



# THE ROYAL OAK FOUNDATION

Americans in Alliance with the National Trust  
of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland

Restoring Bath Assembly Rooms  
Celebrating Sir Joshua Reynolds  
Wordsworth's Allan Bank



SPRING 2023



Front entrance of the Bath Assembly Rooms.

## Dear Members & Friends,

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Royal Oak Foundation, a truly remarkable achievement. Founded by the National Trust in 1973, it started with humble beginnings but has grown to become a major supporter of the National Trust and attract a national audience of members and friends throughout the U.S. Our programs engage and educate anyone with an interest in the United Kingdom and raise awareness of the National Trust by exploring important issues concerning British art, architecture, design, history, and gardens.

During the last half century we have given nearly \$20 million directly to the National Trust, provided over \$500,000 in scholarship and fellowship opportunities, and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for other historic properties in Britain. Some of our notable achievements include \$1.5 million “to keep Churchill at Chartwell,” \$1.25 million for Knole and, of course, our \$4 million gift for the Royal Oak Conservation Studio. As we look ahead to the next 50 years, we will continue our mission of raising support for the National Trust with the goal of increasing our impact across all areas of the Trust.

This year our appeal will raise funds for the Bath Assembly rooms as part of a larger £15 million initiative by the National Trust. The Assembly Rooms in Bath are a Georgian delight that were built for the continuance of the civilized society that developed during the 18th century. However, much of the original 18th-century interiors have been lost, and the Trust intends to restore these rooms to the highest standards of decoration and furnishing to rediscover the opulence and aesthetic beauty of the Assembly Rooms. Our appeal will focus on the main entrance, where visitors will be welcomed in the Georgian splendor of a bygone age.

Finally, since our last newsletter we have had some historic yet sad news with the passing of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Her death, which ended the longest reign in British history, occurred while many Royal Oak Heritage Circle members were in London for our annual Study Day. The outpouring of public sympathy was overwhelming, and one could scarcely get near Buckingham Palace where people queued for hours just to place flowers in Her Majesty’s honor. It is truly the end of an era but also the beginning of a new one as we anticipate the coronation of King Charles III on May 6.

I hope you will all get the chance to visit Britain this year and, as always, thank you for your support.

Ian Murray  
Executive Director



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Cover Photo: Lady Henrietta Antonia Herbert, Countess of Powis by Sir Joshua Reynolds.





## Join the Royal Oak Legacy Circle

### Lacock Abbey's Ceramics

Conservators at the Royal Oak Conservation Studio at Knole in Kent have begun treatment on a group of 17th-century Chinese porcelain vases and jars from Lacock Abbey. Due to their poor and unstable condition several had been removed from display over the years. Previous restorations were failing, and sections missing.

The ceramics are highly significant, particularly the porcelain from Jingdezhen Province from 1650-1700. Blue and white porcelain were a prominent feature in the Stone Gallery as illustrated in Matilda Talbot's (1839-1927) watercolor, above. Once the ceramics have been restored, they will go on display in the showrooms, particularly the Stone Gallery and South Gallery, which are quite sparsely populated with decorative items, to provide a rich layering that might be expected of generations of families living in a country house.

*These are just a few of the hundreds of objects being restored at the Royal Oak Conservation Studio. Our \$4 million gift was made possible by generous legacy donations from Royal Oak members and supporters.*

**Become a part of this legacy. To learn more, contact Ian Murray, Executive Director at 212-480-2889, ext. 202, or [IMurray@Royal-Oak.org](mailto:IMurray@Royal-Oak.org).**



The ceramics before and during conservation.



# The Georgian Splendor of Bath Assembly Rooms

Royal Oak is raising \$500,000 to help the National Trust restore the elegance of this iconic building

Bath is one of the UK's most loved and visited cities. Turn any corner across this UNESCO city of historical importance and you are surrounded by sites of breathtaking beauty and historical significance, from the Royal Crescent to the Roman Baths.

During the Georgian era, the famous and prestigious Assembly Rooms in the city of Bath were at the heart of fashionable society. Designed by John Wood the Younger, when they were completed in 1771, they were described as "the most noble and elegant of any in the kingdom."

Bath Assembly Rooms were built for the delight of the polite society that developed during the 18th century, when the ceremonials of rank were broken down, the nobility mixed with the gentry and people passed their time together in agreeable conversation against a backdrop of strolling, dancing, playing cards and taking tea.

It was a place where marriages were made, fortunes won and lost, and society's stories were shared and debated. Jane Austen, Dickens, Gainsborough, Haydn, Strauss, Sheridan, Linley, Herschel, Liszt,



and Wilberforce are just a few of the notable individuals who frequented the Rooms.

The Grade I listed Assembly Rooms have been owned by the National Trust since 1931 and managed by the local authority since 1937. The council's lease will end in 2023 creating the perfect moment for the National Trust to work with a range of partners to create a new future for this special place and restore the historical integrity of the Assembly Rooms.

