

Susan Lees

Started volunteering at Lyveden in February 2008

In 2008, Mark Bradshaw came to Kettering to speak about Lyveden to members of the East Northamptonshire National Trust Association. He made a plea for 'more volunteers', so Val Buckland and I went along to the pre-season meeting at Glapthorn. Not only did we learn a lot - but had a marvellous lunch provided by volunteers, Judith and Keith Alvey. My first task as a volunteer was to help welcome the hoards who arrived on Good Friday for the start of the Easter Egg trail. Angela, Mark's wife, and I sat in Mark's car and jumped out whenever visitors arrived to issue tickets (in those days they were torn off a roll – varying colours for members etc.) and trail leaflets. It was bitterly cold and snowing hard for much of the day. Mark's Mother and Aunt kept us warm by bringing hot bacon rolls and coffee down to the car park... The weather at Lyveden features in many of my memories. In any one day, one could need almost every combination of clothing from a T-shirt to a very warm jacket!

Laying out the specially designed labyrinth took Mark and the Garden Team a whole day. It wasn't until we, in the Visitor Centre, were ready to go home that they started doing the first cut of the grass paths. Later in the season, local schoolchildren made flowers to decorate the paths. Initially, they looked really pretty. However, the remains of the sparkly decorations were something of a challenge for the garden team to clear up at the end of the season.

One bright sunny day, we spotted two ladies walking towards the 'Shed' (aka the Visitor Centre). Clothed in black from head to foot, they had obviously been to a funeral. They bought cups of tea and at our suggestion sat on the lawn near the moat to enjoy them. About an hour later they came to say goodbye; and said that they felt so much better than when they had arrived. The peace and quiet of Lyveden and its very special atmosphere had helped them enormously.

Each weekend, we used to arrange tours of the site for visitors. Although our route was very much the same each week, the content varied to accommodate the interests of the group members. One little boy was very taken with the Roundels on the outside of the Bield. The one representing the night Jesus and some of his disciples spent in the Garden of Gethsemane is particularly well-preserved – the fact that Malchus' ear was depicted on the sword really appealed to his sense of the macabre.

Every day was different...

Whatever happened to the terrapin that lived in the moat? We assume he had got too big for his original 'home' and had simply been slipped into the moat at Lyveden.

Mark lying on his stomach on the edge of the moat, fishing for freshwater mussels to show to our young visitors.

Monty Don visiting in October 2014 to film part of his BBC series on Garden Design.

Olivia, Mark and Angela's daughter, picking cherries in the orchard and, later in the year, blackberries and apples for crumble.

Each morning, taking a bucket to the Bield to collect the twigs dropped by the birds nesting in the walls and chimneys.

Searching for orchids near the path to the car park.

Selling plants grown on by Sue Payne, another volunteer, using re-cycled pots.

Recording the Graffiti in the Bield – only up to head height, as we couldn't use ladders. We found some amazing things: such as the initials of one the former residents of the cottage, 'witch marks' and little faces.

Happy days indeed. I learned a lot from my time at Lyveden, met some really lovely people and made some very good friends. What more could one ask for?