dealing with heritage issues.

This meeting, for which there will be no admission charge, will also be held at Rodbaston College and will begin at 7.30pm.

It is hoped that members will find this programme attractive and give their support.



Middleton Hall - The Walled Garden

Hall is an exhibition of photographs illustrating the parlous state into which it had fallen before the Trust began its programme of restoration, and if there is any single one which encapsulates the extent of the initial task and the measure of the Trust's achievement it is of the grand staircase down which successive brides have since swept which had been virtually destroyed by vandals. A short slide show showed just how much had been accomplished. The home for over ten years of John Ray, recognised as the Father of British Botany, Middleton Hall saw the compilation of "Ornithologia", the first-ever encyclopaedia of birds, based on sketches by Francis Willoughby, John Ray's patron and himself a renowned naturalist.

Already rich in historical association, Middleton Hall was also able to chalk up another historic 'first' when it became the site of the first ironworks in the Midlands.

Visited by members of both the SGPT and the Staffordshire Historic Buildings Trust in early June, the party was fortunate to have the services of Ian Dillamore, an experienced guide who lightened an extensive knowledge with enthusiasm and good humour.

The Trust, which needs another £1.5m for the next stage of its restoration programme, is now already halfway through its hundred-year lease; it is to be hoped that when the lease reverts to its owner, there will be an appropriate recognition of just how the survival of his asset has depended upon the hard work of the Middleton Hall Trust and its volunteers.

Weston Park

Finally, on a very hot day in July, a large party of members and friends enjoyed guided tours of the gardens and parkland at **Weston Park**, the seventeenth-century home of the Earls of Bradford.

The tour of the gardens was led by Martin Gee, the Head Gardener, who first began working on the estate thirty-six years ago, following a family tradition which began at the beginning of the nineteenth-century! We started on the Italianate formal terraces which front the house; laid out in Victorian times and restored less than twenty years ago closely following the original planting, they offer magnificent views of the



Weston Park - The Weeping Woman

parkland beyond. Here, "Capability" Brown worked, laying out the Shrewsbury Walk and separating parkland and pleasure grounds with a ha-ha. Our tour took us through the Rose Garden, where the planting echoes the gables of the house, into the Broderie or Italian Garden, where the beds have been planted to provide all-the-year-round colour. The appropriately-named "Bridal Seat" has become a favourite place for photographs to be taken since Weston Park was first licensed as a venue for civil weddings. The Orangery which overlooks this garden was added in 1865 and refurbished in 1935.

We next entered the Teardrop Garden, so-called because of its centre-piece, the statue of a weeping woman which is said to have stood over the grave of a still-born child, although another belief is that it depicts a young woman jilted in love. The theme of mourning is continued in the shape of the flower-bed in which the statue stands and the presence of six silver weeping pear trees.

Finally, we made our way to the Walled Kitchen Garden, passing a multi-layered chestnut tree believed to be at least five hundred years old and Pendrill's Cave, intended as a hermitage to accommodate the hermit who was once an indispensable feature of such estates. The Walled Kitchen Garden continued to provide produce for the house until 1991, but it now houses an animal learning centre and a maze planted at the beginning of the present year, as well as a newly-planted orchard.

Now led by David Wright, the party entered Temple Wood, whose present form owes much to the arboricultural passion of Gerald, the sixth Earl. There, David pointed out a rich variety of trees, of which a variegated tulip-tree, the red-barked paper maple, the red oak, whose leaves turn scarlet in the autumn, and the cut-leaf beech were but a few. David reminded us that, when "Capability" Brown was working in Temple Wood, the range of trees at his disposal was, by modern standards, restricted, but he was nonetheless innovative in his planting; and, admitting that he was being a mite controversial, David went on to state his belief that the National Trust was sometimes a little too purist in its approach to restoration, even suggesting that, had conifers been available to him, Brown might well have used them!

The tour of the woods embraced the Temple of Diana, a magnificent folly designed by James Paine but now a

private residence, and the Temple Pool crossed by the Roman Bridge, also designed by James Paine.

The weekend of the visit was also the occasion of a two-day Gardener's Fayre, of which, at the conclusion of the tour, the party took full advantage, and I for one have a souvenir of the visit, a deep red pelargonium called "Lord Bute"! We were very fortunate in having Martin and David as guides for this visit; their deep knowledge, lightly carried and generously shared, greatly enhanced both our interest and enjoyment.