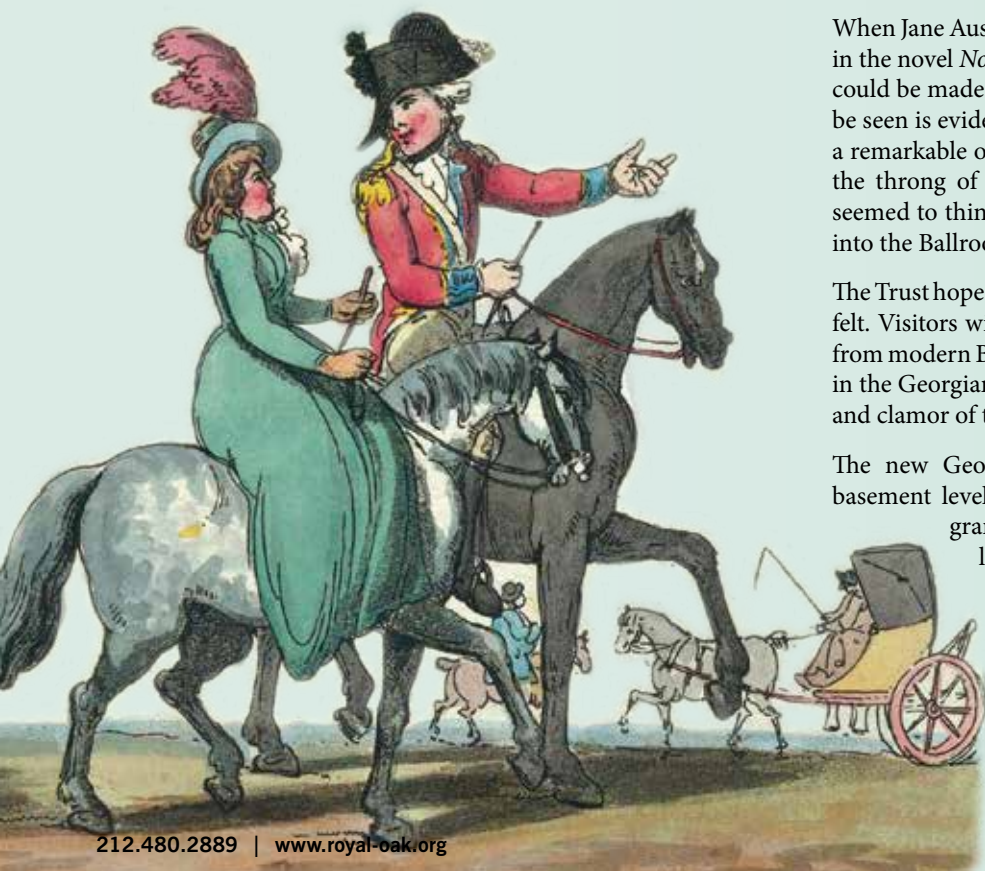
The Assembly Rooms will allow contemporary visitors to immerse themselves in an evocation of a Georgian ball and explore histories of the time. The American Declaration of Independence, the First Fleet's departure to Australia, and the French Revolution would all have been discussed and debated within the walls of the Assembly Rooms.

Visitors will be able to feel the tension that would have been palpable in the Great Octagon as vast sums of money were waged at the card tables, the nervous energy of those dancing the minuet in the crowded Ballroom and the delight in tasting ice cream in the Tea Room.

When Jane Austen's Catherine Morland first enters the Upper Rooms in the novel *Northanger Abbey*, her anticipation of what connections could be made, what dances could be danced and what sights could be seen is evident. For her, attending a ball at the Upper Rooms was a remarkable occasion. Her senses and body are overwhelmed with the throng of people, squeezing through the crowd which never seemed to thin as she moved down through the Little Octagon and into the Ballroom.

The Trust hopes to ignite the same sense of anticipation Miss Morland felt. Visitors will feel welcomed in, the interiors transitioning them from modern Bath outside into the Georgian rooms, much as visitors in the Georgian era were drawn into the rooms away from the noise and clamor of the coachmen outside.

The new Georgian-inspired cantilevered staircase down to the basement level, where the experience begins, will be part of this grandeur. New light wells will bathe visitors in natural light as they move through to feel the warmth of the fireplaces and check their reflections in the newly recreated gilded mirrors, much as Austen's Anne Wentworth might have done as she waited there for the concert to begin.



Top: One of several chandeliers designed by William Parker in the Ballroom. Bottom: Detail of an illustration from *The Comforts of Bath* published in 1798 by the caricaturist, Thomas Rowlandson.



## Funds from Royal Oak Will Be Used to Restore the Grandeur and Elegance of the Main Entrance

### A new Georgian-inspired staircase

The Trust will replace the two modern staircases, which were installed in the 1960s. The architects for the project have sought out inspiration and precedents which will allow them to create a unique Georgian-inspired staircase for the Assembly Rooms.

### Re-gilding of the mirrors

The mirrors would originally have been gold leaf, but this wasn't feasible financially during the post war re-building so the mirrors were painted white to make them look like plaster. The re-gilding of these mirrors will restore the historic opulence to the room.

### Marbling to the columns

There are 36 replica columns from the main entrance to the Great Octagon. Specialists will carry out the marbling effect much more convincingly than the current versions, restoring grandeur to the room.

### New front doors

New doors will replace the current ones which are not in keeping with the original design. These doors will transform the look and feel of the front elevation, welcoming visitors and giving a hint of the splendor that awaits them inside.

Facade and entrance of the Bath Assembly Rooms.

### New carpet

Expert curators from the Trust will be helping to source a beautiful carpet in keeping with the elegance of the space.

