



ENGLISH HERITAGE

Witley Court

INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS



English Heritage Photo Library

Witley Court with the Poseidon Fountain in the foreground.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Witley Court today is a large and impressive ruin, but one hundred years ago it was one of the foremost Victorian country houses of England. It shows how the profits of industries could be used to create palatial country residences. The house and gardens were created between 1854 and 1860 by William Humble Ward, the first Earl of Dudley. In the 1890s Witley reached the height of its magnificence. The extravagant lifestyle of the second earl was epitomised by royal shooting parties attended by his friend the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VII.

Beneath the nineteenth-century

Entrance Hall lies evidence of the earlier phases of Witley's history, the remains of a vaulted stone building (now inaccessible). This was possibly the undercroft of a thirteenth-century manor house owned by the Cooksey family. Little is known of the subsequent house built on the site by Robert Russell in 1498. An enlarged residence was sold in 1655 to Thomas Foley of Stourbridge. The Foley fortune originally came from nail making, enhanced by supplying iron cannon during the Civil War.

Thomas III, was created Baron Foley of Kidderminster. He extended and modernised the house between 1725-30. The two Ionic porticos on the north and south fronts were added in about

1805. They were designed by the London architect John Nash (1752-1835). Lord Foley spent much of the family reserves on these alterations. When he died in 1833, his son had to sell Witley to clear the debt. The house was sold to William Ward, the eleventh Baron of Birmingham. The price was £890,000 equivalent to over £32 million today. Ward, one of the richest men in the country, moved to Witley in 1846.

By the 1850s Nash's neo-classical architectural styles had gone out of fashion. A hybrid of Gothic revival and sixteenth-century Italian designs had become popular. Ward brought in Samuel Daukes (1811-80) to carry out the transformation. He clad the brick building in Bath stone, leaving Nash's existing

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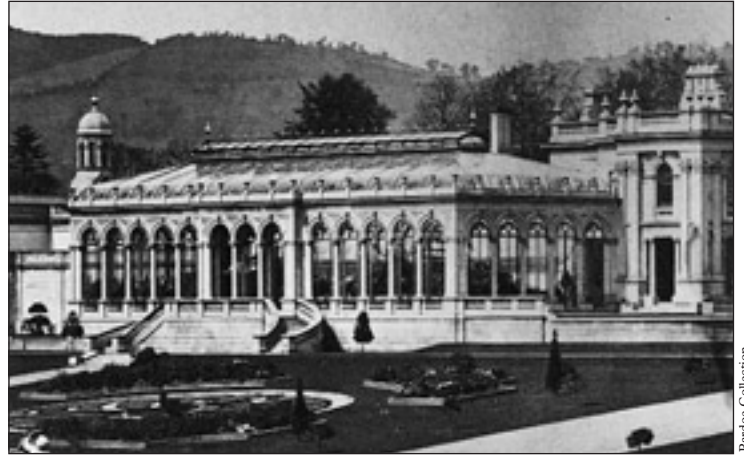
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stone porticos untouched. A curved south-west wing was added and beyond this a large new conservatory, known as the Orangery, was constructed. The gardens were laid out by the Victorian landscape architect William Nesfield. They were the wonder of the age with miniature box hedges and immaculate lawns set off by colossal fountains.

In 1860, Ward became the Earl of Dudley. He died in 1855 and when his heir, the second earl (1867-1932), took up residence, Witley witnessed lavish events that included sporting activities followed by grand dinners. At this time there were fifty household servants, twenty-five gamekeepers and a large staff of gardeners.

The Orangery in 1870. To benefit from the warmth of the sun, the building faced south and had thick plate glass vertical windows and a curved glass roof.



Parade Collection

The great days of Witley came to an end when the Earl's wife drowned in Ireland in 1920. The Dudley fortunes were in decline as a result of foreign competition and, as there was a willing purchaser, the house changed hands

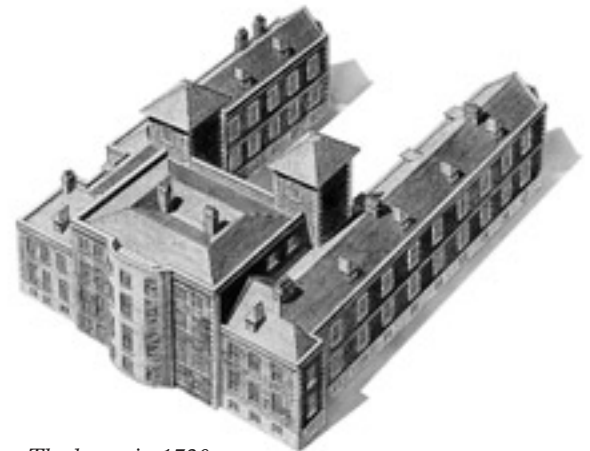
within three weeks.

