

When I started, Mark Bradshaw was the custodian, and had been at Lyveden since 1995. Bob Oakley had been volunteering for most of that time, and between them, had brought the Elizabeth garden back to life after years of neglect.

My role mostly involved using strimmer /brush cutter/ ride on mowers (boys toys) to help maintain the garden. In the winter months, it would primarily be hedge planting/hedge laying/scrub & woodland clearance. The rest of the year we'd concentrate on mowing and strimming to ensure that the formal design of Sir Thomas's plan was preserved.

I particularly remember one day in my first winter at Lyveden. Bob was not there that day, and when I arrived on that frosty morning following a light shower of snow, Mark asked me to take the mower and 'top' the meadow now known as the Sheep Field. This involved taking the mower with its deck raised, and mowing back and forth across the field to cover the whole area. The field is some 160 x 180m, and the mower had a cut width of about 1½m. That needed almost 150 passes across a frozen, snow covered field, and took all morning. I was quite grateful to be offered Mark's ski-ing jacket – an essential piece of PPE in that situation. I have often speculated that that task might have been a test to access my commitment to a volunteering role? If it was, then presumably I passed the test.

In 2002, Bob and I were working in the water when a VIP was being shown around the site by Mark. We did know he was coming, but not from which direction, so it came as a bit of surprise for me to find myself near the edge of the moat being asked by HRH Prince Charles what I was doing. I was a new boy then and fully expected any conversations to be between Bob and the VIP. I pointed to Bob and said something like "*I duno, ask him. He's been doing this much longer than I have*".



In the warmer months, we would occasionally don waders and venture (up to waist depth) into the moats to pull out reeds. This was a messy and smelly business at the best of times, particularly for those on the banks clearing the reeds as they were thrown onto the bank by those in the water. Another 'essential' skill needed was to know the difference between reeds and flag iris – the former were to be removed, the latter not, which could result in some harsh words from him in charge!

When I started, the orchard was just a field with 18 lines of white painted 2' high posts stuck in the ground. Each line had 17 posts about 7½m apart – a total of 306 posts. In preparation for tree planting, Mark and I spent several days auguring holes at each planting position, and then re-filling those holes with a mixture of soil and manure. The auguring process used a small petrol motor driving a drill of some 10" diameter down into the soil. The process reminds me of a Wallace and Gromit clip produced many years later – Gromit was using a hand drill to make a hole in a wall. It all started well until the drill bit hit something a bit hard. At that point, the drill bit stopped rotating in the hole, and the drill itself along with Gromit started to spin round. Imagine Mark at one end of this auger handle, and me at the other, about 3m away. It all started well, until we hit a stone. The load became too much for me to hold, and I lost my grip. Mark was hanging on, but coming round to meet me. I started running in the same direction trying to catch up with the handle I'd just let go of. Eventually I realised that if I went the other way, past Mark, I'd could grab the handle coming round to meet me! I wasn't involved in drilling all the holes – perhaps Bob was a more reliable partner for this process!

Mowing the grass areas was an essential task to keep the site looking fresh and cared for, particularly around the Lodge, the cottage, and the routes visitors took going to the visitor centre. The same care

principle applied to the nearby Upper Lane, which we would have to sweep clean of grass cuttings that dropped from the mower deck and wheel treads, or after strimming. Woe betide anyone driving off the lane leaving wheel tracks in the (often sodden) grass surface.

As might be expected, there have been a few incidents that reminded us that care needs to be taken at all times. Once, I was strimming with Mark on the moat side near West Spiral Mount. It was a wet day, (I was wearing wellies) when I slid down into the water. Fortunately, the water was not deep at that point, but the mud was. Getting your boots half full of water while you are wearing them is one thing. Getting yourself, boots and a strimmer clipped to your harness, out of the mud was something else. I was certainly glad that Mark was there to help, and have a spare pair of boots and socks to allow work to continue.

On another occasion, a mower nearly went down the East Moat bank into the water. Fortunately, the brake was holding it, but how to release the brake, and pull it up the bank required some thought. Eventually, Bob brought his car (with tow bar) into use, and with much pulling, grunting and spinning car wheels we succeeded.