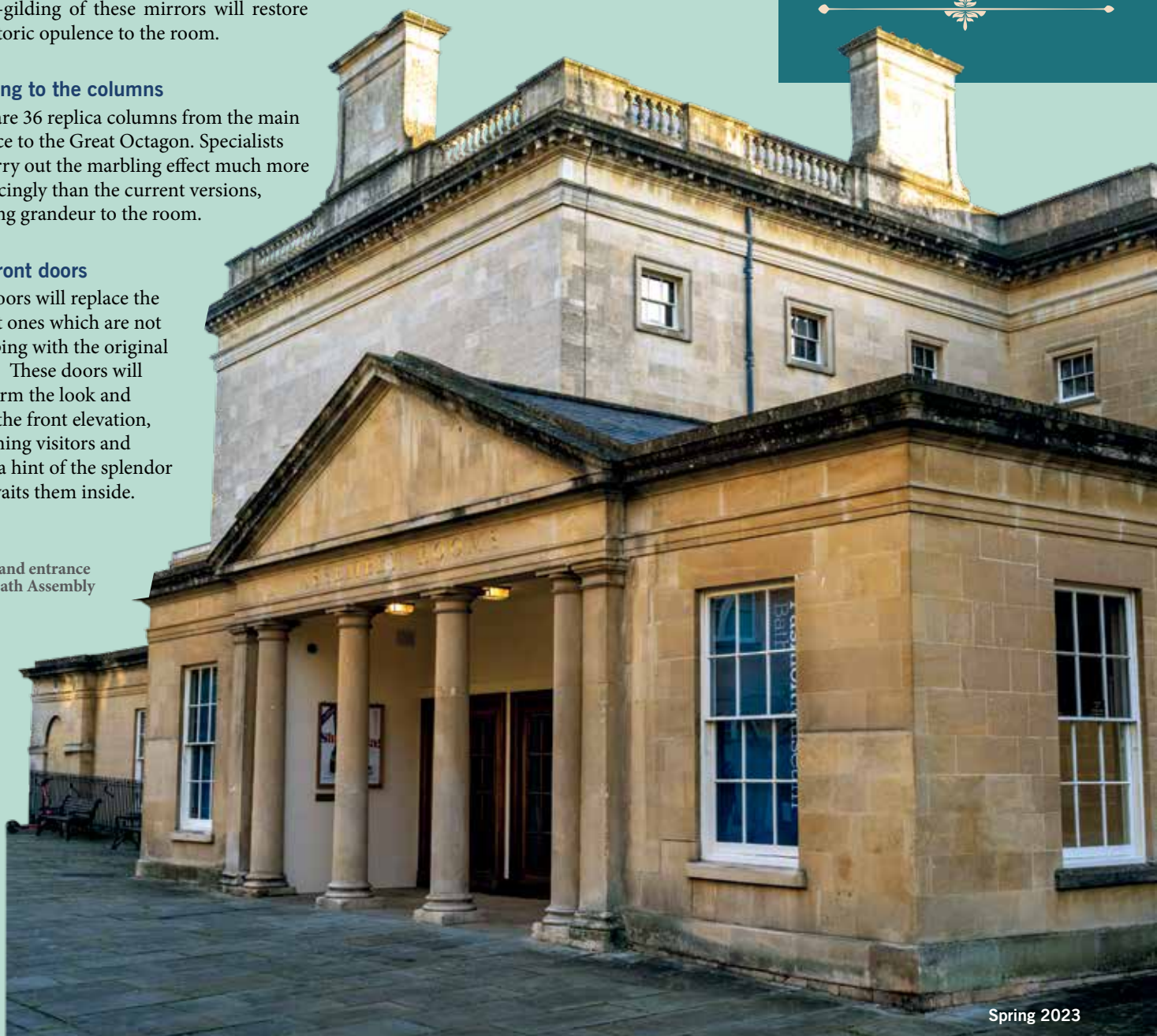
### New light wells

The original entrance would have been through a narrow corridor with lightwells on either side, but much of this area was infilled after 1948. This infill will be removed, allowing natural light to flood in again, transforming the space for arriving visitors.

Royal Oak is raising \$500,000 to help the National Trust restore the grandeur and elegance of the Bath Assembly Rooms.

Support from Royal Oak Foundation will help the National Trust breathe new life into one of England's most stunning gathering places.

We hope we can count on your support.





# Drawn to Nature

## Beatrix Potter's Journey From Artist to Farmer

By Helen Antrobus, Assistant National Curator  
for Cultural Landscapes, National Trust



Illustration of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter.

In 1929, the expansive Monk Coniston estate, a jewel of the Lake District, went on sale. Roughly 4,000 acres comprised of farmland, woodland, slate quarries and the spectacular Tarn Hows, the estate embodied the unique character of the Lakes. As fears arose that the estate would be broken up and sold for development, action had to be taken; and it was a local farmer, wife of the solicitor William Heelis, who took up the mantle.

Mrs. Heelis is better known as Beatrix Potter, children's author and illustrator, creator of beloved characters such as Peter Rabbit and Jemima Puddle-Duck. Beatrix blended idyllic watercolors, and delicately clothed animals with both the dark realities of the natural world and projections of her imagination onto the society she lived in. Her stories were informed by worlds she knew and inhabited; from the restrictive Victorian household she was raised in, to the home she made for herself in the lakes. These two identities – the artist and the farmer – can be defined by separate monikers of Mrs. Heelis and Beatrix Potter. As Mrs. Heelis, Beatrix spent the last 30 years of her life in a partnership with the National Trust, working to preserve pockets of land in the Lakes, protecting not only beautiful landscapes, but traditional ways of life.

Monk Coniston was the apex of Beatrix's conservationist work in the Lakes; as she wrote: "The things I have had to miss are vexatious remembrances. However – I am glad I had the pluck not to miss Monk Coniston." This was the pinnacle of years purchasing pockets of land across the region, so they might be preserved forever.