The new owner Sir Herbert Smith, a rich industrialist, lived at Witley for seventeen years before a fire, which began at 8pm on 7 September 1937, destroyed part of the house. The insurance would

TIMELINE

1086 Lands on which Witley stands mentioned in the Domesday Book.

c1200-1300 Manor house owned by Hugh Cooksey.



The house in 1730.

11th Century

12th Century

13th Century

14th Century

15th Century

1100 Manor of Witley acquired by William Beauchamp.

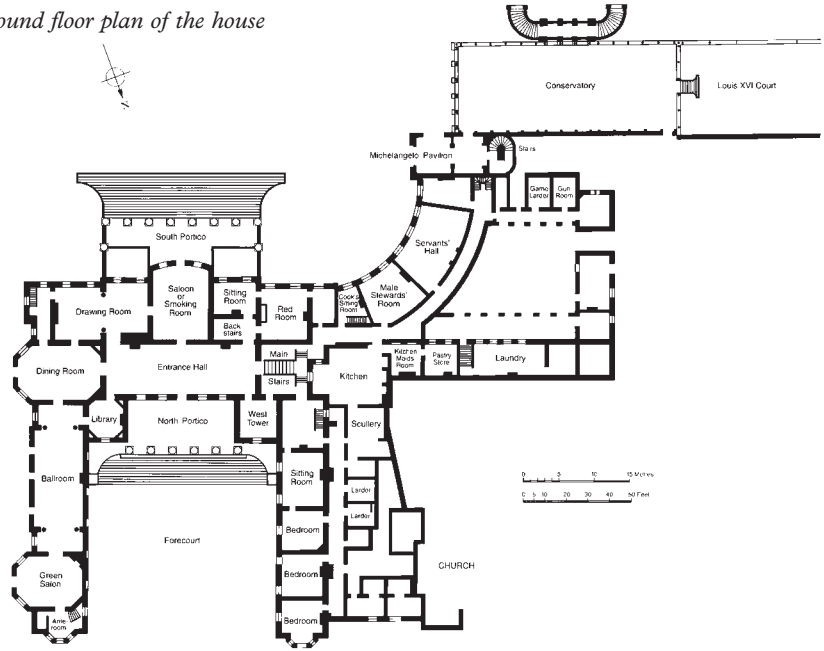


Jacobean house at Witley.

1498 A new house was built by Robert Russell, cousin of the Cooksey family.

only cover a quarter of the cost of repairing the damage so Sir Herbert decided to sell. The contents and many garden ornaments were auctioned in the autumn of 1938 and in the following year the house, park and farm were sold off separately. In 1954, a salvage dealer bought the house. The building was stripped and it came close to demolition. The Department of the Environment rescued it in 1972 and the building was consolidated to prevent further collapse. In 1984 the management of Witley passed to English Heritage.

Ground floor plan of the house



English Heritage

DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The house and gardens are approached from the visitor centre.

Walkways lead past the pool to the restored forecourt which stands in

front of the main entrance to the house. As you face the portico and steps, the west wing (to the

1600 Witley was enlarged by a descendant of Robert Russell.

1642-60 During the Civil War the house was owned by William Russell, a Royalist.



1850 modernisation of the house.

1850 the new owner, William Ward, bought in Samuel Daukes to modernise Witley.

