

Regaining ground

After being lost to decay and wilderness for years, two sections of Walmer Castle's historic pleasure grounds have been restored and reopened for visitors to enjoy – just as their creators intended

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First created for Henry VIII in 1540 to defend England's southern shores, Walmer Castle in Kent is perhaps best known for its ties to former resident the Duke of Wellington. However, the Waterloo victor, who died here in 1852, is actually just one of a succession of Lord Wardens of the Cinque Ports – the first Lord Warden was appointed in 1267.

Today, it's Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger who looms large in the £2.3 million restoration of a swathe of the castle's pleasure grounds. Amid eight acres of varied greenery, the rejuvenated wild flower meadow known as the Paddock and former chalk quarry named the Glen now offer visitors the same bucolic joy they gave when first fashioned two centuries ago.

Like all great gardens, Walmer Castle's green spaces are an ever-changing natural tapestry, whose shifts are overseen by one of my guides, head gardener Mark Brent. As we set off to explore the rejuvenated gardens with senior properties historian Paul Pattison, a visitor approaches Mark to ask about some unusual tulips that have appeared since her last visit. Mark delights in explaining ►

the historical inspiration for the planting from the ‘tulip mania’ of 1760s Europe. ‘It’s a planting that gets closer to the age of the castle gardens too,’ he says.

Research dates Walmer’s first formal ornamental garden to 1725 but, Paul explains, garrison commanders had a kitchen garden in the decades after the fort was first built. ‘After the Restoration, castle captains wanted ornamental gardens as a sign of status and for entertaining.’

The pleasure grounds took their greatest leap forward after Pitt the Younger came to Walmer in 1792. The chance to fashion a distinctive Kentish Eden provided a welcome salve to Pitt when he was forced to give up his beloved country house at Holwood after losing the position – and salary – of prime minister in 1801.

Pitt’s vision for expanded and improved pleasure grounds marked a key point in Walmer’s evolution from a coastal fort to gentleman’s residence. ‘At Holwood, he had taken advice from the famous garden designer Humphry Repton,’ says Paul. ‘But his family also knew about gardens, so a combination of people contributed to his plans at Walmer.’

Pitt’s niece Lady Hester Stanhope was particularly important. Letters by Hester provide

small clues of her green-fingered efforts during the years when complicated family circumstances made her a near constant companion to Pitt. ‘When he wasn’t here, she supervised – and that was crucial,’ explains Paul. ‘She specifically mentions chatting with the gardener to discuss what to plant the Chalk Pit with.’

Scar on the landscape

‘This space was basically a scar on the landscape with very little soil,’ adds Mark. ‘This was before the era of plant hunters, so they planted anything native that could live on chalk. This included yew trees, gorse and broom – and anything else they could beg, steal or borrow!’

Reading between bills of purchase for plants and letter snippets, both men express admiration for what Pitt and Stanhope achieved. ‘I think the effort was bigger than the historical record tells us,’ says Paul. It clearly impressed Georgian visitors such as Lady Hawkesbury, who arrived in 1806 as the wife of the new Lord Warden, Lord Hawkesbury – she declared that the transformed garden ‘astonished almost as much as it pleased me’.

Other Lord Wardens added new elements in the century or so after Pitt’s death in 1806, such as ▶



Previous spread An aerial view of the Glen, which has been reopened after being inaccessible for a century
This page, clockwise from top left: A visitor explores the newly opened Glen garden; visitors stroll amid the topiary in the Broadwalk; new displays bring the gardens’ stories to life; a view of the bridge connecting the castle to the gardens; the castle’s kitchen garden; a family enjoying an element of the new play trail; a new path leads through the Glen
Following page The view towards the restored Glen

New and improved

The reopened pleasure grounds are just one of the new additions for visitors

Storytelling

The project has also provided an opportunity to upgrade visitor facilities. There are newly restored paths through the woodland, while new interpretation reveals the history of the gardens.

Early learning

A new learning centre will enable schools to explore the gardens and woodland as a wonderful free resource for pupils studying science and geography, using fun, interactive and sensory learning. New multimedia learning guides provide further learning opportunities.

Woodland play trail

Younger visitors will enjoy discovering an exciting new play trail throughout our woodland. Taking inspiration from the surrounding landscape, it includes wobbly bridges to cross, hollow tree trunks to hide in and climbing nets to conquer.