How did this beloved author of children's tales become such a champion of the natural world? Beatrix Potter's journey from London to the Lake District, from artist to farmer, is the tale told in *Beatrix Potter: Drawn to Nature*, a partnership exhibition between the Victoria & Albert Museum and the National Trust that will be shown across the United States throughout 2023 and 2024.

Bringing together the collections of the Trust and the V&A has been invaluable in telling Beatrix's whole story; with many of these objects reunited for the first time on display since they passed from Beatrix's ownership.





Portrait of Beatrix Potter by her friend, the English artist Delmar Harmood Banner.

Exploring Beatrix's life beyond her books, *Drawn to Nature* follows the trail of Beatrix's extraordinary life through a close look at her three greatest achievements: as a storyteller, a natural scientist, and a conservationist.

Born in 1866 into a wealthy, Unitarian family, Beatrix grew up at 2 Bolton Gardens in Kensington with her younger brother Bertram and her parents, Rupert and Helen. In the family home and on visits to surrounding galleries and museums, the Potters encouraged Beatrix's artistic practices. Early sketchbooks of Beatrix's show how she copied from books and household objects, while the creative efforts of other members of the family highlight the different mediums, including clay work, photography and watercolors, that the Potters dabbled in.

Beatrix was open about her preference for the countryside, especially in her letters and diary entries. Beatrix first experienced this love at Dalguise, the country estate where the Potter family would spend the summer months. In 1882, the family rented Wray Castle on the shores of Windermere, sparking a lifelong affiliation with the region.

*Drawn to Nature* travels from these early experiences to the schoolroom where Beatrix and Bertram created a laboratory dedicated to their interests in natural science. Beatrix's pets played a huge part in this developing fascination; her rabbits, mice, even hedgehog were studied as specimens, alongside wildflowers, shells, and birds'

eggs. Beatrix's main preoccupation was mycology – the study of fungi – and her correspondence with Perthshire postman and botanist Charles Mackintosh, along with her drawings and watercolors, illustrate her fascination and commitment to the science.

These skills of observation and accuracy were put into practice when Beatrix converted a story that she had written in 1893 for the son of her former governess into a manuscript. Published by Frederick Warne in 1901, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* became an instant bestseller, causing Beatrix to remark: "The public must be fond of rabbits! [w]hat an appalling quantity of Peter." *Drawn to Nature* unpacks Beatrix's early expeditions into the world of publishing, and the people, places and things that inspired her work. Framing the original artworks along these inspirations illuminate how Beatrix had an eye for interesting tales, traditions, and landscapes. Layering objects from the real world with her active imagination – and putting to good use her skill for copying – gave her stories a realism that attracted readers.

Beatrix's favorite places in the Lakes provided the foundation her books. Lakeshore and garden, fell and farm – the landscapes of the lakes became a home and a shared universe for her characters. Beatrix's sketchbooks reveal the in-depth knowledge she possessed of the local vistas, her perceptiveness, and of course – the power of her imagination.

Purchased in October 1905, Hill Top farm helped Beatrix forge her own roots in the lakes, where she developed her competence as a farmer. Beatrix's determination to preserve traditional ways of life manifested itself in working to renovate and preserve the vernacular buildings on her farms and building prize-winning flock of Herwick sheep, the breed that had thrived in the lakes for thousands of years. Significantly, recognized that to advocate for the protection of the Lakes on a larger scale, she could put faith in the National Trust. She once wrote of

the organization: "The Trust is a noble thing and humanly speaking – immortal. There are some silly mortals connected to it, but they will pass."

Beatrix was always ready to challenge the decision-making of the organization, but ultimately, shared the Trust's mission to keep the Lakes accessible to all. Beatrix was active in welcoming groups like the Girl Guides, who camped at Hill Top. She had a warm relationship with American tourists, finding them much politer than other visitors, with a greater respect for children's literature.

Beatrix's love of nature was a constant that journeyed with her from childhood to old age. Even when illness in her later years prevented her from walking familiar routes, nature was her balm. She wrote in 1943: "Thank God I have the seeing eye, that is to say, as I lie in bed I can walk step by step on the fells and rough land seeing every stone and flower and patch of bog and cotton pass where my old legs will never take me again."

Beatrix left 4,000 acres and 14 working farms to the Trust, a powerful legacy of a life shaped by an affinity with the natural world. Of the many messages to take away from *Drawn to Nature*, gently challenging how the world remembers Beatrix Potter is perhaps key. As we fondly think of Beatrix Potter as the woman who brought joy to so many through her stories, so we should admire – and be inspired by – Mrs. Heelis: the woman who helped save the Lakes.

Throughout 2023 and 2024, *Drawn to Nature* having been on display at the V&A during 2022, will travel to three different venues in the United States, starting at the Frist Art Museum, Nashville.

Helen Antrobus is an Assistant National Curator specializing in Cultural Landscapes at the National Trust, and co-curator of Beatrix Potter: *Drawn to Nature*.



Illustrations by Beatrix Potter being conserved at the Royal Oak Conservation Studio at Knole in Kent.



# Wordsworth's Allan Bank

By Stephen Lacey



View of the house and grounds at Allan Bank, Grasmere, Cumbria, surrounded by woodland.

*Excerpted from the newly revised, Gardens of the National Trust to be published this year.*

**“I wandered lonely as a cloud/That floats on high o’er vales and hills”–**

William Wordsworth published his most famous Lake District poem in 1807, a year before moving from Dove Cottage, on the eastern edge of Grasmere village, across the valley and up the hillside to Allan Bank. And in spring, you will be met by lawns flecked with that same wild daffodil, *Narcissus pseudonarcissus*, which inspired him to write this poem as he walked with his sister Dorothy along the shore of nearby Ullswater.

