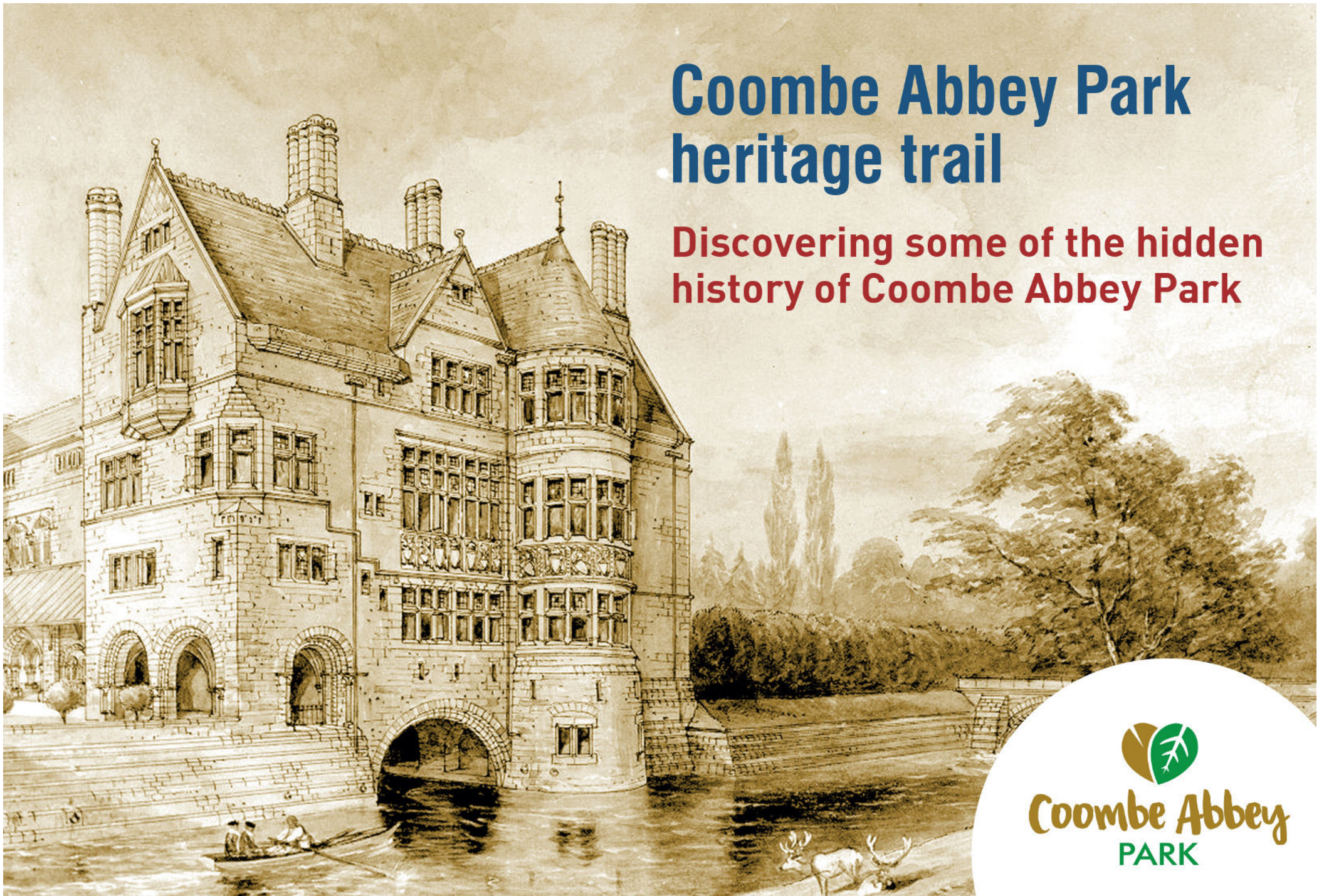


Coombe Abbey Park heritage trail

Discovering some of the hidden
history of Coombe Abbey Park



Coombe Abbey
PARK

Staff and volunteers are always working to manage the conservation within the park whether this is its biodiversity or heritage. On your walk today you will come across new interpretation of some of the areas of the park as well and some hidden not widely known historical aspects.



Coventry City Council

Coombe Abbey Park
Brinklow Road, Binley,
Coventry CV3 2AB

   **Coombeabbeypark**

www.coventry.gov.uk/coombe



heritage open days



The potted historical 'Who's Who' of Coombe!

Meet some of the people who have, over the centuries, stamped their personality onto the park and wider Coombe estate.

Cistercian monks 1150 – 1539

When the land was first given to the Cistercian monks they lived in wooden shacks whilst the Abbey was being constructed. The first Abbey was opened in 1150. At its peak the Abbey was the largest and most influential in Warwickshire, even King Edward iv stayed at the Abbey in 1470. It did not matter however, how successful as sheep and arable farmers the monastic

abbey was, the monks still witnessed murder, bankruptcy and eventually homelessness. With the dissolution of the monasteries in 1539, the abbey and lands “were saved from ruin” and given to King Henry viii.



