

Developing parkland in the heart of the Downs has been a true labour of love...

Nestling at the foot of the South Downs in 1,200 acres of historic parkland, Bignor Park has always been proud to be part of the unique West Sussex landscape.

Records show the history of Bignor Park and Manor go back to the 1300s when it was home to the Earls of Arundel.

More recently, Cornish tin miner John Hawkins built the present house some 185 years ago and 100 years later it became home to the Bigham family who have remained there ever since.

It wasn't that long ago that Richard, the fourth Viscount Mersey, built a temple in the

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By **JENNY MOULAND**
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shrubby commemorating his mother Kitty's 80th birthday in 1992.

That same year he and his wife Joanna moved in and she set about redesigning aspects of the garden and creating the Zen Pond.

It is a never-ending labour of love and a huge responsibility maintaining those historic buildings and the land now at the heart of the new South Downs National Park.

But the new Viscount Mersey is very much up for the task.

His father Richard died in 2006, and in July last year Ned, aged 44, and his wife Clare moved down from London to make their home at Bignor Park and manage the running of the estate.

It was a massive change of life for Lord Mersey who had made a highly-successful career as a music composer, but with him at the helm, Bignor Park is now going through an extensive transformation.

“It has been a huge learning curve,” he said, “but I always knew

I would be taking over the running of the estate one day and it is something I am passionate about. I am trying to take the best possible advice and bring a very modern approach to the task.”

Assisted by Natural England, the parkland is undergoing major restoration, including lake dredging, reinstating the original parkland fencing, coppicing and tree planting.

“Since Clare, I and our two daughters Flora, eight, and Polly, four, moved down permanently last July, there has been a lot going on here. The estate has been quite a hive of activity,” said Lord Mersey.

The early 19th-century stables and clock tower have been restored and already established as a venue for marquee weddings on the old croquet lawns. Bignor Park is also planning to hire out the larger refurbished rooms for weddings and parties.

“They were in very poor condition, with gaping holes in the ceilings and flooding in the courtyard whenever it rained. We have retained as much of their original character as practical in the restoration process, using

specialised craftsmen, original materials, lathe and plaster ceilings and limewash on the walls.

“We have converted the east and west wings of the Home Farm into two residences, one for my mother Joanna and the other for gamekeeper Mark Walker and his family. There is also a large studio room where my mother does her printing and clock workshops and other events are held.”

At the same time there have been major changes in the 11 acres of garden where many of the walls were structurally unsound.

“We are delighted to announce Fleur De Lys have been taken on to look after the garden and instigate a programme of new planting. Many of you will know Lisa and Louise, gold medal winners at Chelsea Flower Show last year, and we are very excited to be working with them.”

As for the farm and woodland, more than 400 acres have now been converted to organic.

“In the late 1970s my father planted pine across Broad Hapenny and Colum Hill. These were commercial plantations, the intention being to harvest them



Taking a stroll:
Lord and Lady Mersey
at Bignor Park
PICTURES BY
LOUISE ADAMS
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Spectacular: Bignor Park

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when they were ready.

“They were of little ecological value, unlike the ancient woodland we treasure elsewhere on the estate.”

With a grant from Natural England, and the support of the South Downs Joint Committee, the pines have been felled and the land de-stumped and returned to heathland.

“Over the past 100 years thousands of acres of heathland have been lost in England,” said Lord Mersey, “representing huge damage to the natural habitat. By restoring the heathland here we are contributing to a reversal of this.”

“Our new heathland is grazed by the Dallyn's organic cattle and sheep in order to provide a habitat for, among others, ground-nesting birds, woodlarks, stone chats, Dartford warblers, insects such as the rare field cricket, digger wasps, minotaur beetles, tiger beetles, silver-studded blue butterflies and of course flora such as heather.”

And in recognition of this work Bignor Park was awarded the Woodpecker Trophy for Conservation at the South of England Show last summer.

A major desilt of the lake has also been carried out, together with the creation of some shallows to encourage wildlife.