The views from the stuccoed villa, over what he considered “the loveliest spot that man hath ever found,” are superb. Below, the land sweeps down into the valley and across the stone walls, paddocks and copses to the glinting lake. Behind, it climbs to a steep, undulating ridge, with spurs of exposed

rock, canopied in trees. And encircling the entire panorama are the hills, rising low and wooded, such as Butharlp How, or swelling into bald, skyward-soaring crags and fells, Seat Sandal, Heron Pike and Loughrigg Fell among them.

In the early 18th century, such wild landscape would have been considered desolate and frightening, but a hundred years on, it had become a source of wonder and artistic inspiration – Wordsworth himself fueled its popularity. Prosperous merchant classes were drawn out here from the cities to build villas and taste the country life of the landed gentry. One of these was John Crump, a Liverpool merchant and solicitor, who started constructing Allan Bank in 1805 as a future summer residence. Wordsworth disliked the villa even as he watched it being built – considering it “vulgar-looking” and its prominent position disruptive to “the vale’s character of simplicity and seclusion” – but he needed more space for his expanding

family and when Crump decided to lease it out, he became the first tenant.

Dorothy, who lived with William even after his marriage, wrote that “the children are delighted with the Liberty and Freedom of wandering up and down the green Fields without fear of carriages and horses,” and that Mr. Crump had sought William’s advice on the garden: “the planting is all left to him and he may do whatever he likes about the grounds.” It is not known what he planted, but Wordsworth had gleaned experience from planning the garden at Dove Cottage and the Winter Garden at Coleorton in Leicestershire for his friends the Beaumonts. His ideas on landscaping – a delight in variety and intricacy, and the need for a sensitive transition from house to countryside – chimed with those of his friend Sir Uvedale Price, author of *An Essay on the Picturesque as compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful*.



The family were soon joined by literary friends – fellow poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who stayed nearly two years, and essayist Thomas de Quincey. It was not an entirely successful cohabitation and sadly, in spite of its location, the house failed to endear itself to William even over time – not least because of its badly smoking chimneys – and he and his family moved out in 1810.

But while here, he worked on his *Guide to the Lakes* as well as publishing his political tract, *Concerning the Convention of Cintra*.

Allan Bank had several more tenants until 1834, when the 52-acre estate was sold to Salford barrister and merchant Thomas Dawson, who remodeled the house and developed the garden along its present lines – though, again, there are no detailed records of how it evolved. Further changes and additions took place after 1915, when it was bought as a retirement home by Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, one of the three founders of the National Trust; his second wife Eleanor was a keen gardener who lived here until her death in 1959.

The garden consists of some 15 acres of pleasure grounds – grassy and open around the villa but wooded and secluded above. Nature sets the mood. Rocks, ferns and mossy tree stumps punctuate the leaf litter, bulbs flush over the lawns, and the greens of beech and oak, Scot's pine and wild holly frame the views. The drama of the garden comes mainly from the topography – the excitement of following the pathway as it twists and turns, climbs and descends – and the sudden, breathtaking plays of scale and mood, light and shadow, as trees part to reveal epic landscapes and ever-changing skies.

Carpets of snowdrops begin the seasonal succession of flowers, followed by swathes of bluebells, foxgloves and red campion; hellebores, aconites, erythroniums, pheasant's eye daffodils and other plants of wild character are also now being added to some of the slopes. But the trees themselves are the principal players, as, together with the ferns, they complete their cycle from the



View of Grasmere from the house at Allan Bank, Cumbria.

acid greens of spring to the coppers and butter golds of autumn, all set against the tapestries of the distant hills. They are home to red squirrels as well as a host of woodland birds, including woodpeckers, nuthatches and treecreepers.

The garden circuit leads you on a loop around the edge of the parkland and over the wooded ridge, which would once have been coppiced. From the Billiards Room – a small neo-Gothic building behind the house, built by Dawson and recently restored – there is a sharp ascent up stone steps and through a stone tunnel, revealing an expansive view of Dunmail Raise, the steeply climbing road where the summit once marked the border between the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland. In the past, the Wordsworths had a little productive garden in this corner of the wood, and there is a small reservoir that originally fed the house with water off the fell.

A little higher, a large, level glade opens out, strewn with more mossy stumps, rocks and leaf litter – formerly the site of a charcoal-burning platform. As you climb to the knoll above it you are rewarded with a superb view over the boundary dry stone wall into the neighboring Easedale Valley and to

Helm Crag beyond. At one point, the wall is breached by a water smoot (hole) that takes rainfall from the fellside, channeling it into a stream which runs through the woods and over a ridge before plunging into the cascade pool far below, but in many places rivulets of water drip over the little crags, creating spongy encrustations of moss and waterfalls of icicles in winter. As you progress down the southern flank of the ridge, views open up again over Grasmere village and lake, a curving flight of mossy steps tempting you to a vantage point.

As you return beside the parkland, the sinuous path offers a fine prospect of the cream-colored villa before bringing you to the kitchen garden. Much earth-moving must have been needed to create this gently sloping, workable site, which has large beds set out around a central dipping pool, edged in slate from Elterwater quarry. A stone wall provides additional shelter, but because the garden is otherwise open-sided, deer cannot be excluded. So today, rather than struggling with traditional crops of vegetables, fruit and cut flowers, the beds are treated in a wilder way as perennial and annual meadows, with forage crops such as crab apples and sloes on the bank behind.

