

Gerald Fisher

Started volunteering at Lyveden in March 2005

Happy and memorable memories, yes! Not sure I could dig up a bad one if I tried.

First and foremost has to be the cottage-living Bradshaw family – father, Mark; mother, Angela; children, Tom and Olivia; the dogs, Ella and Cirrus. Without exception all, one, or any number of them would give a cheery welcome as I arrived each time, enquire as to well-being during the day and offer grateful thanks at the day's end.

Such kindness and appreciation by the whole family set the tone for the property, volunteers and visitors.

Typical day at Lyveden? No such thing. Different weather, different people, different challenges and different opportunities.

V A R I E T Y !

Lashing rain, wind howling from the north-east, no signs of visitors, hunkered down in reception with the door closed against the storm. A face appears at the door. We open it against the gale, a man, lady and two children scuttle in dripping water everywhere. The man (Dad) says, "Please meet my wife X, children y and z. My wife arranges all of our outings. Given the weather, she suggested a nice cosy National Trust stately home. What do we get? A place without windows or roof!" A lovely 'explorer' family on a day out. We had noticed his wink in our direction before he spoke.

Halloween. A great event in the Bradshaw days. Ticket only. Lantern paths from the car park, lights, witches, ghoulies and ghosties in the trees near the mounds, hand reaching out at visitors through the hedge. You name it. Lyveden on a still, cloudy winter night is DARK, very! One year, ticket only, fellow volunteer Ana Geyer and I were detailed to be at the bottom of the track on Harley Way allowing ticket holders only up to the car park. We walked down with torches. Standing there all alone in the pitch black we scared ourselves witless with our imaginations, tales and "What's that?!! Yes, really. So pleased whenever car lights appeared with expectant visitors. Don't believe me? YOU try it some time, or ask Ana.

We sold jars of local honey in reception. It came to the cottage in a large stainless steel tea urn-type of container with a tap on the side at the bottom. Mark and family will be away for the day. "Bottle up some honey, if you have time, please." says Mark. "All the kit is in the cottage kitchen: honey, jars, labels." Yes, but the urn full of honey is on the floor and has to be lifted onto Angela's kitchen work-surface with the tap hanging over the edge. Tricky! And if we drop it and there's an inch of honey all over the kitchen floor, we asked ourselves while lifting it? Which of us will say what to Angela on her return? It didn't happen. Another couple of different days at Lyveden: bottling 1lb jars of honey.

Mowing: Mark liked the place to be pristine, not least the grass around reception. Came the day he left one of the walk-behind motor mowers out and asked for some mowing along the moat bank side and nearby area, "If you have the time." Miss a Bradshaw opportunity (subliminal challenge?) No chance! Go for it!

Unfamiliar powerful mower coupled with determination to mow neater and closer to the water's edge than Mark, the mower heads into the moat. Presence of mind to let go, the engine stopped with the handle reachable by a couple of us from the bank. Keep this quiet.

Maybe, Mark thought his mower had been washed after use? After all, he was known to expect equipment to be working and clean before putting away.

Quiet, warm spring day. Cottage family away and very few visitors. A small rowing dinghy on its side behind the store container against the moat. 'Jolly boating weather'. Surely some oars somewhere?

Yup, found them: Launch the boat and off for a row round the other side of the snail mound. Sue Royds, volunteer on with me that day, declined an invitation to voyage together . . .



Visitor stories:

A retired master from Oundle School: when a new, young teacher, some of the boys asked him if he had a bicycle. Yes. Come for a ride with us on Sunday after chapel, sir? Yes. They set off and ended up at Lyveden. No-one about in those far off days. The reason for the rope they had with them soon became clear. They had him abseiling off the top of the Bield. One way of testing new masters, he discovered later from colleagues in the staff room.!

In the Bield one day: bunch of senior gentlemen reminiscing, when local youngsters they used to 'mountaineer' up inside the chimney from the kitchen and sit on the top eating their sandwiches. Great views, they assured me.

Another time, chuckling ladies: when youngsters growing up in nearby Brigstock, they too had climbed into the chimney but one of them (we'll call her Alice) got stuck. They rushed home to Mum. Mum scrambled around looking for pennies to 'phone the police from the village phone box. The fire brigade turned out several hours later to get 'Alice' out of the chimney. Apparently, she never did it again...

Bits and . . .

A joy to watch the Blue Tits queueing up on the four-bird feeder in the cottage garden next to reception and emptying it in an afternoon.

Hearing the woodpecker working away in nearby trees.

Red Kites gliding majestically overhead.

Kingfisher in the tree overhanging the moat behind reception. And fishing in the North Moat.

Little Owl frowning from its ledge in the Bield at opening time.

Ushering out the small, fledged jackdaws from the Bield into the field so that they could get the wind under their wings and fly into the oak tree.

The swallow family and their descendants that returned year after year to their home up in the roof of the public lavatory porch. Usually reared several broods each year which would obligingly line up face out at the edge of the nest for visitors to take their memorable pictures of Lyveden.

Sir Thomas, thank you for Lyveden. Lyveden, thank you for the memories.