

The most dramatic change to the landscape, however, was the construction of the Dudley No.2 canal. When opened in 1779, it had reduced the extent of Priory Pool and blocked views across Halesowen.

John Hodgetts sold The Leasowes in 1765 and, after several further changes in ownership, it was purchased in 1934 by Halesowen Council, which became part of Dudley Council in 1974.

In 2008 work got underway to restore the landscape to its former glory, with restoration works taking place to Virgils Grove using Shenstone's original design. The high cascade was also rebuilt, footpaths returned to their original layout and many new trees and wildflowers replanted. The project, which was completed by December 2008, was funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Wildlife at The Leasowes

The Leasowes is not only an historic landscape but also a nature reserve. The site has several different habitats, including woodland, grasslands ponds and streams, each one providing a home for, and supporting many different species.

In the 18th century, the woodland would probably have been a mixture of wood pasture and coppice with standards. The major tree species seem to have been oak and beech with an under story of hazel and would have been managed to produce timber and materials for charcoal and fencing.

The woodland is now managed to benefit the wildlife, which includes a variety of species such as green and great spotted woodpeckers, tawny owls, badgers, wood mouse, bank voles, bluebells, wood anemone and many more.

At The Leasowes there are a number of ponds, streams and wetland areas; important to wildlife as they support a wide variety of species such as the emperor dragonfly, frog, toad, newt, kingfisher, daubentons bat, stickleback fish and grey wagtails.

The farmland of the 18th century would have been a mixture of arable and pasture; indeed the name 'Leasowes' means meadow and parts of the site still retain evidence of the former ridge and furrow ploughing system.

Some of the grassland areas have remained undisturbed for centuries and are therefore of great value to wildlife, supporting many wildflowers, invertebrates, small mammals and fungi including the rare Ballerina and Crimson waxcap species.



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Location

The Leasowes
Leasowes Lane
Off Mucklow Hill
Halesowen
West Midlands
B62 8DH

The Leasowes lies east of Halesowen, not far from junction 3 of the M5 motorway.

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The Leasowes

a guide to the historic landscape and nature reserve



The Leasowes

Nestled to the east of Halesowen, the enchanting landscape of The Leasowes holds great historical significance in the borough and beyond and is home to many wonderful species that live in its woodland, grassland, streams and lakes.

Designed and created by poet William Shenstone between 1743 and 1763, the historic park has been ranked highly with the likes of prestigious landscapes including Blenheim and Stow and is now Grade 1 listed on the English Heritage register of parks and gardens of special historic interest in England.

During its lifespan the fortunes of the site have waxed and waned but its most treasured hidden gem, Virgils Grove and other aspects of the site were restored to their former glory when £1.3million of Heritage Lottery Funding was used to bring the site back to life.

Visitors can make the most of opportunities to while away the days across the 57 hectare site, whether it's a walk along the many footpaths taking in the wonderful views or exploring the wildlife and wildflowers that have made a home for themselves.

Read on to discover more about the Shenstone's family connections to the site, the era under William Shenstone and the wildlife.



The Shenstone family

It was in the early 18th century that the Shenstone family moved from the nearby Lapal to The Leasowes and on November 5 1714 William Shenstone was born to parents Thomas and Anne.

Shenstone's early education was under a school-dame in Halesowen, whom he later immortalised in his poem, 'The School Mistress'. Subsequently he attended Halesowen Grammar School before going to academy in Solihull and to Pembroke College in Oxford in 1732.

Thomas Shenstone died in 1724 leaving William and his younger brother Joseph in the care of their mother. She continued to manage the farm until her death in 1732. The guardianship of the land passed to John Spencer and later to Thomas Dolman (William's uncle), before William took over the estate in the early 1740s.

Shenstone admitted that he was a poor farmer and only ever wanted to write poetry. His poems were occasionally published until 1755 when Robert Dodsley included some of his work in a book of modern poems. The book was a best seller and Shenstone's poems became very popular.

He was preparing his collected works for publication when he died of fever in February 1763 and was buried in Halesowen churchyard. Shenstone did not marry and his estate passed to John Hodgetts, a distant relative.

The Leasowes is renowned both nationally and internationally for its significance in marking a fundamental change in garden design.

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The William Shenstone era

The Leasowes is renowned both nationally and internationally for its significance in marking a fundamental change in garden design.

At the time, gardens in Britain were laid in formal designs with rigid lines of trees and shaped flowerbeds and pools. This was Shentone's original approach to landscaping The Leasowes but he soon abandoned this for a style that respected and utilised the natural landscape.

He was not a wealthy man; indeed, if Shenstone had the means he would have probably continued with his formal designs. He worked in an unplanned fashion, forced to economise and to use his imagination, which is why it became such a unique landscape.

Shenstone transformed parts of his property into a 'ferme ornee' – an ornamental farm. Not only did he introduce cascades and pools into the natural waterways, constructed ruins and seats to decorate the landscape, dedicated urns to the memory of friends and planted trees and shrubs to highlight the views both within the site and more importantly the surrounding countryside.

The distinct features added by Shenstone developed into a themed walk, which visitors to the site can still enjoy today.

Although famous during Shenstone's life, The Leasowes reputation increased after his death, due largely to the publication of 'A Description of The Leasowes' by Robert Dodsley in 1765. This described the circuit path, which led visitors through the varied landscape, allowing visitors to tour The Leasowes. Visitors to the site have included Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Wesley.

In the years since, fortunes have increased and declined. The house itself was rebuilt in 1778 and several other buildings including the Ruined Priory, survived until the 1960s. Sections of the circuit walk remain, but many of Shenstone's original trees have gone.



North Valley



Priory Pool



High Cascade



Top Wood



The Leasowes

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Daisies in Stennels Fields



Top of the High Cascade



View point from Virgil's Grove

