

# Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

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# News Letter

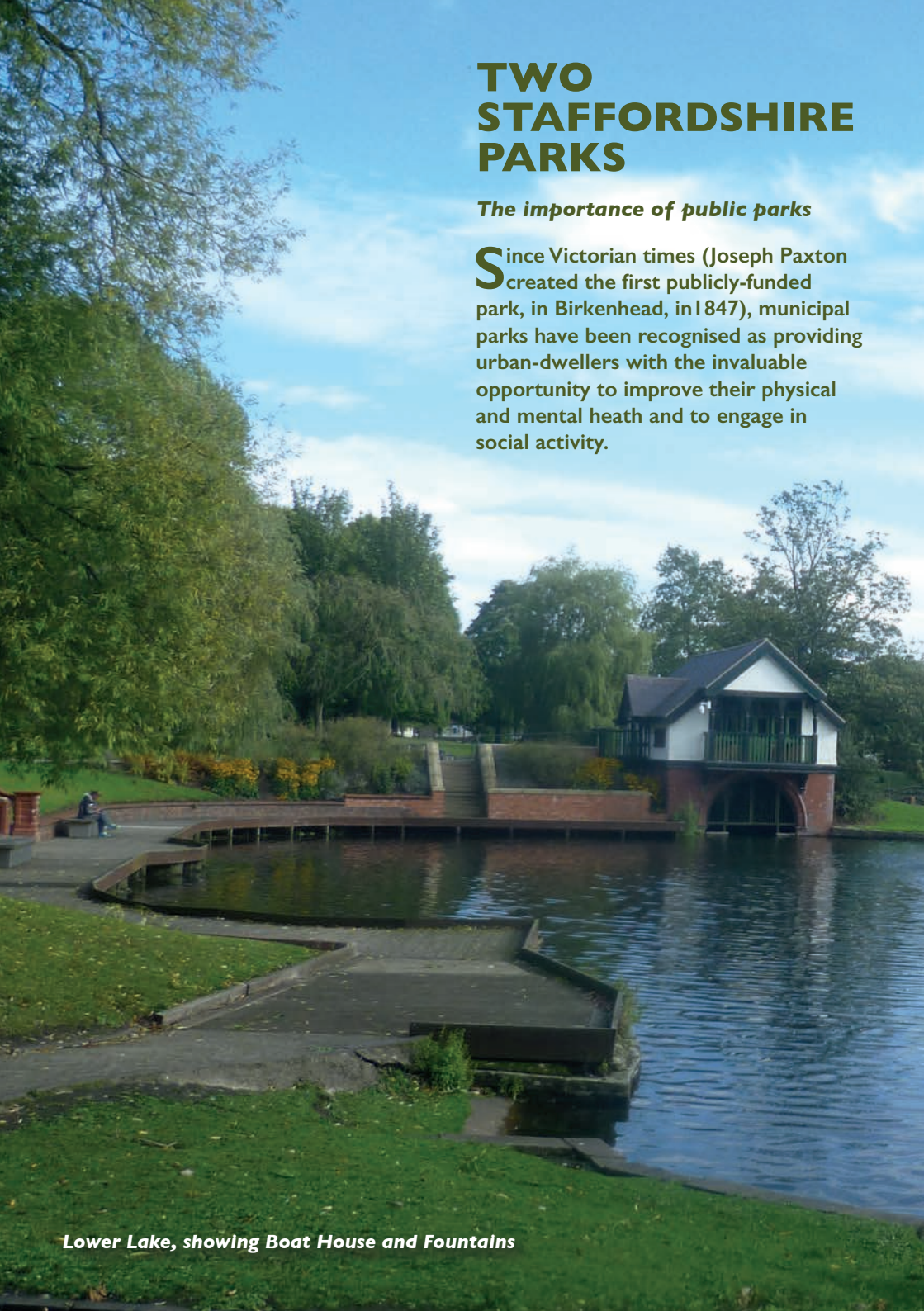


# TWO STAFFORDSHIRE PARKS

## *The importance of public parks*

Since Victorian times (Joseph Paxton created the first publicly-funded park, in Birkenhead, in 1847), municipal parks have been recognised as providing urban-dwellers with the invaluable opportunity to improve their physical and mental health and to engage in social activity.

