



Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

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News LETTER

Trust Appoints New President and Chairman

Council of the Trust is very pleased to announce that Sir Patrick Cormack has agreed to become the new president of the Trust in succession to the late Lord Lichfield. Sir Patrick needs no introduction to residents of the county where he has been M.P. for South Staffordshire for 37 years, one of the longest serving Members of Parliament in the House of Commons.

The Trust is greatly honoured by Sir Patrick's acceptance of this post because, as well as being a well known figure in Staffordshire, he is also one of the country's leading conservation champions with an unrivalled involvement with many conservation causes and bodies nationally. Sir Patrick is also President of our fellow Trusts, the Staffordshire Historic Churches Trust and the Staffordshire Historic Buildings Trust, with whom we look forward to working more closely. With Sir Patrick's wide range of connections, enthusiasm and energy the Trust looks forward to a new era of progress under his leadership. The Trust also has a new Chairman, Alan Taylor, who was elected by the Council of Management in November. Alan was a founder member of the Trust in 1992 and has been active on Council ever since. He has been a resident of Staffordshire for over thirty years and was heavily involved (with Keith Goodway and Peter Hayden, other founder members of this Trust) in raising the profile of Biddulph Grange before it was acquired by the National Trust in 1982. Alan worked for 25 years as the County Council's conservation officer and is now an Inspector of Historic Buildings for English Heritage in the West Midlands.



Alan is looking forward to the challenge of this new role and to working with our new President. He greatly admires the achievements of the Trust under Sarah Ashmead, the outgoing chairman, and intends to consolidate and build on that work.

Equal Opportunities?

The following extract is from the Editorial of "The Gardeners Chronicle" of 22nd October 1864, discussing the number and variety of exhibition classes at the Royal Horticultural Society shows: "We see no reason why there should not be classes for Ladies. They are good gardeners, many of them excellent, (and) there is no question that they could produce certain flowers in a state every way fit to command the admiration of the throng of visitors which frequent these fetes. They have skill in the arrangement of flowers and could give us of the ruder sex many a lesson by which we should only be too glad to profit. They have spirit and would take up, *con amore*, a matter of this sort, if made congenial to their tastes."

Sue Gregory November 2006

PARKS AND GARDENS DATA PARTNERSHIP

Issue No. 3 "Parks and Gardens", the journal of Parks and Gardens UK, has just been published and may be viewed on <http://parksandgardensuk-jan07.blogspot.com/>

Diary Dates

Sunday, April 22nd: Working Party at Monks Walk, Lichfield from 10.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. (Bring a packed lunch if you intend to stay for the whole day). For details contact Sarah Ashmead on 01543 473222.

Friday, April 27th: Annual General Meeting The Holtom Room, Main Building, Rodbaston College, Penkridge, commencing at 7.30 p.m. Speaker: Sir Patrick Cormack, FSA, MP, President of the Trust.

Wednesday, May 16th: Evening visit to The Wombourne Wodehouse, Wombourne, near Wolverhampton (the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Phillips). The house dates from about 1150, and is known for its collection of pictures, porcelain and furniture, while the garden was first laid out and the pond formed in the early 1700s. (see booking form for further details)

Saturday, June 16th: Guided tour of Castle Bromwich Hall Gardens. Long neglected, these early-eighteenth century gardens have been restored over a number of years to their Baroque glory by a dedicated team of volunteers (see booking form for further details)

Saturday, July 14th: Visit to Mayfield Hall, near Ashbourne, the home of Mr. and Mrs. Michael Brett, followed by a guided tour of the historic East Staffordshire village by a member of the Mayfield local history group. 18th century garden features at the Hall include 'egg-timer' steps (one of only two in the country), ice-house, red-brick kitchen garden wall, dovecote and arbour with Victorian rock garden. There will also be an opportunity to view parts of the house. (see booking form for further details)

Saturday, September 8th: Guided Tour of Derby Arboretum. Designed by the celebrated Regency landscape architect and prolific writer on garden topics, John Claudius Loudon, and opened in September 1840, Derby Arboretum was Britain's first publicly-owned park. It has now been re-opened after extensive renovation. The tour will be conducted by a City Blue Badge Guide, and there will be an opportunity for members to visit the nearby Crown Derby Works. (see booking form for further details)

WHETHER THE WEATHER BE HOT....

