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National Trust - Lyme

Pride, but no prejudice



Thousands of romantics make the pilgrimage for the opportunity to worship at a National Trust ‘shrine’ renowned the world over. Greg Rhodes meets Gary Rainford, the Head Gardener at Lyme in Cheshire, who regularly rubs shoulders with film and media crews

Lyme Hall and Estate has many moods as the seasons switch, but the image of Darcy emerging from the lake, flimsy top clinging to his chest, still sets many a heart fluttering, whatever the time of year.

The BBC TV adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel *Pride and Prejudice* transformed the ancestral home of the Legh family into a destination recognised by global millions.

Ambling along one of the many paths and tracks surrounding the imposing Grade I listed stone pile, mirrored in Reflection Lake, vividly summons up scenes from the period drama as Elizabeth Bennet, her aunt and uncle, visiting while ‘Pemberley’ owner Mr

Darcy is away in the south, eye the imposing Classical frontage from their open carriage. It’s then that Elizabeth glimpses her destiny.

Lyme’s destiny these days rests with its custodians, The National Trust, and the visitors that throng the site since the 1995 adaptation made millions tremble with anticipation at the outcome of this turbulent love story.

So popular is Lyme that, at holiday times, a stream of visitor vehicles snake along the 1.5-mile approach road to the hall from the busy A6 that passes by the main entrance gate just south of Disley in Cheshire.

Welcoming us in the car park with a beaming ‘Cheshire grin’ is Lyme Head



The National Trust would close without volunteers. They do everything from trimming lawn verges to picking up litter



After thirty hours, they pick up a volunteers membership card and, after another twenty, can enjoy 20% discount in Trust shops and restaurants



Gardener Gary Rainford.

We walk up the rise to what appears to be the rear of the hall (but is actually the front) looming high above, cut into the sandstone edge.

At the top stand solid brick sheds, with a brace of Kubota tractors sporting turf tyres, with trailers, back arm and front bucket, standing in the yard.

"We have three Hondas with rear rollers too," Gary notes in passing, "which replaced our original Ford 220 tractors. They were so well engineered."

Now that April and May's spring bedding scheme has made way for colourful summer plantings, Gary spares a moment to talk about his gardening year.

"This was the Legh family home for 600 years," he begins, "then came WWI and WWII. They lost many of the staff to the battlefield and decided to bequeath the hall and estate to the Trust in 1948 in lieu of death duties."

Offered to Stockport council on a 100-year lease, Lyme saw massed ranks of rhododendrons planted to create vivid spring colour but, by the 1990s, the property was proving too costly for the authority to maintain, so returned management to the Trust in 1994.

The gardening team of four would struggle to keep the formal gardens in their current pristine condition without the sterling assistance of some 160 volunteers, Gary explains.

Beyond the formal beds and borders, National Trust rangers maintain the moorland expanse. "They are licensed to control our historic herd of red deer," Gary continues, "which have bred here for several centuries and have even helped populate royal parks."

The Bowmen of Lyme, who stage archery events here, form a poignant legacy of the estate's hunting history in what was then the ancient Forest of Macclesfield.

Gary has worked on Trust properties for thirty years. Before Lyme, he was head gardener at the Tudor 'magpie' black and

white timber-framed Speke Hall near Liverpool John Lennon Airport.

He began there after working for Liverpool Parks and Gardens since 1971, when he joined as an apprentice. When Merseyside County Council was abolished, management of the Hall passed to the Trust, Gary working under its auspices until it offered him the head gardener's post.

He later combined his work there with a stretch at Quarry Bank, Cheshire, another Trust property, three days a week, where he met Princess Anne, before moving to Lyme in 1994.

"Assistant gardener James Gosnold, who holds a City and Guilds in gardening and a biology degree from Manchester Metropolitan University, has been with us for five years and is highly focused on the job in hand," Gary tells me. "He compiles many of our reports, which allows me to concentrate on other tasks."

"Simon handles the photographic archive of the house amongst his other gardening work. He's applying himself to his career and is busy digitising slides for us and being a whizz on computers."