Once there were thirty gardeners caring for the gardens at Weston Park; now the work is done by just three, and it is a tribute to their dedication that the gardens remain so attractive.

Like Middleton Hall, Weston Park now relies on a flow of visitors and a succession of attractions to remain financially viable and its Trustees are to be congratulated on maintaining it to such a high standard.

Stourton Castle

In addition to the above visits, a small team of researchers spent a morning at Stourton Castle, in the south of the County, at the invitation of its owners, Stuart and Alison Grove, who, having acquired a neglected historic property, had already carried out an extensive and sensitive restoration of the interior, were now ready to look at restoring the gardens.

Prior to the visit, the Trust's Archivist, Sue Gregory, had trawled through all the available archive material, but the material unearthed had proved disappointing; papers relating to the sale in 1913 of the Prestwood Estate, including Stourton, had not provided a good description of the gardens and pleasure grounds, which such papers would normally be expected to provide, while a history of the Castle published in 1919 by a former owner also failed to mention the gardens.

In addition, while five drawings dating from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, part of the collection of Staffordshire Views held in The William Salt Library, showed the Castle standing on its eminence surrounded by belts of trees, in all but one the view was too distant to show evidence of gardens, though the fifth did show an entrance gate and courtyard.

However, the first-edition Ordnance Survey map showed a garden designed

Lichfield Medieval Market

For a second successive year, the Trust had a stand at the Lichfield Medieval Market, held in the Cathedral Close on the first Saturday in July.

In addition to the Trust's own display unit, there was a second display illustrating a number of reconstructed medieval gardens found in other parts of the country, for which the additional display boards were kindly provided through the good offices of fellow-members Peter and Pat Magee.

Three members, suitably garbed, were on duty throughout the day – Sarah Ashmead, Lorna Bushell and Bryan Sullivan –, and were kept agreeably busy answering questions about the Trust.

However, 'Friar Tuck' felt unable to grant the requests of three revellers who asked him to grant them absolution!

The Monks' Walk - next working party Sunday 15th October. On site at Lichfield Campus from 10.30am. Tel Sarah 01543 473222

on two terraces on the south side, below the Castle walls; these were connected by steps and walks leading to shrubberies containing specimen trees. A serpentine path lead to and ran alongside the River Stour and past the Castle through woodland to a three-acre kitchen garden, now demolished.

In other words, this had been a typical early 19th century garden.

Armed with this information, the party arrived at the Castle and began a limited survey of what remained.

There, they found that a small box and gravel parterre had recently been planted on the top terrace, replicating a larger and more intricate version shown in an early 20th century photograph, which would have been filled with flowers. An iron fountain basin on the lower level appeared to have been placed there in order to provide a viewpoint from windows in the Castle, though from its awkward position it was concluded that it had probably not been part of the

original design.

A circular pond, now empty and surrounded by bamboo and rhododendrons, had been inserted in the lawn - apparently towards the end of the 19th century - to form a focal point on one side of the house.

In what was the most significant departure from the original design, the two original steep terraces had evidently slipped during one of the periods of neglect and had been shored up into four narrow paths with original stone from the walls, consolidated by rather crude brickwork.

The party hope that they have been able to make a positive contribution to a future restoration programme, but the visit vividly illustrated two problems which often face anyone minded to restore an historic garden to a semblance of its former glory: first, archival material may be sparse and scattered; and, secondly, restoration work is demanding of both time and resources.

HELP TO KEEP OUR VALUABLE HISTORIC GARDENS AND PARKS

How you can help:

We need volunteers to help with:

- Surveying Gardens - On site work, recording existing condition,
- Research work - Archival research, help the Research Group develop the inventory,
- Promotion - Preparing/manning exhibitions,
- Education - Attending events and study days. Lectures to societies and school groups,
- Social - Help with activities programme. Attend meetings
- Financial - Seek sponsorship and funding.

Contact membership secretary:

W. B. Sullivan

24 Park Gate Road, Cannock Wood, Rugeley, Staffordshire. WS15 4RN

Telephone: 01543 684965.

