



BOWOOD PRESENTS.....

A stately stage in fabulous Wiltshire countryside

An impressive cast of characters has been acting out the Bowood story for a run that has lasted just over 250 years to date. Their dedication and passion in preserving an estate stretching out across 4,000 acres near Calne, Wiltshire has spanned nine generations of the Lansdowne family and countless visitors of all ages. Today this magnificent production is directed by the 9th Marquis of Lansdowne and is set to enthral audiences for many more years to come.

Among the leading lights that have walked onto Bowood's stage are Capability Brown, Robert Adam, Talleyrand, Jeremy Bentham and Dr. Joseph Priestley, while representing the Lansdowne family there have been a former Prime Minister, a Foreign Secretary and a Chancellor of the Exchequer as well as a Governor General of Canada and a Viceroy of India.

Today, Bowood employs a highly-skilled and multi-talented team of staff – 75 of whom work fulltime with another 200 people coming on board when the house and gardens open up to the public. Together, they carry on the legacy of their predecessors with similar passion and dedication.

Whatever the season, the scenery at Bowood is hard to beat and the Grade I Listed Great Park is peppered with such whimsical backdrops as rock landscapes, cascades and grottoes, a Hermit's Cave, a Mausoleum and a lakeside Doric Temple. Scenes shift down from a woodland garden of rhododendrons, across to an Adventure Playground, over to Italianate terraces, then indoors to a family home (distinguished by priceless art and antiques collections, a private chapel and the laboratory where oxygen was discovered) and then out again across to Bowood Golf & Country Club on a separate part of the estate.

“Without a doubt, though, the scene-stealers are the House and Gardens,” says Charlie Lansdowne who took over the running of Bowood in 1972 when his father retired to Scotland. Three years later, Lord Lansdowne opened his home to the public and ever since has continually looked at ways to expand the attractions while making sure that they are in keeping with Bowood’s character and heritage. Open to visitors from April – November, Bowood House & Gardens draws 150,000 people annually, as well as film crews, classical and pop concerts, family fun days and shopping fairs.

....and this is how it all began:

Bowood House takes shape

Bowood House originally dates back to around 1725 when building started on the site of a former hunting lodge. Together with Bowood Park, the unfinished house was then bought in 1754 by the 1st Earl of Shelburne who commissioned architect Henry Keene to complete the Big House, adding a grand portico and building an E-shaped service complex behind it, known as the Little House.

The 2nd Earl of Shelburne (who became the 1st Marquess of Lansdowne having, as Prime Minister, negotiated peace with America following the War of Independence) then began a major programme of improvements and appointed Robert Adam (who had built a mausoleum for his father) to work on the house’s interiors throughout the 1760s. Adam also set about designing the magnificent ‘Diocletian’ Orangery wing to conceal the service courtyards. At this time, the Big House and the Little House were quite separate but a huge drawing room was built in the 1770s to join them together.

Bowood was later restored in the grand 19th century style by the 3rd Marquess, commissioning C.R. Cockerell to design the Chapel and alter the Library. Bowood’s famous terraces also date back to this period.

Returning to England in 1894, after serving as Governor-General of Canada and Viceroy of India, the 5th Marquess used the Big House mainly for entertaining, with his family living in the Little House. This state of affairs remained up until World War II, when the Big House was occupied by Westonbirt School and then by the RAF. Sadly, after the war the Big House remained empty and fell into such a state of disrepair that by 1955 the only course of action for the 8th Marquis was to pull it down – a tough but brave decision.

The Little House was then converted into a more hospitable home and thankfully many traces of the Big House have now taken up residence here. For instance, the Adam-style painted doors at each end of the Orangery and the marble chimney piece in the Library were originally in the great drawing room;

railings and marble torchères from the staircase and dining room are now in the Chapel; the four urns at the bottom of the central steps of the terraces came from the balustrade and the recumbent stone lions on the Lower Terrace once looked down from the Big House's stone gate piers.

