

National Trust - Wimpole Sunday Stroll

A short walk & talk in the park near the hall. Distance 1.25 miles. Time 1 hr to 1¼ hr. Explains the history of Wimpole, and why the landscape looks the way it is.

Starting off

The guide needs a set of laminated images and maps (from staff room in Stable block).

Start at stables [1851 by Henry Kendall] , and walk to the Church [Henry Flitcroft 1748]. Enter graveyard (beware rabbit holes). Point out war graves/memorials – e.g. the three Skinner brothers who lost their lives in WW1. Also graves of lifetime servants. Pass church door – could enter briefly if group is small, to observe side chapel with tombs of Wimpole owners.

Point 1

Stop at the Bambridge grave on the Hall side of the church. Use the modern map to show position of Wimpole at intersection of two roman roads [Ermine Street main road from London to York]. New car park unearthed Iron Age and Roman remains, so long continual habitation. Settlement of Wimpole was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086.

Face the church, and point out the blank wall of Chicheley chapel – in 1428 Wimpole manor and estate acquired by Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury. This is the first of our known owners, and it remained in his family for some 250 years.

Face the Hall. The grave is that of Elsie and George Bambridge, the last occupants of the estate. Mrs Bambridge bequeathed 2,400 acres to the National Trust on her death in 1976. At peak, the estate covered 11,000 acres. Elsie was the daughter and heir of Rudyard Kipling, and it was Kipling royalty money that kept the house going. George died 1943, so Elsie lived alone for 33 years, with very few servants. She demolished the rickety servants wing which would have nearly filled from church to hall – that's why no big kitchen in hall!

Head for hall, and pass through a gate to stand in gravel area facing front of house.

Point 2a

Sir Thomas Chicheley, wool merchant, MP, a Royalist in the Civil War, was responsible for the building of the 7-bay central block of Wimpole Hall from 1640 and demolition of the moated manor house. Forced to sell the estate (because of costs of his high living) for £51,000 in 1686 to John Cutler (grocer).

Daughter Elizabeth Cutler marries Charles Robartes, 2nd Earl Radnor, who then sells to John Holles, 1st Duke of Newcastle, His daughter Henrietta marries Edward, Lord Harley (Earl of Oxford). In London, Oxford Street, Harley Street and Wimpole Street are adjacent.

1720 Hall extended by Gibbs for Harley book collection. Harley is an over-collector (original British Library is mainly his). Chapel 1724 (Thornhill) - fake windows to right for symmetry.

In 1740 Harley was forced (bankruptcy) to sell estate to Philip Yorke, Earl of Hardwicke – his family hold Wimpole for 150 years. In 1742, Flitcroft uniform design for South front. Statue on top is Charity giving to the poor! Walk South down gravel drive to Avenue.

Point 2b

1725 Charles Bridgeman planted the South Avenue of elms - double rows 50 feet apart for over two miles. Bassingbourn Airfield was US Army Air Force from 1942 to 1945. The 91st Bombardment Group flew B-17 Flying Fortresses. South Avenue used as a navigation aid, and to hide planes. Dutch elm disease killed them in the 1970s - replanted with lime trees.

Look back at house. In 1842 - extensions and modification were made to the Hall by Henry Kendall, including Victorian conservatory (west side) and domestic area (kitchen and

servants wing to the east. These were demolished by Elsie in the 1950s.

Walk west to where there are hollows in the ground on left. These were the water garden shown on the Kip engraving. Stress the straight-line formal nature of early 18C gardens.

Point 3

Continue along the drive to where a grass path leads NE to the west end of the house. Point out the position of the deserted Wimpole hamlets at Thresham End (South) and Bennall End (here). They were present in 1638 but deserted over the next 150 years for gardens and deer park. Point out ridge and furrow on hillside – not ploughed since 17C – two strips = one acre.

Point out that beyond the gate to the west is the site of the WW2 American Hospital. From 1944 Wimpole hosted an American Hospital treating army casualties, an experimental teacher training college, a community school, emergency local authority housing, and lastly a Maternity Hospital. During 1959/60, the USAF Hospital was decommissioned and all the buildings and roads were completely removed.

Point 4

Turn north east across the grass towards the hall, passing old avenue of Walnut trees – approach to original moated manor.

Go to Ha-ha at the end west end of the garden - surprise! Point out the east-west avenues and the flower beds laid out to the Victorian pattern. Parterres were restored in the 1990s when revealed after snow. The location of the Greening garden of 1750 can be seen from here with its 11ft walls and 600,000 bricks. The plan is dated 1752 (in drawings pack).

The east avenue is also visible from here –mention Victoria Drive taken by Victoria and Albert in 1843. They were already in Cambridge hence accessing the estate from the eastern end. Earl of Hardwick was Lord-in-Waiting to Queen Victoria.

Point 5

Walk up the hill to viewpoint at top. In 1760s/70s Capability Brown worked at Wimpole. He removed formal features by felling some of the avenues of trees and incorporated farmland into the park. Woodland belts are also classic Brown features along with serpentine lakes, follies and parkland. Following the fashion of the day, for nature rather than formality.

Walk to the bridge over the fosse (ditch). Look north to the Folly, aka 'Gothic Tower' 1772 on Johnson's Hill, To the east are the walls of the walled garden of 1752. Using the Kip engraving explain the position of the bowling green and later walls of the enclosed garden.

2008 Film “Easy Virtue” starring Colin Firth and Kristin Scott Thomas was partly filmed here. There is a romantic scene in the folly and other scenes at the farm, in the grounds and in the Hall's basement. It is based on a Noel Coward play.

Point 6

Walk down to the double gate in the railings behind the house. Point out view through the house via Yellow Drawing Room (John Soane 1790).

Stand on the mid line of house to Folly, about 10 paces north of the gate. This is the position of the brick-built foundation of the 20-pace diameter fountain shown on the Kip engraving, fed with water by wooden pipes from Johnson's Hill. It was built, probably for the Earl of Radnor in the 1690's. It replaced an earlier garden only known from archaeology, probably built by Thomas Chicheley when he built the first house.

Head west to the Ha-Ha, to front of hall and end the tour.

Paul Hardy 2023 after original by Mike Coles 2012. Much amended.

This is not an official National Trust document, but a set of personal notes!