

Chiswick House & Gardens - Aviva Fellowship Visit April 2015.

We boarded the train to Chiswick on a sunny Wednesday morning and before long we were passing through the leafy suburbs of west London. After a short walk from Chiswick station, we arrived at our destination, Chiswick House. Early arrivals took a brief snack in the Café (RIBA Design Award 2011).

At the House we then met Margaret, our guide for the morning, and we started on what was to be a very interesting and enlightening tour of the house. The first Earl of Burlington had been a supporter of Charles I and had been rewarded with lands in Yorkshire and Ireland. Besides Chiswick House, he also owned a town house in London, naturally named Burlington House, which is now the home of the Royal Academy in Piccadilly.

The 3rd Earl aged 20, in 1714, embarked on a 'grand tour' of Europe, and had returned with a total of 878 crates of collectables. A fire in the old Jacobean mansion prompted the 3rd Earl to re-house his collection, so the present Chiswick House was built between 1726-9 in the Palladian style by the designers William Kent (also brought back from Italy!) and Inigo Jones. As this separate 'Villa' from the existing house was designed solely for his collection, it contained neither a kitchen nor any bedrooms.

Moving from room to room looking at the paintings and sculptures Margaret also explained the 'hidden' Catholic support messages some contained. Many original items are now in the Chatsworth collection as the property passed in 1753 by marriage to their estates and from 1984 owned by English Heritage. In passing Margaret pointed out one part of the Villa's early re-design features were for small doors under the windows for ventilation, as the obelisk-like chimneys didn't work!

After the tour of the house, we all repaired as a group to our reserved area of the Café for a light lunch and refreshments.

After lunch we then met Rosemarie outside the House who was to be our guide for the afternoon tour of the Gardens. We learnt it is generally accepted Chiswick House Gardens are the birthplace of English Landscape Movement. Apart from the 'natural' garden design, they feature a lake, many notable sculptures, architectural delights and include an Ionic Temple. The gardens are now a public park and managed by the Trust with volunteer gardeners ably assisting several mornings a week. We ended the tour in the Conservatory, which now houses an impressive collection of Camellias, the oldest such collection under glass in the Western world.

A further visit is a must and thanks go to our Organiser for what proved to be an interesting and memorable day.

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