Since 1991, the Trust has run its own training scheme for rangers and gardeners, both on site and using Reaseheath college in Nantwich. "The calls on them are far more onerous than in my day when I was earning £9.50 a week working at Calderstones Park in Liverpool."

At Lyme for thirty-five years, Mark Kay is "brilliant on all things mechanical", also managing the landscaping and infrastructure projects.

Ablly assisting them are the volunteers - largely semi or fully-retired men and women in their mid to late sixties. As we walk along the grassed terrace, I spot one on her hands and knees, trimming the edges with long-handled shears. "A real labour of love for them, giving us their free time," says Gary, before chatting in lively fashion with her for a moment.

"The National Trust would close without them. They do everything from trimming



They take a day off school a week to experience this environment. Volunteers adopt them whilst they are on site and it can prove life-changing for them

lawn verges to picking up litter. After thirty hours, they pick up a volunteers membership card and, after another twenty, can enjoy 20% discount in Trust shops and restaurants.”

Lyme also delivers a pastoral programme for young people in their mid-teens to early twenties with learning requirements. “They take a day off school a week to experience this environment. Volunteers adopt them whilst they are on site and it can prove life-changing for them. Comprehending others’

requirements and needs can be hard, but they do seem to enjoy their time with us as they don’t see it as a learning process.”

Gary is visibly well versed in interpersonal skills, with volunteers and visitors alike - the media too. “We entertained a group of international journalists last year,” he says, and he’s all too familiar with the wiseacre bent on getting one over on the experts.

“They ask you their most challenging question, trying to trip you up. ‘I found this in my garden, do you know what it is?’ is a

common one. Mostly we can give them a way forward.”

Looking across the mirrored surface of Reflection Lake from the imposing Italianate portico of the house rear, Gary tells me of the pleasure grounds that regaled Lyme in Elizabethan times. “Paintings in the house from the mid 17th century clearly reveal them, complete with paths and formal structure,” he notes.

Like many ancestral homes, Lyme has seen its gardens and grounds evolve over the



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generations. In the mid 18th century, the 1st Lord Newton instructed his head gardener to construct the parterre, before more planting followed in 1860.

For once though, the hand of master landscape architect Capability Brown is absent. William Kent, the early 18th century eminent English architect, who introduced the Palladian style to England, created the framework of the gardens seen now.

An originator of the landscape garden, he cultivated a style of natural gardening that transformed the layout of gardens and estates across the country.

But perhaps most importantly for Gary's work is Graham Stuart Thomas, a deeply knowledgeable horticulturalist and rosarian whose work with the Trust shaped many notable gardens - including that at Lyme.

"He approached the layout and planting of gardens as an art form," The Guardian reported on his death, aged 94, in 2003, "and, over seven working decades, changed our perception of gardens and plants."

Thomas assisted the Trust following acquisition of its first garden in 1948, later being appointed gardens adviser in 1955.

Gary states: "Most of what we see in Trust gardens is based on his work and we continue to take account of his influence here. Essentially, he was their first gardens adviser, pointing the way forward for us gardeners by providing a shape and structure."

The policy is still firmly in place. "Lyme runs a garden panel, who visit us, prepare a report then plan the next steps. They consider many factors, but it is the head gardener and the adviser that make it happen."

"At 850ft above sea level, Lyme gardens are the second highest in the Trust estate - only Castle Drogo [overlooking the river Teign gorge in Dartmoor] is higher," he states.

At this elevation, winter can cover Lyme in deep snow, but that doesn't deter the deluge of visitors. In recent years, cars have

crowded the site over Christmas and New Year as young and old braved the crystal white landscape to marvel at the panoramic views over Cheshire and the Dark Peak from The Cage and other vantage points.

His time with the Trust has given Gary an easy familiarity that endears him to those he talks to. He has hosted many a media team and film, fronting gardening slots too.

No doubt that experience has promoted his cheery demeanour, but this native of Liverpool is innately charming and that's critical if Lyme, like other Trust properties, is to fulfil the paying public's great expectations.