*Lower Lake, showing Boat House and Fountains*



For many, the opportunity to garden has also provided a similar opportunity to sustain their physical and mental well-being, as well as contributing to their family budget.

Recently, however, the demand for housing has increased, which has put increased pressure on virgin land, which

is substantially less costly to develop than 'brownfield' sites, which are costly to prepare for housing.

Consequently, the space allocated to gardens in recent housing development appears to be diminishing, limited to a narrow strip at the front of the house and a small rectangular area to the rear, often enclosed.





***The newly restored Pavilion at Hanley Park***

The outcome has been a recognition of the importance of municipal parks in maintaining public well-being by providing space for leisure, sporting and other recreational activities.

Parks are also recognised as making a contribution to combating global warming by absorbing carbon emission: they also assist in flood management, absorbing and storing rainfall which might otherwise create run-offs on hard surfaces such as tarmac and concrete.

By their contribution to people's health, it is estimated that parks add billions of pounds to the nation's economy; they also add value to properties closest to them.

**“A really lovely & interesting park”**

In view, therefore, of their growing importance, it was appropriate that the Trust's final events of 2021 should have focused on two of the County's most historic parks.

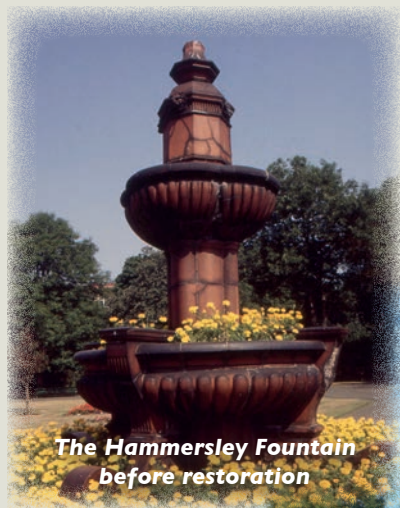
Alive to their value, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Stafford Borough Council have, with the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund and other funding sources, been spending millions of pounds restoring and extending the facilities provided by their parks.

Claire Studman's talk on the restoration of Hanley Park in November 2019 (see Newsletter 61, 2019, "A good example of a late Victorian Park", available on line) was followed by a walk round the park led by Claire last September, when a party of members saw for themselves the result of the £4.5m. Lottery-funded project, which saw its perimeter walls and gates repaired, the Main Pavilion and Boathouse repaired and re-purposed, and the Bandstand and Hammersley Fountain restored.

**“A very tranquil place”**



*The Cauldon Canal - once Mawson's 'eyesore', now an attractive feature of the Park*



*The Hammersley Fountain before restoration*



*The Hammersley Fountain after restoration*

The final meeting of the year was a talk at The Haling Dene Centre, Penkridge, on the restoration of Victoria Park given by Lisa Hibbert, Stafford Borough Council's Community Engagement & Events Officer, and Vicki Burke, Project Manager.

Victoria Park opened in 1908 as the Victoria Park Pleasure Grounds. Several years of lobbying finally led to the acquisition by Stafford Borough Council of twenty acres of land on which to lay out a public pleasure ground, but it took a further twenty-three years for work on the present site to begin, when the first task was to raise the level by three feet so as to prevent flooding from the River Sow, which flows through it (and provides visitors with attractive riverside walks).

The Park was extended in 1911 and again in 1930, and now covers nearly five acres. Apart from flood-prevention work on the river banks, the original layout of the park remains substantially unchanged.

## Funding the project

However, following the ravages of time and years of neglect by cash-strapped local councils, the Borough Council's Programme Management team took the first step to acquire the funding to finance the restoration of the historic fabric of the Park, when, in 2014, a bid was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund, but were rebuffed.

An extensive consultation was launched, both of residents and of stakeholders (of whom over seventy were canvassed).

Foremost amongst expectations of the public were improved catering and toilet facilities, a horticultural and education centre, and a greenhouse accessible to the public. There was also strong support for retaining the aviary, though this did meet with some objection.