In 1850, John Bill opened a Garden and Farm Diary in which he recorded the details of when his garden produce was sown or planted and when it was harvested. He also recorded in precise detail when his hay was cut, dried and stacked.

The Bill family home was Farley Hall, in North Staffordshire, where they settled on moving from Norbury, in Derbyshire, in 1607. They subsequently purchased additional property in the surrounding area and in Derbyshire. Their family papers ⁽¹⁾ are particularly interesting because three members of the family each became land agent to an Earl as well as running their own estate. Richard Bill worked for the Earl of Shrewsbury on his Alton estate from 1702 to 1750, William was agent to Lord Gower at Trentham from 1758 to 1777, and Charles Bill was agent to the Earl of Ailesbury at Tottenham Hall, near Marlborough, in Wiltshire.

John Bill kept his diary ⁽²⁾ and recorded the effects of the weather on his crops as a means of forecasting it. We are so used to having weather forecasts at least hourly on radio and television and in newspapers or on demand by means of the internet and being able to buy fruit and vegetables all year round but 150 years ago, knowledge of the weather and seasons, so critical to food production, came from amateur records. The idea that certain types of weather recur at specific times of the year is enshrined in country lore, but recent analysis of statistical information proves that this is often the case. For example, the good weather which often occurs on or about 8th October was known as 'St. Luke's little summer', and if it occurred around 15th to 21st November, it was known as 'St. Martin's summer'. Meteorologists now call these periods 'singularities', and about twenty-two are known.

As well as cropping, John Bill recorded observations on the cycles of nature such as when he saw the first swallow (25th April), heard the cuckoo, 'water warbler' and corncrake (3rd May) for the first time, when he had to hive his bees (24th April), when he gathered the 'first nettles for tea' (12th March) and the state of his meadow grass. He enjoyed his first sea-kale (26th January), asparagus (23rd April), strawberries and peas in the first week of July, and the first potatoes, melon, grapes, radish, raspberries, 'scarlet runners' and cucumber in the second week of that month. He also collected what he called 'weather prognostics':

"A rainbow in the morning gives the shepherd warning.

A rainbow at night is the shepherd's delight. Evening red, next morning grey are sure signs of a beautiful day.

When the glow worm lights her lamp, the air is always damp.

If the cock goes crowing to bed, he will certainly rise with a watery head.

When you see gossamer flying, be sure the air

is drying.

When black snails cross your path, black clouds much moisture hath.

When the peacock loudly bawls, soon we'll have both rain and squalls.

When ducks are driving through the burn, that night the weather takes a turn.

If the morn shows like a silver shield, be not afraid to reap your field,

But if she rises haloed round, soon we'll tread in deluged ground.

When rooks fly sporting high in the air, it

shows that windy storms are near.

If at the sun rising or setting, the clouds appear of a livid colour, extending nearly to the zenith, it is a sure sign of storms and gales of wind."

Sue Gregory

19 November 2006

(No St. Martin's summer this year!)

¹. Staffordshire Record Office, reference D554

². D554/140/16



Lichfield Lions members Brenda Tolley (back left) and John Whitehouse (front left) present a cheque for £180 to Monks Walk Group members Patricia Magee, Lorna Bushell and Sarah Ashmead, watched by students and staff from Queens' Croft School, Lichfield (Picture courtesy Lichfield Mercury © CIN)

Beercroft or Beecroft

The Editor has received the following appeal from Dianne Barre, one of its members:

"If you have space in the next newsletter I wonder if you could ask for information for me? Among some correspondence I looked at among the Beaudesert papers at Stafford Record Office, there was a marvellous series of letters from Lord Paget about a very troublesome head gardener called Beercroft/Beecroft. The correspondence dated from 1774, and I happened to notice that Dorothy Stroud, in her book on Capability Brown, also mentions this gardener in 1776. It would be rather interesting to track him down if this hasn't already been done. So if anyone in the Trust happens to come across Mr. Beercroft/Beecroft, either in Staffordshire or elsewhere, I'd be very interested in hearing from them."