In his *Guide to the Lakes*, Wordsworth wrote that “persons of pure taste . . . deem the district a sort of national property in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy.” With his gift of Allan Bank to the National Trust, Canon Rawnsley helped to make this a reality.

Stephen Lacey is one of the UK's best known garden writers, a columnist for the Daily Telegraph and the author of books including *The Startling Jungle*, *Real Gardening* and the RHS Companion to *Scented Plants*. He has revised and updated *Gardens of the National Trust* several times since its first publication in 1996.





# Celebrating Sir Joshua Reynolds

By Alison Cooper, Curator for the National Trust in the South West

This July will mark the 300th anniversary of the birth of Sir Joshua Reynolds, one of England's most celebrated portrait painters. The National Trust holds around 80 oil paintings by the great artist across 28 of its properties.

Born on the outskirts of Plymouth, Reynolds showed from a young age “a very great genius for drawing,” and at 17, secured an apprenticeship in London with established portraitist Thomas Hudson. In 1745, Reynolds returned to Plymouth, setting up a studio in the new town of Dock (modern day Devonport). Attached to the great naval dockyard, Dock had direct links with London, providing a sound base for Reynolds to build up a naval and aristocratic clientele.

It was during his early years in Plymouth that Reynolds forged a lifelong friendship with the Parkers of Saltram House situated only a half-mile from his birthplace. Amongst the 13 works at Saltram, a particular highlight is the portrait of Theresa Parker which was commissioned for the family's newly remodelled Robert Adam Saloon. Completed in 1772, it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1773. Letters written by Theresa give a sense of her and Reynolds' amiable relationship. When mentioning the non-arrival of the portrait in a letter, Theresa wrote (of the famously productive Reynolds) “Sir Joshua is very lazy.”

## The Grand Manner

Reynolds' early training coupled with informative years spent in Italy from 1749-1752 enabled him to launch himself into the London art world with a new style that became known as the “Grand Manner.” This style blurred the boundaries between traditional portraiture and history painting, achieving Reynolds' ambition to avoid simply copying nature, but rather seeking a generalized and ideal form. His approach quickly proved popular, and it wasn't long before Reynolds had established himself as the leading society portrait painter.

The “Grand Manner” style was as popular as ever when Reynolds submitted his portrait of *Diana Disarming Cupid – Elizabeth Montagu, Duchess of Manchester and her son Viscount George Mandeville*, now at Wimpole, to the first Royal Academy exhibition in 1769. Whereas Reynolds' approach to ideal form will have pleased and perhaps flattered his sitters – and others like them – contemporary critics were not always convinced; one remarked “what claim a Duchess of Manchester, with her last born in her lap, could have to the distinction of Diana, it is difficult to guess.”

## The Grand Tour

At Knole, Reynolds was the natural choice for the state portrait of the young John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset. Depicted in full ducal robes, this full-length work was originally in Knole's Ballroom. Like Reynolds, Sackville was inspired by his own time in Italy on the Grand Tour, which sparked his passion as a collector and led to him becoming a great patron of the arts. Like the Parkers at Saltram, he became friends with Reynolds and was even one of the pallbearers at the artist's funeral.

## The Royal Academy and History Painting

In 1768, architect Sir William Chambers visited King George III, petitioning him for permission to “establish a society for promoting the Arts of Design.” Thus the Royal Academy was born and Reynolds was elected its first President. In this role, Reynolds delivered 15 *Discourses* which contributed to contemporary debate on aesthetics, the cultivation of taste and the importance of cultural value. Within his *Discourses*, Reynolds was a proponent of “history painting” which encapsulated his theories on art, considering these subject works to be of a higher form than portraiture.

At Petworth, George Wyndham, 3rd Earl Egremont (1751-1857), used his wealth to develop the art collection by patronizing



*Piping Shepherd Boy* by Sir Joshua Reynolds from Antony House in Cornwall.



living, English artists. Petworth's collection is distinguished by a number of Reynolds' history paintings, including *Macbeth and the Witches*, and *The Death of Cardinal Beaufort*. Such works received mixed and critical views in their time but show that Wyndham engaged in art discourse; both works were commissioned by the publisher John Boydell for his Shakespeare Gallery in London's Pall Mall in a bid to revive "history painting," a genre thought to be of great public benefit because of its morally instructive messages.

In the late 1780s, Reynolds' eyesight had deteriorated and, although he was still active in society and debate, had all but retired by the end of 1789; he died in London in 1792. Reynolds' body of work during his lifetime, and his contribution to art criticism, elevated the art of painting to a position of prominence. Edmund Burke wrote in Reynolds' obituary that he had "added the praise of the elegant arts to the other glories of his country," and as a result, cemented his name into the history of British art.

*Alison Cooper is Curator for the National Trust in the South West covering properties in the Tamar Valley including Cotehele, Antony, Buckland Abbey, and Saltram. Previously, Alison was Assistant Curator of Art and then Curator of Decorative Art at Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery where she developed an interest in 18th-century collections with a specialism in ceramics.*

Portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds.  
Left: Sir John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset. Right: Mrs Theresa Parker.



## Upcoming Exhibits

**SALTRAM:** Starting in April, visitors will find a focus on the 13 oil paintings by Reynolds alongside new displays of books and prints curated for the anniversary. In Plymouth, the city's new flagship museum and art gallery, The Box will host a major exhibition of Reynolds' work including works on loan from Saltram.

