



Ham House & Garden

Garden history tour

Welcome and thank you for coming on our tour of the historic gardens at Ham House.

We estimate it will take you approximately 30 minutes to walk through our route but please feel free to wander and maybe sit and relax on one of the many benches and take it in stages. The tour is divided into five stops which will be clearly marked with a number.

After arriving at reception, **Stop 1** is the North Forecourt.

Stop 1

The North Forecourt

We are standing here in the North Forecourt facing Ham House which is Jacobean, built in 1610. The garden, which surrounds the house, was originally laid out in the seventeenth-century and was the creation of Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart who lived here. When Elizabeth married the rich and well-connected Duke of Lauderdale in 1672 the couple wanted a showpiece garden which would reflect their wealth, status and loyalty to the newly restored King Charles II.

Thanks to a National Trust project in the 1970s much of the original garden has been reimagined and restored. In recent years the garden team at Ham have been developing the garden inspired by its history and with a focus on sustainability and the encouragement and preservation of wildlife.

You can see an example of this approach in front of you in the management of the lawns – by reducing mowing we are allowing wildflowers to flourish and providing pollen and nectar as well as shelter for insects.



If we turn around and look through the entrance gates we can just catch a glimpse of the River Thames. Wealthy and important visitors to Ham in the seventeenth-century would have travelled here by river and would have walked up through an avenue of trees and approached the house by way of a central drive with lawns on either side. Notice as you look up and down the river the number of tree-lined avenues. They radiate from the house in all directions to demonstrate the extent of the owners' estate.

The circular drive we see here now was added in the nineteenth-century to accommodate carriages. Don't miss the Coade stone river god in the centre of the circular lawn.

At the time Ham House was built, the wealthy owners of large houses and estates wanted their gardens to follow the latest fashion and showing man's control over nature was popular at that time. You can see examples of this in the topiary here where there are formal shapes of evergreen: bay drums, yew cones and box hedges. We will see more of this formality and topiary in our next stop, the Cherry Garden.

Please make your way to [Stop 2](#), the Cherry Garden. Facing the house turn to your left, then right just after the wall, walking under the hornbeam archway you will find the entrance halfway up through a gap in the yew hedge.

Stop 2

The Cherry Garden

This beautiful garden is named the Cherry Garden and inspiration for its design was taken from the time of Elizabeth's father William Murray. William was given this house and created the first Earl of Dysart by Charles I in return for his loyalty and friendship. Elizabeth used this walled Privy (or private) garden as it could be accessed for her favoured guests from her private apartments on this side of the house.

Now the four walls have been replaced by yew hedges and hornbeam arches to retain the tranquillity of a private garden. The design for the Cherry Garden was inspired by a typical seventeenth-century parterre and this space was created as part of the National Trust's re-creation and restoration of the whole garden in the 1970s.

Here again, we see formal shapes of cones and hedges enclosing over 1,200 lavender plants. The lavender plants here are two varieties with slightly different shades of foliage and flowers – Sussex and Anniversary Bouquet. Using more than one variety extends the flowering time and



the lavender attracts a large number of pollinators especially bees. In the autumn it is clipped to form round shapes to reflect the formality of a seventeenth-century garden.

The statue is Bacchus, the god of wine, which is the only original piece of statuary remaining from the Lauderdale's garden.

You will see that we have a lot of box in this garden and like many gardens in south-east England we have had a problem with box moth caterpillar. We use an organic spray during spring and summer to minimise the damage to the box leaves and we monitor for moths to plan when to spray most effectively.

A popular garden design feature of the time was the *claire-voie*. Look to your right and you can see openings through the hedges giving a surprise view of the garden beyond.

The Cherry Garden is a popular design for film crews as it offers an historical back-drop with year-round garden interest.

Do feel free to take a seat to enjoy this garden and when you are ready to leave cross the garden and exit via the opposite side furthest from the house, turning right under the arched hornbeam towards your next [Stop 3](#), the South Terrace.

Stop 3

The South Terrace

Here we are at the edge of the South Terrace, which was all about display and wealth. It was originally a place to promenade, to see and be seen, to view the garden which was then the height of fashion and take in the surrounding countryside. Here was the seventeenth-century 'wow factor'.

On your right, you will see that our borders are planted in the style of that time with a wide seasonal interest and inspired by the exotic plants which we know were displayed in the gardens of the wealthy. Do look through the yew hedge to see the *claire-voie* from this direction.

You can imagine the hundreds of pots of tender plants that would have adorned this terrace and other parts of the garden, set out in on gravel to show off their flowering and fruit. These were overwintered in the orangery, which you will see shortly.



