

THE DOWNTON MOOT

Are you one of the thousands

of people who drive through Downton every day, or perhaps just occasionally, and pass this Brown Sign at the traffic lights pointing to The Moot? Have you made the short journey to the top of the village to visit the Gardens, or are you part of the large majority who either glance at this sign and briefly wonder what The Moot is and pass on by? Perhaps you don't even notice it now?



The Moot signpost

If you have never visited The Moot, next time you are passing the traffic lights and see this sign, why not take a 5 minute diversion to drive to The Moot car park and have a walk round the Gardens. If you are in a hurry, allow 10 minutes to take a quick look round and I am sure you will want to come back for a longer visit next time. It is free.

But what is a Moot?

Some dictionaries refer to a Moot as an Anglo-Saxon Parliament. However, stories that this Moot was the site of a Saxon Parliament, whilst sounding exciting, have no evidence at all to support them. The Moot does in fact take its name from Motte, part of the original development of the site as a Norman Motte and Bailey Castle. The earthworks were put up in the early 12th century by the Bishop of Winchester, who was the brother of King John. The Bishop owned much land

round Downton and wanted to protect a crossing of the river Avon, which was at Downton at that time. It was a substantial earthwork with mounds (known as Mottes), ditches and probably a wooden fort and other wooden defences.

Was the castle ever attacked?

The Earl of Salisbury captured the castle by stealth in 1147, but the Bishop laid siege to it and starved them out. Shortly after the Bishop died, the fortifications were destroyed. What a lot of work to build something for such a short period!

And then what?

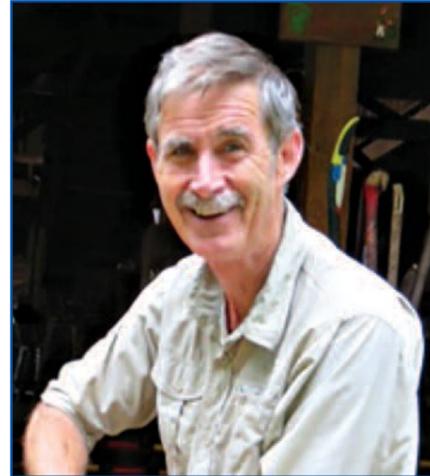
Little is known about the site until about 1725 when Moot House, which overlooks it, was extensively remodelled and the site was landscaped as a pleasure garden for the house. It incorporated the earthworks which provide clever changes of levels. It is thought that Charles Bridgeman was the architect. Although not as well known as Capability Brown, he was a pioneer in the change from formal gardens to the wilder landscape gardens era. His best known work is Stowe Gardens, a National Trust property in Northamptonshire. Since then, there have been some alterations and additions and Country Life included an article with photographs of the Gardens in 1925.

How important is it?

It is nationally important. It is a Scheduled Ancient Monument and is also a two star garden in the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. "Rare and outstanding..." and "extraordinary and impressive..." are some of the words used by experts in these fields to describe The Moot. However, to the layman like me, it is just a lovely place to walk in and explore- or toboggan if there is snow -particularly with our children and grandchildren!

What is there now?

The site extends to about 8 acres. On entering the Gardens through the beautiful old hand-crafted iron gate set into the new iron railings, you arrive at a sunken lawn, where many events take place. It is a popular area for picnicking and for children to run or roll down the grassy banks or sit in the Giant's Chair, a large seat set into mature yews. A new border has been planted against the historic brick wall over the last two years. Many visitors to the Gardens never venture beyond this section so miss out on the main area.



Charles Grenville-Heygate

If you pass through the sunken lawn you will have the option of taking the Upper Terrace walk between the outer and inner ditch fortifications of the Norman Castle, past the Castle's Bailey where the cattle were brought during times of trouble, or down the Lime Avenue, which crosses the inner ditch on a brick bridge.

Then a difficult choice; to go up Bevis Mount with its fine views over Downton and the surrounding countryside, including Cranbourne Chase and Clearbury Ring (an Iron Age hill fort) ; to walk on down to the clover leaf pond with its fountain, or to walk up to the top of the amphitheatre?



The amphitheatre

The amphitheatre is probably the most unusual and impressive feature of the Gardens. Its six curved grassy tiers make a wonderful seating area for plays or concerts, which are put on in the summer. In fact my grandfather, Dr Whitehead, produced plays here after the war. The amphitheatre overlooks the pond at the back of which there used to be an attractive Italianate Loggia. Sadly, this was destroyed by vandals during a period when The Moot was neglected, as was a dramatic Greek Temple, which sat at the top of the amphitheatre.

