A secret walk at: Attingham

The Great British Walk

Five generations of spenders, savers and saviours loved or neglected Attingham. But we have the second Lord Berwick to thank for setting in chain the events that lead to this walk. In between scandalising society by marrying a 17-year-old courtesan and being the proud owner of a working model of Vesuvius, the second Lord appointed Humphry Repton to redesign the estate.

Repton chose to use natural means - trees, open land, rivers and shrubs – to shape the landscape. At Attingham he was careful to only rarely offer clear-cut views of the house. As you walk around the park today you often catch glimpses of the house but there is only one place where you can stand and really appreciate its full glory.

THE SECRET

A path, newly opened up for the Great British Walk, allows visitors a rare view of the front of Attingham House.

When the first Lord Berwick built Attingham he originally intended for the main drive to approach the south-facing entrance head-on, from the south. At the eleventh hour, for whatever reason, he changed his mind and it was never really used.

Historically, only the owners and their privileged guests, would have even glimpsed this view. Everyone else - like visitors today - must drive in from the west, arriving and seeing Attingham side on.

Mark Rowe, our walking pro, has discovered this secret walk for you to explore. Now you can follow in his footsteps...

He fell in love with walking in the wilds of Hertfordshire, while growing up in the suburbs of north London.

Today, Mark has worked regularly for the Trust’s Great British Walk and The Independent on Sunday. He is also a contributing editor to BBC Countryfile Magazine. He is however, still learning how to fold an OS map in a force eight gale.

This route has been extended to take in our popular woodland walk. If you're just after our secret walk, please pick up a map at reception.
Our destination on this walk is an old Palladian arch bridge that now serves as the Shrewsbury to Holyhead road. Between us and the bridge are overgrown meadows that are grazed by longhorn and jersey cattle. We cross the river Tern and enter the ancient deer park. The fallow deer date back to the creation of the park in 1797 and are quite habituated to humans, ambling slowly rather than skipping away when they judge us too close. The River Tern threads its way through the east of the estate. It rises near Stoke and after leaving Attingham flows into the River Severn.

The trees around us are planted in ‘drifts’, in odd numbers and never aligned, so to look more natural. Huge poplars and horse chestnut, cedars, oaks - are reminders that Attingham enjoys SSSI status for its vintage trees. One beech tree is fetchingly carved with the names of US airforce and WRAF personnel who met here during the war.

WE suddenly branch off to the right across open ground. The thin track is waymarked and leads towards the river and a tucked-away corner of the field. Edged on both sides with shrubs, you get the feeling you’re venturing off the beaten track. We reach the bridge and turn around to see the full face of Attingham’s southern facade and entrance.

It’s the classic graceful view, that centuries of grand home owners everywhere have deployed, declaring: “look at me, look at my wealth”; yet it is one that the Berwicks chose not to share. To the right is the orangery where the ladies would sit, crotchet and chat. This is joined to the main house by a sheltered colonnade. Just hidden by trees is the men’s wing, where port and cigars would have been enjoyed.

I’m struck by the sense that the original owners would not have wanted us to be here. This view was for the exclusive few, not for casual visitors.

“People never see the house straight on. Very few would ever have seen the house from here. They wouldn’t have wanted peasants or ruffians to stop and enjoy it.”

– Colin Morris, Head Warden

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