Stowe’s £9m makeover allows visitors to follow in the footsteps of 18th century tourists

10/03/2012

A £9million project by the National Trust to restore and transform the gateway to Stowe, one of Britain’s earliest tourist attractions, is now complete.

The New Inn, built in 1717 by Lord Cobham, was the original purpose built entrance for visitors to Stowe.

Acquired by the Trust in 2005, the dilapidated inn has been rebuilt and restored over the last two years to become a visitor centre worthy of today’s contemporary day-trippers [1].

Visitors can now experience a real taste of 18th century life, sitting and playing games by the open fire in the parlour rooms, sampling ale in the old tap room on special days and seeing the kitchen and laundry room at work.

The original Georgian Bell Gate entrance into the gardens themselves has also been reinstated, marking a 20 year milestone in the Trust’s restoration of the landscape gardens, which were created by the Cobham family over a 150 year period.

David Brooks, National Trust property manager at Stowe, said: “Stowe is an inspiring place for visitors to get outdoors and explore thanks to its 250 acres of gardens, 2,000 trees, 40 temples and two large lakes. Due to its scale and the calibre of architects and garden designers involved including Sir John Vanbrugh, William Kent, [2], Charles Bridgeman, James Gibb and Capability Brown, it is a garden of monumental significance on the international stage.

“Until now we were lacking a ‘heart’ to the property – somewhere worthy of the magnificent grounds. Rebuilding the New Inn means that day-trippers can now follow in the footsteps of the original Georgian tourists. The reinstatement of the Bell Gate means that visitors will now catch their first glimpse of the breathtaking grounds as originally intended.”

Much of the original inn built by Lord Cobham has been reconstructed thanks to thorough research into the original building design by tracking down historic photographs, drawings and documents as well as researching materials and construction methods used at that time. A 75 strong building team, and over 250 volunteers have been involved at one stage or another in the project.

Thousands of recycled clay tiles, thousands of bricks and many of the timbers found in the six month clear up of the site, have been reincorporated into the building. The historic rooms now open to the public have been furnished with original Georgian furniture wherever possible.

Acknowledging the requirements of the modern tourist, visitor facilities have also been sympathetically created on site on the original footprint of the farm and stable block to include a conference centre, 85 seat café, shop and plant sales area. These new buildings have been built using 120 larch trees from the nearby Ashridge estate, which is also looked after by the National Trust.

Richard Wheeler, National Trust garden historian, said: “Money was no issue for the Cobham family who commissioned the gardens. Lord Cobham and his nephew and heir Earl Temple could spend liberally on making their own paradise,

and created what became a theme park style tourist attraction of its time. Over the last two decades we've restored much of the grounds and recreated three pathways, 'Vice, Virtue and Liberty' to encourage visitors to fully explore the grounds which will be we hope a fantastic playground for young and old alike."

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) provided £1.5million towards the £9million [3] for the restoration and revival of the New Inn with other fund-raising initiatives and donations making up the remainder. Approximately £10million has been spent on the restoration of the actual gardens over the past 20 years.

The New Inn visitor centre will formally open on 23 March 2012 with a celebratory, free entry, open weekend on 24 and 25 March where there will be activities for all the family. For more information visit National Trust website.

Notes to editors

[1] 120,000 visitors currently visit Stowe each year. Now that the new visitor centre is open, it hopes to attract up to 160,000 a year.

[2] Vanbrugh and Kent also worked on Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

[3] The £9million restoration monies breakdown as: HLF £1.5m, private donation £1m, Stowe appeal and local fundraising, smaller grants (WREN) £500k and National Trust funds.

National Trust
With more than 250,000 hectares of countryside and 710 miles of coastline across England, Wales and Northern Ireland there are plenty of opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors with the National Trust. The charity is one of the most important nature conservation organisations in Europe. It promotes environmentally friendly practises and cares for the diverse and rare wildlife that lives on its land. It also looks after for more than 300 houses and gardens, from workers cottages to stately homes, preserving not only buildings but the stories of the people who lived there. These spaces inspire the Trust's 4million members, 61,000 volunteers and 5million other visitors every year.

Further information

National Trust
Contact Alison Dalby, Senior Press Officer, alison.dalby@nationaltrust.org.uk / 01793 817 780 / 07824 418 351 or Fliss Coombs, Marketing and Communications for National Trust, Berks, Bucks and Oxon, fliss.coombs@nationaltrust.org.uk / 07901 811 375.

Heritage Lottery Fund
Contact Katie Owen, HLF press office, on 020 7591 6036 or 07973 613 820.