



STOWE HOUSE Volunteers' Newsletter

June 2016

Introduction

We have enjoyed a busy start to this month; on Tuesday 31st May we held our first Wine and Wisdom quiz. It was attended by 20 volunteers and guests, so we had 5 teams who answered a series of questions on Authors, Local History, Dates, Ireland and Currency. The final result was a clear win for team one, with team three collecting the wooden spoon. But most importantly we had fun. We already have a volunteer question master for next quiz so watch this space.



This was followed on Thursday by a training day, presented by "Past Pleasures" who provide guides/interpreters for Hampton Court Palace among other historic houses and galleries. I personally found the day most informative and interesting, with a number of easy to understand learning points. Which if I ever do a tour again will come in use full!

On Friday a number of us enjoyed the hospitality of the National Trust at Concord and Victory. A



very enjoyable break from your normal Coffee Mornings, held in the magnificence C and V with the view over the Grecian Valley, even the sun shined for us - "wonderful". This was followed by a walk around Capability Brown's Stowe, under the watch full eye of Philip Clarke who delivered the tour.

September's away day will be on Wednesday 21st Sept, when we will be visiting "Holdenby House" more details to follow.

Stephen
Volunteer Social Organiser

Coffee Morning and Capability Brown Walk

Stowe House is currently joining with the National Trust's Stowe Gardens and scores of other properties around the country to celebrate the **300th anniversary of the birth of Lancelot "Capability" Brown**, the world-famous landscape gardener. A group of Stowe House volunteers recently enjoyed a walk around the grounds, tracing the footsteps of this extraordinary man.

Starting at the NT Capability Brown exhibition at the Temple of Concord and Victory, our guide, Philip Clarke, outlined Brown's humble origins in the north-east of England and the journey down through Lincolnshire that brought him as a young man to Stowe's neighbouring estate at Wotton. Brown arrived at Stowe in 1749 and – as Head Gardener - proceeded to enact Viscount Cobham's vision to replace the formal French-style gardens with a more natural style, echoing the undulations of the English landscape.

Together with William Kent, Brown pioneered a whole new style of gardening at Stowe. He painstakingly supervised teams of men, who armed with only spades, buckets and wheelbarrows, carved out the immense Grecian Valley in the north of the garden, framed by undulating trees and with views out to parkland. The group saw how Brown cleverly used the displaced earth to fill in and surround the formerly free-standing Grotto built by Kent - so that by 1752 it had become a building below ground. We also saw how he tricked the eye by creating hidden and sunken ha-ha walls to keep the livestock out of the main garden whilst creating views that appeared as one harmonious and natural scene.

The walk provided us with a fascinating insight into the man who changed the face of 18th-century England. It also provided much useful background information for the special Capability Brown A Tale of Stowe (taster tours) we are offering visitors to Stowe House throughout 2016.

Julie Lemagen
Volunteer

Visitor Services

I was fortunate enough to go to New York for 5 days at the end of May and whilst we enjoyed all the many sites (and visited – what felt like – every museum in the city!) one visit stuck out as particularly memorable. On a busy Monday morning we went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to meet our tour guide for the morning. Before setting off for New York I had booked a [Museum Hack](#) tour. The idea behind Museum Hack is to appeal to those who would not think a museum was really for them – primarily those in their 20s and 30s who think museums are a little boring and are not at all relevant to their lives. Museum Hack specialise in 'alternative' tours – our tour was called the Un-highlights tour – we would bypass all of the usual suspects, the blockbuster objects and busy areas, instead we would be shown objects with fascinating hidden stories to tell, most of which the official MET tour would avoid. These stories would (as all those who have completed my Tour Guide training will know...) be relevant to the visitors in the group.

So the first surprise came when waiting next to a large Egyptian sculpture in the MET's main hall – Zak our tour guide (or 'Hacker') was wearing a very fetching, almost Hawaiian style, shirt – not your normal tour guide uniform! I could tell this was going to be a fun tour. The second surprise was that

there was only a maximum of 8 visitors on the tour. This was unexpected – in my cynicism I had presumed that any company running tours would privilege quantity over quality and we would be herded around in a large pack. The third surprise was that Zak knew our names – before meeting us he had written out a name tag for each of us and he worked out who we were as he handed them out. This changed the dynamic of the group – he became like a knowledgeable friend showing us around his favourite parts of the museum. We set off on our tour – distinctly walking in the opposite direction to the hordes of visitors – it felt like we were privy to insider knowledge – we weren't tourists today – we were New Yorkers.

I won't detail all of the many stories Zak told us – or explain the intricacies of Asmat 'bis' poles however I will highlight the key things that made Zak's tour so fantastic:

1. **Us:** Now we all know that we are our own favourite subject, this is human nature, however Zak took time to ask us where we were from and most importantly he listen to the answer. He remembered and he would ask us questions about the places we spoke of. The group was made up of people from across the world and where possible he would link the stories he told us back to the things we had told him.
2. **Relevance:** Each story Zak told was tailored perfectly to the audience – he used everyday ideas, objects and celebrities to bring meaning to the complex art we discussed – needless to say he perfectly wove the 'celebrity' Kim Kardashian and 21st century politics of beauty into a story about this 6000 year old Cycladic stone sculpture known as steatopygous.
3. **Fruity Language:** Zak cut the proverbial and spoke clearly and directly – by that I mean that he spoke to us like he would to friends. He removed technical language and he altered his language to fit the group. His language was at times a little fruity – however this added to the informality and worked well for the target audience.
4. **Museum Baby:** Zak warned us that the tour was an exercise in not having a 'museum baby' – this idea comes from when people go to a fabulous restaurant and eat so much they go home hugely bloated (with a food baby). Zak was going to ensure that we would finish our tour feeling as light and svelte as when we started – we would not grow weary and we would not need a sit down half way through. Although the tour was the advertised 2 hours Zak began the tour by asking if anyone had any special interests – he wove in the subjects we suggested whilst always keeping great pace and ensuring there was not time for anyone to tire of a subject they were not interested in.
5. **Making Memories:** We played games – now I know this possibly sounds horrendous however the games were cleverly devised to ensure there was no possibility of looking silly (unless you wanted to) and you were encouraged to be part of the team and join in. We solved a murder, acted out a tableau of a painting in the collection and we took photos on our phones of the perfect thing to bring to a rocking party (mine won – puppies depicted on a Japanese screen ...why not bring puppies to a party?!). These were low-level, easy and fun things to do which