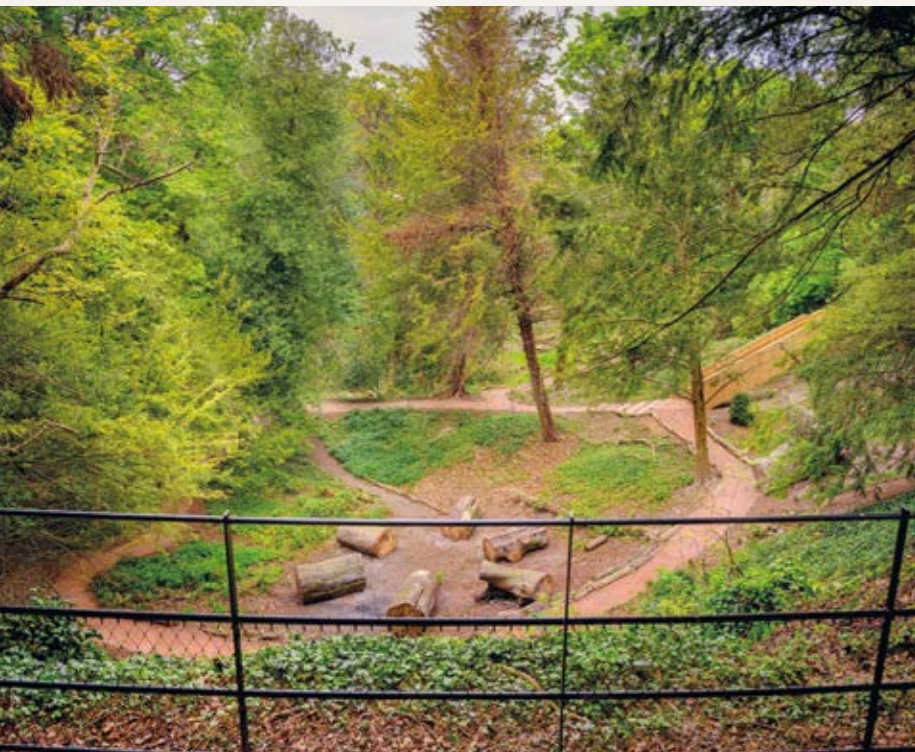
Community engagement

New opportunities for local people include getting involved in the gardens as guides or ecological monitors, alongside activities such as horticultural workshops, flower shows and garden tours.



Café culture

Overlooking the kitchen garden, the new Glasshouse Café (above) serves food prepared using fresh produce grown just yards away. ‘Visitors can see where their lunch has originated from – a real plot-to-plate experience,’ says property manager Kate Olpin. You can watch a video about the kitchen garden on the English Heritage YouTube channel.



‘The old chalk pit was so overgrown it had been inaccessible for a century’

the Boardwalk, introduced by the 2nd Earl Granville in the late 1860s.

Then there’s the ‘keyhole’ view fashioned by the 7th Earl Beauchamp during his tenure from 1913 to 1934, created by extending the Boardwalk to a narrow gap (the keyhole) cut into woodland at the garden’s far end. This made the view from the castle seem longer by hinting at the countryside beyond. ‘We’re slowly opening up the keyhole vista, which had been largely lost since the Second World War,’ says Mark.

The big reveal

As we walk further from the castle, the landscape takes on a pleasing, more natural feel. ‘Up here is where you really have the historical gardens, the parkland we’ve been slowly revealing and enhancing,’ explains Mark.

In Pitt’s time, the Paddock was open meadow for grazing animals, which Mark’s team have honed by clearing unwanted trees and root-blocked paths to recapture and redefine its original gentle parkland style. ‘Paul’s research has helped us understand what was here, why it was created, and its importance to the landscape.’

A broad ecological awareness underpins the rejuvenation of a sylvan tapestry in which summer orchards mingle with a traditional hay meadow dotted by rare orchids. Wildlife is a key draw at

— IN NUMBERS —

700

Approximate number of rose species cultivated by William Masters, head gardener for Lord Granville, Lord Warden from 1865–91

23

The number of years the Duke of Wellington came to stay at Walmer Castle

£3,000

William Pitt the Younger’s annual salary as Lord Warden – over £400,000 in today’s money

Walmer – not just for visitors but also a new wave of volunteer helpers. ‘Where previously we just had gardeners, now we have bird monitors, moth monitors and so on,’ says Mark. ‘This enhances opportunities for volunteers and also helps to engage visitors and improve their knowledge.’

It’s the chalk pit glen, however, that’s the most unusual element of Walmer’s pleasure grounds in both their Georgian and new incarnations. ‘It has a hint of the Picturesque, adding surprise to the hard edge of nature,’ says Paul. ‘Previously there wasn’t a reward for making a journey up here,’ adds Mark. ‘But now the Glen is that pay-off.’

Accessing the past

Before the regeneration began, the old chalk pit had become so overgrown that it was impossible for visitors to even see into, let alone enter. ‘The only way we got in was sliding down a slope and hoping to arrive at the bottom safely,’ reveals Mark.

Mystery clung to this wilderness spot when its restoration began until Paul unearthed a military survey map from 1859, which seemed to show the garden in considerable detail – including the pit. But did it reflect the original layout of Pitt and Stanhope? ‘We did some archaeology,’ explains Paul. ‘In this large hole, ridges and troughs seemed to correspond with paths on the map, so we excavated and found faint traces of paths.’

Descending into the Glen, I enter a small leafy haven where little undulating paths wend through the galleries of the old quarry, and seats beckon amid fallen tree trunks. Paul points to a yew tree standing in exactly the spot shown on the 1859 map. ‘It’s a beacon,’ he says.

In terms of planting, Mark has tried to echo what Pitt and Stanhope might have planted in the Glen’s tricky soil. ‘Ferns to soften the landscape and green it up, broom, dog roses, cherry – and amelanchier for colour,’ he says.

Ambience is important too. ‘We’re trying to create a sense of seclusion and tranquillity down here,’ says Mark. ‘You get a real feeling of what it must have been like in 1805, and how they dealt with a rough corner of the garden to create a little magical secret on your perambulation.’

As we head back towards the castle, Paul sums up the pleasure that he’s found from unpicking the secrets of Walmer’s pleasure grounds: ‘This garden is a historic manuscript in its own right – you have to read it,’ he says. ‘For me, it’s a living embodiment of people’s changing taste during the time they spent here.’ #

PLAN YOUR VISIT

For more information about Walmer Castle, including opening times, go to www.english-heritage.org.uk/walmer. To extend your visit, why not stay in one of our beautiful holiday cottages while visiting Walmer Castle? (See facing page)



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