**PETWORTH:** Petworth are partnering with the Royal Academy of Arts to show **Explorations in Paint** March 6 – September 24, 2023. Taking Reynolds' *Studio Experiments* as a starting point, this display will bring together artworks by current Royal Academicians including Rebecca Salter, Sean Scully, and Frank Bowling.

**KNOLE:** A program of events will run between July and October. Open days at the ROFCS will give visitors the opportunity to see conservation work in progress of Saltram's *Theresa Parker* (until May) and compare it with Knole's portrait

of John Frederick Sackville being examined ahead of conservation.

**WIMPOLE:** In July, to coincide with Reynolds' birthday, conservation work to the portrait of *Diana disarming Cupid* will commence in situ, allowing visitors to see the conservation of this painting in action.



**Diana disarming Cupid:** Elizabeth Dashwood, Duchess of Manchester and her Son George Montagu, Viscount Manderville.

## Conserving Reynolds

Part of Reynolds' practice and bold innovation was a deep engagement with materials and techniques. He questioned, through experimentation, traditional technical training in his use of pigments, binders, and translucent glazes. This innovation often came at the expense of longevity; deterioration of his work was noted even in his lifetime and James Northcote, his apprentice, even recorded paintings cracking as they left the studio.

Recent research in this field has shed light on contemporary challenges of conserving work by Reynolds. This anniversary offers the opportunity to explore and contribute to this field of enquiry by investigating the four key works from Saltram, Knole, Petworth and Wimpole, and their frames. It's with thanks to the Royal Oak Foundation gift that much of this work is being carried out.





# The Art of Tapestry

by Helen Wyld, Senior Curator of Historic Textiles at National Museums Scotland

Describing his deep love of the tapestry medium, designer William Morris remembered a childhood encounter with “a room hung with faded greenery” in an Elizabethan hunting lodge in Epping Forest. His evocative description of this room expresses a beguiling Romantic perception of tapestries as sleepy witnesses to a lost past: a perception that continues to color our reactions today. But tapestry has not always been an art of the past. In my new book *The Art of Tapestry*, I aim to retrieve the vivid history of this often overlooked medium through the National Trust’s outstanding collection, and to show that tapestry was once a key economic, cultural and even political concern; but also to recognize the importance of figures like Morris in shaping modern attitudes.

The National Trust cares for over 600 tapestries – the largest collection in the UK, but one that has received little sustained attention until now. Distributed across 40 properties, and gathered over some four centuries, the collection is unique not only for its history but its scope. Unlike famous museum collections, which represent the tastes of ruling dynasties or more recent collectors, the Trust’s holdings represent changing taste and preoccupations over centuries and can give us a unique vantage point not only on the tapestry medium, but on the cultural history of England and Wales.



Top: The state bedroom at Powis Castle. The tapestries in the bed alcove show scenes from the *Story of Mark Anthony and Cleopatra* and were probably made by Joris Rombouts, Oudenaarde, in the 1670s. Bottom: *Peter the Great*, St Petersburg Manufactory after a design by Louis Caravaque, 1764, Blickling



While the tapestries displayed in historic houses now appear fixed and immovable, they often bear witness to past mobility and ritual use, something I am keen to show was central to their original role. For example, the 1660s State Bedchamber at Powis Castle, has tapestries made to fit a bed alcove screened off by a railing – the only survival of its kind in Britain. In such arrangements, textiles were an important symbolic element in the rituals of the royal *levée* and *couchée* designed to stress the sacred nature of the royal body. Mobility was key to a set of armorial tapestries of c. 1670–80 at Ham House, originally used as “sumpter cloths,” ostentatious covers for baggage mules accompanying travelling aristocrats – an example of the very public role of textiles in proclaiming identity. Elsewhere, we find religious hangings that once had active roles in Catholic contexts – from a 17th-century French choir hanging at Lytes Cary Manor, which would have been displayed at feast days devoted to the Virgin, to an exquisite late 15th-century devotional tapestry at Montacute, whose imagery aided private prayer and meditation. Tapestries could also carry messages across continents and were among the most prestigious forms of diplomatic gifts in the early modern period. The earliest tapestry in the collection, the famous *Knight with the Arms of Jean de Daillon* (c. 1477–80), was in fact paid for by the city of Tournai as a gift to a French military commander who had protected the town's inhabitants from marauding troops. Such gifts also played the important role demonstrating a nation's soft power through its manufacturing economy. A vast representation of *Peter the Great* – the only Russian tapestry in a public collection in the UK – is one of many that originally served this role.

Economic realities governed the industry in the Low Countries, France and England, and an understanding of the complexities of financing production is essential to explaining why historic tapestries look the way they do. To produce a tapestry required a huge outlay to cover design, raw materials and skilled labour. This led to the development of ingenious strategies to spread risk and cost; and a constant tension between quality and value. The National Trust's tapestries retain signs of these methods, from signatures that reveal both collaboration and fraud, to the use of paint on surfaces – once a common practice. Design also responded directly to the market. Popular styles and artists were imitated rapidly, with a skill that has continued to baffle modern scholars more used to attributing paintings: for example, tapestries long thought to be after Rubens are in fact the work of now-anonymous artists, working to the demands of canny entrepreneurs.

For museum visitors, textiles can be challenging; and tapestries especially so, because their pictorial images can give them the appearance of woven paintings. Judged in this way, they will always fall short. To try and combat some of the barriers to viewing historic tapestries I have devoted a chapter in the book to exploring tapestry design, and the qualities that have endured over the centuries despite changes in taste: an awareness of surface, a tendency to all-over pattern,



*St Agnes* by Morris and Company after a design by Edward Burne-Jones and Henry Dearle, 1887, Standen.

