

Lowther Castle and Gardens

Penrith, Cumbria CA10 2HH (01931) 712192

Website [Lowther Castle & Gardens Trust](#)

Newsletter February 2012

Opening 2012

We are planning two special daffodil weekends on 24/25 March and 31 March / 1 April; and then to properly open the stable courtyard (complete with fabulous café and glorious toilets) on Good Friday 6 April 2012. The museum, gallery, shops, and castle ruins are scheduled to open in July. Each month will of course see romping progress across the 130 acres of gardens!

History of the Castle and Gardens

We have been delighted to hear the rich and personal stories from people with associations with the Castle, gardens and the Lowther family; and our early research is uncovering many fascinating accounts. We need to ensure this information is not lost and make it available more widely.

Following discussions with local enthusiasts we would like to help establish a local history group centred on Lowther / Askham. The group may wish to consider taking part in the Cumbria County History project which is creating a history of every place in Cumbria.

We have arranged an ***Open Meeting 7.00pm Monday 20 February 2012, at Askham Village Hall*** to discuss plans and share ideas, and will be delighted if you are able to attend. No commitment or money is required – just an interest in local and personal history, a keen mind and a dose of good ideas! Bryan Gray, Chairman of the Trust and myself will be waiting with cups of tea at the ready.

Gardens

The arrival of Steve Lannin, our shiny new Head Gardener, has generated both excitement and relief (especially from me). At long last we have someone to plan the delivery of the development and restoration of the gardens; and wrestle with tricky questions about planting schemes, garden buildings and the relative merits of flail versus cylinder mowers. He has started recruiting his team to commence proper gardening, which will be a great joy after months of messy landscaping.

The felling and clearance of so many stands of commercial softwood trees has really opened up the gardens and yielded a host of new vistas and lost features. The storms over Christmas caused a few anxious moments with fears of damage to trees recently freed from surrounding trees. Thankfully the only major casualty was one of the giant poplars in the Countess Garden which had the decency of falling just a few metres short of the castle walls. Three days of hard graft by a team of tree surgeons resulted in a whopping pile of logs and dense carpet of woodchip, and we are in the throes of removing the timber before felling the last few trees in this area. Once removed the next task will be the removal of a large heap of demolition material mainly formed, we think, from bulldozed remains of the inner castle walls. Some delicate digging to investigate the several thousand tonnes of material is planned before letting the large diggers go to work.

Teams from the Probation service have made startling progress in the Rock Garden, clearing decades of debris and finding several original plant labels in the process. Each find is quickly "Googled" and it is fascinating to see how many varieties are still available. Sedum Spathulifolium, Saxifraga R W Hosier, Sax. Aizoon Notata and Campanula Portenschlagiana are just four labels recently found. Dominic Cole, our garden designer was somewhat sniffy about the Dalmation Bellflowers (Campanula Portenschlagiana) and professed greater affection for the Serbian variety (Campanula Poscharskyana) but I think he was just showing off.

The limestone escarpment is awash with snowdrops at the moment, and we will need to clear some of the lower branches of bordering trees to give these welcome gems the light and space to thrive. Daffodils were racing away until the recent cold snap, and I was astonished to see the first few blooms a week into the New Year. The savage frosts and icy winds have put paid to such exuberance!

Work to restore the shelter belts has been progressing carefully and gently, with the plan to recreate the low, dense canopy of dark green yew interspersed with lollipops of bright green from the pollarded small-leafed limes. The task of removing thumping self-seeded sycamores without squashing the surrounding yews and limes is causing many a furrowed brow from the tree surgeons. The shelter belts are still amazingly effective after decades of neglect, providing a welcome respite from winds roaring in from the fells to the west.

Castle

With funds quickly diminishing we are making difficult decisions about which elevations to do and which to leave for another day. Complicated and often contrary demands from maximising safe access for our visitors, minimising on-going repair liabilities, maximising the economic use of the existing scaffold, and restoring the imposing outline are all important considerations. The logic applied to restoring a castle has become apparent – you start at the top, strip away unstable stone until a solid line is found and then build back up again. Areas of major collapse however demand hideously expensive engineering solutions (mainly deep stainless steel anchors).

Stable Courtyard

Work is cracking on with stone floors, timber panelling and final coats of plaster being applied, and at long last we are getting glimpses of the first few finished rooms. Frantic efforts with banks of heaters to prevent fresh plaster from freezing appear to have been successful and we are trying to gently coax enough moisture from the sodden walls to allow the final decorative finishes to be applied. Miriam Kelly, our architect, cheerfully told me the walls would take a year or two to properly dry out after decades of water ingress!

Wildlife

We have used the quiet winter months to carefully thin the trees around the heronry to create a cathedral stand. The clearance of ragged undergrowth in this area has also been completed just in time for the recent arrival of the herons. Early squabbling for the prime nesting sites has started, with the odd birds announcing their return with a trade mark "cronk".

Andrew Mercer, Project Director

For latest images and news see our Facebook page [Lowther Castle and Gardens](#)