



Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

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A pleasure park - with trees

When Derby Arboretum was officially opened on September 30th, 1840, it was Britain's first publicly-owned park in the country. That Derby should enjoy this distinction is due to the generosity of Josiah Strutt, who, wishing to employ part of his prosperity for the benefit of the people amongst whom he lived and to whose labours he owed his wealth, donated a small family estate on the southern edge of the town to be transformed into a site for "public walks and grounds".

The first half of the nineteenth century had seen rapid urban and industrial expansion, in which Derby had shared, giving rise to concerns over overcrowded housing conditions and fears about the impact which this would have on the health (and therefore the productivity) of the working population.

The purpose of the Arboretum, therefore, was to give the people of Derby the opportunity, in Strutt's own words "of enjoying with their families exercise and recreation in the fresh air", but, at the same time, he wished the people of Derby to be educated and informed, and with that aim in mind, to every specimen planted was attached a label giving details of its species and country of origin. It was to emphasise its educational purpose that Strutt chose to call it an arboretum rather than a park.

Originally planted with more than a thousand trees and shrubs, including oaks, robinia, elms, alders, hawthorns, conifers and twenty-two types of cherry, the Arboretum was, according to John Claudius Loudon, its designer, one of the most extensive ever planted.

It was not surprising that Strutt chose Loudon, who had already designed the Birmingham Botanical Gardens in Birmingham. An advocate of a style of natural planting which he called "The Gardenesque", he was a prolific writer on the subject of garden design, publishing a monumental "Encyclopaedia of Gardening" in 1822. At Derby, Loudon created a series of mounds and small hills to provide height, afford privacy and give an impression that the park was bigger than it was, and laid out serpentine gravel paths totalling more than a mile in length. Four straight walks converged at a central point marked by a fountain erected shortly after Loudon's death (Loudon would have preferred a statue and stone seating). Only the lower basin of this fountain is original, the stem above being a replica.

At the same time, Loudon insisted on providing two open spaces devoid of trees "where a band might stand and people might dance". He also made provision for a flower garden at one end of the Arboretum. Surviving photographs show that, at one time, the Arboretum had lots of flower beds, but these had been removed by the 1960s, when funding for municipal parks was low.

Loudon's original plan provided just two entrances, but more were opened up as the area around the Arboretum was developed. The Grove Street Lodge, built in the Elizabethan style, was once the main entrance, but in 1850 was replaced by a new entrance lodge off Arboretum Square. Its striking Classical façade contains a niche which holds a statue of Josiah Strutt holding the Deed of Administration which he handed to the Town Council at the opening ceremony.

Other structures were added, including a bronze copy of the Florentine Boar, known to locals unversed in Renaissance art, as "The Pig", decapitated by a German bomb in 1941 and renovated as recently as 2005, and the now-departed statue of Asclepius (the God of Medicine better known by his Roman name of Aesculapius) commemorating Josiah Strutt's association with the Derby Royal Infirmary and taken, like some of the classical vases, from his own garden. Few of the latter remain.

Originally eleven-and-a-half acres in size, the area was increased by the acquisition by later purchases of a further six-and-a-half acres of adjacent land in a district of Derby called "Rose Hill". The Rose Hill playing fields are thought to be one of the first in England dedicated to public sports and games.

Having given the land and £10,000, Strutt had decided not to endow the park, believing that it should be maintained by the people who owned it, that is, the public, so subsequent admission was not free (except on Sunday afternoons - allowing for church attendance in the morning - and Wednesdays, early closing day), and consequently working people, who were expected to be the main beneficiaries of Strutt's munificence, did not attend in great numbers - except on special occasions such as the annual celebration of the opening - until charges were finally abolished in 1882.

Initially, its management was placed in the hands of trustees, but eventually the Town Council took over responsibility, and today the Arboretum is managed by the Parks Department of the

News LETTER



Florentine Boar (photographed by Chris Brown)

Derby City Council.

The years that followed saw radical changes in the fortunes of the Arboretum.

For a start, industrial pollution killed ninety per cent of the original trees and plants, which were replaced by London Planes (which had been found to be resistant to pollution) and limes, a practical step, perhaps, but one which destroyed the original underlying purpose of the Arboretum.

Sadly, over the years, the Arboretum - once situated on the outskirts of the town, but now standing in the centre of one of Derby's busiest areas - suffered from vandalism to such an extent that it was being shunned by the townsfolk for whose welfare it had been laid out.

