



# PARK LIFE

*Leigh Clapp visits Bignor Park and enjoys the late season splendour of the gardens*



HOME to the Bigham family since 1926, Bignor Park near Pullborough is an historic 1,200-acre property with history dating back to medieval times when the land was used to fatten deer for the Arundel Estate. Only two coade-stone pinnacles remain of the original 1632 mansion house. It was replaced in 1826 by the then owner, John Hawkins, with a handsome Regency house that still sits imposingly today on the land, commanding stunning far-reaching views over the glorious South Downs. The current custodians, Ned Bigham, Viscount Mersey, and his wife Clare moved to Bignor Park with their two young daughters in 2010, having taken on the running of the estate after the death of Ned's father in 2006. "I fell in love with the place from an early age and above all want to keep it going," Ned says.

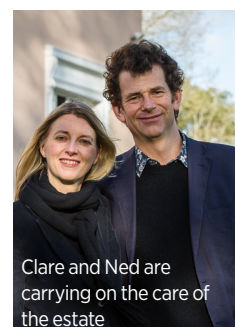
There are 11 acres of peaceful gardens to explore, with both informal and formal areas. The essence of the layout for the parkland created by renowned landscape designer and artist William Sawrey Gilpin in the 1820s remains, and the formal gardens by the house have much the same structure as depicted in photos from the end of the 19th century. Elements of the past are combined with new planting and redesign. Ned's father was passionate about planting trees and

working with English Woodlands, and now in turn Ned, with assistance from Natural England, has embarked on an ambitious restoration plan for the parkland, drawn up by Dr Philip Masters, who is an expert on Gilpin. This involves repairing the ha-ha and garden walls, dredging the lake, repairing Victorian wrought iron deer fencing and extensive planting of trees. "In this context of parkland you have to think 100 years ahead. For example when a tree may fall down, there needs to be something growing up in readiness," he explains.

In the informal areas woodland paths meander through a changing vista, from carpets of daffodils in spring, through wild flower meadows in summer to reflections of autumn hues in the ponds. Closer to the house the garden is more formal. Much of the credit for what you see today is down to past generations. "My grandmother, Katherine Baroness Nairne, did a huge amount from 1959 and really transformed the garden from what was a bit of a wilderness," says Ned. Other significant elements include a temple built to commemorate Katherine's 80th birthday. Ned's mother Joanna, Lady Mersey redesigned various aspects of the garden as well, including the creation of a Zen Pond. "We too want to keep the garden looking very special and have found that holding weddings

## OPENING TIMES

Bignor Park, Bignor, West Sussex, RH20 1HG  
 Grounds and gardens available for wedding and events.  
 Enquiries welcome, contact Events Promoter Louise Hartley on [louise@bignorpark.co.uk](mailto:louise@bignorpark.co.uk) or 07798 807043  
[www.bignorpark.co.uk](http://www.bignorpark.co.uk)  
 NGS : Sunday 20 September (2pm-5pm)  
[www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)



Clare and Ned are carrying on the care of the estate



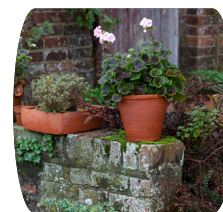
Hedging encloses seasonal planting

and events is a way of enabling the gardens to flourish,” he adds.

Ned and Clare are developing the walled garden with its striking modern sculptural Aeolian harp by Geoffrey Stinton at the centre. Admitting they are not natural gardeners, they have called on local designers and RHS Chelsea gold medal winners Louise Elliot and Lisa Rawley to manage the space. “I felt it lacked colour. We are thrilled that we found Louise and Lisa, who have transformed it with cleverly thought through colour, using a variety of flowers, including some vibrant dahlias that I particularly love. We discuss ideas together and areas which need changing, and they have come up with inspired solutions. The garden was a bit daunting but now it is a real joy and it is exciting for us all thinking of new ideas,” Clare says. Late into the season it blazes with massed candy-pink dahlia ‘Karma Fuchsiana’ and dramatic dahlia ‘Arabian Night’ combined with salvias, asters and penstemons against a foil of shimmering ornamental grasses, such as towering *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Flamingo’. To one side of the walled garden is a maturing cut flower garden, as Clare loves to have armfuls of blooms for the house and doesn’t want to disturb the displays in the borders.

From the large walled garden, past arrays of pots billowing with pelargoniums, you enter into the more intimate and equally manicured Dutch garden, so-called because of the traditional Dutch desire to control nature. Hedges enclose intricate topiary spirals, pyramids and spheres, while heavily pruned bay, buddleia and lavender also draw the eye in this charming parterre garden. Seasonal blooms, in blue and white to echo delftware, add light to the deep greens of the box with clouds of white cosmos peering above the neatly trimmed hedges. To the side of the Dutch parterre, draped in *Vitis coignetiae*, is a rather charming Victorian glasshouse adorned with a swathe of pale blue *Plumbago auriculata* and dangling dried seed heads of alliums and honesty on its whitewashed walls. By the windows are rows of potted crimson pelargoniums and dancing fuchsias, while a lovely old cane seat and tiny upturned pots on a ledge complete the scene.

Allow plenty of time at your visit to enjoy the spirit of the garden, its sense of timelessness blended with the continued evolution in the safe hands of the latest members of the family, as they too put their mark on this special place. Ned has a particular passion for biodiversity and creating a natural balance both in the garden and on the estate. “It’s a great pleasure to see the bees and butterflies around the flowers, and I love seeing the wildlife returning, for example in an area we have reverted to heathland which is becoming a haven for a myriad of birds and insects, including the rare field cricket,” he says. Open through the National Gardens Scheme for many years, this is one not to miss, and if you are lucky enough to have been before, one to revisit to see how it is changing. ♦



Potted pelargoniums are used through the garden



Dahlia Karma Fuchsiana with its glorious coral flowers



White cosmos in the Dutch Garden

## GET THE LOOK

Formal areas by the house, informal blending into woodland

Sections of interest, from parterres to tranquil ponds

Meandering paths to slow your journey

Seating at vistas

Eco-friendly practices with planting choices and habitat areas

Planting for something beautiful in every season

Late season perennials and grasses keep the show going into autumn

Adding trees and shrubs with a vision of how they’ll look in the long-term future

Contemporary sculpture in the landscape as installations or focal points



Enter into the walled garden