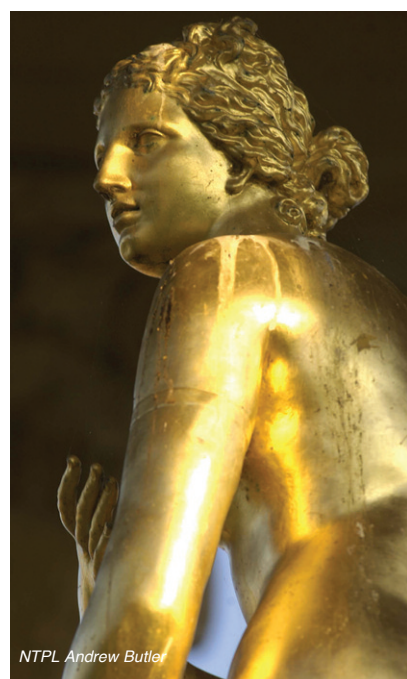


Theo Chalmers visits Stowe Landscape Gardens to find out why the National Trust is looking to forge closer links with local businesses.



NTPL Andrew Butler

Theo Chalmers



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National treasure calls us its 'home'

MILTON Keynes is by now fairly well known as the city that has everything and its list of offerings has just increased in a very significant way. Stowe Landscape Gardens, which lies 14 miles west near Buckingham and is one of the jewels in the crown of The National Trust, has adopted Milton Keynes as its 'home'.

As someone particularly interested in Milton Keynes and its environs, I was privileged to spend an afternoon there in the company of its commercial development officer Melanie Whitrow - and to say it was a revelation is an understatement.

I had always thought that Stowe was just a rather swish and expensive public school. Which is true but I had not realised that the hundreds of acres in which it sits, replete with the nation's finest collection of 18th-century classical-style buildings, temples, follies and monuments, would be so astonishing.

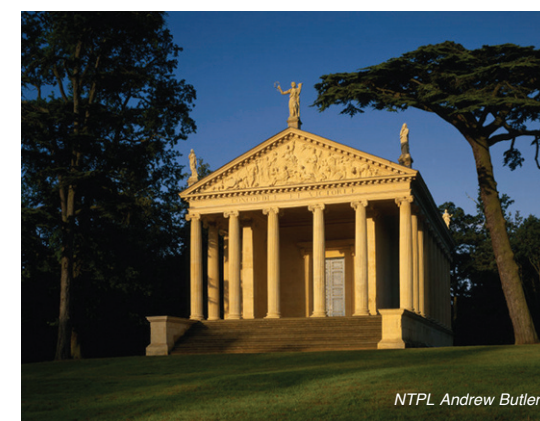
Impress

Apart from more than 40 major monuments, it has 250 acres of landscape gardens creating carefully crafted linked-vistas of lakes, rivers, bridges, waterfalls, grottos and streams. Everywhere are majestic cedars, oaks and poplars, all set in 1,000 acres of parkland. The estate was laid out by the hyper-wealthy Lord Cobham and family who in their day were 'wealthier than the King' and it shows. Nothing was too extravagant, showy or expensive.

Only the finest landscape gardeners, architects and masons - all using the finest materials - were employed. Once built, the urge to impress could not be suppressed. Entire buildings, mature



NTPL Linda Mellor



NTPL Andrew Butler

- **Jewels in the crown: The Golden Venus (left); Stowe's arch; the Temple of Concord and Victory.**

'When new development and other restorations are complete, business can and should play its part.'

trees or watercourses would be moved on a whim to create a particularly pleasing new vista. The family even developed huge mechanical devices for lifting and moving 300ft-tall living trees. I would have liked to have seen that.

The original estate buildings still serve as a boarding school but the land is now protected by the National Trust. The school, to its shame, formerly neglected and even plundered some of the fine buildings in its care before it realised the value to the nation of the buildings in its trust and bequeathed them to posterity. In the 20th century it even removed two Doric columns from a particularly fine Palladian temple in order to prop up the school's chapel. To prevent the temple's subsequent collapse, they replaced them with two ill-matched piles of bricks. Fortunately,

the National Trust commissioned, at huge cost, two new well-matched limestone columns and I defy anyone to spot the newcomers.

Benefit

Stowe is now a major priority for the National Trust and is currently undergoing a multi-million pound refurbishment which includes development of a new visitor centre based around the somewhat inappropriately-named New Inn. This is the ancient coaching inn, now also being restored, which greeted visitors to Stowe in its heyday in the 1700s.

When new development and other restorations are complete, Stowe will be spectacularly relaunched in March next year and local Milton Keynes businesses can and should play a part.

Stowe is seeking business partners who can benefit from association with Milton Keynes' newest and yet one of its oldest treasures. They will enjoy access to the major media coverage planned, as well as the 3.7 million National Trust members. Stowe also offers corporate hospitality and employee volunteering prospects for businesses.

Even if getting your business involved with this gem is not for you, I heartily recommend a visit, now, before the rush starts. Some events are free, being community-centred or why not just go along and enjoy a fabulous walk or cycle ride past beautiful scenery, astonishing Palladian architecture and marvel at the spectacular trees. For more details, visit the Stowe Landscape Gardens website www.nationaltrust.org.uk/stowegardens.

Stowe Landscape Gardens is one of Milton Keynes' finest offerings, you know... and we can all be proud of that. Cheerio.

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