

Lyveden's 100th anniversary

*Or lost in meditation wander'd on,
To where in gloom monastic, buried deep,
'Midst shadowy trees, and lone sequester'd fields,
Thy ruins, Lyveden, still majestic stand*
Rural Album 1847

My first encounter of Lyveden was in 1992 as a volunteer when the National Trust had owned the property for 70 years. I clearly remember parking my red VW Beetle in the allocated parking bay on Harley Way and starting the ascent up the hill on a hot July day. Greeted by Ted and Enid Falkner, the then Custodian, I soon became consumed by the isolated, idyllic cottage, with no evidence of modern life surrounded by open fields, woodland and the ghostly silhouette of Lyveden New Bield in the garden.

Little did I know that three years later this was to become my home for the next 15 years. A place where friends and family called their place of calm, fun and togetherness. A place where new friendships would be formed, memories created and discoveries made. A place where I'd meet royalty, make television programmes, introduce contemporary art and re-discover a remarkable garden.

My interview for the role of Custodian was in May 1995. I had been working for Carter Jonas in Peterborough and my mum told me that Ted Falkner was leaving Lyveden and was I interested in applying for the part-time role which came with the Cottage and an opportunity to join the National Trust. The interview was in the living room of the Cottage which at that time was undergoing renovations including the introduction of a damp proof coursing and mains water. There was a distinct smell of damp, but the approach past banks lined with cowslips and late spring blossom made this a more than a house, it was a piece of rural idyl.

My first day on the job was the 5th July 1995. There hadn't been a custodian for some months so the grass around the Bield and the Cottage was over-grown. The equipment stored in the shed was dated and limited. A lightweight strimmer and old Westwood mower which could only be started with a rope around the starter engine. Both were inadequate to tackle the long grass.

A day or two after I was driving past Brigstock and an old tractor was cutting the grass alongside the A6116. I pulled over and walked over to the tractor and was greeted by an elderly, rough looking farmer with everything including his trousers tied together with baler twine. 'Top of the morning' (it was late afternoon!) was the Irish greeting I received from the farmer. Willy Hall kindly cut and baled the hay at Lyveden that first year, then returned with his sheep, and became a friend and regular visitor often driving his tractor from Brigstock on an evening for tea and chat and leaving behind a distinct smell of diesel and cow muck.

1996 was the last year of stubble burning – where arable fields after harvest were set alight to clear the stubble. At this time the NT managed land at Lyveden only consisted of the field surrounding the Bield (then fenced) and the cottage garden. The 'water garden' was let as part of the Barnwell shoot to Mick Gregory and game birds were released in the woodland and the whole area was covered, including the moats, with thick bramble, scrub and trees. Beyond was arable fields, intensively farmed and heavily fertilised to produce a marginal crop on heavy clay soil. The autumn of 1995 and 1996 saw the field alight with thick smoke and ash engulfing the cottage and depositing dust and muck on every surface.

As I became acquainted with Lyveden and the history of the lodge and garden I began to imagine Sir Thomas Tresham's vision. A vision that was created under sufferance and persecution and a dream that was interrupted by fines, imprisonment and eventual death in 1605. To understand Lyveden, you need to understand Tresham, the late Elizabethan age and the religious extremes of the time. Lyveden is a manifestation of these three elements surrounded by a landscape that has remained largely unchanged for over 400 years.

Visitors in the late 1990s were occasional but totalled around 3,000 a year. Tickets were administered from the Cottage and on arrival the visitor would ring the bell which would vibrate throughout the Cottage. £1 adult and 50p child and the offer of a dated black and white guidebook which also cost £1 – making the maths easy for the reception which had to wait another 25 years before the first till arrived!

Amongst the visitors in that first year was a couple I met at the garden gate. Conversation developed and Bob Oakley shared his interest in gardens and having just retired early, was interested in helping as a volunteer. Over the next 15 years, Bob and Jenny became great friends, and Godfather to my son Tom as well as my encyclopaedia on horticulture and forestry. In fact, I'm sure I learnt more from Bob than I had during 4 years of university study.

Bob shared my vision, to return Tresham's Lyveden to the time Tresham's dream ended, to uncover the gardens, retore the moats, recreate the orchard and restore the landscape. A couple of years later I doubled my volunteer workforce when Mike Rogers joined the team which meant the restoration work could accelerate. This core volunteer team supported by Rob Limage, who helped to fell the trees and Peter Knight who helped to drag them out the moats with his antiquated JCB which often ended up on two wheels fighting against the mud. Step by step over the next five years the mounts, moats and banks were cleared to reveal the original form of Tresham's garden. Every week there was a new discovery that provided a tantalising glimpse into this forgotten landscape.

