

NTS-LMC Spring Tour 2023: Perthshire

This year's Spring Tour was to Big Tree Country, as Perthshire styles itself – with every justification. Where else might we have gazed up into the branches of a champion Wellingtonia with a girth of 36 feet, as we did at **Cluny House Gardens** near Loch Tay? Happily, this escaped damage when the devastating Storm Arwen, which swept across Scotland in November 2021, brought down thirty spruce trees around it.

Our base was in the charming town of Dunkeld, where the NTS owns and preserves twenty houses. At the end of a mile-long drive, the purple rhododendrons and yellow azaleas surrounding our hotel were at their peak during our visit. Across the River Tay is **The Hermitage**, also owned and managed by the NTS, where Douglas Firs tower over the riverside paths. The trees are named after the Perthshire botanist, David Douglas, born at Scone.

At nearby **Queen's View**, the vista stretches along the wooded hillsides of Loch Tummel and beyond on a clear day.



Elsewhere, we saw trees which are the sole survivors of an earlier age. In the grounds of **Dunkeld Cathedral**, one tall larch is all that remains of a group planted over 250 years ago. Similarly, the nearby **Birnam Oak** is the last vestige of the medieval forest celebrated in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. *"I will not be afraid of death and bane, Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane"*, says the king, only to find his enemies advancing towards him, concealed behind boughs of oak. It came as a surprise to learn that, from early childhood, **Beatrix Potter** - usually associated with the Lake District - spent many holidays across the Tay from this iconic tree. There, she wrote 'The Tale of Peter Rabbit', and is commemorated in a small exhibition and garden in Birnam.

Blair Castle



For the NTS, Perthshire is about landscape and trees, rather than grand houses and castles, but we were able to visit two properties in private hands.

Scone Palace



After a 'wee dram' at **Blair Athol Distillery** (which, despite its name, is in Pitlochry), we came to the lovely **Blair Castle**, owned by the Duke of Atholl. A bagpiper heralded our arrival - or so we liked to think. A few days later, we were at **Scone Palace**, home to the Earl of Mansfield. On Moot Hill, Kenneth MacAlpin was the first monarch to be enthroned in 843. The Stone of Destiny was seized from there by Edward I's forces in 1296, but a replica of it and the Coronation Chair can be seen in the Palace. In 2024, the Stone will return to Perthshire when it is moved from Edinburgh Castle to its new permanent home in Perth Museum.

Scone Palace Gardens



Going still further back in time are crannogs – Iron Age thatched huts built on wooden piles in a loch. Sadly, a reconstruction at the **Crannog Centre** on Loch Tay was destroyed by fire two years ago. But enthusiastic volunteers at the site emphasised to us the level of skill of the inhabitants 2,500 years ago, whether in weaving, cooking or crafting tools for building. We tasted a morsel of their bread (not so very different from today's), and admired the range of colours they could produce from plants for dyeing fabrics.

The climate and soils of Perthshire lend themselves to the development of lovely gardens. Nowhere could be more formal, or more French, than the parterres of **Drummond Castle Gardens**, best viewed from the terraces above.

Drummond Castle Gardens



The NTS's **Branklyn Garden** in Perth, on the other hand, feels intimate. It celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2022, having been developed by John and Dorothy Renton around their Arts & Crafts house. This is now used partly as a tearoom serving delicious scones, which we enjoyed at tables on the lawn. Their interest in the plants and trees of Kashmir, Bhutan, and Tibet is evident, and we were delighted to see the blue Himalayan poppy in flower. Different again are the wild woodland gardens of **Cluny House** (mentioned above), where we saw red squirrels frolicking among the trees.



Since the NTS-LMC's last visit to Perthshire in 2004, **The Library of Innerpeffray**, near Crieff, has been made more welcoming for visitors. Established in 1680, it was Scotland's first free public lending library, and was used by the local community until 1968. Volunteers were proud to show us some of the fine books on the shelves and in the display cases.

A less happy aspect of the county's history has been preserved at **Stanley Mills**, where the power of the waters of the Tay, and later electricity, drove machinery that manufactured cotton textiles for 200 years. Today, the imagined voices of workers in the mill help to recreate the atmosphere of those times.

One evening, we had the pleasure of entertaining to dinner the NTS-LMC's President and his wife, the **Earl and Countess of Kinnoull**, who were pleased to meet some of our members.



Elinor Evans

While they retain a family seat near Perth, a former residence of the Earls, Balhousie Castle, is now the home of the **Black Watch Museum** where we learned about the Regiment's pivotal role in military campaigns across the world.



Balhousie Castle

Another evening, **Elinor Evans** came from Edinburgh to give us a recital on her clarsach, including a few of her own compositions. The music was delightful, and we were full of admiration for her enthusiasm and skill on this small harp.

With so much to see in Big Tree Country, we were pleased to have blue skies and sunshine for our Tour. Only as we were leaving did the first drops of rain begin to fall.

Margaret Cund



The tour gathering in Dunkeld at benches donated by the LMC in memory of David Cripps