**The Bandstand**

100% of respondents were interested in attending organised events in the Park. However, many also valued it for providing a green space in the town centre in which they could relax and re-connect with nature.

Armed with the findings of these Surveys and the details of the project refined following input from consultants of which The Environment Partnership (TEP) of Warrington was the lead consultant, the Council re-submitted its bid, which was this time successful.

The Council next put the project out to tender and received five bids. However, when the project was costed, it was found to be over budget and adjustments had to be made before work could proceed, which it did following a successful outcome to a planning application to the Borough Council's own planning committee, subject to sixteen conditions. Once The

Environment Agency had been satisfied that, river level would not be affected by the work, the project proceeded, only to be held up by Covid, delays in the supply chain and an archaeological dig!

## **Completing the project to be**

By and large, though, once under way, the restoration met the requirements of the public. A new café, called "Albert's Café" in honour of Queen Victoria's Consort, which is raised on stilts to protect it from flooding, is circular in shape, giving its patrons a 360° view of the park.

It is run by The Great British Experience, a Stafford-based company which, as well as providing catering facilities, also organises activities and events (it brought drive-in cinema to nearby Sandon Hall in the summer).

The new aviary has a powder-coated mesh facade which matches that of the café. A



*The new aviary*



**The Mottram Shelter**

single-storey horticultural and education centre includes a greenhouse in which both staff and visitors can exercise their horticultural skills (the flowers which make up the carpet bedding for which Victoria Park has long been renowned have always been grown on site).

The education centre has room for sixteen people and is equipped with Wi-Fi and interactive whiteboard. Already it is being used by a drug-and-alcohol addiction rehabilitation unit, and by a group meeting the needs of adults with additional needs.

The greenhouse will be a working greenhouse for use by visitors, students and, of course, horticultural students, and will in time house a butterfly, reptile and plant collection. Disability access will be provided.

The historic cast-iron Mottram Shelter, donated by Alderman John Mottram, a former Mayor of Stafford, in 1908, has been meticulously restored, using original material, where possible. Some of this work has been carried out by students from Stafford College, who have played an active part in the project. Gates at the entrances to the park have been made more attractive, and toilet facilities have been improved.

## “Bringing back a real sense of community”

Now that restoration is complete and the park is once again open to the public, events are being staged to bring the public to the Park.

It is imperative, too, that the Park must make a substantial contribution to its running costs. Events have already taken place this year, and, at the time of writing, a festive event is taking place offering visitors a fair, an ice rink, street food and licensed bar, and live entertainment. A Food Festival is planned for 2022. There are plans to hold events on every Bank Holiday, as well as dramatic and musical events, including reggae, folk and pop.

An oral history project is about to be launched which will invite people to record their life-experiences of living and working in the town.

For a time, the Covid pandemic prevented the development of other schemes, such as the introduction of apprenticeships, but there are now apprentices working in catering, horticulture and digital marketing.



In all their endeavours, the park authorities have had – and continue to have – the support of a very active “Friends of Victoria Park”.

In response to questions about the safety of users of the park, the meeting was told that Park Rangers patrol the park during opening hours, and further security is provided by CCTV cameras.

The park is covered by by-laws, including a ban on cycling and an insistence that dogs should be kept on leads.

It was acknowledged that parking close to the park was very restricted, and the concern expressed at the meeting would be referred to the appropriate Council Department.

A visit to Victoria Park is not currently on the Trust’s programme of events, but this talk will have given some members a desire to see for themselves the work that has been carried out to restore Victoria Park to its historic prime, and the Trust is

grateful to both Lisa and Vicki for such an interesting and informative talk

(In the preparation of this article the following literary sources were consulted: *2019 Engagement with Parks Report, published by the National Recreation and Park Association, Virginia, USA;* *The value of public parks by Annabel Manley, Research Assistant at the Bennett Institute for Public Policy;* *Victoria Park Consultation Report;* *Restoration of Victoria Park, Stafford: The Environment Partnership)*



### *Acknowledgements–*

*The Editor acknowledges with grateful thanks the support given to him by fellow Council members in the preparation of these articles and to Michael Faarup and Alan Taylor for providing some of the illustrations.*



### **Christmas Tree Festival 2021**

The Trust once again entered Lichfield Cathedral’s Christmas Tree Festival, and we are grateful to Catherine Thorpe for again employing her artistic talents in decorating the Trust’s entry.