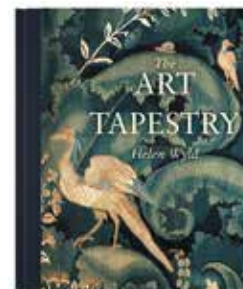
and a playful interaction with other media. One famous room, installed in the 1770s at Osterley Park House in Middlesex, lined with tapestries after François Boucher and others and woven at the Gobelins in Paris, epitomizes many of these themes, while also being uniquely of its time.

A decline in the use of tapestry for both state rituals and interior decoration led to the closure of workshops in the Low Countries and England at the end of the 18th century, production continuing only in France, where it was sustained by state investment. But this was not the end of the story. The period from 1860–1940 saw an incredible revival of interest in tapestry – led by a new generation of collectors whose wealth came not from land but finance and industry. Astonishingly, over one third of the tapestries in the National Trust's care are in collections formed during this dynamic period. An outstanding example is Waddesdon Manor, furnished by Ferdinand de Rothschild in the 1860s with old and new tapestries to evoke pre-Revolutionary France. Just as creative are the interiors at Packwood House, bought by Graham “Baron” Ash in the 1920s, who added a Great Hall and a Long Gallery and filled them with fragments of antique tapestry to recreate a typical English manor house. In these and other cases, tapestry was central to the evocation of the past, but this was not an end in itself; it was a way of making sense of a rapidly changing present. This is perhaps clearest in the work of innovative

new producers, above all William Morris, who sought to be true to the spirit of the Gothic, while bringing a sensibility that anticipated the Modernist tapestries of the early 20th century.

National Trust houses have also contributed to some of the great museum collections, which continue to shape modern perceptions of the tapestry medium. In 1912, John Pierpont Morgan bought a group of tapestries from Knole, and added them to his legendary Medieval collection which was exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum after his death the following year, later passing through the hands of other key names including William Randolph Hearst, before entering various North American museums. The history of these tapestries underlines the importance of the Medieval, and of the notion of European cultural heritage, to the public identity of Morgan and his gilded age contemporaries of this grand medium. The value of the Knole tapestries to Morgan and subsequent collectors rested in part on their link to a venerable country house; and their presence in museums across North America today maintains a living link to this heritage, now cared for by the National Trust.

*Helen Wyld is Senior Curator of Historic Textiles at National Museums Scotland, where she is responsible for European and Scottish textiles from the medieval period to 1850. Her new book, The Art of Tapestry, provides a fresh perspective on the history of tapestry in Europe.*





# Royal Oak Conservation Studio News

## Using Tree Rings to Trace Charles I's Court Style

By Gerry Alabone, Senior Remedial Conservator of Furniture and Frames, National Trust

Thanks to the generosity of the Royal Oak Foundation members, the National Trust's Conservation Studio at Knole can commission analysis as part of the conservation treatment process. Not only does this support decision-making for conservation it also strengthens art historical understanding and knowledge. Recent research conducted during treatment of two sets of objects from Lacock Abbey informs us about the development of English design in the second quarter of the 17th century and enables us to trace the development of Charles I's court style. Dendrochronology, the scientific dating of trees using growth rings, is a key analytical tool in the interdisciplinary field of technical art history.

In 2020 the National Trust celebrated its 125th anniversary by highlighting 125 treasures from Trust collections. One of these was a set of nine sgabelli chairs from Petworth House, which the studio examined and conserved.

Sgabello is the Italian word for stool, but it has become the name for a type of Italian Renaissance hall-chair often richly ornamented with a mixture of grotesque, strapwork and scrollwork motifs. The set was thought to be English but due to the scarcity of documentary evidence the



Top: Dendrochronological analysis being carried out in the studio by Ian Tyers. Bottom: Detail of fragments from a pair of auricular frames at Lacock Abbey.

studio became interested in what material examination and technical analysis could reveal. Work led to a similar set of six sgabelli coming to the studio from Lacock Abbey for conservation and analysis.



Cross-sectional analysis of paint from Lacock Abbey's sgabelli has been commissioned to confirm observations that the decorative surface was originally a brown painted background with gilded ornament highlights. This would match the discoveries made on the Petworth set, whose original surfaces are also obscured by overpaint. Dendrochronological analysis dated both sets to between the 1620s and 1630s and made of Baltic oak not used in Italy.

During the 1630s, high-status English frames started to be made with innovative auricular ornament, influenced by designs from the Netherlands, seen for example in silverwork. These designs went beyond previous interpretation of Italian painted and gilded scroll-frames. Fragments of two full-length auricular style frames stored at Lacock Abbey made dating through dendrochronology possible due to their exposed end grain. This established they were also made from imported Baltic oak, with a date range between 1633 and 1650.

Opportunities to conserve and research objects in parallel and around a theme such as these sgabelli and frames benefits our collection on many levels. In this example, it helped demonstrate the intense period of creativity in the decade before the start of the English Civil War in 1642, and how design in England evolved beyond direct Italian influence to being at the forefront of a new transnational style.

*Sgabelli from Lacock Abbey in the studio.*







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Spring 2023





Grey seal on the Farne Islands, Northumberland.

The Royal Oak Foundation seeks to raise awareness and advance the work of the National Trust of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland by inspiring support from the United States for the Trust's efforts to preserve and protect historic places and spaces – for ever, for everyone.



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