The river Avon runs along the edge of the Gardens offering a cool peaceful shady walk in the summer. You may even see a kingfisher. The rest you will have to find for yourself, including the Nuttery, the chairman's seat, the wildlife area and hangman's hill!

Why was there vandalism?

The Gardens were part of Moot House until 1972, when ownership of the Gardens was separated from the house. The new owner, a property developer living in the Channel Islands, failed to maintain the Gardens and they started to fall into neglect. It was at that point, by chance, that I started

my involvement with the Moot having become Chairman of the newly formed conservation society, the Downton Society. A visit to the Moot was arranged in 1974. The Society was very concerned about the deteriorating condition of the Gardens and decided to try and stop the decline and get it restored.

How was the vandalism stopped?

It was very difficult and, sadly, took a long time. Severe vandalism took place in many areas along with natural growth of all vegetation, which eventually swamped the Gardens. The owner was not prepared to consider a maintenance agreement, but did eventually enter into talks with the Parish Council. These proved fruitless and it seemed nothing could be done. However, after the Temple, Loggia, stone steps and wooden entrance balustrade had been destroyed, and the last two remaining brick features, the bridge and the gate pillars, were becoming unstable, the Downton Society persuaded Salisbury District Council to take the highly unusual step of using its compulsory powers to buy the Moot. One condition was that, understandably, they would not be responsible for its maintenance or management. As a result, a charity was set up with local trustees. The Council used its compulsory powers and, after a very acrimonious Public Inquiry, the Inspector confirmed the Order and the Council acquired the freehold of the Gardens on 29 February 1988. The Gardens were then sold to The Downton Moot Preservation Trust Ltd for the agreed price of £15,000 on 1 March 1988, nearly 14 years after my first involvement! One condition of the sale was that the Gardens must be open to the public without charge, except for events.

How does the Trust work?

The Trust produced a management and restoration plan with the help of professional consultants and have steadily worked through this since 1988. This was hampered, at the start, with the great storms of 1988 (the famous Michael Fish storm!) and also that of 1991, which blew over half of the feature trees. Volunteers, with the support of specialist contractors, have now worked for nearly 30 years to get the Gardens in their present condition, which is a remarkable effort.

What happens in The Moot?

It is a wonderful place to explore and just wander through. The Gardens change throughout the year and snowdrop time is particularly popular. Dogs are welcome provided owners clean up after them. It is used as a resource by children through the Forest School for orienteering, for plays and music, the very popular Easter Egg hunt on Easter Monday, when over 3,000 eggs are "hidden", the family dog show, bat walks (The Moot has a wide range of bats) and even a star gazing event. So come along and visit sometime. It is open from dawn to dusk and has free entry and parking, except for events.



Audience at a summer event



Easter Egg hunt

Is there a future project?

Yes, we need to improve the paths through the gardens and set up an archive system. The good news is that we have just received a grant of £8,000 from Tesco's Bags of Help scheme towards this, but the bad news is that, after nearly a year filling in forms for the Heritage Lottery Fund, our main application for £60,000 has just been turned down. We are now trying to find other funding sources.

Is there a web site?

Yes, www.downtonmoot.co.uk. This is a new site that we are developing at the moment and has information on the charity, the history, details of events and, most importantly, how you can help. The Trust is not publicly funded so, in order to keep costs down, much of the maintenance is carried out by a dedicated team of volunteers. However, we still need to raise between £10,000 and £15,000 each year. We tend to fund capital items, such as a new mower or a pump for the pond, by finding grants from grant aiding bodies, but revenue items all have to come from our own resources.

Can I help?

YES PLEASE! The Trust is always looking for volunteers to work on a regular or occasional basis and for donations. You can contact us via the website. We rely heavily on regular giving on a monthly or annual basis with Gift Aid. This produces just over half of our funds but we need to increase this. Again, you can find how to donate through our website. Just click on the How to Help headline. You can also receive news about The Moot and the events by sending us your email at the bottom of that page.

I am retiring next year after 30 years as Chairman and it would be wonderful to see more people visiting or getting involved with The Moot.

Charles Grenville-Heygate
Chairman, Downton Moot Preservation Trust