This decline was halted when, in the 1990s, the City Council drew up a plan for its regeneration and, on the basis of that plan, submitted a successful bid for Lottery funding. With almost £3m. from Heritage Lottery, along with funding from other sources, restoration began in 2002. Buildings were restored, planting renewed, lamps replaced, security improved and additional facilities added. As an extra precaution, the park gates are now kept locked overnight.

Our tour, which took place last September, was led by David Parry, one of Derby's Blue Badge Guides, whose encyclopaedic knowledge and light touch provided the perfect commentary and who displayed admirable sang-froid in dealing with the intrusions of an inebriated passer-by.

In the morning, the group had seized the opportunity to visit the nearby Royal Crown Derby Works, where, once again, our two guides provided us with informed and interesting tours around the factory, whose week-end silence allowed us to visit parts to which Health and Safety regulations would otherwise not have allowed us access.

We are indebted to all three, truly professional in their knowledgeable and enthusiastic approach to their tasks, for making the Trust's visit to Derby both memorable and enjoyable.

“A Very Fair

“Lord Anglesey’s house occupies the finest elevation on Cannock Chase, and around it for many miles stretches beautifully wooded and diversified countryside”
(*The Gardeners Chronicles, 1884*)

The Past

It is believed that the first house at Beaudesert was built towards the end of the thirteenth century as the residence for the Bishops of Coventry and Lichfield, who held lands in Cannock, Rugeley, Longdon, Haywood and Abbots Bromley.

From the 1560s onwards, the house was extensively rebuilt by Thomas Paget, whose father, William, had been given the lands in 1546 for services to Henry VIII, to whom he was Private Secretary, following the dissolution of the monasteries. Much of the old Hall to the rear was retained, but the house was extended eastwards in red brick, fired on the estate. However, most of the medieval manor house was demolished and replaced by “a very fair brick house”.

The interior of the Hall was remodelled in the 1770s by James Wyatt, whose family firm, Benjamin Wyatt and Sons, based at Weeford, near Lichfield, carried out the work. (James Wyatt, who made his reputation as a classical architect before playing a leading part in the Gothic Revival of the early nineteenth century, belonged to a family of major English architects whose work spanned more than a century. His brother, Samuel, designed Fonthill Abbey and Broadway Tower, and his nephew, James, whom he trained and who was later to become better known as Sir James Wyatville, achieved fame as both an architect and a garden designer. When it came to architects, only the best, like so much else, was good enough for the Pagets!).

Best known of the later Pagets was, of course, Henry, second Earl of Uxbridge, who was Wellington’s second-in-command at the Battle of Waterloo, where he famously lost his leg, to the apparent indifference of the Duke! He subsequently became the first Marquis of Anglesey and died a national hero, mourned by

amongst countless others the Queen herself. Following a fire in 1909, the sixth Marquis restored the house, drawing on the sixteenth-century designs of the third Earl, which included removing the original porch which had prevented a clear view of the frontage of the Hall, but heavy taxation - a combination of income tax, property tax and inheritance tax – imposed after the Great War led to the sale of the estate, although by 1920, the sixth Marquis was no longer using the house, preferring instead to reside at Plas Newydd, on the Isle of Anglesey, the family’s other country house. (In 1893, “The Gardeners Chronicle” reported that Beaudesert “is not inhabited, and the grounds are neglected”, so it seems that the Marquis had already shown a partiality for his Welsh estates).

In 1920, considerable properties and land elsewhere in Staffordshire were sold, followed by the Beaudesert Estate in 1932 (The sale catalogues give a revealing insight into the opulent lifestyle which the family had, until recently, been enjoying). However, the Hall itself remained unsold, so in 1935, the Marquis decided instead to sell its fabric. Consequently, many of its furnishings – panelling, carved architraves, fireplaces and windows – have found new accommodation elsewhere, both locally and abroad.

Most notably, the grand staircase, known as “The Waterloo Staircase”, was taken to Australia, where it became part of Carrick Hill House, in Adelaide, a part-Jacobean manor house newly-built by Sir Edward and Lady Ursula Hayward in order to receive it, together with window- and door-fittings, fireplaces and panelling, while the exquisitely-carved Minstrels Gallery can now be seen at The Burrell Art Gallery and Museum, in Glasgow. (Sir Edward and Lady Ursula, “more British than the British”, were on honeymoon in this country when they visited Beaudesert Hall as it was about to be demolished, and Carrick Hill House, filled with antiques and works of art, became, from the 1940s until the late 1970s, a centre of high living, counting

stars of stage and screen amongst its guests. Sir Edward bequeathed both the house and its contents to the people of South Australia, and it is now one of Australia’s finest museums and art galleries).