Photo 1: Steatopygous – 4000 BC

helped to break up the tour, keep us focused and ensure we had great stories of our own to tell when we got home.

6. **Souvenirs:** There is a lot of research into the psychology of souvenirs and their role in recalling memory and Zak used this perfectly. As part of the games we played he had prizes – these were not costly items just small souvenirs from the MET shop. He also took a photo of our tableau on his phone and using a tiny polaroid printer he printed us each the photo and attached a sticker with [#MuseumHack](#) hashtag written on it (a great bit of marketing via Social Media as we were all sure to take a photo of the photo and post it on twitter with the hashtag).

Since my Museum Hack tour I have been thinking alot about interpretation at Stowe, live-, multimedia- and paper-based interpretation and thinking about how we can best tell Stowe's stories. Last week I had a group of Ladies from Brackley come for an evening tour – I know them well and many of them have been round on tours of the House before. Due to the heavy rain we could not go on the roof as I had originally planned... so in the spirit of Stowe I needed to get creative - I decided to do my own 'alternative' tour of Stowe House... and here is the result:



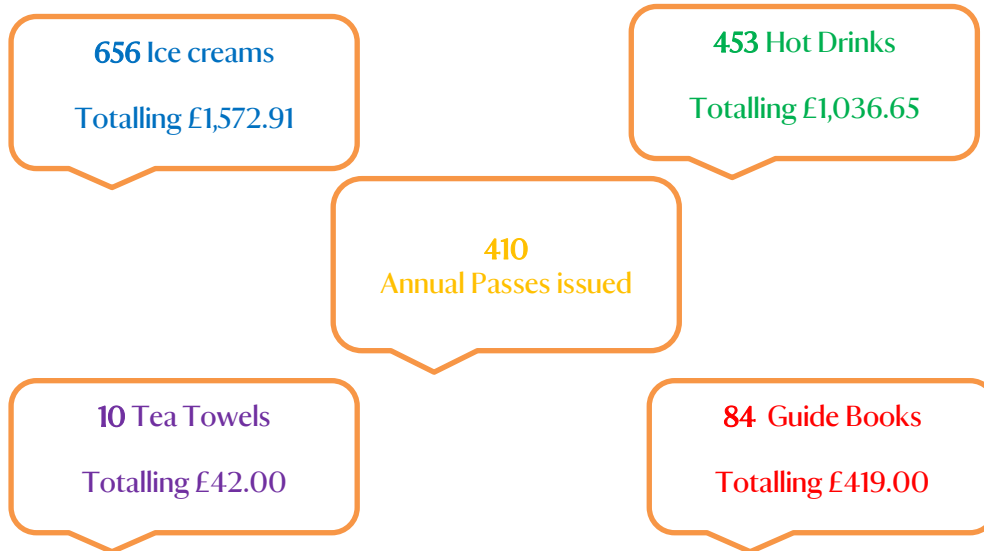
Photo 2: Brackley Ladies Circle become the Marble Saloon Frieze

Ruth Peters
Visitor Experience Manager

Facts and Figures

Hi everyone,

This month you will be pleased to know I am not talking all about me like my last newsletter entry. I wanted to use this opportunity to make you all aware of some particularly interesting facts to do with sales and visitors for the last month that I think you will all be surprised at:



I hope you will all agree that these facts are interesting but let's see if we can over the month of June beat these figures and create more!

Sadie

Visitor Experience Officer

House Custodian News



Here we have the 1st Duke on his way to have yet another holiday – he only had one last year! But this isn't anything like his grand tour in 1827 – he is merely being cleaned again since we found the surface had been damaged. He had been restored last year. As you can imagine with the painting this size, it required a scaffold tower and 4 strong men to take him off the wall, and a van large enough to take him. But how did this happen in the 18th

and 19th centuries? Wooden scaffolding towers? Horse and cart, and a lot of packing? Tracking items across continental Europe to end up at Stowe would seem a daunting task now but back then it must have seemed monumental. But it happened all the time, as we know from the Duke's diaries and from the objects that eventually settled at Stowe.

So the Duke is off on his second sojourn in a year – maybe he's taking his lead from our holiday-happy volunteers...

Anna McEvoy
House Custodian

Forthcoming Volunteer Social Events

- **Wednesdays 6th July, Coffee Morning**, Speaker Ruth Peters 'Interpretation – what I've learnt recently' in the Music Room at 10.00am
- **Friday 12th August, Volunteers' End of Season Picnic** at Concord and Victory 6pm. More details to follow (no coffee morning in August)
- **Friday 2nd September, Coffee Morning**, Speaker Hettie Dix Purcell Heritage Consultant 'restoring the past' in the Music Room at 10.00am
- **Wednesday 21st September, Away day** to Holdenby House – details to follow



Photo 3 The winning A team, plus quiz master!