Whilst team members James and Mark are busy mowing, planting out, pruning and managing the beds and herbaceous borders in the four formal gardens, Gary masterminds the year's programme with the army of volunteers.

"They are split into three separate groups working on garden maintenance, in the nursery and engaging with the public. They



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can work up to six hours a day throughout the year," he explains.

Access support for those with mobility challenges is a task that involves the whole team. Members patrol the gardens and a minibus and mini buggy is on hand seven days a week, says Gary, "whilst team members find out their needs before they begin their visit."

He seems the perfect host to preside over the conducted tours of the formal gardens,

and they take up a fair slice of his time as he explains aspects of conservation and environmental work underway at Lyme.

Engaging the public

Captivating vistas across the park from the garden spring into view once we walk out from the hall. Over the centuries, sandstone follies and tree planting set up wonderful lines of sight from the house.

To the east of the garden, we spy the

Lantern nestling in the woods whilst views to the south through Calves Croft open up along Lime Avenue.

The Legh family are said to have loved spending time in the garden enjoying many of the popular pastimes of the day, Gary tells me. "We provide Edwardian games, such as quoits, croquet, giant skittles and boules, on the lawns for visitors to try."

On cue, Gary strikes up conversation with long-time volunteer Jean Walton, who is



The history here percolates through your life and the school room to reinforce an emotional link with the property



overseeing the croquet, among her other duties, today, as the usual lawn on the West Terrace will be accommodating staff and volunteers for their Summer Soiree.

The Trust's team of helping hands first came to Lyme in 1995, with Jean amongst them. "She has worked with me since I arrived," says Gary, "carrying out stewarding and engaging the public."

Keeping visitors happy is part and parcel of volunteers' tasks, but the grounds team do their fair share of face time too, he adds.

"Managing a garden can be a chore sometimes," Gary admits, "it's a maintenance regime with little of yourself in it, but at Lyme we are restoring features not seen for nearly a century and that's really exciting."

In that respect, he relishes cultivating a "tinge of immortality" and feels that, at sixty-two, he can start preparing a gardening legacy for future generations to enjoy. "I remember planting that blue cedar," he recalls, pointing across the lake. "I take it as a huge compliment that garden lovers come here in such numbers to see our work." (Visitors through the gardens reached 145,000 in 2015, the largest recorded to date).

"This has always been a family garden," Gary adds, referring to the devotion generations of Leghs gave to it. That family tradition expresses itself during open days, when visitors are invited to don period costume and play their part as Legh family members. "It's another way to engage with our public."

Under a remit to attract families across its estate, the Trust draws youngsters to Lyme with features such as the Lego trail - somewhere there's a crocodile head poking out of the lake to pique their interest, Gary reveals - and the play area in Crow Wood, near the timber yard.

"Are you Disneyfying the National Trust?, I'm asked, but we need people to come here to create memories to pass on. It's all about building up links. The history here percolates

through your life and the school room to reinforce an emotional link with the property."

Formality flourishing

The 17-acre formal gardens are laid out on terraces - upper and lower, East and West - each with its own design and character and each etched out of the moorland contours.

They are graded into discrete areas - the restful rhododendron walk and rose garden for example - and most popular spots, Gary explains, so that the space satisfies differing horticultural tastes. "This is anything but a plantsman's garden," Gary declares, "rather one of distinction."

Dotted around are several specimens to celebrate. A *Celtis glabrata* - "our rarest tree and Grade 1 listed"; a Hungarian Oak, introduced in the 1830s, with its lustrous deep green foliage; flowering Korean Dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) and rich red *Penstemon rubicunda*, given to Lyme from the renowned garden of judge Sir Vicary Gibbs in the early 1900s.

The Edwardian Rose Garden was conceived by the 2nd Lord and Lady Newton, who made many changes and improvements at Lyme. The Trust remains faithful to their original design, featuring highly scented varieties and dazzling summer hues.

"The lower garden comes through early," Gary explains. "Once the first batch of bulbs have come out, we plant the second batch." Now in summer, hot yellows, oranges and flecks of flaming red blooms burn brightly in the sun.

