

Hermits' Heritage



Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal, just three miles from Ripon, form the Harrogate district's own world heritage site. The Fountains estate attracts visitors by the thousand, each wanting to sample the special atmosphere which the area exudes. But, as Profile writer JEREMY BLACKMORE discovered, a dedicated team of workers and specialists are undertaking an on-going programme behind the scenes to restore the site for future generations to enjoy

THE FIRST RECORDED VISITORS to what we now call Fountains was a 13-strong group of 12th century monks looking to live as hermits and seek their souls' salvation.

In the lush valley of Skelldale, three miles from Ripon, the monks found a special atmospheric place where they were to build one of the finest abbeys in the country.

Last year visitor numbers were somewhat up on 13 — 295,000 came to sample for themselves the magic that still is Fountains 858 years since the monks first settled in the area.

The extensive abbey ruins with the adjacent deer park and 18th century water garden of Studley Roger form the National Trust's most-visited property in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

Most tourists agree a visit to the estate is a unique experience. As the Trust says, no other site in Europe contains such a rich variety of monuments from past ages giving an unparalleled opportunity to appreciate the range of England's heritage.

Preserving this special site is an on-going, never-ending task.

The National Trust, which acquired it in 1983, has set about a major restoration programme alongside the work of English Heritage which has guardianship of the abbey.

The abbey began life after the monks left their order in York aghast at its relaxed atmosphere and wanting a back-to-basics life of prayer, worship, meditation, and manual work.

Over a period of 350 years the abbey was built and constantly added to as the monks increased their wealth.

But deterioration set in after Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and the ransacking of the abbey for stone to build Fountains Hall — itself now benefiting from National Trust restoration work.

Meanwhile Studley Royal's magnifi-



cent water garden owes its beauty to a political scandal.

Ripon MP John Aislabie was expelled from Parliament and returned to his Yorkshire estates where for 20 years he poured all his energies and imagination into the creation of his garden.

Full of temples, follies, and vistas, the garden was a masterpiece.

Aislabie harnessed the River Skell into two canals, a half-moon pond, and a lake.

The area stood out in a period where elaborate gardens were like status symbols.

Only the ruined Fountains Abbey, visible from his garden, lay out of

Aislabie's reach. Ruins were a common feature of an 18th century garden.

Aislabie's son William finally acquired the abbey ruins in 1768.

The estate has since passed through various ancestors and two county councils before the National Trust took over.

Major restoration is needed to return the garden to its former glory.

In the absence of records of Aislabie's original design and intentions, the National Trust has fallen back on the garden as its own best document.

Not wanting to rush things the trust spent the first two-and-a-half years surveying all trees and buildings on the estate.

By logging the information on a computer the trust was able to establish a planting record over the years and to establish what work needed to be done.

Early tasks included restoring Studley's lake, which had become a sea of mud. Some 30,000 tons of mud have been removed from the silted lake.

Other water features needed work, too.

Instead of crisp edges alongside the ponds and canals the stones had become undermined and ragged, resembling the side of a stream.

The trust has set about digging out the stones and replacing them.

The design of the garden's original creator, John Aislabie, is paramount to the Trust in its restoration work.

When garden buildings are restored specialists take off layer after layer of paint to find out the original colour and consistency of the original paint.

The Trust wants to re-create Aislabie's views and vistas, but many are now blocked by mature trees.

Estate manager John Ingall said the Trust would not pull down mature trees, but when the trees blocking Aislabie's vistas reached the end of their natural lives they might not be replaced.