

Society Outing

Tour of Waddesdon Manor Gardens 24th September 2016

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Waddesdon Manor - The North Avenue and Fountain

So what would you have done if you were 36 year old Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild, wealthy owner of numerous outstanding works of art, about to inherit a further fortune and art collection but your beloved wife and cousin Evelina had just died in childbirth and your son stillborn?

Our guide explained how Ferdinand resolved his dilemma. He set up the Evelina hospital for poor children in the borough of Southwark, since absorbed into the Guys' and St. Thomas's NHS Foundation Trust, and began to search for a site wherein to house all his treasures.

In 1874 Ferdinand bought the site of 2,500 acres at Waddesdon in Buckinghamshire from the Duke of Marlborough. This area was already familiar to the Rothschilds and their friends because of their hunting and leisure activities and once the top of the hill had been plateaued off and surrounding roads built, construction could begin.

Ferdinand had been brought up in France and chose Gabriel-Hippolyte Destailleur to design a chateau similar to those of the Loire valley, not to use as a home but as a place to store his works of fine art and for friends and family to visit and enjoy them. Likewise the garden, designed by Elie Laine, tends to be formal and in the French style although originally various exotic animals were housed there in addition to goats who roamed among the artificial Pulhamite rocks.

The manor house is approached by an avenue flanked with oak trees with wide lawns on each side. Mature trees, since replaced due to disease, were planted at the time, transported on specially designed carts drawn by Percheron horses. Bedding plants – no perennials – were formerly cultivated on site but are now bought in from local suppliers.

The aviary, in rococo style, Chinese blue-

green in colour and with gold- leaf trellis effect, has zoo status, although the smallest in the world, and is now used for conservation purposes to help prevent extinction of rare birds. Each bird has its own logbook which travels with it. Near the aviary are two large bird structures, a Pekin robin about 10 feet high on its mound and a pheasant. Both are covered in 3 dimensional carpet bedding, similar in style to the crown in the centre of the Market Square in Dover this summer.

Ferdinand died in 1898 and his youngest sister Alice, who lived until 1922 and who had acted as his hostess, continued to maintain the estate in the established manner and the property remained within the Rothschild family. In 1957 James de Rothschild and his wife Dorothy inherited from Alice and bequeathed the property and 160 acres to the National Trust under a unique arrangement whereby the family have influence over the management of it. Indeed, the property does not have the "flavour" of the National Trust about it. James has been succeeded by his cousin Jacob who is a great benefactor to the estate and patron of the arts and has spent much of his own finance on restoration. New works of art are being added. This is very evident in the garden statuary. At the end of the avenue near the house are a pair of

plant-shaped structures about 20 feet high installed last year and designed by Joana Vasconcelos. Unsurprisingly they are called Lafite as they feature magnum wine bottles which apparently light up at night. This, and a representation of coach and horses entitled *Speed La Carrosse*, (2012) in red powder- coated stainless steel and designed by Xavier Veilhan contrasts greatly with the older classical sculptures, notably those of Apollo and of Bacchus with a goat, which are carefully covered up in winter.

At the back of the house, on the Southern side, is the terrace and the parterre, the designs of which are changed in winter and spring and which often reflect art works in the house such as, at present, the border of the carpet in the recently opened Red Drawing Room. The large fountain in the centre features Pluto taking Persephone to the underworld. Fourteen full time gardeners work on the estate, supplemented by National Trust volunteers. With 25,000 bedding plants used annually it is no wonder that the garden is Grade 1 listed.

Finally, a human touch among all the magnificence, we were shown an electric socket at the base of a tree near the house where Mrs James Rothschild liked to sit in the summer. It was where she plugged in her telephone, so we were told.



The Parterre