The Festival ran from November 27th, 2021 until January 2nd, 2022.



**Boughton House**

## TWO COTSWOLD GARDENS

*In September eighteen adventurous members of the Trust travelled down into Gloucestershire to visit two iconic Cotswold gardens – Boughton House Gardens and Kiftgate Court Gardens*

**B**oughton House is in Bourton-on-the-Hill, a picturesque stone-built village in the Gloucestershire Cotswolds. The house dates from the mid-sixteenth century, but was substantially rebuilt at the beginning of the eighteenth.

Adjacent to the house is a magnificent tithe barn dating from 1570 and listed Grade 1 by English Heritage. Now

used as a tea room and shop, it offers visitors excellent hot drinks and light meals, of which many of our party took advantage.

When, in 1983, Mr. and Mrs. R. Paice acquired ownership of the estate, the garden was a wilderness, a consequence of years of neglect, and, over the next quarter-century, they dedicated themselves to creating a garden which, they felt, would be more in keeping with the historic buildings.

The formal garden that gradually emerged featured topiary, a knot garden, a parterre and herbaceous borders displaying a dazzling array of plants (Timothy Mowl detects the influence of Rosemary Verey in the inclusion of the potager and the rose-filled parterre).

In 2010 the house and garden were bought by Roelof and Cheryl Quintus, who have ensured that, with the support of Jackie Rae, head gardener since 2018, and a team of three gardeners, remain a memorable experience for its many visitors.

The garden does not reveal its delights all at once. Entering the garden by a short flight of steps, the visitor sees on the left The White Garden, enclosed within hedges of English yew and divided into quarters, each marked out by a low clipped hedge, a rectangular fountain at its centre. Plants here are, as the name of the garden tells us, of a single colour—syringa, lilac, valerian, abutilon, hydrangea and other varieties blend to symbolise innocence and purity.

Adjacent to The White Garden is the Main Lawn, where herbaceous borders run the length of opposite sides of the lawn. A striking feature



of the entire garden, they display closely-packed shrubs and flowers which offer a variety of colour from spring to autumn, including varieties of geraniums, anemone, sedum, penstemon, clematis, stachys and aster.

A feature which remains from the eighteenth century is the raised walk which stands at the far end of the lawn and provides a vantage point from which visitors can enjoy a panoramic view of the landscape beyond.



**Magnificent  
combinations  
of colour,  
form and  
texture**



In the south-west corner of the garden stands The Shade House, so called because it accommodates several varieties of shade-loving plants, pre-eminent amongst which must surely be *podopyhllum versepelle*, whose large umbrella-like leaves decorated with red and chocolate-brown spots give it its popular name, "Spotty Dotty"!

Quite literally, topiary defines the garden: it provides the framework within which the garden has been developed; it shapes the individual 'rooms'; it demonstrates the skill of the topiarist.

The Fountain Garden occupies a small enclosed area against the west wall of the house., overlooked by a single Palladian-style window. It is laid out in four quarters. A stone fountain stands at its centre, and its beds are planted with insect-friendly shrubs and flowers.

Close by is The Knot Garden, which, in its prime, offers the visitor a perfect example of the draughtsmanship requisite to the topiarist's art. Here, the straight line dictates design, which is strictly geometric. The low, closely-clipped walls of box outlining the design are relieved by shaped pyramids of box. Sadly, at the time of our visit, box blight had necessitated drastic cutting back of the garden, and it was hoped that careful nurturing will restore it to its former glory.

The circular tour as described ends at The Parterre, which faces the front of the house, replacing the earlier gravelled courtyard. Designed by Mrs. Paice, it is as breath-taking as it is unexpected. Here, the straight line is replaced by sweeping curves and the customary pyramids have been replaced by spiralling cones and 'lollipops', manicured balls of box atop narrow stems.



