



ASHTON COURT ESTATE

a glimpse into the future

Foreword

When people think of Bristol and the places that define its character, culture and heritage, Ashton Court Estate will always figure prominently; together with the Docks, Clifton Suspension Bridge and the Avon Gorge.

The park's Grade 2* status on the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks and Gardens recognises its regional and national importance. The nationally important collection of veteran oaks, and the rare beetles they support, has resulted in the estate being designated by English Nature as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

Ashton Court's primary importance to the people of the Bristol region however is as a place for recreation and popular culture. It was for this reason that the first City and County of Bristol in their wisdom paid £100,000 in 1959 to add the estate to Bristol's rich portfolio of public parks and green spaces. Today Ashton Court is the third most visited park in the country, welcoming 1.6 million visitors each year.

The challenge for the city council **then** was to arrest the dereliction and decline that the house and grounds had suffered since the death of Lady Smythe in 1947 and for a number of years previously. A great deal of work, paid and voluntary was carried out in the 1960's and 70's to stabilize the house, the lodges and other historic features and to bring the gardens and grounds into a suitable condition to make the park accessible to visitors.

All of the work was carried out with the very best intentions and some to good effect. But some, as we now know in the light of extensive surveys and research, was misplaced.

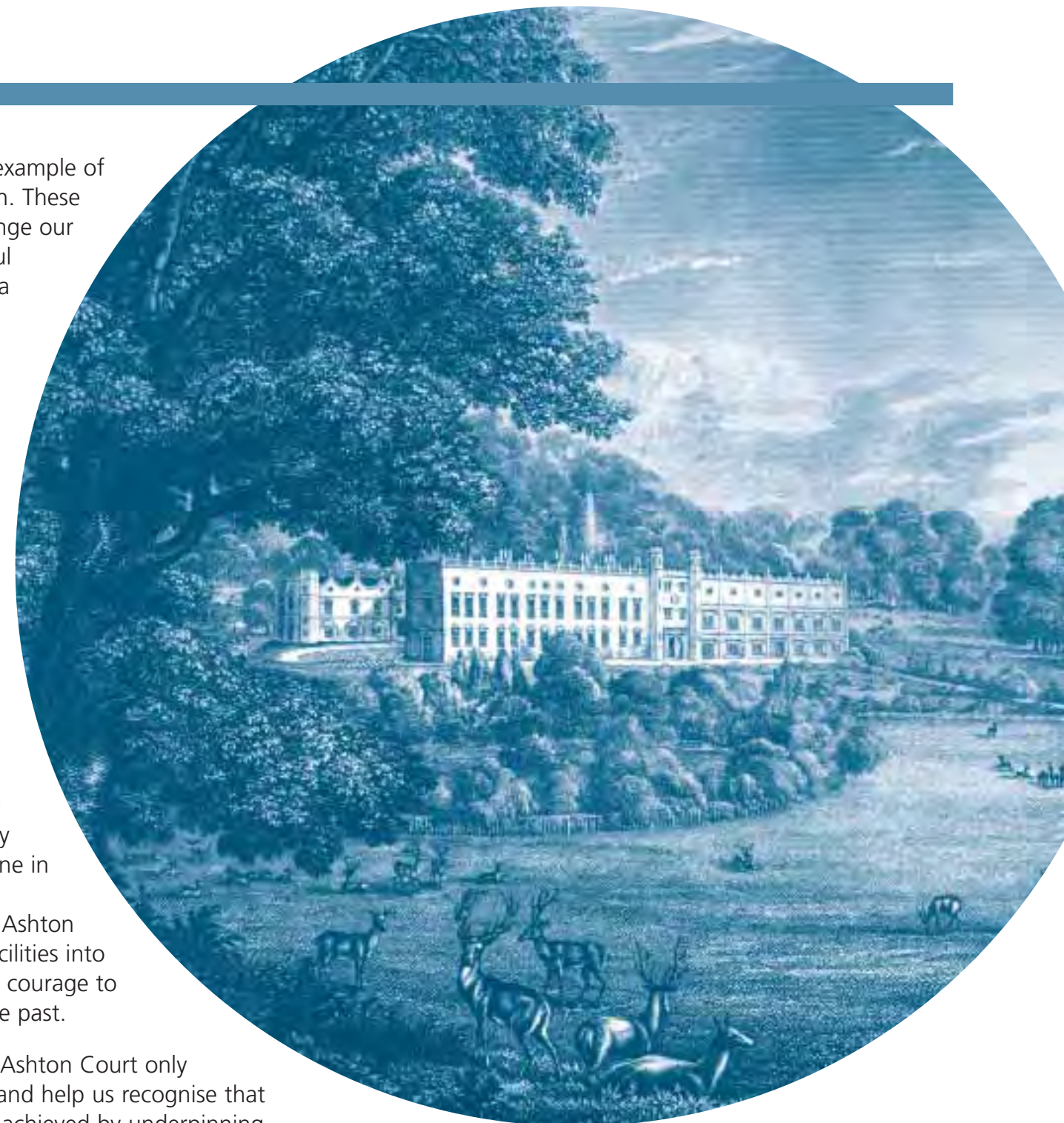
During the last decade, much good work has been carried out by the city council to further the aims of the 1991 Historic Landscape Survey and Restoration Plan. The removal of large numbers of self sown trees to secure the

future of the veteran oaks is an example of bold and courageous intervention. These early 90s works started to challenge our low expectations for this beautiful place, and for the city's parks as a whole, to help us see how much further you can go if you don't settle for second best.