HISTORIC BUILDINGS AT RISK

At the end of business at the Annual General meeting in April, Alan Taylor introduced a joint presentation with his former colleague, Kuni Gough, on historic garden buildings at risk. He began by referring to Witley Court, in Worcestershire, which he referred to as having the only significant garden in the care of English Heritage in the West Midlands. Following a disastrous fire in 1937 and asset-stripping by the scrap merchant who subsequently purchased it, the Hall itself, once the home of the Earls of Dudley, was left a derelict shell until it was acquired by the Department of the Environment in 1974, later to become the responsibility of English Heritage.

The most important structures in the gardens are the two giant fountains, the larger of which depicts Perseus and Andromeda. English Heritage has recently restored the fountain and the surrounding parterre, after seventy years of neglect, with the help of a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The second fountain, depicting Flora, is still in a neglected condition and awaits restoration. English Heritage has also created a modern woodland garden at the site as part of its Contemporary Heritage Garden project.

Attached to Witley Court is the late seventeenth-century Great Witley Church, with its breath-taking Baroque interior. Further afield, English Heritage has custodianship of such outstanding properties (and their magnificent gardens) as Eltham House, near Greenwich, a 1930s Art Deco mansion built next to a medieval palace; Brodsworth House, near Hull, built in the 1860s in the popular Italianate style of the period; Osborne House, on the Isle of Wight, Queen Victoria's favourite home, also built in the Italianate style to the design of Thomas Cubitt, under the no-doubt close supervision of the Prince Consort. Audley End House, in Essex, by contrast dates from the early seventeenth century and, while still palatial in appearance, is now only a third of its original size. In addition to buildings and their gardens within their own custodianship, English Heritage monitors the condition of historic gardens in the ownership of others, maintaining a register of buildings and other garden structures seen as being at risk and advising on their restoration.



The Rotunda at Coombe Abbey

One way of ensuring their survival is to find an alternative use for them. Negotiations are in hand with The Landmark Trust to convert the redundant Watchtower at Knypersley Hall into holiday accommodation, while the semi-derelict Menagerie in the grounds of Coombe Abbey, just outside Coventry (which never, as far as is known, housed animals) has been put on the housing market by its owners, Coventry City Council. This unusual building has been sold to a North Warwickshire couple interested in converting it into a private dwelling. Many garden buildings have been neglected because of their distance from the main house of the sub-division of ownership. The landscape park at Croome Court, also in Worcestershire, is now owned and maintained by The National Trust. However, the distant Rotunda, which can be seen from the M5, and other of the outer eye-catchers are in separate ownership. English Heritage is involved in discussions over their restoration with a hope that The National Trust can take on their management and re-unite them with the rest of the estate.

The recent revival of Trentham Gardens has been accomplished through a careful balance between conservation and the commercial activity which underpins it by generating essential income. The owners, St. Modwen, still have plans to build a luxury hotel on the footprint of the demolished Hall, broadly following its design, though this ambitious plan has lost its urgency since the down-turn in North Atlantic tourism following 9/11. St. Modwen have investigated the possibility of bringing back two pavilions moved to Lilleshall Hall in 1910 (and seen by the Trust on its visit in 2001). No agreement has been reached with the owners, not least because the structures, like the Belvedere, formerly at Trentham and now in the grounds of Sandon Hall, have subsequently developed a sense of belonging to their present location. Amongst other Staffordshire gardens where English Heritage provided funding and advice, Alan listed the Conservatory at Heath House, in Upper Tean, built in 1832 by the Lichfield architect, Thomas Johnson; and the Gothic Museum at Enville Hall, near Stourbridge. The condition of the latter was considered so perilous and its survival so important that, in 1989, the full cost of the renovation was met by English Heritage and the usual condition making public access available was waived, though visits by appointment were now possible. In the second part of the presentation, Kuni drew our attention to the contribution made by smaller buildings such as dairies - often built, as at Blaise Castle, near Bristol, in a rustic style -, dovecotes, glasshouses and ornate garden sheds. She also showed us examples of water features such as the bath house at Wrest Park, in Bedfordshire, another garden in the care of English Heritage, where the original water tank can still be found. On a sober note, she spoke of the difficulty of finding the skilled workers needed to carry out the restoration work essential to the continuing survival of what have become characteristic features of our historic landscapes. Copiously illustrated and covering a wide range of diverse buildings and other structures, this presentation held its audience's attention from start to finish and left everyone better informed about the vital work of English Heritage in preserving a vital part of our national heritage.