The building was bought by a Leicester firm of demolition contractors, who had failed to complete the task before they went bankrupt. Ownership then reverted to the Marquis, who continued to sell the fabric of the building over the next few years. However, an attempt at demolition by Army engineers in the 1950s, limited to trying to prevent access to the cellars, having been only partially successful, part of the fabric still stands, and now – perhaps ironically, in view of previous strenuous attempts to raze the buildings – what remains, including parts of the thirteenth-century house and a fragment of the fifteenth-century Great Hall, as well as a twelfth-century window from the original chapel, is listed Grade II in recognition of its historical importance – and is known, appropriately enough, as “The Ruin”! In 1937, 125 acres of parkland were conveyed to trustees, and a further 230 acres were later purchased jointly by the Trust and the Staffordshire County Guides. The Lands are now held in Trust by the Guide Trust Corporation. The major part is farmed, with the exception of Georges Hayes and Piggotts Bottom, both managed as nature reserves by the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust. Located within this parkland, the Scout and Guide Camp Site, known world-wide, was officially opened in 1938. It continues to be visited by scouts and guides from abroad (as well as other youth groups and training organisations), offering a range of supervised outdoor activities such as climbing (high and low rope courses, initiative exercises), abseiling, orienteering, cross-country running and archery. The site is administered by The Beaudesert Trust, who employ a small number of paid staff, but rely heavily on volunteers, most of whom are members of The Friends of Beaudesert.

A century ago, the gardens of Beaudesert Hall featured terraced walks, ornamental yew hedges, rock gardens and a walled kitchen garden with a range of peach and fig houses, six carnation and orchid houses, vine houses, ice houses and a palm house measuring eighty feet by sixty feet. All of this testified to the opulent life-style enjoyed by the family, funded by great wealth derived primarily from coal-mining and iron-making, the latter initially fuelled by charcoal supplied from coppices specially planted in the woodlands (In its heyday, the Hall employed a butler, a housekeeper, cooks, footmen and numerous maids, while a photograph of that period shows as many as forty-nine gardeners, gamekeepers and foresters).

The house was supplied with water from a reservoir situated on Hednesford Hill (owned, of course, by the Marquis – and now the site of the Hednesford Raceway), the surplus feeding the ponds. On the appropriately-named Gas



Beaudesert Hall

Brick house”



The Ruin (Photographed by Bryan Sullivan)

House Hill, an acetylene gas plant, housed in converted stables, fuelled by coal brought from the nearby Cannock Wood Colliery, also owned by the Marquis, generated gas for the gas-fired lighting introduced into the Hall in the mid-nineteenth century – everywhere, that is, except the servants’ quarter, which continued to be illuminated by candlelight after the Marquis decided that “candles will do for the servants”! Only four years later, gas was abandoned in favour of electricity, putting the family once more at the forefront of modern technology.

Beyond lay an extensive range of eighteenth-century stables, bigger than those at Shugborough. Set in a valley a mile away from the Hall, they were crescent-shaped and built in dazzling white stone, but were demolished in 1932, and only the foundations now remain. Humphry Repton and William Emes, both noted landscape gardeners of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, worked at Beaudesert. It was Emes who persuaded the Marquis to demolish the ‘ponderous’ gateway which once prevented a clear view of the frontage of the Hall. It was Emes, too, who, with a professional eye for beautiful landscapes, successfully petitioned the Marquis to stop the proposed felling of trees which would provide a background to the dining room he intended to build.

Repton’s Red Book survives and includes a design for a Tudor flower garden, but the extent of his work is still uncertain. However, a lake and series of cascades linking a chain of lily ponds to a fishpond predated Repton’s proposed improvements.

The parkland, once an enclosed deer park, still contains a variety of trees, even though it was severely depleted by widespread tree-felling in the 1920s and has since been colonised by self-set sycamores and birches.

The Future

A group of SGPT members visited Beaudesert Park in November 2007, where they were met by Michael Street, OBE, DL, Chairman of The Beaudesert Trust, and Michael O’Callaghan, The Trust’s Project Manager.

Following a guided tour of the site, the party was given an illustrated talk on The Trust’s proposals for its future development, in support of which The Trust was preparing a bid for Heritage Lottery funding.

The Trust had commissioned NJL Consultants, a firm of landscape architects, to carry out a survey and draw up a Conservation Management Plan, which appeared in April 2007.

