



Photograph © Mike O'Carroll

Accessible Play in a Heritage Setting

Fun and Games at Hestercombe Gardens

By Andy Holden, Education Officer

Hestercombe Gardens Trust manages roughly 100 acres of Crown-owned estate in the heart of Somerset, just north of Taunton. The Gardens themselves represent fifty acres that encompass over three centuries of garden history. The famous Edwardian Gardens, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and planted by Gertrude Jekyll, were created between 1904 and 1906. The terraces and borders are based on Jekyll's original planting scheme and are considered the supreme example of their famous partnership. The landscape garden was opened in April 1997 for the first time in 125 years. Created by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde in the 1750s, these Georgian pleasure grounds comprise forty acres of lakes, temples and delightful woodland walks.



The main obstacle faced at the Gardens is trying to achieve an acceptable balance between making the grounds accessible without detracting from the original design. For those with mobility issues the Gardens can be hard going, particularly as Lutyens was not shy in his use of steps in the design of the formal gardens (*left*). It is equally tricky out in

the landscape garden and although the grounds team have endeavoured to make paths as compact and wheel friendly as possible they are limited in their efforts by the need to remain faithful to the original Bampfylde scheme. The

result is that a reasonable area of the landscape gardens and select parts of the formal garden can be accessed, although it is hard work on the pusher. Recognition of this limitation is given by a reduced entry fee for wheelchair users and their helper comes in free. Restrictions aside, the views from the Octagon Summerhouse across the Pear Pond are worth the hard work to get there!

This tricky terrain and tranquil setting are not the first thing that leaps to mind when thinking of exuberant children, adventurous activities and wild experiences, however, somehow it works! Although the Gardens have been lovingly and painstakingly restored over the past 15 years, the Trust is not precious about them. In fact they actively encourage visitors to do their own thing and discover the gardens in their own way.

Learning to fly a buzzard

It is this open-minded approach that frequently sees children paddling at the foot of the Great Cascade and subsequently allows us to run rafting activities on the Georgian Box Pond! One could argue that it teaches that you can enjoy a place without detracting from it or causing damage but equally it demonstrates to garden visitors that it doesn't need to be treated as if it were a museum.



In January 2010 a new post came into existence- that of Education and Outreach Officer, a post jointly funded and managed by Hestercombe Gardens Trust and Somerset Leisure. Somerset Leisure is a non-profit making leisure trust. They currently operate a wide range of sport and leisure centres across Somerset and are the largest provider of leisure activities in the county. As well as leisure centre facilities, Somerset Leisure also provides an outdoor activity programme, based at Hestercombe gardens. The brief for the new post was to encourage more groups to use the Gardens and develop the existing product 'Active Hestercombe'. In February, a second role was created by Somerset Leisure, one that focused on realising the potential of the Active Hestercombe brand and capitalising on the skills of the man who set it all going, Andrew Burns.

Active Hestercombe began in the summer of 2009 and initially consisted of outdoor activities for the summer holiday. The range of activities included den building, raft building, climbing and fire lighting. One of the first opportunities that arose for us was funding for young people with disabilities through the

'Aiming High' route. I had some experience of working with children with additional needs and Andrew is an ex-marine- how could we not succeed? Before we knew it, we had been awarded the funds to put on an activity day for 10 youngsters with a view to it leading to a summer holiday programme. We consulted with various experts and then 'went for it', hosting a day that included camouflage and concealment, climbing, paintball and toasting marshmallows. The day was hugely successful and has since led to programmes for the school holidays and a monthly weekend club- primarily for youngsters with disabilities- but also for their siblings and friends, making it as inclusive as is possible! The feedback from families and professionals alike has been hugely positive and constantly refers to our 'can do' attitude as underpinning our success. It is this attitude that first led us to believe it was a good idea to put paintball guns in the youngsters hands and subsequently to teach them how to make their own rope swing and eat food that they had cooked on their own fires.



Perfecting the art of camouflage

Much of what we do draws on utilising the natural environment, however we are in the fortunate position to also have a range of 'outdoor' equipment. Our equipment list includes a static and a mobile climbing wall, rafting equipment and a full battle complement of paintball equipment. This said, we still count our imagination as our most valuable resource! Many of the activities carry a certain element of risk, which is usually

why the youngsters love them so much. Personally I was very inspired by the work of Gever Tulley and his book 'Fifty Dangerous Things (you should let your children do)'. We also had a discussion reflecting upon our childhood memories and how Andrew and I were certainly no 'angels'. We came to a similar conclusion as Mr Tulley; that the modern day world is a lot safer and, in many ways, more sterile than the one we grew up in. This then became our mission: to introduce as many youngsters to as wide a range of so called 'dangerous activities' as we could; we even vowed to teach them how to play conkers without the use of safety equipment!



Jack, who is blind learning to use a hammer

Over the past 9 months we have engaged with a huge range of young people, from all backgrounds and with widely varying needs. Although the nature of what we do often means that the activity is quite structured, there is scope within for the youngsters to explore, experiment and draw their own conclusions. Of all the youngsters we have worked with, we still find those with disabilities the most rewarding and truly relish exposing them to new life experiences, the look of pure joy when they go on their first rope swing or their first sledge ride is priceless. Although funding changes are having an impact across the board, we feel inspired by what we have achieved in a relatively short time and are planning bigger, better and more for 2011!



More information on the two organisations can be found on their respective websites

www.somersetleisure.org.uk

www.hestercombe.com

The two Andrews can be contacted by email:

Andy Holden: andyholden@hestercombe.com

Andrew Burns: ABurns@somersetleisure.org.uk