

Otterhead Lakes Local Nature Reserve

The Heritage of a Victorian Estate

The Otterhead Estate

The Estate was developed in Victorian times and by the 1890's included over 1700 acres of land mainly in the parishes of Churchstanton and Otterford, now in the Borough of Taunton Deane, Somerset but until the 1890s, Churchstanton was in Devon.

The heart of the Estate, a steep sided section of the River Otter valley, is leased from Wessex Water by the not for profit Otterhead Estate Trust Co. Ltd., set up to conserve and part restore built heritage features and the designed landscape as well as continuing the work of Somerset Wildlife Trust in this recently designated Local Nature Reserve.

The earliest description of Week Farm, predecessor of Otterhead House, is from 1817 and soon after William and Mary Oliver of Kingston St. Mary acquired land in both parishes, which their son-in-law William Beadon developed as the Otterhead Estate.

Beadon, a surgeon, inventor and radical politician, has been described as transforming Week Farm but it is not clear whether the transformation referred only to changed land use or whether the farmhouse became with additions Otterhead House.

There are anomalies regarding the early history of Otterhead House and its walled gardens but the designed landscape at Hestercombe was the likely inspiration for Otterhead as the Beadons lived at nearby Gotton House.

Following the death of William Beadon in 1864, Sir John Mellor of Culmhead, a Justice of the Queen's Bench, acquired most of the estate and a few years later the neighbouring Royston Estate. During the 1880's William Beadon's two lakes, one of which may have had earlier origins, were enlarged and became known as the Otterhead Middle Lakes when additional lakes were constructed upstream and downstream.

The Lewis Lloyd family of Radnorshire, forced to move because of the Birmingham Corporation's reservoirs scheme, became the new owners in 1893. By that time, this part of the Estate resembled a mile long water garden with a chain of seven lakes of varying sizes, ponds and two leats. Additional farms were acquired but a decline in the Estate's fortunes was imminent.

Otterhead House and surrounding land was let to tenants, the last being Sir William Goschen. Most of the Estate farms were sold in 1919. The lease of the house and surrounding land ended in 1938. Taunton Corporation acquired the property from the Lewis Lloyd Trust as a water catchment. With no long-term use for the house, gardens or the many specimen trees, these fell into a state of disrepair. Successive water undertakings have owned the Estate since then.

The Estate's history has meant that for a hundred years, there has been little incentive for modernisation and the heart of the Estate remained almost unchanged from the 1880's until the 1930's even though the resident families were affected by events of the time, especially the First World War. Much of a Victorian landscape and infrastructure still survives though often hidden or unrecognised.

There have been significant heritage losses including Otterhead House which was the first of several demolitions. Most features that have survived are at risk.



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The new Estate Trust intends, subject to funding, to reverse the trend so that this survival of the social, economic and horticultural history of the Blackdown Hills will become an increasingly important community education resource, as well as providing more opportunities for walking and other quiet leisure pursuits.

