Hidden 200 year old Swiss Garden reveals its rare



The Grade II* listed Swiss Cottage at the Swiss Gardens, Bedfordshire

A little-known Swiss Garden created in the heart of Bedfordshire in the early 1800s has been saved from decay thanks to a grant of £2.8m from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), which has helped fund a vital £3.6m restoration project to its crumbling fairytale-style landscape and buildings.

Looking as though it has stepped off the pages of a European children's storybook, its quirky buildings, bridges and ornamental structures, act as focal points on a magical journey along woodland paths, through grassy glades and past tumbling water. Its makeover has transported the nine-acre garden back to its Regency appearance, when its creator, Lord Robert Henley Ongley dropped this 'alpine' landscape into its unlikely Bedfordshire setting close to Biggleswade.

Previously hidden behind the hangars of The Shuttleworth Collection aviation museum, the Swiss Garden – one of Britain's most important gardens – is now set to take equal billing and prominence as a visitor attraction when it re-opens on 31 July after its extensive makeover.

The garden's 13 listed buildings and structures – including six listed at Grade II* – have undergone careful conservation using traditional materials and techniques where possible. Its two-storey centrepiece, the Swiss Cottage, has been re-thatched using water reed from Norfolk, its finials re-gilded with 23 carat gold leaf and missing or broken rustic decoration replaced using slices of Monterey Pine cones and hazel and willow twigs. Almost 4,300 panes of glass in the

Grotto and Fernery have been replaced with hand-cut handmade cylinder glass and rosette detailing replaced on the Pond Cascade Bridge.

Over 25,600 shrubs and 8,400 bulbs have been planted in 53 beds and 340 metres of path laid using 300 tones of gravel. Lost vistas have been reinstated recreating the scenic windows which opened onto very deliberate stage-set views of buildings, bridges, urns, arches and other garden features as originally intended by Lord Ongley.

With the original layout of the Swiss Garden so intact, it is the best surviving Regency garden in the country – and a unique example of the ‘Swiss Picturesque’ style. Located close to Lord Ongley’s mansion within the park that was a fraction of his 2000-plus acre Old Warden Estate, it took eight years to create and was completed in the 1820s.

It is not known if he created it after visiting Switzerland as part of a ‘Grand Tour’, or if he was influenced by the fashion for rustic, Swiss-style architecture popularised by the Prince Regent.

With his fortunes waning, Lord Ongley sold the estate to industrialist Joseph Shuttleworth in 1872, who set about improving the garden, which was by then in decline. He reworked some of its features, introduced new plants and created a formal terrace and broadwalk to host elaborate garden parties and pageants. These Victorian features have also been restored, including some of the artificial Pulhamite rockwork he introduced, although he retained the essence of the original Regency garden, including its layout and buildings.

His grandson Richard Shuttleworth inherited the Old Warden Estate on his 23rd birthday but was killed in a flying accident in 1940 at the age of 31. Four years later his mother Dorothy Shuttleworth founded the Richard Ormonde Shuttleworth Remembrance Trust as a permanent memorial to him.

After the Second World War, the garden gradually fell into a perilous state of disrepair. In 1976 a partnership was formed between the Shuttleworth Trust and Bedfordshire County Council, who took over the lease and undertook some repair and restoration work, although the Shuttleworth Trust is responsible for the garden’s day-to-day management. The garden and its buildings, along with the surrounding registered landscape of Old Warden Park, were placed on the English Heritage Heritage At Risk Register. The restoration works now mean that the tust can request English Heritage to take the garden off the register.

Una Watts, General Manager, said: ”Thanks to the HLF grant, we have been able to reverse the fortunes of this remarkably rare garden and with the help of local volunteers and apprentices, we aim to keep it looking pristine again. With its magical charm and lovely natural setting we expect it to become as much of a draw as the aircraft museum in the future and to be enjoyed by many thousands more than ever before as these two sides of the Shuttleworth story combine to make a great day out for both aviation and garden enthusiasts.”

Maggie Appleton, Heritage Lottery Fund East of England Committee Member, said: “Much care and thought has gone into how best to restore the Swiss Garden. The hard work has paid off: it looks wonderful and thanks to a significant investment of both time and money its distinctive features continue to delight visitors. As well as honouring the garden’s history, the Shuttleworth Trust has had the foresight to look to the future by providing a complementary range of learning and volunteering opportunities plus four apprenticeships. Truly inspiring!”

There is a new more prominent entrance to the Swiss Garden located beside the main visitor reception. A sculpture trail has also been added through the woodland, created by chain-saw sculptor Patrick Brown, inspired by ideas suggested by children from seven local schools based on the garden and its history.

From July 31, the Swiss Garden is open from 9.30am to 5pm daily and admission is £8.00 for adults and £7.00 for seniors with children under 16 free. Joint tickets, to include entry to the Shuttleworth Collection are £17.00 for adults and £16.00 for seniors. The Shuttleworth Collection has almost 50 aircraft on display dating from 1909 and vintage cars and stages regular air displays.

Notes to editors

In addition to the HLF grant, funding has also generously been given by other organisations including Central Bedfordshire Council, the Country Houses Foundation and Friends of Swiss Garden.

About The Shuttleworth Trust

The Shuttleworth Trust was created in 1944 by Dorothy Shuttleworth in memory of her son Richard who was killed in a flying accident, aged 31. As well as the Swiss Garden, the trust is custodian of the Shuttleworth Collection of historic aircraft. Old Warden Park is also home to Shuttleworth College, which specialises in land and environment courses.