Beyond the 'garden' the field to the north of the Bield was rented to Barnwell Manor Estate and farmed as part of their wider arable rotation. To restore the setting of the garden and protect the archaeology I wanted to revert the agricultural land to wildflower meadow and introduce sheep grazing but the National Trust only owned a small part of this landscape setting. The field to the north was the first field to revert with a seed mix from Miriam Rothschild's Aston Estate in 1998. To develop this vision further required delicate negotiations with HRH Duke of Gloucester. I wrote numerous letters to him, enclosing pictures and requests to meet and discuss options to buy or rent his land. Usually his agent responded, reluctantly engaging, often blunt and once reporting me to my manager that I was being too pushy. I continued to push and after numerous meetings with the Duke I gradually saw the transfer of the land under a Farm Business Tenancy and then, after a period of further negotiation, the opportunity to purchase in 2000. The whole area was established with Miriam Rothschild's seed mix affectionally called 'Farmers Nightmare'. Twenty-five years later, the Trust's strategy is all about arable reversion, nature friendly farming and storing carbon in grassland, so I guess Lyveden was leading the way, but many decades behind Miriam Rothschild's conservation beliefs.

At this same time, hedgerows were re-planted along the historic boundaries and other older hedges laid, initially by contractors and then by the small volunteer team. The orchard planting also began in 2000 with trees obtained from the National Collection at Brogdale. The layout was to reflect the visible pit holes from the 'luftwaffe' photograph believed to be from Tresham's original planting and many of the species were those listed in his letters. The planting, mulching and subsequent pruning and picking became quite an industry but one of the most fulfilling parts of the restoration project and photographed by many of the

broadsheet newspapers. Bees were introduced to the orchard and for a number of years we produced honey for sale, but eventually the keeping of the bees became too challenging alongside all the other duties of a workforce of two members of staff.

Research formed an important part of the conservation project, and Clare Bense generously gave her time to explore the archive at the British Library and at county record offices. Tresham's letters, many written from his prison cell, provided the backbone to understanding Lyveden and transcribing these works formed an important part of Chris Beardshaw television programme, Hidden Gardens broadcast in 2002 and the accompanying book. Together this elevated Lyveden's profile and from a few thousand visitors a year, Lyveden was now welcoming the low tens of thousands fascinated by the discovery of the emerging beauty of this landscape.

The visitor building (former shed and water treatment room) was converted in 2000 as a temporary space for welcoming visitors who had until then been served from the Cottage or left donations in the box on the gate. I recall painting the inside of the building and creating a table stand for a delightful model of Lyveden as the centre piece to the interpretation. In such a small space it was remarkable that we issued tickets, sold ice creams, hot drinks, and a small retail space as well stored and issued audio guides which transformed the visitor experience and brought Lyveden's history to life.

Volunteers were recruited for the 2000 opening and for the next 10 years provided the face to Lyveden's warm and unique welcome. Lyveden's success could not have been achieved without the dedicated service of the 'visitor room volunteers' who were welcoming increasing numbers of visitors every year from a small, cramp converted garage. The volunteers became part of the family, the cottage was used for meetings, storing ice creams and guidebooks as well as the catering outlet for events. My young children, Tom and Olivia and wife Angela also became an integrated part of the visitor experience, helping wherever possible, especially with the weekly stock count of ice creams and merchandise.

Events increasingly became part of everyone's annual calendar. I think the first Easter Egg Hunt was in 1998, a year or two before the wider National Trust started Easter Trails. Meticulously designed by Auntie Jane, the annual event grew in popularity especially when it was accompanied by bacon sandwiches. Some of the most beautiful days were at Easter (and the coldest) and this season felt especially meaningful at Lyveden which was designed to celebrate the Passion of Christ.

Another memorable event was the Elizabethan Day in 2005 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of Queen Elizabeth I. Tudor re-enactment, falconry, Elizabethan crafts offered a wonderful sight set up on the lawns around the Bield. However, Tresham was persecuted by Queen Elizabeth and so the wild storm late that afternoon was seen as Tresham showing his anger for the event. I recall the main marquee collapsing on the displayed birds of prey and the donkey (not sure where that came from!), but all of which emerged from under the marquee cover unscathed once the storm had passed.

Possibly the biggest event of the year was the New Bield Challenge. The creative idea of Rob Newcombe and Caroline and Billy Nall, involved teams of four competing in a multitude of challenges to win the New Bield Cup. Challenges would range from archery, clay pigeons, blind sheep herding or blind mini-tractor driving. It was a great event and attracted teams from all over the local area which was followed by the evening Sundowner which involved live bands and plenty of local ale. The event raised thousands of pounds for the property and provided the main fundraising for many of the conservation projects.

Weddings developed as a lucrative part of the business as couples loved the unique setting of Lyveden and rural romantic setting for a marquee wedding. We met many wonderful couples and experienced amazing, creative ideas for illuminating the Bield, decorating the event and imaginative firework displays. I can still picture a wedding guest, staggering with his family along the moat bank late into the evening, and seeing him gradually drift over towards the moat edge before a huge splash.

As well as fundraising events, an annual programme of work was developed with local artists. Roz Stoddard's contemporary works were possibly the most contentious, exhibited outside of the Bield and then one year, craned into the building. Watch this Space was a creative arts company that provided amazing experiences both visual and audio the culmination being the Gunpowder Plot event in 2010 involving young people from Corby creating a wonderful display of drama, lighting and of course fireworks.

