



Friends News

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Keeping in Touch during Covid-19

Open to the Public

One of the many things we've missed since the start of Covid-19 restrictions is that great British pastime of visiting stately homes and gardens.

Why do we love it so much? And when did this very English tradition begin?

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According to Bill Bryson a custom arose in the eighteenth century of providing tours to callers if they were respectably dressed, and it became common for middle class people to visit stately homes in much the same way as they do today.

Servants were happy - they made money from showing visitors around.

In 1776, a visitor to Wilton House noted that she was visitor number 3,025 that year, and it was still only August. Some properties received so many sightseers that arrangements had to be formalised to keep things under control. Chatsworth was open on two designated days a week, and Woburn, Blenheim, Castle Howard, Hardwick Hall and Hampton Court similarly introduced opening hours to try to limit the throngs. Horace Walpole was so plagued with visitors to his house, Strawberry Hill in Twickenham, that he issued tickets and printed a long, rather peevish list of rules about what would be permitted and what not. If, for example, an applicant applied for

four tickets, but five people then turned up, none would be admitted. Other houses were more accommodating. Rokeby Hall in Yorkshire opened a tea room.

So it seems that this is where the English country house tea and cake began. Beautiful architecture and landscapes, houses displaying treasures from around the globe - and cake! No doubt that's a magic combination and perhaps explains why we like a historic house visit so much.

Great competition between stately home owners resulted in a wide range of grottos, temples, artificial ruins, obelisks, menageries, amphitheatres and so on.

The famous pagoda at Kew Gardens, rising to a height of 163 feet, was for a long time the tallest structure in England. Until the nineteenth century it was sumptuously gilded and covered with painted dragons - eighty in all - and tinkling brass bells, but these were sold off by King George IV to reduce his debts, so what we see today is really a stripped-down shell. At one time the grounds of Kew had nineteen other fantasy structures scattered

about, including a Turkish mosque, an Alhambra Palace, a miniature Gothic cathedral and temples to Aeolus, Arethusa, Bellona, Pan, peace, solitude and the sun - all so that some members of the royal family would have a selection of diversions with which to punctuate their walks.

For a time it was highly fashionable to build a hermitage and install in it a live-in hermit. At Painshill in Surrey, one man signed a contract to live seven years in picturesque seclusion, observing a monastic silence, for £100 a year - but was fired after just three weeks when he was spotted drinking in the local pub.

Not every aspect of the old OTP survives these days - but won't it be great to once again enjoy those which do!

So many restrictions in 2020 - but let's hope in 2021 all our favourite places will be once again Open to the Public