1860 The gardens and fountains were completed costing £250,000 (equivalent to £10 million today).

1880 The height of Witley's fame with lavish parties.

1954 House was bought by a salvage dealer.

16th Century

17th Century

18th Century

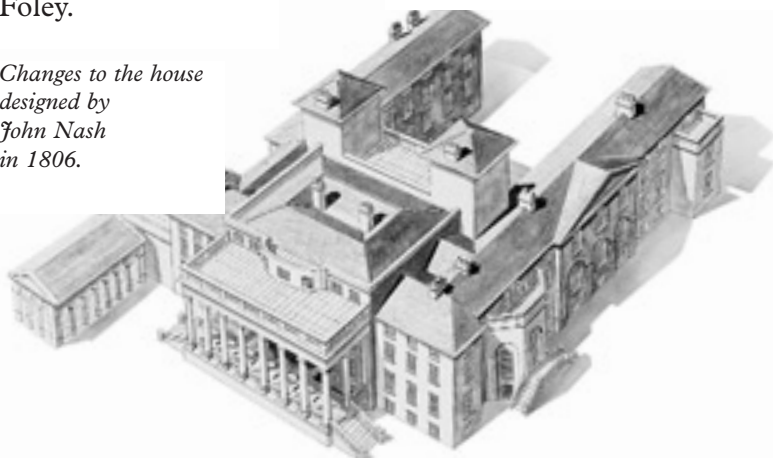
19th Century

20th Century

1655 Witley and its surrounding lands were sold to Thomas Foley.

1730 Baron Foley of Kidderminster (Thomas Foley III) modernised the house.

Changes to the house designed by John Nash in 1806.



1920 Wife of the Earl drowned. The house was sold to Sir Herbert Smith, a carpet manufacturer.

1972 House taken over by the Department of the Environment - passed to English Heritage in 1984.

1806 John Nash, an architect, designed many changes to the house. Lord Foley was left in debt.

1937 A fire in the Ballroom. Sir Herbert sold the house and the lands were divided and sold separately.

right) housed a sitting room and bedrooms, whilst most of the east wing (left) was taken up by the Ballroom and Green Salon with the principal bedrooms above. The service rooms, almost below ground level, extended under the entire house except under the west wing.

Entrance Hall

The hall stretched across the full width of the building. On the right side was a stairway leading to a brass-railed balcony that ran across the width of the room and gave access to the first floor bedrooms. Straight ahead, opposite the entrance, was a door that led into the Salon. Notice the remains of 'Carton Pierre' panelling to the right of the door. This was a form of mass-produced decorative moulding made from refined paper-mâché by a French inventor in the mid-nineteenth century. Through the door and across the Salon is a view of the Perseus and Andromeda Fountain.

West Tower

Off the Entrance Hall a well preserved seventeenth-century door

leads into the West Tower. More of the plasterwork is visible. The reinforced concrete rings were inserted in the 1970s to support the structure.

Dining Room and Ballroom

The octagonal Dining Room has a bay window with views of the east parterre garden and the Flora Fountain. A large opening leads to the Ballroom. This room extended for almost the whole length of the east wing. It had a high ceiling to support eight huge chandeliers. Notice the charred timbers vivid evidence of the 1937 fire.

Drawing Room

Witley had an elaborate and costly heating system consuming nearly thirty tonnes of coal a day. The remains of a mid nineteenth-century firegrate can be seen at first-floor level in the earlier Jacobean chimneystack on the inner wall.

Salon and South Portico

In the Salon more moulding has survived. This room was used mainly as a passage leading to the garden. Walk out through the Salon and look back at the South

Portico. Notice the refurbishment of the decoration above the central doorway. Pupils can identify the elements of Greek architecture present in the portico.

The curving wing to the right of the portico dates from Samuel Daukes's alterations in the mid nineteenth-century. Before the fire it housed the servants' hall, the nursery, the schoolroom and the governess's accommodation. The small room at the end of the wing is the Michelangelo Pavilion, one of the best-conserved parts of Witley. Notice the tessellated marble floor and the niche for a statue.

Conservatory (sometimes called the Orangery)

Many country houses had a room like this, and it can be compared to a modern hothouse with its collection of tropical plants and trees. The camellia growing up the wall is an original plant dating from before the fire. Notice the remains of the plate-glass in the grooves in the columns. A self-contained coal-fired heating system maintained the temperature in winter.