Any reader able to assist Dianne in her researches should contact her at The Manor, Streethay, Lichfield, Staffs. WS13 8LU, or by email on dianne.barre@internet.com

MANAGING AN HISTORIC ESTATE

(A report of a talk given to members of the Trust by Richard Kemp, General Manager of the Shugborough Estate, in November 2006)

Richard began by reminding us of the circumstances in which ownership of Shugborough came to The National Trust. Viscount Anson, the son and heir of the fourth Earl of Lichfield pre-deceased his father, and the Earl's death in 1960 meant that the family faced paying substantial death duties twice within two years. Consequently, the house and estate were made over to the Treasury in lieu of death duties. The National Trust then leased Shugborough to Staffordshire County Council for ninety-nine years.

In the 1960s, Staffordshire County Council saw Shugborough as a potential cultural centre for Staffordshire people, but by the 1980s pressure was beginning to mount on local authorities to examine their expenditure on the basis of 'Best Value', and the question was being asked, "Why was Staffordshire County Council running a stately home at a loss?" In response, the management took the decision to increase revenue by offering itself as a venue for special events such as craft fairs and concerts, and in 2004 twenty-five such events were held, all organised by other people, who paid the estate a fee to do so. Even then, the year recorded a deficit of £1m., in part because the events were not succeeding in bringing visitors to the house. In 2003 Staffordshire County Council began a re-organisation which transferred the management of Shugborough from the Museums and Archive Service to Development Services, and the decision was taken to look for a more dynamic approach.

As a result, an advertisement appeared in The Guardian headed "New Light through Old Windows", and Richard was appointed General Manager on 4th March 2004, bringing to the appointment the experience which he had already acquired at Castle Howard and The Jorvik Viking Centre at York.

He immediately discovered that special events, not all of them appropriate for a classic space, had come to dominate; these included an all-night 'rave' and a Noddy event made memorable by a tattooed Noddy who was later involved in a drunken brawl in a local pub! Shugborough was still not a place to come for a day out; of the 250,000 people who were said to support the events, few visited the house, and it was clear that what was needed was a radical new business direction.

The management team began by asking themselves what was special about Shugborough. It was not in the same league as Chatsworth or Blenheim. It was neither particularly old nor well preserved. It was not known for its contents; like any other stately home it had its gallery of portraits and other paintings, but

only a handful by acknowledged masters. What was identified as exceptional was its completeness, particularly its collection of ancillary buildings, all dating from 1805. Whereas, at Castle Howard, such buildings had either been swept away or adapted to other uses, Shugborough had retained the walled kitchen garden, together with its bothies and head gardener's house, and a working farm with mill, chicken houses, pig houses and even the original flushing privy. The servants' quarters had also survived intact, as had the gardens outside the house and the unique collection of monuments in the park land beyond.

It was decided that it was this completeness which made Shugborough special, and put it in a unique position in an already crowded market of bigger and better-known stately homes.

The new policy, therefore, would be to present house, museum and parkland as 'The Complete Working Historic Estate' It was a maxim of Pam Sambrook, former curator of the County Museum, that, before any new areas could be brought into use, it was essential that the chimneys should first be made to work! Once this had been achieved, ranges could be fired up and the kitchen and laundry brought back to life.

Now, 'Mrs. Stearn', whose homely features figure prominently in the latest publicity, prepares food nearly every day on the kitchen range, ensuring that the kitchen forever smells enticingly of cooking. The laundry, too, has been brought back into use, its atmosphere permeated by the warmth and smell of fresh washing.

The mill grinds corn in front of visitors, who can then visit the dairy and lend a hand in the cheese-making (but, be assured, the finished product is *never* put on sale!).

And next year will see the brewery at work every day, ingredients and labour provided by the Titanic Brewery of Stoke-on-Trent. Beer, we were reminded, was very important to the economy of the house, each servant receiving eight pints of 'small beer' a day.

