

THE WONDERS OF FORDE ABBEY



Cattle House and Lawn

One of the undoubted heritage gems of Dorset is the house and award-winning gardens of Forde Abbey, tucked away in the north west corner of the county. 45,000 people every year visit the thirty acres of gardens which include topiary lined vistas, colourful herbaceous borders, an arboretum, a bog garden, which together with swathes of early spring bulbs and camellias provide all year round interest. Rupert Hardy from Dorset CPRE recently visited and spoke to Alice Kennard about Forde.

History

Home to the stunning Mortlake tapestries, woven from the internationally famous Raphael cartoons, now housed in the V&A, the Abbey has a rich and varied history spanning 900 years. Through the centuries, it has played host to Cistercian monks at prayer, 19th-century philosophers and politicians, by misfortune implicated in the Monmouth Rebellion and more recently, the backdrop to the Hollywood adaptation of Thomas Hardy's 'Far From the Madding Crowd,' starring Carey Mulligan, Michael Sheen and Tom Sturridge.

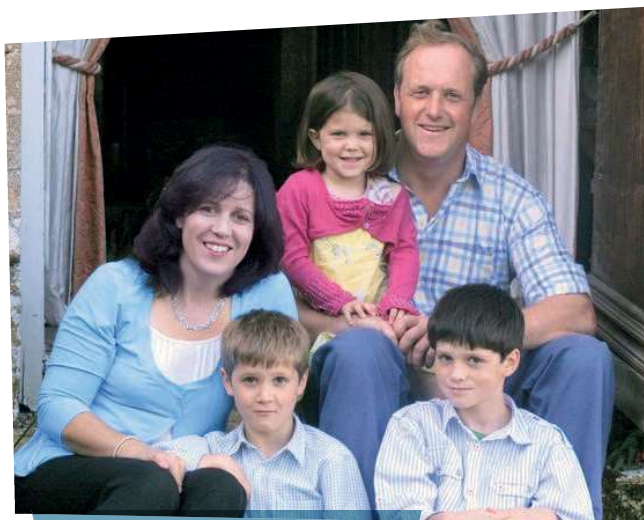
If any of Forde Abbey's 12th-century Cistercian monks were to return today they might well recognise their quarters, their kitchen and refectories, and their chapter house. It is rare to see so much of a medieval monastery preserved as an integral part of a private dwelling.

Responsibility for this wonderful home was inherited by the Ropers in 1905. Elizabeth Roper died in 1943 and the house passed into the care of her son, Geoffrey and his wife Diana. Geoffrey devoted his whole life to the Abbey and its gardens. He added the arboretum and planted many of the woods that are a feature of the estate. In the 1970s Geoffrey's son Mark and his wife Lisa took on the responsibility, modernising the house, developing a fruit farm on the estate, establishing the acclaimed herd of Forde Abbey Devon Cattle and turning Forde Abbey into a successful tourist attraction.

In 2009, another generation became stewards of this beautiful place with Mark and Lisa's eldest daughter and son-in law Alice and Julian Kennard, taking their turn to maintain it.



The Saloon



Alice and Julian Kennard with family



Bog Garden

Gardens

The early Cistercian monks would have farmed the land and grown seasonal fruit and vegetables in accordance with a strict vegetarian diet. Today, the only monastic structure that remains in the garden is the Great Pond. Sir Francis Gwyn created the beginnings of the modern garden during the early 18th-century. Gwyn used the water from the Great Pond to create the connecting three lower ponds while also laying out the lawns and drives and, in keeping with the design principles of the day, incorporating great yews and limes to lead the eye along significant views and vistas. The Evans family bought the Abbey in 1864 and under their stewardship the garden at Forde Abbey was of typical Victorian design, with the extensive walled garden to the north and dark shrubberies to the South. Summer bedding provided the colour to frame the house but the garden was very labour intensive and even at the outbreak of the First World War required ten full time gardeners to maintain it.

Using the legacy of the eighteenth-century landscape and the nineteenth-century trees, three generations of the Roper family were responsible for establishing the Bog Garden, Park Garden and Rock Garden and during his lifetime, Geoffrey Roper planted more than 350,000 trees on the estate. Designed to incorporate both the formal and informal aspects of garden design, the straight lines give way to meandering pathways the further you head away from the house, with plenty of benches and seating to admire the views along the way.



Sweet Peas

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Recent Developments

The majestic Centenary Fountain was installed in 2005 to celebrate 100 years of the Roper family at Forde Abbey. Powered by a pump from the strawberry farm on the estate, it reaches a height of 160 feet and is the highest powered fountain in England.

The Kennards have been busy too, restoring borders and the arboretum, as well as building new features. The tulips have now become a major draw with 40,000 planted there. Last year they built a Spiral Garden, which is based on the design of a monastic penitentiary spiral. It is full of wild flowers and tulips lasting from July to October. They also installed a Willow Den in the arboretum for children to play in. Alice loves particularly the beautiful Rock Garden.



Grange Goats

Events at Forde

Every week there seem to be garden-themed events at Forde. In particular there is the Summer Fair in July, Toby's Garden and Harvest Festival in September, and Halloween in October with pumpkin rolling for children. In 2017 they started Christmas Winter Illuminations covering the house and gardens with LED lights, which has been successful. Surprisingly as Alice says, "lighting the whole garden took less energy than boiling a kettle".

Other Developments

Besides the long-established Pick-Your-Own Fruit Farm and the prize-winning Devon Cattle on the estate, Forde Abbey is now home to 2,500 milking goats. They are the UK's second biggest goat milk producer. They have also reduced their carbon footprint by installing wood chip boilers and solar panels (400KW) on the goat shed roofs, which we thoroughly commend.

The Future

Alice says "the biggest problem is keeping the roof on". Their repair bill alone is £100,000 a year so they look to take any opportunity to develop the garden and boost visitor numbers, yet still keep Forde in family ownership.

Opening Times

Dorset CPRE are holding their Summer Open Day there on 5th July so do come then (see enclosed booking form) but do also consider visiting any time of the year to take advantage of the half price entry to the gardens for members (don't forget your card). There is also an excellent cafe. The gardens are open 10–4.30pm daily while the house opens 12–4pm from 27th March to 31st October, but not on Saturdays and Mondays (www.fordeabbey.co.uk). It really is a fantastic place! Do go!

Rupert Hardy