The eight rectangles of grass and meadow were known as the Plats. In the seventeenth-century, short formal lawns were a status symbol showing you had enough wealth to employ a team of gardeners to hand scythe them while not needing your house-accessible space for productive crops.

The garden team reimagined the planting in the plats with nature in mind in 2019 – looking to give present-day visitors the sense of status and beauty a seventeenth-century guest might have felt. Now every alternate plat is transformed with successional flowering in the spring – half-a-million bulbs were planted in autumn 2018 to achieve this. The other four lawns were converted to wildflower meadows, full of colour, plant diversity and wildlife. The central scroll shapes in these plats are based on a returning motif on furniture in the house.

Looking out across the Plats you'll see a wooded area with two white statues, this is the Wilderness, a popular and fashionable feature of gardens in the seventeenth-century and your next stop.

As you walk towards the Wilderness consider that the gravel underfoot was an expensive material. The Duke of Lauderdale was able to use his influence and obtained a licence from King Charles II to remove 1,000 loads of gravel from Richmond Park for use at Ham. We do not have such arrangements today!

Make your way to the middle of the South Terrace, down the set of steps and along the central gravel path towards the statues framing the entrance and [Stop 4, The Wilderness](#).

Stop 4

The Wilderness

We have now arrived in the Wilderness which as you can see is set away from the formal garden surrounding the house and contrasting with the parkland beyond. As well as a place for contemplation and reflection it was a place where the ladies of the house would have felt safe to wander. It was somewhere for private assignations.

The original gates which mark the end of the Wilderness remain in place but your eye is drawn to further avenues stretching into the distance, south and east. These views into the distance reinforce the scale of wealth and the land owned beyond the walled boundaries.

In the 1970s when the Trust came to restore this part of the gardens, the seventeenth-century layout was still evident despite being



overgrown with rhododendron, holly, brambles and tree suckers. The land was ploughed up, then replanted to the original seventeenth-century design, using only species introduced into Britain prior to the 1690s. One mile of hornbeam hedges inter-planted with field maples were planted to form the boundaries to the grass paths. Recently the hedge has been reduced in height throughout to help regenerate growth and reduce shading the turf. The hedge height would have reflected a person's average height at the time so that most people were able to 'peep over' it.

The Wilderness is divided into 16 compartments. Four are kept with native spring bulbs and summer wildflowers and four others are planted with shrubs, roses and herbaceous plants. These compartments have summer houses and if you look around you can see them above the hedges. The summer houses were added in the 1980s but in Elizabeth's time, they would have been thatched and may have revolved, a servant standing by to rotate them, providing more or less shade as required, for a change in view or a private meeting. Nobody is on hand to provide that service today!

Why not take time to explore and enjoy the Wilderness at your leisure, returning to the statues and turning left towards the open gates and into the Kitchen Garden, [Stop 5](#), to continue your tour.

Stop 5

The Kitchen Garden

Here we are in our walled kitchen garden. In the early part of the seventeenth-century, this was extensively planted with fruit trees and when the garden was redesigned in the time of Elizabeth she wanted an ornamental kitchen garden – to supply the house and estate with fruit and vegetables and to be a beautiful place to show her fashionable guests. We know from original plans, which are still in the house, that the kitchen garden would have been much bigger extending beyond the west wall and the back of the garden too.

Straight ahead of us we see the recently restored Orangery which was an important feature of Elizabeth's seventeenth-century kitchen garden. It is thought to be one of the oldest surviving examples in this country. We know that it was seasonally heated and orange and lemon trees were stored there over winter along with other tender plants such as jasmine, oleander and pomegranates. The windows are few and small as the orangery was designed and built before the discovery of photosynthesis. The garden team cannot understand how any plants would thrive in there!



The restoration of the kitchen garden began in 2000 when the productive plots were gradually reintroduced and fruit trees were planted against the walls. We now grow a variety of fruit and vegetables which are used in our Orangery Café.

The kitchen garden vegetable plots are gardened using organic principles and the gardeners make their own compost to enrich the sandy low nutrient soil. Plants are fed as needed using only organic feed. We currently irrigate by collecting rainwater from the house and making use of an original Victorian system.

The re-creation of the kitchen garden is an ongoing project and in 2020 was planted with a new orchard of London and Surrey apple trees. We have two cut flower plots, a plot dedicated to edible flowers and a plot full of salad ingredients popular in the seventeenth-century.

In the kitchen garden, you can see how gardening for nature at Ham runs through everything we do – from the number of different flowers we grow for pollinators to leaving dead wood on our apple tree. We garden inspired by history in a way that is both sustainable and good for nature – the garden is constantly developing for everybody to enjoy.

This concludes our tour. Do talk to a gardener on site today if you have any questions. The garden changes every year and dramatically each season. So do come back to enjoy it again.