The Walled Garden, where the tour starts, is, in fact, made up of three gardens, but only one has been restored. Here, the gardeners dress and talk in the style of 1805, using the gardening practices of the period, so that root fly in the brassicas cannot be treated with modern pesticides but, instead, with the nicotine tea on which their early nineteenth-century predecessors would have relied (We wait to see whether this will lead to an eye-catching nation-wide appeal for cigarette-ends which was promised!).

Unlike other historic houses, some of which simply dress their staff in period costume, the staff at Shugborough remain in character, never coming out of role.

Passing through the farm where role-playing staff mill, cook, brew and make cream and cheese, and meeting 'Mrs. Stearn' in her kitchen, visitors arrive at the house itself, where 'Lady Anson' extols her husband's achievements as a progressive farmer, drawing attention to his investments in the model farm and walled kitchen garden, the home of an academy where people come to learn the latest horticultural and agricultural techniques. Modern guides are also on hand in the house to answer modern questions.

In the same spirit, dishes served at the restaurant are also inspired by history, made from meat and produce faithful to the period, often supplied from the estate and cooked to the recipes of Mrs. Beeton.

Indeed, food – its progress from farm and garden to dining-room table – is now the carrying theme, and the house-centred approach of other historic estates has been abandoned in favour of offering visitors a contextualised servant's perspective.

Previously, the excitement generated by the original approach along a drive lined with thick shrubbery was lost once visitors reached the junction which required them to decide whether to continue on to the house or go to the farm and walled garden. Now, the relocation of the car park to a site in front of the Walled Garden means that house and farm are no longer in competition with each other; the middle area has been reclaimed from cars, and the site is once more unified.

Inevitably, these changes have not been to everyone's liking; free access to the grounds is no longer available, a measure forced on the management to combat vandalism and other anti-social activity.

The aim is to double the number of visitors within ten years, and in 2006 a new season ticket was introduced which allowed unlimited access to the whole site and was undoubtedly found to be good value, especially as it included free admission to selected events, a free cup of coffee in the restaurant at the end of each visit, free parking and other benefits, including two free newsletters!

Season passes for 2007 are now on sale. Details can be obtained by visiting www.shugborough.org.uk or by phoning 01889 881388.

Gwydir Castle - 'a pretty place' (Leland, 1536).

The Association of Garden Truſts annual conference was held in Bangor, North Wales, at the beginning of September 2006. Based at the university, the conference was a mixture of official AGT business, informative talks and garden visits. On a wet Saturday, the first visit was to Bodnant Garden, where curtains of miſt obscured moſt of the view but created a wonderful atmosphere.

The ſecond visit made was to a place called Gwydir Caſtle, a ſhort drive away, ſomewhere I was not aware of before the weekend.

Gwydir is ſituated in the Conwy Valley, ſome eleven miles from Conwy, near Llanwrſt, at the foot of Carreg-y- Gwalch, the Falcon's Rock. It has a reputation for being one of the moſt haunted houſes in Wales.

The houſe at Gwydir was conſtructed c1500 on the ſite of an earlier manor; the Hall block and the Solar Tower from that period now form the core of the preſent building. The property was in the Wynne family from then until being ſold in 1920. The houſe is liſted Grade I by CADW and the gardens liſted Grade I on the ICOMOS register.

The viſit ſtarted inside, with a brief introductory talk followed by a tour of the houſe, which took in ſome magnificent 1640s panelling now brought back to the houſe from



The Courtyard at Gwydir (from www.gwydircastle.co.uk)

New York after its ſale in 1956. The upſtairs windows provided views out over the gardens on both ſides of the houſe, encouraging us to deſcend and explore further; deſpite the weather.

The entrance to the houſe is from an enclosed courtyard laid out with a gravelled knot garden in the form of a Tudor roſe; if you are lucky you will ſee the peacocks bob their heads up above the hedging to eye you over. There is an Elizabethan raised terrace along the north eaſt ſide of the houſe with an imposing Renaiſſance arch, probably of 1590s, at the north end. It is recorded that quinces, oranges, lemons and other exotica were grown here in the late ſixteenth and early ſeventeenth centuries.