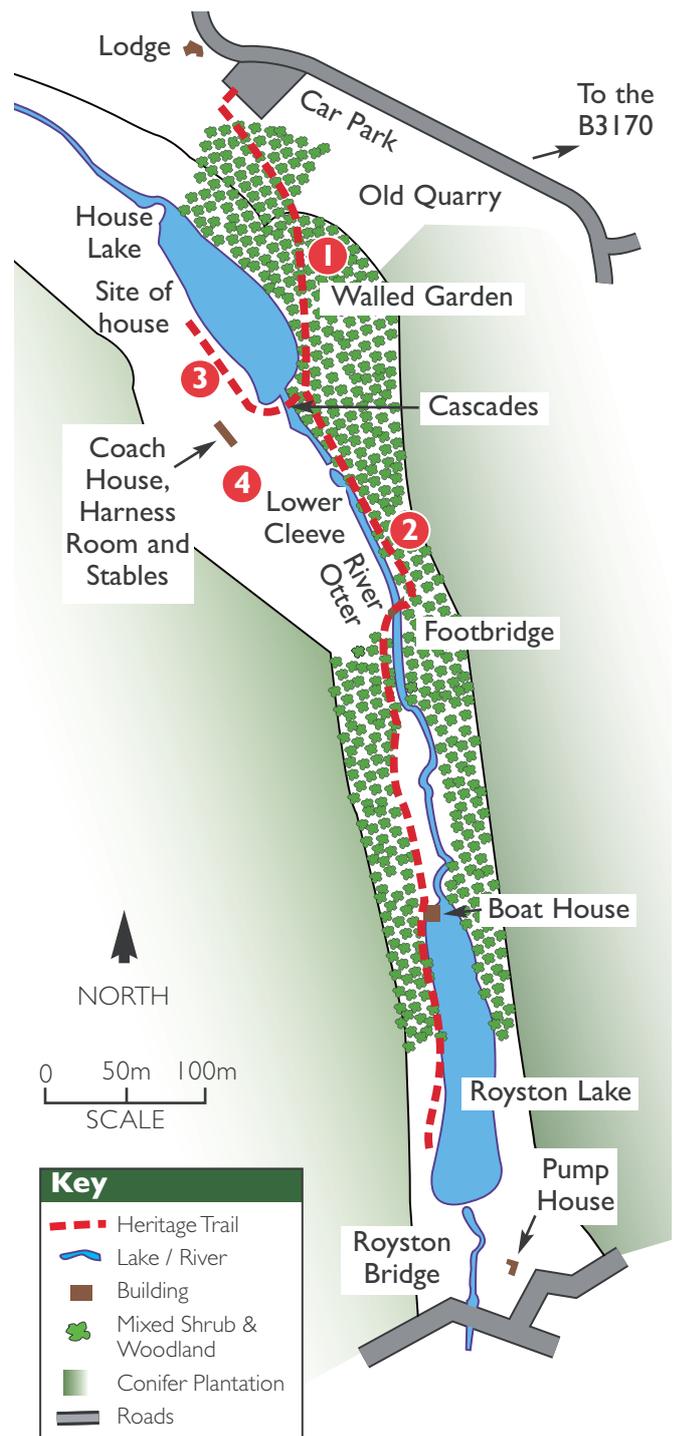
Some of Otterhead's heritage features

1 From the car park follow the drive downhill bearing right at the first junction. Soon there are steps on the left that lead to a collapsed doorway into the lower of the two walled gardens. Both gardens are closed due to the poor condition of the walls. The laurel hedge on the right of the drive is at least 100 years old. The drive continues across the dam and bridge of the House Lake, one of the Otterhead Middle Lakes; but take the left turn just before the bridge. Two cascades on the right are in poor condition but an old photograph will help restorers.

2 The path continues with the disused bypass leat (Victorian technology to reduce lakes silting) on the left and the River Otter on the right. At the first footbridge, the situation reverses, as there was also an aqueduct for the leat. Beyond, the river flows through the remains of Otterhead Lower Lakes with remains of dams and former waterfalls all visible from the path. The flight of lakes ends with the largest of the Otterhead Lakes, the still surviving Royston Lake.

3 Return the way you came and cross the bridge above the cascades. Beyond a gate on the right, the drive continues as a sunken feature partly under rhododendrons. The site of Otterhead House is in front of you. The steps by an oak tree are just beyond the house site and led to lawns, flower borders, tennis courts and more gardens. The sites of the tennis courts are at the end of the grassed area and have been partly planted with trees.

4 Return to the gateway and bear right. A former pond on the left among laurel is a relic of the House Leat that powered a water mill, a water pump, a smaller water wheel as well as providing water for grazing animals during hot weather by continuing as a contour leat along the slope of the pasture beyond the laurels. The building to the right of the drive contained the coach house, harness room and stables. The rhododendron by the far gable is 'Cornish Red'. This drive continues past the back of Otterhead House and then after a branch on left to the former Estate yard, it passes former lawns and more heritage rhododendrons.



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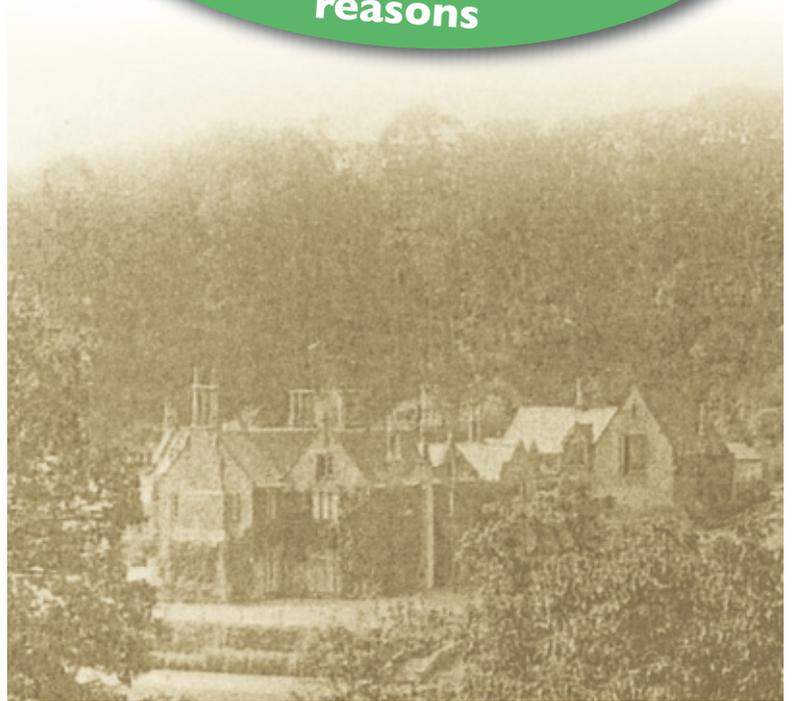
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Joining the Friends of Otterhead will provide opportunities to help restore the majority of the Estate closed at present for safety reasons

Visitors should keep to clearly visible paths as dangerous deep silt is found in former lakebeds and leats. Naturally occurring spring line mires can be equally dangerous to everyone though small children and dogs would be particularly at risk if leaving the visible paths.

Please remember that the lakes provide drinking water for Taunton and that nesting birds will be present in the woodland during summer months so **please keep dogs on a lead at all times.**



If you require further information please contact:

Otterhead Estate Trust Co Ltd

C/o Blackdown Hills,
Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty,
Tel: 01823 680681
Email: otterheadestate@aol.com
Web: www.blackdown-hills.net
www.thelocalchannel.co.uk/otterheadestate

Heritage and Landscape Team,

Taunton Deane Borough Council,
The Deane House, Belvedere Road,
TAUNTON, TA1 1HE
Tel: 01823 356562
Email:
heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk

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Bengali

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Chinese

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Hindi

अगर आप इस दस्तावेज़ का अनुवाद दूसरी भाषाओं या ब्रेल, बड़े अक्षरों वाली छपाई, ऑडियो टेप, या सीडी में चाहते हैं, तो कृपया हमें इस नंबर पर फ़ोन कीजिये 01823 356562 या यहाँ ईमेल कीजिये heritage.landscape@tauntondeane.gov.uk

Portuguese

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Polish

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