In it, the firm identified the potential of the site for development as a leisure and ecological amenity providing opportunities for historical and archaeological research and ecological studies, as well as leisure activities, especially for families and young people, such as camping, walking, cycling, orienteering, canoeing, and rock-climbing, many of which were already being pursued.

To achieve this, the firm were proposing a number of measures: improving security; laying out waymarked trails, hides and platforms for pond-dipping; providing viewing points and information and interpretive panels. The main vehicular access to the site, at present a narrow and winding drive, poorly surfaced, would be improved.

It is proposed to provide a footprint of the Hall so that its location and scale can be appreciated – and the historic role of the family who occupied it for four hundred years understood – and to secure and open up the foundations of the stable block.

However, opening up the Ruin to public access at presented a problem when it was found not to be in the ownership of The Trust, who could not therefore use its resources on the much-

needed conservation work which had to be carried out before it could be made accessible to visitors. Fortunately, this problem was resolved, and measures to preserve the ruins can now be included in The Trust’s Management Plan.

Following the collapse of the ruin in 2007, Lichfield District Council made a grant of nearly £3500 from its Heritage Fund budget – to which Staffordshire County Council added a further £2000 and Cannock Chase AONB £7193 – so that undergrowth could be cleared from around it and an archaeological recording and assessment could be made, but, if it is not to be lost for good, work on its preservation and conservation must be started without further delay.

At the heart of the site, the New Walled Kitchen Garden, laid out in 1911 to replace an earlier kitchen garden constructed, it is believed, under the supervision of James Wyatt, would – in fulfilment of The Trust’s policy to engage young people – become the centre of youth activities, housed in new buildings which would either replace or augment the existing outbuildings already in use. In addition, there were plans for an educational centre, a heritage centre, which would include information about the Paget family and the important role it played in our regional and national history and a computerised interpretative model of Beaudesert Hall, and a demonstration Victorian garden.

The particular needs of the disabled would be addressed and met.

The Woodland Management Plan operated by The Trust would be extended.

Already, four hundred and fifty hardwood trees were being planted every season; the task of reducing the rhododendron (which at present cover a third of the site) would continue, and time-expired sycamore and birch would be removed to create glades, thus extending the range of flora and variety of natural habitats. The magnitude of the task which The Beaudesert Trust is preparing to undertake will be obvious to anyone who, like us, walked the site under the guidance of someone as dedicated to its survival and as clear-sighted as to its rich potential for development as a living asset to the local and regional communities as Mike Street, and it is hoped that the generosity of the Heritage Lottery Fund will match the vision which he and his colleagues have brought to this task. W. B. S.

(The factual information which is the basis of this article comes from a variety of published sources, including “Beaudesert, The Pagets and Waterloo”, by John Godwin, published in 1992, and “Beau Desert: The Staffordshire Seat of the Marquess of Waterloo and the Chestall Estate”, by Bernard Richards, first published in 1996 and revised in 2007. Reference had also been made to the two-part Conservation Plan drawn up by NJL Consultants)

“Samuel Hellier’s Follies”

(The article which follows is a shortened version of a talk given to the Trust by Dianne Barre shortly after a visit by members of the Trust to The Wombourne Wodehouse. In the course of her research, Dr. Barre was allowed free access by John Phillips, the present owner of The Wombourne Wodehouse, to the Hellier correspondence, which covered the period between 1730 and 1783, with some significant gaps. She describes their contents as providing “a fascinating social history”. The full version of her talk will appear as an article in a forthcoming issue of The Garden History Society’s journal)

Samuel Hellier lived from 1736 to 1784. His mother died when he was only nine, and his father, also named Samuel, re-married the following year, dying suddenly in 1751. Samuel went to Exeter College, Oxford in November 1753, where he got into bad company, attending race-meetings when he should have been going to lectures.

He was no more distinguished as a suitor than he had been as a student, being horse-whipped by another Staffordshire squire, Sir Edward Littleton, of Teddesley Hall, for failing to honour a promise of marriage made to one of Sir Edward’s relatives, to whom Sir Edward had introduced him.

Weak and easily led by stronger characters, he was apt to behave bombastically towards his servants, who then did exactly as they pleased! Yet he was basically very kind-hearted (he was kind to animals in an age when most people weren’t) and showed a genuine concern for the poor. Passionate about music – he had his own collection of superb musical instruments and musical scores he paid for local Wombourne people to learn to play instruments. He was also keen on poetry and, when young, given to breaking out into verse.

