Grand garden revival at Grade I registered Wrest Park

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After decades behind virtually closed doors, its treasures overgrown and largely unknown, English Heritage is reviving one of Britain's largest 'secret gardens' - Wrest Park in Bedfordshire.

Revealed and restored as English Heritage now intends and thanks to a major grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Wrest Park will read once more as a magnificent 'who's who' of garden history, including figures such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, Batty Langley, William Kent and Thomas Archer.

From August 2011, visitors will see the first fruits of this restoration, when the Italian Garden and Rose Garden as well as miles of pathways and vistas will be unveiled, completely conserved and reinstated. Within the French-inspired mansion, the conservatory and Countess's Sitting Room will be restored and open to the public while a new exhibition will tell the story of the estate, its evolution and its personalities. New facilities including a visitor centre, cafe and play area will ensure that visitors can – in between exploring the house and landscape – relax in comfort.

Wrest Park belonged to the de Grey family from the Middle Ages until the early 20th century. The family commissioned many of the 18th century's most famous designers to work on the landscape. But whereas in other gardens the previous designs were lost in the pursuit of new gardening vogues, each generation at Wrest Park respected the work of their predecessors. As a result, visitors today can walk through over 300 years of English garden history.

The revival project will see important areas of the magnificent 90-acre landscape brought back to their early 20th century appearance before the de Grey family sold Wrest Park in 1917. The gardens declined from this time and by the latter half of the 20th century, Wrest Park housed an agricultural research institute, at the end of which only four gardeners maintained the grounds. This compares with a garden staff of around 30 in its heyday.

English Heritage gained full ownership of the estate in 2006, and in 2008 announced a 20-year master plan to restore Wrest Park as one of the pre-eminent gardens in England. In 2010 the Wrest Park revival project was awarded a major grant of £1.14million from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the first phase of which will be completed this August. As part of the project, an historic gardens apprenticeship scheme is giving eight novice gardeners the opportunity to be involved in the restoration while gaining valuable skills and qualifications.

Highlights of the restoration currently underway include:

- The Rose Garden – previously covered over by lawn, photographic evidence from 1904 and archaeological surveys have revealed its early 20th century design. New beds have been planted with 525 traditional-style roses, donated by David Austin Roses, to create the colourful effect of a late Victorian rose garden.

- The Italian Garden – this formal garden is undergoing transformation from its layout in 1882. The broken stone edging around the beds is being fully conserved and re-laid, and seasonal bedding - including tulips, wallflowers,

hyacinths, dahlias and pelargoniums – will replace the former planting of low maintenance year-round foliage.

- An avenue of 26 disease resistant elms have been planted to replace the lost English elms which once framed the French parterre.

- The French parterre – based on Earl de Grey's original 19th century design, will be completed next year after archeological investigation this autumn into its original layout. Hedges and gravel paths will be restored and standard Portuguese Laurels re-introduced in Versailles planters, interspersed with Pencil Junipers.

- The American Garden was the last of the gardens created by Thomas Earl de Grey (in 1857), and named for the acid-loving plants commonly found in North America it contained. Due for completion next year, work includes the removal of inappropriate Cedar trees introduced in the 20th century and the restoration of four hedged gardens.

Other work – to be completed by August this year will include the revealing of overgrown vistas and the reinstatement of three miles of paths to link the upper garden area near the house with the woodland and waterways beyond, a hallmark of Wrest Park's landscape.

They include pathways, grassed over during World War II, on each side of the Long Water, created in the 17th century and leading to Thomas Archer's early 18th century Baroque Pavilion. It is Wrest Park's most iconic – and most romantic vista. This vital element of the restoration project means that the gardens will once again make sense as a whole, rather than being a group of individual spaces with no obvious connection.

The Pavilion is one of several buildings dotting the landscape. Others include a 19th century Orangery, late 18th century Bath House and early 18th century Bowling Green House, remodelled in 1735 by leading garden designer Batty Langley.

Some of the buildings will house new displays and the expansive Walled Garden will boast a children's play area, a new visitor centre, complete with introductory exhibition, shop and 74-seater café. Inside the mansion, inspired by 18th century buildings in Paris and amongst the earliest French-style houses in England, a new exhibition will tell the story of Wrest Park. Selected rooms can be viewed, including the restored Countess's Sitting Room, shown to reflect how it would have looked in the mid-19th century. Visitors will be able to enjoy the view through to the conservatory and the Italian Garden and Walled Garden beyond, just as Henrietta, Countess de Grey did when the house was newly built in the 1830s.

The revival will see Wrest Park take its rightful place as one of England's foremost garden attractions, with opening hours extended to reflect its new status.

Wrest Park is close to the M1 motorway off the A6 near Silsoe, Luton, Bedfordshire MK45 4HR – call 01525 860152 for more information, or visit www.english-heritage.org.uk/wrestpark.

Notes to editors

Wrest Park Opening Times 2011/12

- Until 31 July

Sat - Sun & Bank Holidays 10am-6pm

- 1 Aug - 18 Sep

Thu - Mon
10am - 6pm

- 19 Sep - 31 Oct

Thu - Mon
10am - 5pm

- 1 Nov - 31 Nov

Sat - Sun
10am - 4pm

- 1 Dec - 29 Feb

Closed

- 1 Mar - 31 Mar

Sat - Sun
10am - 4pm

Prices until 31 July
Adult £5.50
Child £2.80
Concession £4.70
Family Ticket £13.80
Admission is free for English Heritage members.

Prices from 1 August (when the Walled Garden Visitor Centre opens)
Adult £8.00
Child £4.80
Concession £7.20
Family Ticket £20.80
Admission is free for English Heritage members

Futher information

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