Exterior

The gardens of Witley Court were mainly the work of William Andrews Nesfield (1791-1881). The main features were the parterres (level garden spaces with flowerbeds). These were formal layouts, designed to be looked down on from the most important rooms of the house or from the raised balustraded areas. The parterres and shrub borders were enclosed with clipped evergreens. Remains of two large circular beds are still visible in the front of the Perseus and Andromeda Fountain (often called the Poseidon Fountain). This fountain is thought to be the largest in Europe with its figures based on Greek legend. A smaller garden to the east of the house contains the smaller Flora Fountain. Here, Flora, the goddess of Spring is surrounded by four Tritons. The



Entrance Hall in 1882 with the front door on the right. There are contemporary photographs on the interpretation panels and in the guidebook of a number of the rooms which will enable pupils to envisage how they once looked.



The Poseidon Fountain working in 1870. An immense amount of water was piped and pumped from pools and reservoirs as the main jet, which spouted from the sea monster's open mouth, reached a height of 36m (120ft). When the Dudleys were in residence, the fountains worked twice a week.

fountain was vandalised during the house's decline but there are plans to restore the central figure.

DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

Extracts from the Berrows Journal describe the second Earl's twenty-first birthday celebrations in 1888.

"The celebrations began on Tuesday 7 August and continued for a week. At noon on the 7th, the Earl received the first address of congratulations from his tenants. At 3pm the tenants of Holt tendered their congratulations. In the evening the celebrations really got under way with the County Ball which was attended by 214 guests. The magnificent Ballroom gleamed with the light from the eight crystal chandeliers. An additional supper tent was erected with access from the Conservatory. The drives from the Worcester and Stourport lodges were lit by hurricane lamps, and fairy lights bordered the lawns.

Thursday 9 August was devoted to the Cottagers' Festivities. From day-break, wagons filled with food and equipment to provide for more than 1,000 people converged on the Court. Two enormous tents, 110ft (33.5m)

long and 36ft (11m) wide, were erected in the park, just outside the Golden Gates. The dividing walls of the tents were removed so they formed one enormous tent and here, at 2pm, 893 cottagers sat down to an ample cold meal with plentiful supplies of beer. The tents were so arranged that a view of the ceremonies was easy from the south front of the house.

In the park there was a fair with merry-go-rounds, swingboats and coconut stations. There were pleasure boats on the lake, and in the shadow of the giant trees Signor Sisnefield and his troupe of six gave a two-hour entertainment including Punch and Judy shows, juggling, ventriloquism and musical eccentricities.

At 4pm the fountains played for an hour and in the tents, 416 of the younger children and 427 women sat down to tea. After tea the tents were cleared and dancing took place, on which a special floor had been laid, with two bands providing the music.

Athletic sports were then held throughout the afternoon. The fountains played again when it grew dark and were transformed into fairy-tale scenes as lights threw some forty distinct coloured rays on the falling water. The celebrations concluded

with a fireworks display with many set pieces and 300 giant rockets let off in a final burst."

During the 1880s and 1890s, Witley witnessed many lavish parties. One celebrated the Earl's twenty-first birthday, another his marriage to Rachel Anne Guerney in 1891. The Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) was a regular visitor to Witley attending many lavish shooting parties. Gamekeepers were employed to maintain a stock of pheasants and deer for such occasions. The Prince stayed in the royal suite in the east wing overlooking the Flora Fountain.

Imagine what it must have been like to have been a cottager (an estate worker, mother or child) attending the event on 9 August. Ask pupils to write to a friend describing the scene, the activities they witnessed and how they felt attending such a lavish party.

EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES

A visit to Witley Court is of particular interest to pupils at Key Stage 2 studying Victorian Britain or an aspect of local history such as life in a country house. In all Key Stages, Witley Court provides opportunities for work in a range of National Curriculum subjects. New requirements for literacy and numeracy can be supported by work both on site and back at school.

Preparation

Preparation should include a planning visit to the site by staff. The audio tour will enable teachers to become familiar with the layout and key features of the site. (This facility is not available to pupils.) Walking around the grounds and gardens today, it is difficult to envisage the scale and grandeur of the house and its setting. Contemporary pictures used on the interpretation panels on site and in the publications listed in

the Bibliography provides some insight. Teachers may also find the information and photographs at the rear of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels (not in the care of English Heritage) useful.

Before the visit pupils could study a ground plan of the house as it was before 1937 to pinpoint the principal rooms. They could also find out about classical architectural styles, especially the features of Corinthian, Doric and Ionic columns and capitals. The timeline on page two could be used to introduce pupils to the people who owned and lived in Witley.