Although these were special events, nothing quite came close to the event of a royal visit. I remember being in the property office (middle bedroom of the cottage) when David Wilson, my then line manager came in and casually said Charles wants to come and visit. I assumed he meant Charles Rothschild, son of Miriam who had interest in the National Trust. No, he said, Prince Charles, but you can't tell anyone. It was the summer of 2002 and significant progress had been made on the restoration of the gardens and the Lord Lieutenant of Northamptonshire thought Prince Charles would enjoy experiencing the Pleasure Garden as part of his visit to the County.

The day arrived, and beautiful summer weather. The visit had been meticulously planned involving scuba divers in the moats and sniffer dogs in the Bield. Early in the afternoon Prince Charles arrived in a shining Rolls Royce at the bottom entrance to the orchard. He met numerous dignitaries who had arrived for the visit, as well as a few protestors campaigning against plans the Duke of Gloucester had to create an off-road motorcycle track in the Lyveden valley.

For the next couple of hours, I was given the honour of escort HRH through the garden, explaining the history and ongoing conservation project followed by a group of tabloid reporters. He was genuinely interested and explored every part of the garden including the Bield and a photo opportunity with my family that had gathered by the Cottage garden. This really was a wonderful occasion for everyone involved and local and national press ran stories of the visit the following day. HRH then went on to meet his friend Miriam Rothschild at Ashton and later flew over in the royal helicopter to see Lyveden from the air on his way back to Highgrove.

Nothing quite matched this visit, but other special visitors included Monty Don, Michael Portillo, Duke of Buccleuch, and Director Generals of the National Trust.

The new access track around the newly acquired land provided the route to the new car park, which finally provided enough space for the increasing numbers of visitors. I think it was constructed in 2015 after a lengthy fundraising, design and planning process. This moved the welcome point to the car park but the visitor room by the Cottage still remained the ticketing location. To the east of the car park a new spinney was planted named Bradshaw Copse after Bradshaw Wood which once covered this whole field linking to Lilford Wood. A lovely coincidence of my family's surname associated with this landscape over past centuries.

The setting of Lyveden has always felt as important as the historic buildings and garden. When plans were developed in 2006 to build a five-turbine array less than a mile from the site boundary it felt only right to object to the scale and proximity of the development. At that

time, little did I know that that our challenge would last a further six years and end in the High Court. The scheme, developed by Barnwell Manor Estate, was refused by East Northamptonshire Council. This was then appealed through a Planning Inquiry which overturned the local planning authority's decision to grant consent. We took the decision to challenge this consent in the High Court and English Heritage and East Northamptonshire Council joined the National Trust to lodge a successful appeal. However, the developer decided to take the case to the High Court where three judges in the Court of Appeal dismissed the case, and wind farm was eventually aborted. The Trust supports renewable energy, but this development was considered an inappropriate scale and location. The outcome not only protected the setting of the Grade 1 garden lodge, but also the setting of the now designated Grade 1 Registered Park and Garden. The decision highlighted the duty to give considerable weight to preserving the setting of listed buildings and the Barnwell Manor case has been the grounds for many subsequent judgements for inappropriate developments close to listed buildings.

After 15 years as Custodian and then Property Manager the National Trust introduced the new role of General Manager in 2010. This led to me and my family to move out of the Cottage after many happy years, as my role now encompassed all National Trust interests across Northamptonshire including the wonderful Canons Ashby. While the Cottage had been a home for centuries, with increasing visitor numbers there was an opportunity to make new use of the building. European funding provided the money to convert the Cottage into a tearoom and the upstairs into a small flat which became the property office. This provided the opportunity to generate a new source of income for the property as well as inviting many more people to enjoy the beauty and tranquillity of the Cottage.

In 2011 the Manor House unexpectedly came up for sale by tender. I remember the conversation with my then Regional Director, Beccy Speight, informing her of the opportunity. She said, 'do you want to go for it?' We had six weeks to seek approval from the Trust to acquire the property which included negotiating with the Duke of Gloucester to relax a covenant restricting the building being used only as a private residential dwelling. This was achieved and our tender of £1.85m was accepted which included the grade one Manor House and a further 20 acres of land which formed the missing piece of Tresham's jigsaw.

Until this point, the visitor experience of Lyveden was back to front, starting at the Lodge and discovering the garden in the opposite direction to what Tresham intended. The acquisition of the Manor House meant that plans could be developed to enable visitors to experience Tresham's plan in the right order, following the gradual garden ascent to the lodge at the top. An impressive project followed my time at Lyveden, which included creating a new car park, café and interpretation space within the Manor.

From my very first visit to as a volunteer in 1992, Lyveden has played an important part in my life. Over the years, I consider myself very fortunate to have had the opportunity to restore a garden of national if not international significance. To develop a visitor attraction which received royal approval, and to have acquired a landscape and buildings that will give pleasure to people for generations to come. None of this would have been possible without the support of many people, especially my family who dedicated hundreds of hours to fulfilling my dream and that of Sir Thomas Tresham too.

Mark Bradshaw

1995-2015