**The Knot Garden**



**The Parterre**

## “topiary defines the garden”

Bourton House Garden is not, strictly speaking, 'a garden for all seasons', since it is closed to the public between November and March, though it may be described as 'a garden of all seasons', but it is a garden of infinite delights, and is well worth a visit at any time it is open.



Set on the edge of the Cotswold Escarpment, the garden at **Kiftsgate Court**, as viewed today, **K**is the work of three generations of women gardeners. Created by Heather Muir in the 1920s, her work was continued from the 1950 by her daughter, Diany Binny, and is now cared for by her daughter and present owner, Anne Chambers, and her husband.



*The White Sunk Garden - Kiftsgate Court*

The house was built between 1887 and 1891 and has, over the years, been substantially reduced in size and modernised, but has remained throughout a family home.

In creating the garden, Heather Muir was greatly assisted by her neighbour, Lawrence Johnston, owner of Hidcote Manor, just a mile away. Born in Paris into a wealthy America family, Major Johnston became a naturalised British Citizen and served in the British Army during the Second Boer War and the first World War.

He had begun developing the garden at Hidcote in 1907, the year his mother bought the manor. A pioneer in the Arts and Craft style, he continued its development over the next forty years.

Essentially, an Art and Crafts garden was designed as a series of separate

but interrelating 'rooms', enclosed with hedges or walls and each given its own individuality by the manner of its design and planting. The garden at Kiftsgate, like that at Boughton House, follows the Art and Crafts style.

The layout of the garden at Kiftsgate is dictated by the proximity of the house to the edge of the escarpment. It is laid out in an irregular curve extending across the front of the house from the south-west to the south-east.

When Heather Muir first came to Kiftsgate Court with her husband in 1919, the only garden was a paved area in front of the house. She set about laying out the area surrounding the house, laying down paths and planting hedges. This allowed her to design a series of smaller, self-contained gardens with their own distinctive character.

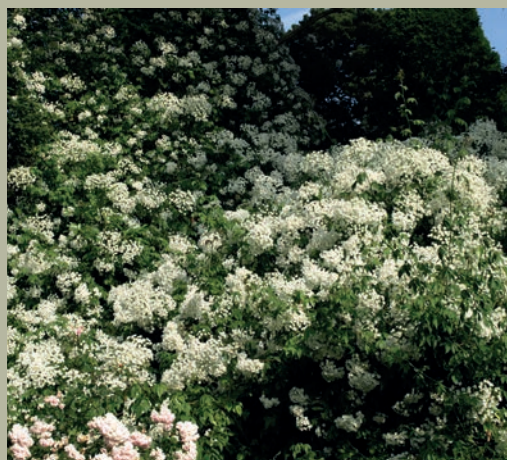


In front of the house is a sunken garden (not to be confused with the White Sunk Garden). Entered by a short flight of stone steps, The White Sunk Garden, adjacent to the north-west side of the house, is laid out in four square beds edged in box, a fountain set in the centre of a raised stone pool at its centre. Pink roses are the dominant plant here, though peonies also feature.

Next to this garden are two conjoined gardens, the Rose Border and the Yellow Border, which, together form an extended triangle. The rose garden is planted with a variety of old-fashioned roses, principal among them, the celebrated Kiftsgate rose.

Native to Western China, it was planted in 1938 by Heather Muir, and a vigorous climber, it is described by the garden's present owners, not without good reason, as 'triffid-like', since it is now twenty metres high (65 ft) and twenty-five metres wide (82 ft)!

The Yellow Border does not entirely live up to its name, being a combination of yellow, blue and orange. But its name underlines the importance of colour and sympathetic colour combinations (such as white with red and pink with white) in Arts and Crafts gardens, which is further exemplified by The White Border at Bourton House and The Red Border at Hodnet Manor







**The Water Garden**

Green arches book-end the path running alongside The Yellow Border which provides access to The Water Garden, waiting behind a high yew hedge to surprise its visitors.

The inspiration of the present owners, where once a tennis court stood there is now a rectangular pond, its perimeter picked out by paving stones. Large, rectangular stepping stones lead to a grass-covered island from which the captivated visitor can view a row of twenty-four gilded bronze leaves moulded from a philodendron and mounted on stems, in front of which jets of water spout.