I must admit that I was responsible for getting a mower stuck on Harley Way when cutting the verge. Impossible you might think, but not at the particular point where I attempted to drive onto the verge from the road. It just happens that at that point, the deck stuck on a small 'hillock', and I was left stranded with the mower precisely balanced so that the drive wheels were off the ground. I cannot remember how we got it off, but we did, and my embarrassment was soon forgotten (by me).

A new mower was delivered late one day (after all volunteers had left the site), and the resident senior member of staff decided to do some mowing on Upper Lane Green to check out the new machine. As part of those checks he decided to engage the cruise control. When he started, he was some distance away from the visitor centre, and as he approached the cottage garden hedge outside the visitor centre he realised he needed to stop – quickly! It took a few seconds to realise that you need to press and release the accelerator pedal to disengage the cruise control, and the mower would come to a stop. Next morning, the hole in the hedge that appeared overnight needed to be explained! We volunteers were encouraged not to use the cruise control feature.

We once had a fire site in the outer meadow, and used the mowers and trailers to take brash to the fire site. I wanted to minimise the number of journeys, and would attempt to load the trailers with as much as possible. Unfortunately, one of the volunteers (say TM) was about to set off, when I confidently said something like "*not yet, we can get much more on there*". So we did, piling it high, and off TM went. As he came past the end of the cottage hedge onto the track, a gust of wind caught the load, and lifted it out of the trailer and spread it across the grass. TM said nothing, but I know what he was thinking.

Probably around 2012, one of us filled the fuel tanks on two strimmers, and two volunteers went off to trim around the Lodge. After a short while, they returned with the strimmers which had, for no apparent reason, stopped working and couldn't be restarted. The cause was soon discovered – both had been filled with lead free petrol instead of two stroke mixture. We had learnt a valuable lesson. Both strimmers were now scrap, and had to be replaced.

A year or so later, the property suffered an overnight break in, and the theft of a quad bike and a mower (or was it both mowers?). Some of the volunteers thought it was a pity they didn't also take the strimmers!

The mowers were the essential equipment, and following that break-in, were replaced fairly quickly. We volunteers possibly missed the quad bike most because we used that quite a lot with the John Deere trailers to move equipment to the area where we would be working. This was not replaced, and we had to return to using the mowers to pull the trailers.

On one occasion, we set off from the barns at the Manor, to take equipment for strimming the moat side bank in West Wood. The mower driver (we'll call him BT) set off first with a mower and trailer loaded with trimmers and fuel. Two of us followed on foot using the same route up Lower Lane, across the Moated Orchard to Elm Meadow and on to West Wood. As we approached Elm Meadow, we were surprised to discover a wheel laying on the ground. We then noticed a fresh looking 'groove' in the grass surface snaking its way towards West Wood. When we arrived there, BT had got off the mower and started unloading the trimmers. At that point he appeared to notice that the trailer was lopsided. We asked him if he was missing something, and offered him a wheel. We also suggested that he should not bother to enter a ploughing competition – he would lose.

It is quite surprising how much was done in the 2000-2015 period with so few people. Our work in Lady Wood is an example. This project started (following agreement with the forestry authorities) by building two bridges across ditches at the entrance to the wood, and then clearing a 3m wide ride through the old mixed woodland. [Clearing a reasonably 'straight' line from a fixed start point to a planned exit point through a fairly dense wood is surprisingly difficult.] Some large trees had to be cleared (making log piles and burning the brash), together with removing some old hazel stools, hawthorn and bramble. Later, picnic tables were installed just inside the wood, and a bench seat about halfway along the new ride. Over the following few years, this ride was kept clear together with the Lyveden Way footpath between the Lodge and Lady Wood. The hazel stools to the west of the new ride were also a useful source for stakes and binders used in hedge laying on the Lyveden site.

Looking back over the past 20 years, I would highlight one particular aspect that ensured the success of the Lyveden property as a popular visitor attraction. From the custodian, down through the volunteers, **ENTHUSIASM** was in abundance. Somehow we volunteers (both visitor welcome and outdoor team) were all equal, and we all thoroughly enjoyed being there. There was a belief that what we were doing benefited both ourselves, and the property we had come to support. Lyveden had become an important part of our lives.