The planting scheme reminds Gary of "3D chess". "We cannot put two varieties of bulb in the same bed as we need to know which ones we are selling on." (The on-site nursery, which once supplied the hall with herbs and cut flowers, offers a range of produce to the public).

"We also move the thousands of daffodil, tulip and hyacinth bulbs around the garden to help prevent diseases like blight."

For the first time in ninety-five years, the complete garden scheme has been





The turf is contoured and cushioned to create a textured look that I've only ever seen here. It's complicated to manage and extremely difficult to cut

reintroduced, to Gary's delight. "Inspiration comes from in here," he exclaims, pressing his hand to his chest in a moment of passion as he imagines the centuries of devotion that have fashioned Lyme's formal acres.

Herbaceous borders feature hot colours, lilacs, pinks and grey, with mustard yellow Lady's mantle flowering spilling out over the path. "It seeds like a monster," says Gary.

Lyme's modest turf machinery fleet

includes Allett Expert walkbehinds to tend the rose garden grass, Flymos for clipping the terrace banks and a Honda rough cut with rear roller for the main lawns, which are edged with steel lining for a crisp appearance.

Some of the mowing is finicky, requiring a fine touch, as Simon demonstrates when we find him deftly manhandling his Allett to trim the narrow strips of turf among the flower

beds of the East Terrace garden.

"The turf is contoured," explains Gary, "cushioned to create a textured look that I've only ever seen here." A kind of plumpiousness I suggest, to coin a Ken Doddism. "It's complicated to manage and extremely difficult to cut."

At the other extreme, a Countax mulching/cutter deck tackles long grass, nettles and brambles across the site.



My job is not to lay the law down, but to achieve results collaboratively by involving as many people as I can and encouraging volunteers to be honest and feisty as we run a tight ship

The prescriptive style of gardening back in the day is fast disappearing and Lyme typifies the trend. "Our garden discussion group, including volunteers, comes together to chat about the bedding schemes, then we design them as a team," says Gary.

"My job is not to lay the law down, but to achieve results collaboratively by involving as many people as I can and encouraging volunteers to be honest and feisty as we run a tight ship - a £35,000 annual budget for the garden, with about £13,000 of that ploughed into the two main annual bedding schemes."

Wildlife diversity

Europe's largest conservation body, the Trust ploughs back much of its £450-£500m annual turnover into property maintenance and upgrades. At Lyme, the work seldom ceases, inside or out.

Beyond the immediate gardens gushes the stream feeding Reflection Lake, which once powered the mill that is now in the early stages of renovation, along with reinforcement of the steep sides of the gully it runs through.

Ambitious plans are afoot to help reverse the decline in wildlife on Trust land under a vision to create 25,000 hectares of new habitats by 2025.

Following a study last year that found 56% of species in decline, the Trust is playing its part to stem the slump in UK species and improve soil quality and water supply in the countryside to improve the condition of the land and deliver more for wildlife.

At Lyme, the Hasebank North project is establishing the next generation of broadleaved trees to replace coniferous species, planted originally for timber, and create lighter, warmer, sheltered conditions to encourage wildflowers and insects.

In the West Park, teams are clearing purple-flowering rhododendron variety *Ponticum* to help establish native species such as oak, ash and pine. "It's cut back heavily across Trust properties as it likes to flourish," Gary notes.



Also, fashioning scrapes or shallow ponds within the grassland helps upland birds such as lapwing and curlew find insects for their young, the Trust reports.

Sheep and traditional breeds of cattle grazing the rough grasslands will bring long-term conservation gains "unattainable using human interventions".

In summer, such landscape management helps fungi thrive - such as Waxcaps: 'The orchids of the fungus world'.

Climate change is on the march here, as it is across Britain, Gary notes. "It was usual for twelve to fourteen inches of snow to fall here in winter. Now we have milder, wetter weather - averaging thirty-five inches of rain annually - and are rarely in drought as water percolates down from the moor. A thick layer of moss has built up over the years and it retains moisture very well. The North now sees slightly hotter but wetter summers."