But the estate has never had the major investment that it needs to bring it up to a standard of repair that can be sustained by cyclical maintenance. We therefore hope that this application for grant assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund to achieve this primary goal will be successful and provide the cash injection that the park so badly needs.

The challenge for the city council **now** as custodians of a nationally important landscape is to intervene in a sensitive and informed way to conserve the qualities that make Ashton Court special, bring the visitor facilities into the 21st century and to have the courage to undo some of the mistakes of the past.

The Heritage Lottery's interest in Ashton Court only serves to strengthen our resolve and help us recognise that our long term vision can only be achieved by underpinning this major capital investment with sustainable funding, to deliver the very highest standards in park management with the estate being responsible for its own financial resources. Long term planning and continuity are the watchwords; quick fix reactive response, ad hoc additions and pro-tem repairs will be a thing of the past.



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The Vision

The city council's vision for the future of Ashton Court is of a place where:

- The art of the registered landscape and the setting of the listed house have been restored and re-invigorated for present and future generations to enjoy
- People will find the art of the designed landscape interpreted in a variety of interesting and accessible ways, together with the estate's unique history, ecology and archaeology
- Visitors can re-discover views and vistas lost to previous generations
- People can understand through direct experience that conserving living landscapes is a dynamic process; visitors can feel part of change for the better
- People can choose from a diversity of experiences on each visit: from the big skies of the wildflower meadows grazed by rare breeds of sheep and cattle to the atmospheric mediaeval oak woods of Clarkencombe grazed by Fallow Deer, to the warmth and scented intimacy of the Exotic Garden
- People can find visual and spiritual relief from the hustle and bustle of the nearby city, to find a place to 'stand and stare' and 'smell the flowers'



- Wildlife habitats are managed in accordance with ecological best practice, to add another layer of interest to the landscape and to enhance the visitor experience
- Visitors can leave their vehicles behind safely in parks designed for cars and venture into a park designed and managed for people; where children, pets and wildlife move about in freedom and safety and the birdsong is not drowned out by car engines and stereos
- Those with cars and others without can still get here by bus or tram, and move around the park courtesy of the popular land train
- Visitors will find gardens and reception facilities are legible and accessible to all
- People can choose where they eat and drink: between the historic Stables Café overlooking the courtyard and gardens or the Plateau Pavilion in its natural setting, surrounded by trees and wildflower meadows grazed by sheep and cattle.
- Visitors will find clean and accessible toilets close at hand
- People, on their own or in groups, can relax, unwind and feel comfortable here, without fears for their property or personal security.
- People, especially children can sit, lie or roll about in the gardens safe in the knowledge that they are dog free

- The gardens are a model of horticultural excellence and diversity and are cared for by a friendly team of estate gardeners who are a daily, visible presence
- Local people can develop their life skills and careers through hands-on work experience and training as part of the estate team
- Children, and the child like, will find that the whole estate is an inspiring and engaging play ground
- Events are part of the Ashton Court landscape and take place in a sustainable fashion with respect for the estate's historic fabric and ecology.
- Festival visitors can be inspired by the skies above Ashton Court teeming with massive balloons, by the diversity and energy of world music, or by the aerobic kite flyers.
- Visitors can get to (and away from) popular annual events like the International Balloon Fiesta and the Community Festival more safely and conveniently by a variety of sustainable transport options as well as private vehicles
- The Mansion sits majestically within its garden, fully restored and buzzing with public and private functions as one of the most popular and prestigious destinations of its kind in the region



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Upgrading Ashton Court will improve not only people's enjoyment of the park but also raise their expectations of public service delivery in their city. In this way our work will make a powerful contribution to the ongoing cultural development of Bristol and its people.



By tackling head on the notion that municipal equals second best, that only the National Trust brand equals quality, we will demonstrate that bringing back the best of an historic designed landscape in this way is meaningful to people.



We will demonstrate that restoring public parks is not about putting the clock back, or the preserve of the few, but instead defines the role of major public parks like Ashton Court as national icons of 21st century popular culture.



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Barbara Janke
Leader
Bristol City Council

Anne White
Chair, Environment,
Transport and Leisure
Bristol City Council

Carew Reynell
Head of Paid Service
Bristol City Council

Dr Andy King
Area Manager for the
Somerset &
Gloucestershire Team
English Nature

John Savage
Managing Director
and Chief executive
Bristol Chamber of
Commerce

Dr Kevin Brown
Regional Director
English Heritage SW

Mike Innes
Clifton College