

## Tring Park

Having good research to draw upon is immensely important for protecting – and in some cases restoring – our historic designed landscapes. It has most recently enabled us to make an important contribution to the restoration of part of Charles Bridgeman’s early 18<sup>th</sup>-century landscape design for Tring Park.

Research at Tring was initiated by Frances Drew who volunteered to help with our West Hertfordshire project in the 1990s, and subsequently continued by the late Alan Fletcher. The foundations of the research laid down by these two volunteers proved invaluable when in March 2011 we were invited to write a Restoration Plan by the Woodland Trust who manage the part of Tring Park that lies south of the A41. This plan was a requirement for the bid they were making to the Heritage Lottery Fund, in partnership with Tring Museum, to gain funding for a project to increase awareness of what both the museum and Tring Park had to offer for local people and visitors alike.



Tring Park from the south-west. Much of the park is designated an SSSI for its rare chalk grassland; the tree-covered slope to the right is the site of Bridgeman’s ‘forest garden’.

Compiling the detailed report on the history of the park and its ecological value, together with proposals for its restoration and management was a major undertaking, but made significantly easier for Jenny Milledge, Kate Harwood and myself, thanks to the earlier work by Frances and Alan. An important part of Bridgeman’s design – the ‘forest garden’ – survives as a series of straight paths or rides radiating out from a central obelisk. These paths were carved out of the steep slope of the Chiltern escarpment which forms the southern boundary of Tring Park. Close to the top of the escarpment runs the King Charles Ride – a long terrace laid out in two straight sections flanked by avenues of trees. When laid out in the 1720s, this high level ride provided glorious views northwards to the mansion in the park below and to the distant Buckinghamshire landscape beyond. Until the 1970s the chalk grassland on the escarpment was grazed by flocks of sheep but a marked decline in grazing at the end of the century meant that scrub and even woodland started to invade the grassy slopes. By the time we visited in April 2011, the views had largely disappeared behind a wall of trees.



The obelisk – known as Nell Gwynn’s monument – at the centre of the forest garden

Hidden in the undergrowth; however, we were delighted to find two circular earthwork platforms – carved out of the slope on their south sides and projecting out above the slope on their north sides. As part of Bridgeman’s design, each of these *rond-points* supported a circle of trees, planted at both ends of the western half of the King Charles Ride. Restoration of these key features became our priority but the reality of the HLF budget and the amount of tree clearance required meant that we had to settle for the restoration of just one of the *rond-points* – the one that marks the change in direction of the King Charles Ride.



The south side of the *rond-point* submerged in brambles and trees. The bank at the back of the circular platform is just visible.



View across the north side of the *rond-point*.

The bid for Heritage Lottery funding was successful and clearance of scrub and trees beneath selected view points along the Ride started in the winter of 2012/13 using contractors with chain saws. The effect was immediate – the relationship of the ride with the mansion in the distance below, and with the surrounding landscape, was re-established. Towards the end of October 2013 work started to clear the trees on the slope beneath the *rond-point* and the *rond-point* itself was cleared of brambles, scrub and small trees. The two largest trees on the platform were left standing – it is a Woodland Trust site after all! When we visited the site on 7 November to advise on the positioning of the new circle of trees, we were astonished at the transformation: the views to Tring and the landscapes beyond were quite stunning. This was surely one of the most spectacular *rond-points* to be created in England!



The south side after clearance. With a diameter of c.34 metres it appears huge!



The north side after clearance – what a view! Measuring out the planting positions for the ring of trees from the cone at the centre of the circle.

The new circle of trees will be planted during the coming winter, the *rond-point* will be enhanced with a new circular path and an information panel will be erected on the approach to explain the historical significance of the restoration. The original intention of the feature needs no explanation – it is there laid out in the landscape for anyone to see. Watch this space for more photos as the restoration progresses!

Charles Bridgeman's landscape design for Tring Park is shown in a bird's eye view by Thomas Badeslade (1739) and in the plan of Tring by Joseph Colbeck (1719), both of which can be seen in *The Parks and Gardens of West Hertfordshire* (2000) and in *Hertfordshire Garden History: A Miscellany* (2007).