



Flying Visits

Phil Broomfield takes his family to visit four gardens in England's Peak District as they open after the first lockdown.

With my wife Helen and 15-year-old twin boys, I had planned back at the beginning of 2020 for our summer holiday adventure to the Peak District, an area of great natural beauty which lies in the middle of England. Little did we know what a year it would turn out to be and how our outings to visit gardens would be affected by the pandemic.

Four of the places we visited belonged to the National Trust, and visits had to be pre-booked via their website (www.nationaltrust.org.uk). Although there were no strict one-way routes around their gardens, as with some private ones, all necessary measures were in place to keep everyone safe. We were urged to photograph the estate maps at the entrance as no printed leaflets were available. Staff were friendly and most welcoming at all the gardens we visited; they were undoubtedly pleased to be back open again!

Bank Holiday Monday, August 31st, was spent at the **Shugborough Estate**, just six miles from Stafford. With its sweeping parkland, ancient woodland and landscape peppered with follies and monuments, it was designed in the 1740s to be Thomas Anson's 'Perfect Paradise'. The Tower of the Winds, the Chinese House, the Shepherd's Monument, the Doric Temple, the Ruin and Hadrian's Arch are just a few of the intriguing structures to look out for, and are some of the earliest examples of Greek Revival and Oriental-influenced designs in England.

The main formal gardens lie west of the Hall and consist of a series of four low terraces laid to lawn with a central axial path. They were added around 1855 to a design by William Andrews Nesfield (1793-1881). Clipped golden

yews line the path, which leads to the River Sow, and time is well spent admiring the splendid seasonal blooms in blues, mauves and whites, including nepeta, Verbena bonariensis, Japanese anemones and agapanthus.

The Walled Garden, completed by 1806 by Samuel Wyatt, was once one of the most important horticultural centres in the country. At the height of its productivity the garden attracted frequent visits from other notable landowners looking to create their own walled gardens, and boasted award-winning head gardeners and even, the NT claims, pineapples named after the family.

Today it produces fruit and vegetables that can be acquired in return for a donation, and, as is the case with so many National Trust kitchen gardens, most of the produce goes straight back into the tea-rooms for visitors to taste.

Originally, one of the most impressive features at Shugborough, sited by the Head Gardener's House, was the Dahlia Glasshouse. The space where the lost building stood has been filled with a multitude of vibrant dahlias of various heights and varieties, re-imagining the towering glass structures that would have once stood there.

The perimeter of the walled garden has been planted with a concoction of flowers, both annual and perennial, mixed together in harmony.

This NT property had been on our list of 'must visit places' for years and we found that, despite the restrictions, the site was well signposted and there was ample time to see all the points of interest. The only disappointment was, of

Above: Clipped golden yews at Shugborough.

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course, not being able to explore the Hall, but that will be for another time!

Just up the road from where we were staying lies **Ilam Country Park**. The original Ilam Hall was a large Elizabethan mansion built by the Port family who bought the estate from William Paget in 1547. In 1770 it was sold to the Watts-Russell family who pulled the house down and in 1820 commissioned John Shaw to build a new one in the Gothic Revival style. This was partly demolished in the 1930s and what remains is now a Youth Hostel, with the land being managed by the National Trust.

The formal Italian Garden was planted up with Irish yews and lavender hedges, with a circular rose bed. Built on varying levels, the paths, stone balustrades, and central lawns with urns dotted about, make it an ideal place to sit and take in the most wonderful views across to the rugged backdrop of Thorpe Cloud and Bunster Hill.

Sadly, little is documented about the creation of the garden here, though there are information boards which give some insight into Ilam's history; but the NT volunteers have clearly been tending to the upkeep of the formal beds and what gives Ilam the wow factor are most definitely the views on the various walking trails, including those around the wider White Peak Estate.

Kedleston Hall, the Derbyshire seat of the Curzon family, is an 18th-century showplace with pleasure grounds



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and parkland. It was here that the architect Robert Adam revealed his genius to the world. Commissioned in 1758, he transformed the formal gardens by Charles Bridgeman into a landscape park, with many iconic buildings, including the bridge he designed in 1759 and built in 1770–71.

Of the temples, alcoves, and seats planned as 'incidents' along the 3-mile-long walk or drive known as the Long Walk only the rustic temple known as the Hermitage remains (see *HGR* 35), along with various statues and urns. The National Trust's focus here in recent years has been the garden: looking at the historic accounts, plans, plant lists and references, and re-creating the vision from bygone times.

As with a great majority of NT sites in 2020, the flower beds had been turned into a wildflower garden, which looked spectacular in early September. In the formal area, annual flower seeds were sown, including bishop's weed (*Ammi majus*), black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), larkspur (*Delphinium ajacis*), and red orach (*Atriplex hortensis*). The hedge of sedum (now re-named *Hylotelephium*) looked amazing too.

Information boards detailing the National Trust's plans for recreating the garden are displayed within the loggia, while others elsewhere explained the history of the garden in a most interesting way.

We were limited to a three-hour visit here, which was not long enough to explore the entire estate – and there was a huge amount to see, despite the Hall being closed – but we felt we made the most of our time and saw enough to do it justice.

Located near Chesterfield in Derbyshire,

Above: The Italian Garden at Ilam Country Park.
Left: The new wildflower garden at Kedleston Hall.

Hardwick Hall is one of the finest Elizabethan buildings in the country. The initials E and S proudly sitting atop the towers are those of its creator and conceiver, Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury (1527-1608), known as Bess of Hardwick. The building, with its spectacular glass windows and golden stonework, is quite something and its design is reflected by the local rhyme "Hardwick Hall, more glass than wall". We were thrilled to find the house had opened just that week with a limited one-way tour showing off some of the rooms.

The gardens are divided into four courtyards planted with flowering shrubs and herbaceous borders. A cedar on the side of the path at the west end of the garden was planted c.1837 as one of a pair – the other succumbed to the Great Storm of 1987.

The current design of the Herb Garden is not the original 16th-century design because in the 1970s the

National Trust commissioned Paul Miles to create a new one, which was updated again in 2004. Today it is packed full of culinary delights, although perhaps not as manicured as normal; but when we spoke to the Head Gardener, he explained that due to the pandemic causing staff shortages, there were only four of them working, so they had to prioritise which areas they wanted to look the most presentable, and had decided to concentrate on the formal gardens at the entrance to the Hall, as these are seen more by visitors.

The yew hedging at Hardwick Hall was a real highlight of the grounds: beautifully clipped and, together with the stone statues, creating the right ambience. There are in fact a great many yews growing throughout the grounds, some of which could significantly pre-date the 16th-century Hall.

The Courtyard gardens are laid out in Elizabethan fashion, each with its own unique garden, surrounded by high sandstone walls. Highlights included agapanthus and asters. The North Court was once the orchard, while the East Court features shrub roses and the South Court contains vegetable plots, orchards and the herb garden.

Each of the four gardens we visited is unique in its own way and, this being my very first article for *Historic Gardens Review*, I do hope I convey what incredibly special places they are. 🌿

Phil Broomfield lives in Bournemouth on the south coast of England. He runs his own gardening business and volunteers in the garden of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery & Museum.



Above left: Hadrian's Arch at the Shugborough Estate.
Above right: Robert Adam's bridge in the grounds at Kedleston Hall.
Left: A mixed border at Hardwick Hall.