Apart from such legacies from the Big House, Bowood House is a treasure trove of antiques and heirlooms that once belonged to the likes of Napoleon, Lord Byron, Queen Victoria and Dr. Samuel Johnson and others that hail from as far afield as Turkey, Burma and India. So, among the 'Bowood Collection' – arranged out across exhibition rooms occupying several levels of the House - keep a beady eye out for: the gilded chair and footstool used by Queen Victoria at her wedding in 1840, Napoleon's death mask, an ivory palace in miniature from the Begum of Bhopal, the cabinet used at sea by Admiral Lord Keith during the Napoleonic wars, a lacquered papier mâché Burmese Buddha, the embroidered court suit of the 1st Marquess and watercolours galore.

...meanwhile outdoors

The changing tastes and circumstances of the Lansdowne family down the generations can also be witnessed through the development of the park and gardens at Bowood over the last three centuries.

A 1725 painting depicts the park originally laid out in a semi-formal style with walled terraces, avenues, wildernesses and ornamental lakes. The fashionable 18th century garden designer, Capability Brown was commissioned in the 1760s by the 1st Marquess of Lansdowne to landscape the park. The ground outside the House was levelled so that it swept down to the sinuous lake – created from the damming of two streams. Belts of trees were planted to encircle the park while Pleasure Grounds – with fascinating and unusual shrubs and trees - were laid out beyond the walled garden. Now, the House appeared to have been set naturally into its landscape.

Obviously, it took many years for Capability Brown's vision to become reality when the young trees reached full height. "It's the modern day visitor to Bowood who can best see what must have dwelt in Capability Brown's imagination," comments Lord Lansdowne. "As you look from the House and Terraces, across gentle slopes to the tranquil lake and beyond to the Wiltshire Downs, you get a sense of what must have motivated him.

"If it is possible to do so, we have endeavoured to take Capability Brown's dreams forward. The arboretum in his Pleasure Gardens has been added to right up to the present day."

Looking towards the House, the great Terraces - dating back to the 19th century and created as a reminder of Italy for the 3rd Marquess - are another distinguishing feature of Bowood. Sir Robert Smirke designed the Upper Terrace in 1818 while the lower terrace was the creation of George Kennedy in 1851. The fantastic forms of Irish yews, planted here around 1900, lean towards the sun.

To capture the glory and colour of Bowood Gardens at their best, a visit during the six-week period from late April to early June is definitely recommended. This is when a woodland garden of rhododendrons and azaleas, sprawling out across 60 acres, erupts into life. When he returned to Bowood in 1894 after his time in India as Viceroy, the 5th Marquess enthusiastically continued the rhododendron plantings begun by the 3rd Marquess. Since the 5th Marquess's time, successive generations down to his great grandson, today, have added new plantings. Just wander aimlessly along some two miles of pathway that make up Bowood's Rhododendron Walks (located in a separate part of the estate, two miles from Bowood House, and with their own entrance) and marvel at some of the earliest known hybrids to be found.

"It's an endless tale to tell the Bowood story fully and in all its glorious detail," states Lord Lansdowne. "Indeed, the only way to gain a true idea of Bowood's magic is to visit us. On behalf of my family, past and present, I can truly say that it is a real pleasure for us to raise the curtain on Bowood each year, from April until November when the house and estate can be enjoyed at their very best."

Bowood House & Gardens is open to the public from Saturday 31 March – Wednesday 31st October 2007, from 11am-6pm daily – with last admissions at 5pm (closing one hour earlier after the autumn clocks go back).

Individual entrance tickets start at £4 per head for children aged 2-4 and go up to £7.70 per adult. Special rates for groups and senior citizens are also available, as are individual and company Season Tickets.

Entrance tickets for the Rhododendron Walks are priced separately from £4.45 per person (with children up to 15 being admitted free of charge). If visiting Bowood House, on the same day too, then entrance to the Rhododendron Walks is reduced by £1 per person.

For further details, log on to www.bowood.org or call 01249 812102.

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