Other areas of the garden are similarly known by self-descriptive names: The Wide Border adjoins The North Border, both occupying an area along the bank just below the house. The Wide Border

is planted so as to ensure a continuity of flowers throughout the seasons in colours of pink and purple.

It is a feature of Arts and Crafts gardens that the further one moves away from the house the less formal (and more open) the design becomes. At the side of the drive leading to the house, The Bluebell Wood welcomes visitors with a glorious sight if they are visiting in May, while, at the far end of the more formal areas of the garden, beyond The Water Garden, lies an orchard and beyond that The Mound, created from the tons of soil displaced when the pond was dug out and from which the visitor gains a panoramic view along an avenue lined with tulip trees and ending at a stainless steel sculpture with an Islamic motif.



The Bridge Border, in which rhododendron thrive in the peat soil, lies close to the bridge that leads to a footpath which winds down the wooded hillside. A recess half-way down reveals a statue of The Mother and Child by Simon Verity, a sculptor and master stone-carver, whose clients also include The Prince of Wales and Elton John. From the viewing point which this recess provides, visitors can enjoy views of the village of Mickleton, laid out below.

The outstanding feature of Kiftsgate Gardens is, for one of their visitors at least, their location. Located on the very edge of the Cotswold escarpment, they afford a spectacular view across fields as far as the Vale of Evesham and the Malvern Hills.

The steep hillside, which drops 150 feet, was terraced and planted with Scotch pine in the 1930s, and a summer house designed by Heather Muir built halfway down the hillside. From here,

steps lead down to The Lower Garden, a lawned area to which was added a half-moon swimming pool.

A visit in September may have denied visitors the spectacle of the Kiftgate Rose in full bloom, but unquestionably there was still much to admire and enjoy, not least an insight into the creativity of three generations of the family who created such a magnificent garden.

The same may be said of Bourton House Garden, of course. The owners of both properties deserve the highest praise and thanks not just for their creativity, but also for continuing to share with the public the joy that such magnificent gardens give.

*(This article has drawn information from the Bourton House Guidebook, the Kiftsgate Court Gardens Guidebook and "The Historic Gardens of Gloucestershire", by Timothy Mowl.)*



# DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

**Thursday, March 3rd:**

*“The Plan for Shugborough”:  
A talk by Hayley Mival, General  
Manager, and Helen Royall, Project  
Manager.*

This talk will take place at the Walton-on-the-Hill Village Hall, Stafford, and will begin at 7.30 pm.

**Saturday, May 14th:**



*Annual General Meeting at Bishton  
Hall, Wolseley Bridge, Rugeley,  
followed by a talk by the historian  
Andrew Baker and a tour of the  
gardens.*

Proceedings will begin at 2.00 pm. The house was, for many years, a preparatory school run by the Stafford-Northcote family, and is now a fine-arts auction centre owned and run by Charles Hanson.



**Sunday, June 26th:**

*Visit to Upton Cressett Hall,  
Bridgnorth, Shropshire.*

Upton Cressett Hall dates as far back as the thirteenth century, but the present Hall was built in the sixteenth century and is noted for its impressive twisted chimneys and its Great Hall. It was bought and restored by Bill and Biddy Cash in the 1970s. Further restoration included the outbuildings, and decorations by their son, William, whose wife Laura, runs a millinery business from the outbuildings. The gardens, though small, are equally historic.

The tour will be led by William and Laura Cash, and will begin at 2.00 pm. To prepare for this visit, members might like to read “A Restoration Heart”, by William Cash.

**October (date and  
destination to be announced)  
Garden visit**

**Wednesday, November 23rd:  
A talk by Dr. David Jacques, Past  
Chairman of the Trust, on Chiswick  
House and Gardens.**

This talk, which will begin at 7.30 pm., will take place at The Haling Dene Centre, Penkridge.

David is author of a book on this subject which is due to be published in February 2022.

*Final details and joining  
instructions will be sent to  
members two or three weeks before  
each event.*



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