The garden ſtill contains four of the twelve Cedar of Lebanon ſaplings planted in 1625 to commemorate the wedding of King Charles

and Henrietta-Maria of France, as well as a yew tree eſtimated to be 600-1000 years old. In the 'Old Dutch Garden'. Below the front of the houſe, there is an avenue of ancient yew topiary with an octagonal pool lying within it. The pool is ſurrounded with quartz ſtones overlaying an older edging and has a central fountain which was fed by a culvert from a ſmall ſtream on the oppoſite hillſide.

The garden is in ſeveral compartments ſurrounding the houſe, each ſeperate from the other, ſo providing a new ſurpriſe on entering the next part. Gwydir is well worth a viſit if you are in the area. One thing I didn't ſee during my viſit was any of the ghoſts, but you may catch ſight of one!

You can learn more about Gwydir Caſtle on their website, www.gwydircastle.co.uk (The courtyard at Gwydir (from) www.gwydircastle.co.uk). A.B.

HERITAGE FACING THE CHALLENGE

The 2006 programme ended in November with a talk by Chris Edwards, formerly conſervation officer with Eaſt Staffordſhire Borough Council, now a conſultant with Brownhill Hayward Brown, a well known Lichfield architectural practice ſpecialiſing in conſervation projects. One of their moſt recent commiſſions of intereſt to this Truſt has been to prepare propoſals for the conſervation of garden ſtructures at Trentham Gardens.

The main theme of Chris' talk was that all conſervation work ſhould be properly informed by a clear understanding of the fabric and ſignificance of a ſite or building. He argued that before commencing any programme of works it is important to aſſeſs the ſite in ſeveral different ways. An archaeological and historical aſſeſſment is needed to interpret the physical fabric through ſurvey of what ſurvives and documentary ſources and to place it in an historic

context. This will ſhow both how the ſite has evolved and its place intellectually and philoſophically in the development either of its designer or the type of ſite under conſideration. The ſtudy ſhould alſo look at the type and ſource of materials uſed on a building (or, in the caſe of gardens, the plantsmanſhip).

Chris' theme was that without this vital preliminary reſearch it was all too eaſy for well intentioned works to deſtroy or cauſe harm to heritage aſſets. He illuſtrated this theme with ſeveral caſe ſtudies, which, although all drawn from historic building work, ſhowed leſſons which were equally applicable to garden conſervation. In particular, he ſhowed how at Wootton Lodge, a grade I liſted building in north eaſt Staffordſhire, remodelled in the 1590s by the renowned Tudor architect Robert Smythſon (beſt known as the architect of Hardwick Hall in Derbyſhire) and again in the 18th century, ill informed alterations in the 1960s had all but obliterated evidence of the original mediaeval hunting lodge which ſtill ſurvived within, together with the later Georgian fittings. Recent investigation in advance of further repairs has helped re-eſta bliſh ſome idea of the history and development of the building but has alſo ſhown how much original fabric was irremediably deſtroyed 40 years ago. The ſame phase of heavy handed works had alſo re-engineered much of the inte-

rior with pre-tensioned reinforced concrete which is now believed to be over-ſtreſſing the external fabric of the building but cannot be reversed without riſking more ſerious harm to its fabric. The external ſtonework had been coated in a ſilicone waterprooſing treatment which, it is now realised, harbours rather than repels damp. The adverſe effects (damp ſtaining and degradation of the ſtonework) are irreversible. A ſurpriſing but ſad diſcovery of the recent reſearch was that a ſmall formal garden to the north of the houſe was liſted 20 feet higher as part of thoſe earlier works, loſing its historic context.

At Wootton all the works in the 1960s had been carried out with the very beſt intentions of making the building fit for purpoſe as an up to date dwelling but alſo to ſafeguard its historic character for the future. However, the moral of this caſe was to ſhow how, without a proper understanding of the material being worked upon, it is all too eaſy to deſtroy or damage unique historic fabric or creations and ſo to defeat the ſpirit of the intended conſervation involvement. This, and other happier examples ſhown by Chris in his preſentation, where projects were enhanced by prior understanding of the ſignificance of the building or ſite, ſhould ſtand as a leſſon to us all in our conſervation endeavours. WBS/AGT