

Ann Rowlett

Started Volunteering at Lyveden in April 2000

I commenced volunteering at Lyveden over twenty years ago, so have seen many changes during that time both with staff and property alterations and additions.

Mark Bradshaw, the then property custodian, had asked for volunteer help at the local National Trust meeting for an open day at Lyveden, and I think it was from there that a small group of volunteers were recruited, but at first there was no real facilities on site and only one or at the most two people plus Mark who was usually around if he was needed, as he was living in the cottage. The visitor centre with facilities came later.

In the early days there were only a few visitors, all who had to walk up the hill, as the only car park was in the lay by in Harley Way, those who did visit were spread over the day, but you could almost guarantee that when I got my sandwiches out or was preparing to lock up and go home, that heads would appear over the brow of the hill.

As the years passed the parking moved up the hill, near to the cottage and eventually the field behind the hedge was developed as the car park, with separate vehicle access, which provided visitors with their first views of the Bield. Other changes took place too, the Parterre was marked out in the grass in front of visitor centre, the orchard was planted and the trees dedicated and purchased in memory of friends or relatives, and a memorial album created and certificates issued to the donors. 400 trees of old types of fruit, were planted with an avenue of walnuts in the middle.

Another change happened in the area between the moats and terrace, following the discovery of what had previously been thought may have been an Elizabethan-type garden had in fact been a Labyrinth, this was re-laid in the grass giving children and energetic adults the opportunity to follow the paths for an extra mile's exercise. Previous to the discovery that had been a Labyrinth, there had been on display, in the visitor centre a model of site showing what might have been intended when the grounds were first laid out in Tresham's day. This was removed when an aerial photograph at the time believed to have been taken by the Luftwaffe in the 1940's came to light. Elsewhere in the grounds there were occasional digs for any other evidence of previous activities and the moats were drained and dredged on at least once that I can remember. Eventually Mark and his family moved out of the cottage which was converted into a tearoom, serving light lunches and delicious cakes downstairs with toilets and upstairs an office and volunteer room and facilities.

All these alterations and additions led to many changes in staff, as more paid staff members were recruited and many more volunteers were required to cater for the ever increasing number of visitors. This meant that as well as a volunteer team for the visitor centre, a dedicated outdoor team and later tearoom team were required. During the last few years before lockdown changes began down at the Manor, and have continued during lockdown with many staff changes, and structural changes inside and outside at the bottom of the hill, in and around the Manor.

Over the years the guidebook has had to adapt to become relevant, and the great addition to visitor's enjoyment and understanding of the site was when the Audio Guide became available, before then it was up to us to try to answer queries to the best of our knowledge. We were helped by the training sessions that were held from time to time, these were also good as we met other volunteers: at one of these session I found myself sitting opposite someone who was in the same school year as me, long ago, We also enjoyed other times of seeing each other both at Lyveden on special occasions, such as concerts and dramatic performances, and at the Carol singing in the Bield by torchlight. The weather did play havoc at times and at least one occasion was a washout and sometimes it was difficult to keep awnings erected for the various events, but after all we were in a very open area at the top of a hill.

Weather has also been a factor causing parts of the property to be closed e.g. the mounts in high winds, because of danger from falling branches or the Bield owing to flooding. Snow did not manage to stop the Easter Egg hunt one year, nor did a heat wave the following year.

There is a sense of peace and tranquillity when alone, or sharing in the companionship of others, who also enjoy the atmosphere that Lyveden has to offer.

March 2020. Lockdown. Closing of the property. Changes yes, but memories survive.