

NTS-LMC Spring Tour 2024: The Cotswolds

Not even the drizzle on the first day of this year's Spring Tour could detract from the fact that the Cotswolds are an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty – the largest in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. If anything, a little light rain enhances the warm, honey colour of the local limestone, as we saw in Chipping Campden where the Tour began. One of the oldest buildings in the terraced High Street is the 17th century Market Hall, now in the care of the National Trust, but the Church of St James, which hosts an annual Music Festival, and the almshouses are also of note.

Our base for the Tour was Tewkesbury where, during last winter's heavy rainfall, photographs were taken of the Abbey – one of the finest Norman buildings in England – standing just above the waterline. Thanks to the Benedictine monks, who chose a site on high ground, it was undamaged but, on a walking tour, we heard about the effects of the flooding on parts of the town, and of the townspeople's fears for the future.



In the early 20th century, the Cotswolds became an important centre for the Arts & Crafts Movement, which was drawn by the area's rich craft tradition. On an exposed site at Hidcote Manor, Lawrence Johnston created an iconic Arts & Crafts garden of outdoor 'rooms', sheltered from the prevailing winds by high yew hedges. Each year, the National Trust spends five months cutting these! Linked by narrow pathways, the rooms lead to a magnificent vista over the Gloucestershire countryside, where a flock of sheep grazes.



Though looking like a traditional Cotswold house, Rodmarton Manor dates only from the 1920's – one of the last country houses to be built of local stone and timber. The owners, Claud and Margaret Biddulph, made a point of using local craftsmen, training them in the necessary skills. Our guided tour was led by their great-grandson, who pointed out the many items of Arts & Crafts furniture original to the house. As at Hidcote Manor, the garden rooms offer splendid views over the surrounding countryside.

Chavenage House, on the other hand, is a genuinely old manor house of mellow Cotswold stone, home to only two families since it was built in 1576. Being a member of the present owners' family, Colin McCorquodale led our guided tour around its atmospheric rooms, the walls lined with tapestries. Afterwards, we were treated to a delicious lunch prepared by Colin's wife and niece.



On a very different scale, and with a very different history, is Sudeley Castle. After being 'sighted' on the orders of Oliver Cromwell at the end of the Civil War, it lay neglected and derelict for nearly 200 years, before being restored and brought back to life. Thanks to some lady tourists in the 19th century, the tomb of a Queen of England was discovered, hidden in the grounds. Katherine Parr, the last and surviving wife of King Henry VIII, lived and died in the castle, and now lies buried in the church.

In Cirencester, known as the 'Capital of the Cotswolds', the church of St John Baptist, built on the proceeds of the medieval wool trade, has dominated the centre of the town since around 1150. But the town itself long predates the church. In Roman times, Cirencester was second in size only to London. Today, evidence of that early history can be found in the Corinium Museum which displays floor mosaics and other items from the period.

The heavy shower of rain while on our way to the Garden at Miserden meant that, by the time we arrived in warm sunshine, the long herbaceous borders fringing a wide lawn were looking fresh and colourful. Designed in the 17th century, and set among rolling hills, this was the winner of Historic Houses' Garden of the Year in 2018. Particularly notable is the height of some of the trees, such as the huge 200-year old sycamore. Dotted around the garden were modern sculptures in a variety of forms. But even a charming robin in metal perched on a garden fork did not persuade us to buy any of the works on sale.

Our last morning was spent at Stanway House, the Cotswold home of the 13th Earl of Wemyss and March. This beautiful Jacobean manor house is in marked contrast to his other ancestral home, Gosford House in East Lothian. Since the Earl's father had served as long-time Chairman and later President of the NTS, we were delighted that the Earl found time to meet us in the water garden. There, he turned on the famous 300-foot single-jet fountain, the highest in Britain and the highest gravity fountain in the world. It was, quite literally, the high point of our Tour.

Our final visit was to Bourton-on-the-Water and the Cotswolds Motoring Museum. This brought us down to earth because, despite the village's lovely old houses and low bridges spanning the River Windrush, this is the Cotswolds at their most touristy. It was a reminder that, after the rural beauty of the past few days, it was time to return to the bustle of our everyday lives.

Margaret Cund



The "Tourists" at Stanway House