It is not clear why he decided to create a garden in his woods (letters covering this crucial period are amongst those missing), but his estate was close to Hagley, Enville and The Leasowes, all visited at the time by the best in society, and it seems likely that he was inspired by their example and anxious to enjoy the social cachet which they brought to their

owners. He is likely to have visited all three, and the garden features he introduced are, in some cases, very similar to those he would have seen at The Leasowes. William Shenstone died in 1763, so it is possible that Sir Samuel (he was knighted in 1762) saw an opportunity to fill a gap. Certainly, in his projects, he showed no desire to be innovative, instead closely following the fashion of the age, his principal aim appearing to be to win the admiration of his wealthier neighbours.

He inherited a garden which had already been improved by his father and his grandmother, both of whom were interested in plants. A rotundo, now to be found at Ingestre, was erected in 1754, and there were already ponds on which Samuel used to sail ornamental boats, often to a musical accompaniment provided by local people - when they had finished work. He also liked to fish in them, and was forever on the lookout for poachers intent on stealing his fish.

On the whole, however, he found life in Staffordshire boring, “shut up in a lonely house and divested of all society, at least what is rational”. To the historian, the advantage of this self-imposed exile in London was a stream of letters to his agent, John Rogers, to whom he sent repeated instructions, concentrating on the most minute details and showing great concern over the preservation of the rather fragile garden buildings.

One of the earliest items discussed was a Dragon weather vane to be erected as an eye-catcher on top of Wombourne Church. It was, he wrote, very noble and gay, and would enliven the spire greatly! This dragon can now be seen on the stable block at the Hall.

The first building he erected was the Music Room, which may date from as early as 1760. However, it was in constant need of attention, threatened by both frost and damp – “I would have you be sure to keep good fires both in ye Brasier and Chimney place...to air the Organ thoroughly”.

The buildings, which included Handel’s Temple (built to a design by James Gandon), a Druid’s Temple, as well as a grotto, were made of wood, painted to appear like stone, and even painted cloth, and while this might make them appear substantial, they were, in fact, quite flimsy and susceptible to damage by the wind. The wooden boards on which poetic extracts, such as lines from Milton’s “Il Penseroso”, were painted were also a problem, affected, as they were, by sun, rain and rising sap.

It is known that there were walks in the woods, presumably following a preferred circuit, similar to other woodland walks at that time, but its exact route is not known. Several of the garden

ornaments were on the perimeter in order to give views out over the countryside, as at The Leasowes.

He made repeated enquiries about who had visited the woods – “Has any Ladies or people of Consequences been to see the wood lately?” he asked, a request which clearly illustrates his principal motive in laying them out in the first place!

The downside of opening his grounds to the public was then, as now, vandalism, as William Shenstone had discovered when he had opened his gardens at The Leasowes. The woods were particularly exposed on a Sunday to the intrusions of the “Tag Rag and Rable”, and the gardener was urged to “keep ye Boys from Robbing the Birds Nests”. More serious still, even the lead piping was stolen from the Music Room. People from Wolverhampton were expressly forbidden access “be they who they may”, and visitors were no longer welcome unless they came in carriages.

Eventually, he issued instructions to his gardener to close the woods to the public, which led to an embarrassing development when, displaying excessive zeal, the gardener refused entry to the Earl of Stamford and his party from Enville.

Most significant and important of all the buildings was The Hermitage, complete with mechanical hermit. A detailed drawing of the interior showed, amongst other items, a skull and bones, books, candles, and a globe, together with a wooden bowl, bottle and platter (which needed yearly treatment against wood-worm) and an appropriate text hanging on the wall. All these items were locked away unless visitors were expected.

Clearly, Sir Samuel regarded The Hermitage as his ‘piece-de-resistance’, universally admired by all his visitors, and, typically, he gave clear instructions on how it was to be maintained, even detailing the plants which were to surround it: house leek on the thatched roof (which leaked); honeysuckle, but not wild honeysuckle, which he did not approve of, instead, honeysuckle taken from the garden, but not his own; a few rose trees, “and other pretty small shrubs”. Chamomile flowers would look exceeding pretty, too.

Throughout his life, Sir Samuel never had enough money to match his ambitious schemes, nor did he live long enough to enjoy his fortune when he had finally inherited it. Sadly, very little remains of what he did achieve, and he owes it to the industry of Dianne Barre that what he did accomplish in his lifetime has not, like his garden ornaments, been lost to posterity.



Handel's Temple



The Music Room

(Illustrations provided by Dianne Barre and reproduced by kind permission of John Phillips)