On site

To help pupils understand the site, start in the forecourt facing Nash's North Portico. In the nineteenth century the forecourt was gravelled to provide a turning circle for carriages. Ask pupils to select words that describe how, as a guest, they might have felt arriving at the house for the first time.

Walk towards the main entrance and up the steps into the Entrance Hall. Give each pupil a copy of the plan of the house so that they can understand the layout of the principal rooms leading off the Hall. After exploring these rooms pass through the South Portico and familiarise pupils with the location of the Conservatory, the gardens and the fountains.

History

On-site activities will develop pupils' historical skills, knowledge and understanding as well as providing valuable opportunities to reinforce work undertaken during the literacy hour.

One activity could focus on evidence of the building's development and change. Divide pupils into two groups - the Foleys and the Wards. Explain to each group that they have been employed by descendants of the Foley and Ward

Building Clues

Jacobean

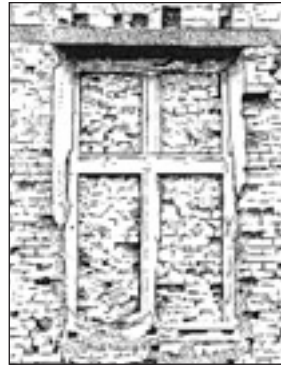
Red bricks and stone quoins (Red Sitting Room)
Mullion and transom window (Entrance Hall)
Doorway (West Tower)
Chimney stack (Drawing Room)
Floor decoration (Sitting Room)

Victorian

White Bath Stone cladding (East Tower from Ballroom)
Ionic columns (North & South Porticos)
Carton Pierre plaster decoration (Entrance Hall & Saloon)
Glass fragments and marble floor tiles (Conservatory)



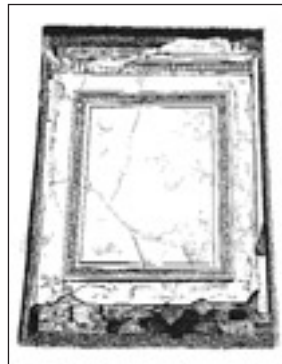
Ionic column



Jacobean mullion and transom window



Jacobean red brickwork with Victorian Bath stone cladding



Carton Pierre plaster decoration



Jacobean chimney



Jacobean doorway

families who want them to investigate and report on what evidence remains of the home their ancestors built. The Foley group will be looking at the Jacobean evidence and the Ward group the Victorian evidence. Give each pair of pupils within each group a briefing sheet containing the building clues they have to find. You can use the line drawings provided or alternatively use photographs that you have taken. Each group is tasked with finding the clue shown and locating it on a plan of the house. Ask them to do an annotated sketch of a doorway and a window from

their family's house - noting its shape, colour and what materials were used. If photographs have not been used on the briefing sheet, then pupils could use a camera to record their evidence so providing illustrations for their report.

Having found the evidence, the groups could compare their findings with the artist's impression of how Witley looked when the Foley or Ward family lived there.

- Did the artist use the evidence the pupils found?
- What additional information

can they get from the drawing that they cannot see today?

Back in school, ask pupils to produce their illustrated report and present it to the other group. They could also produce a pictorial timeline including the people responsible for each building phase. Discuss with both groups how the Wards changed the building that the Foleys lived in. Why do they think the building changed? Explain that the owners made alterations and additions which reflected changing fashion and the different ways in which they used the building. The discussion could be extended to consider the arguments for and against preserving Witley for the future. What do they think should happen to the building?

English

A visit to Witley can help pupils extend their vocabulary by learning some specialist terms to describe architectural features such as portico, balustrade, forecourt, pavilion, salon and wings. Ask pupils to match these terms with their meanings using a dictionary.

The site offers plenty of scope to develop different styles of writing. When the fire started on a September evening in 1937 in one of the kitchens under the East Wing, only the butler and his wife, a chauffeur and two housemaids

Ballroom in the 1880s.



Legend of Perseus & Andromeda

Andromeda was the beautiful daughter of Cepheus, King of Joppa and his queen, Cassiope. Her mother declared that Andromeda was more beautiful than the Nereids, the nymphs of the sea. Poseidon, the god of the sea, heard this and sent a sea-serpent to ravage Cepheus's kingdom. The Oracle of Zeus declared that to save the kingdom, Andromeda must be offered to the serpent. She was chained to a rock at the foot of a cliff waiting to be devoured by the monster.