Where possible, the estate harvests rainfall, the Lyme rangers storing it in large units for watering the nursery as well as the Highland breeds of sheep and cattle introduced to break down the tough moorland grass and help natural heathland and heathers thrive.

Lyme green

Everything is run along 'green' lines where possible, Gary stresses. He uses biological predation to control white fly in the Orangery. "*Encarsia formosa* wasps do the trick in here and in the lower garden," he adds.

Amongst the exotic species thriving in the heat generated by the biomass boiler that fuels both house and estate is *Sparrmannia africana* in the Tiliaceae family. Also known as the African hemp or house lime, it sprouts rapidly and is a native to open woodland throughout Africa, South Africa and Madagascar.

"White fly feed on the sap and their droppings encourage fungal growth, creating unsightly, if harmless, sooting."

He rummages among the two camellias clinging to the Orangery wall to show me the packets of micro-sized wasps fixed to their branches. "These two specimens are at least 165 years old and are a wall of red in the spring flowering season."

The original Orangery, introduced by Lewis Wyatt in the early 1800s (as well as nearby Trust property Tatton Park) was demolished -





Grey squirrels are an issue at certain levels. They like Hornbeam and strip off chunks of the bark. Badgers gain access too. The SAS of the animal kingdom; they always find a way in

Alfred Darbyshire adding the colourful Minton mosaic tile floor and glass roof decades later.

“Although slugs live in the ivy bedding spread through the gardens, we don’t have a huge problem, but grey squirrels are an issue at certain levels. They like Hornbeam and strip off chunks of the bark.” Badgers gain access too. “The SAS of the animal kingdom,” says Gary. “They always find a way in.”

Lyme’s ornithological group manages feeding areas for smaller species, but the larger birds can cause headaches. “Canada geese create a lot of mess, especially if visitors feed them, and too many cause trouble underfoot. Stoats often kill the young, but we maintain a breeding pair that live around Reflection Lake.”

The garden team apply only peat-free compost, but the level of legislation surrounding composting keeps Gary and the Trust busy ensuring everything going into its make-up is allowable.

Constant review of chemicals permitted under EU rulings also keep weed control green at Lyme.

Biodiversity in the lawns is largely retained “as it was under the Leghs” and fertiliser isn’t used. “We control daisies and

buttercups across the gardens, apply lawn sand occasionally and spray Roundup on the paths, but that’s about it.”

Media frenzy

As TV and film production companies include more period properties in their output, such as those the National Trust owns and manages, the spotlight falls on head gardeners such as Gary to present the public face to the media. “TV work is well paid and brings in valuable income for the Trust,” he explains.

Pride and Prejudice was one of many productions to use Lyme as a backdrop. Films include *The Awakening*; *Casanova*; *Far From the Madding Crowd*; comedy-drama *Brass*; Channel 4 drama *Goldplated*. Antiques Roadshow programmes have been shot here, so too TV advertisements for Warburtons, and the second series of BBC TV drama *The Village*.

Everyone has their role model and Alan Titchmarsh is Gary’s gardening royalty. “He visited Lyme for the ‘Secrets of the National Trust’ TV series - such a nice guy.” TV’s gardening pioneer Percy Thrower is up there too. “He really knew his stuff.”

True royalty also set foot in Lyme when

Prince Charles called in when he visited Chatsworth House in next door Derbyshire and invited Gary to visit Highgrove, along with his Trust peers - a high point in any head gardener’s career.

Car parking presents one of the most challenging aspects of management at Lyme, Gary states, as is optimising visitor flow through the entrance gates and ticket point a few hundred metres inside the grounds, particularly at busy times. “They have to phone ahead to alert us about numbers coming through,” he explains. “The overflow car parks above the main one need keen maintenance to ensure wear and tear does not take its toll on the moorland designated for vehicles.”

Smooth traffic management ensures visitors start their visit in upbeat mood. If not, social media channels will be humming to tell thousands about their bad day out. “We really enjoy positive feedback though,” jokes Gary.



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