



Victorians' Secret

The historic parkland at Abberley Hall School is little changed since the 1880s. Now this lack of progress is enabling a masterclass in conservation and ecology

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Just occasionally, a little neglect can have unforeseen benefits...

A perfect example of this theory can be found at Abberley Hall near Great Witley, one of Worcestershire's historic gems.

This splendid country house was completed in 1848 in the Greco-Italianate style and its ground floor interior still contains a complete scheme of Victorian classical decoration, which is a rare survival and comparable with Brodsworth Hall in Yorkshire and Osborne House on the Isle of Wight.

For almost a century the hall has been home to a thriving preparatory school which has invested heavily in extensive educational and sporting facilities, boasting resources such as state of the art science labs, astro-turf pitches and riding stables.

However the sweeping 90 acres of land around this impressive property have not quite kept pace with the school

developments... and thankfully so.

Rhoddy Swire, chairman of the Abberley Hall Foundation which raises funds to preserve the site's historic features, stresses that the grounds were also regarded as an exceptional example of Victorian landscaping.

"The school's facilities have been expanded and developed over the years but there has been no make-over of the old Victorian estate which remains very much as it was in the 1880s.

"This is intriguing from a historic perspective, but also from an ecological viewpoint as it remains astonishingly intact," he explains.

This is something that caught the eye of Natural England, the organisation which aims to preserve the country's unspoilt environment, which was impressed by the substantial array of rare wild flowers here.

Regional officer James Griffiths discovered that fields around the hall contained species such as St John's Wort,

Meadowsweet, Birds-foot Trefoil, Betony, Tormentil, Lady's Bed Straw and Mouse-ear Hawkweed in good numbers.

Natural England now sees so much potential here that it has helped to provide a substantial grant for a 'Parkland Plan'. This new project aims to establish a full history of the site and its development, particularly in the Victorian era, and will be a complete survey of the designed landscape.

James says: "With continued sensitive management the areas of interest should develop and spread even further."

A team of experts led by Max Askew of landscape architects Askew Nelson will work on the plan over several months, covering Abberley's topography, archeology, historic structures, trees and woodland, meaning that it could uncover some hidden gems as the estate is so unspoilt.

There are a number of exceptional features in the grounds such as the iconic





The interior of Abberley hall is restored, now it's time for the gardens to be brought back to glory

“Abberley has a stunning grotto and cascade built down 100 metres of hillside with views stretching for miles over the Vale of Evesham”

clock tower which can be seen, on a clear day, from six counties.

Another is one of the earliest remaining works of the James Pulham dynasty who specialised in faux rock work which became known as Pulhamite.

There are famous structures at Buckingham Palace and Sandringham but Abberley has a stunning grotto and cascade built down 100 metres of hillside with views stretching for miles over the Vale of Evesham. This is possibly the earliest surviving example of Pulhamite work.

The foundation has run a very successful fundraising campaign over recent years, enjoying the support of a wide group of people and attracting grants for some impressive refurbishment inside the house. Specialist company Paine & Stewart has worked to clean and repair old paint and plaster work.

This has paid dividends particularly on the ceilings where the old gilt paint now

shimmers with layers of dirt removed. Decorative plasterwork has also been replaced where it had cracked or fallen off – a huge improvement.

And the parkland plan means that attention is now turning to outside, where the foundation knows that both the grotto and grounds generally are in need of restoration.

“The plan is the key to a better understanding and is an exciting development which will breathe new life into the estate,” says Rhoddy.

“Very little historical research has been done on the grounds so it will be fascinating to see what information turns up and we are hoping to uncover a few secrets. “We might find a Victorian treasure, an ancient tree, an overgrown planting scheme – who knows?”

Whatever is discovered, the foundation’s trustees will use the new-found knowledge to plan their

conservation work for the coming years. And hopefully it will help them unlock funding for these projects. Their immediate goal is to revive into the water garden and it would certainly be a wonderful spectacle to see water flowing down the cascade once more.

“We are delighted to now be moving towards a restoration and are applying for further funding which could see the fabulous water garden brought back to life. In time we aim to see the grounds carefully reinstated to their former glory for people from Worcestershire and beyond to enjoy.” ■

The Abberley Hall gardens open twice a year to the public, but private tours can be arranged by calling foundation trustee and local historian Jo Roche on 01299 832666.