As the serpent approached, Perseus flew by. He was taking the head of the Gorgon Medusa to Athena, the goddess of war. He had originally been challenged with the task of getting Medusa's head by his mother's suitor. Athena hated Medusa and helped Perseus by giving him a magic shield, an invisible cape and winged shoes. The task made Perseus a hero as one look from Medusa would have turned him into stone.

Perseus saw what was going to happen to Andromeda so he went to the King and asked for her hand in marriage if he could kill the serpent. Cepheus agreed and Perseus slew the monster with his sword. At their wedding feast, Perseus's brother, Phineus, attacked the celebrations and tried to kidnap Andromeda. Perseus used Medusa's head and turned him into stone.

were in the house.

- How did they react?
- What did they do?
- How did they feel?

These are some ideas for role-play in interviews with newspapers the next day. Journalistic accounts could be written describing the scene.

Another activity involves asking pupils to prepare an audio tape tour for younger children that describes what the building was like in the 1880s. It asks for the use of appropriate language and concepts, the composing of accu-

rate descriptions and the use of editing skills. Identify with pupils the areas of the building and gardens (such as the Conservatory, Ballroom or fountains) that are going to be featured on a tape tour. In groups send them to the allocated areas. Ask pupils to develop a list of descriptive words by recording four words under each of the following headings - I see, I hear and I feel.

The images on the interpretation panel (where available) will help them. This list can then be used as a framework for the tape script.

The various characters depicted on the fountains could form the basis of research into Greek legends and characters. The story of Andromeda and Perseus could be used for storytelling developed with dance and music to express the dramatic pace of the story. Simple musical instruments could be used such as a drum, a recorder or simple percussion items. Alternatively, masks could be made to depict the characters in the story. These pieces could be performed on site.

Mathematics

Standard or non-standard units of measurement can be used to survey

and draw up plans of rooms such as the Conservatory. Pupils could be asked to be surveyors who have been commissioned by English Heritage to draw up a scale plan as part of their fund raising application to restore the Conservatory as a Victorian hothouse.

Design and technology

Mizière, a Parisian plasterer used shredded paper, glue water, flour and ground chalk to create the papier-mâché used in the Carton Pierre decoration. Pupils could create their own designs based on those seen at Witley and then, back in school, experiment with their own mixes, and press them into clay moulds.

The east parterre garden outline is still clearly visible. Pupils could record and measure this and make a small model using suitable natural materials to show the box-hedge outline, the paths and the flower beds.

Art

Pupils could be asked to take the role of a modern stonemason seeking inspiration from the many decorative designs in a commission for a new public building. Sketches, photographs, notes and ideas will be needed in a sketchbook which will be presented to the town council. For example, pupils could be asked to find examples of the three styles of classical columns and capitals.

All age groups can make their own posters to advertise the site using a realistic or stylised representation of the feature they consider most interesting. Alternatively pupils could use their own sketchbooks to record a variety of impressions, features and patterns and use these to create a visual record of their visit. Pupils could also design a third fountain to be located in the grand front entrance around which the carriages would turn.

MAKING A VISIT

Opening hours

1 April - 31 October, daily

10.00am to 6.00pm (5pm in October).

1 November - 31 March Wed-Sun, 10.00am to 4.00pm (closed 24-26 December, 1 January).

Contact

Education Bookings

English Heritage

112 Colmore Row, Birmingham

B3 3AG

Tel. 0121 625 6864

Educational visits are free for structured curriculum work but must be booked at least two weeks in advance. An adult/pupil ratio of at least 1:15 is required.

It is essential that you make a preliminary visit. You will be sent a free entry permit to do so when your booking is confirmed.

How to get there

Witley Court is situated 10 miles north west of Worcester on A443.

(OS Map 138; ref SO 768649)

Train: nearest station is Worcester, 10 miles.

Facilities

Parking: ample car and coach park.

Toilets and picnic space: near the car park.

Shop: School groups are welcome in the shop as all proceeds contribute towards the continuing work of English Heritage.

Tape tours: these are not available to school groups, but may be useful to teachers on preparatory visits.

Access: good access via new walkways around the lake to the gardens.

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All English Heritage resources are available by post from:

English Heritage, C/O Gillards, Trident Works, Temple Cloud, Bristol BS39 5AZ

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