Lord John Harrington

After changing hands several times, the abbey became the property of Lord Harrington in 1581. Because of the friendship with King James 1, Lord Harrington and his wife became guardians to the then 7-year-old Princess Elizabeth the king's daughter in 1603. Princess Elizabeth was almost kidnapped by the plotters of the Gunpowder plot in 1605 however their plot was foiled when word reached Lord Harrington and he moved the princess into the walled city of Coventry to keep her safe. In later years Princess Elizabeth repaid the Harrington's by almost bankrupting them with her lavish and extravagant lifestyle.



The Craven family 1622 – 1922

Over the centuries, the Craven family have continued to stamp their mark on the abbey and its wider estates. They continued to change the abbey from its monastic start into a loved family home. Over the three hundred years the family were custodian of the abbey they employed a wealth of well know architects and landscape artist to improve their surroundings. Names such as Winde, Brown, Skelton, Nesfield and Miller, all had their hand to play in the development of the Abbey and grounds some of which we can still see today.

Captain William Winde at Coombe during 1682–1686

Winde rebuilt parts of the Abbey building including the centre block and now demolished North wing as well as extensive formal gardens. Winde, although now not that well known, was during his lifetime noted as being one of the foremost architects of the 17th century. The abbey was one of his first independent commissions given to him by his godfather the 1st Earl of Craven.

Capability Brown at coombe from 1771

The 6th Lord of Craven and his wife Elizabeth employed Brown to transform the grounds at Coombe using his known fashionable style of naturalistic compositions to create a fundamentally different garden, to the more formal style that existed. It is his landscaping that forms the basis of the park today.

William Skelton at Coombe intermittently from 1843 for 10 years

The Skelton family were renowned grounds keepers and builders of 'Duck decoys', William Skelton, the son of the famous George Skelton came to the abbey to create a duck decoy within the park grounds.



William Eden Nesfield 1863

Son of the famous Kew garden architect and grounds man, William Eden Nesfield was commissioned to redesign aspects of the main house and garden. Working alongside William Miller, the head gardener, over 4 decades they transformed the garden into its more structured Victorian style. These included green driveways, parkland and elaborate planting schemes.

Lady Cornelia Craven nee Martin

A rich American socialite, The Right Honourable Countess of Craven married the 4th Earl in 1893, bringing with her a vast wealth which she used not only to update the Abbey, but she was also instrumental in the designs of the main drive and arboretum.



Countess Craven C1900

1964 – present

Coventry City Council working with community groups and volunteers are recreating and managing the heritage aspect of the park as well as the biodiversity found within it.



Explore the park and see some of the historic features still visible today.

Burial mound side of hotel car park

This very unassuming mound is in fact the last resting place of many Monks and others buried within, what is now thought to have been, the nave of the original Abbey. Whilst 19th century engineers dug out the moat and the foundations for the stone bridge they found lots of bones believed to have come from the long-lost monks. All the bones were brought here and reburied in the form of the burial mound, reminiscent of a Bronze age barrow, that we can see today.

Stone bridge

As you stand at the side of the grade 1 listed bridge you can see a wealth of different historical points. The gothic arches of the bridge take you through to a stone flagged carriageway which echoes the Nesfield architectural scheme. Under the bridge you will see the Nesfield water feature, the moat, which flows from around the side of the Abbey building and down into the serpentine lake. The gothic revival of the Nesfield period is equally seen by the faux water gate seen down on the right-hand side.

Coombe pool – serpentine lake

Capability Brown swept away most of the regimental, formal parterre gardens designed by Winde with his more flowing natural look. One of his greatest feats was to build the serpentine lake of Coombe pool. The building of the great lake involved damming the River Smite / Smite Brook and then raising the embankment with a bund wall to deepen the water level. Within the lake are a couple of islands utilised today by lots of breeding birds. The pool, a defining feature of the park and when looked at with a bird's eye view, is S shaped, which is how this feature gets the serpentine name. The lake has seen lots of changes over the years the most striking of which was during the Second World War when the whole lake was drained so that it could not be used as an aerial landmark by enemy aircraft to show the way to the City of Coventry.

The Moat

This architectural feature was built by engineers in the 19th century. Nesfield designs for the landscape were inspired by a trip around Europe and some of the

grand houses and estates he had seen there. He wanted to recreate their grandeur within his designs for the Abbey and so the moat and terraces in front of the West Wing of the abbey as we see them today was designed in an Italian style.



Stone steps, wall and griffins

Standing at the base of the stone steps and looking out across the Moat you will see the statue 'The Fisherman and the Nymph' by the renowned, turn of the 19th / 20th century artist, P. G. Bentham. The steps themselves with their Griffins and the stone wall are all grade 2 listed. Designed and installed by Nesfield and Miller in the 19th century as part of their formal gardens renovation they utilized recycled materials found within the estate to embellish their work. If you look closely at the stone HABA wall you will see parts of the original South East Porch set into it.

Formal gardens

The formal garden area is now turned predominantly to grass however over the centuries there has been a wide variety of different planting designs and inspiration. From Princess Elizabeth who liked to walk around the vast parterre gardens to Capability Brown, Nesfield and Miller who have all utilised the space in different ways. Today you will see in the middle of the lawn the ancient Mulberry trees, as the song says... 'Here we go around the Mulberry bush.' On the west side of the gardens you will see a brick-built area surrounded by shrubs, this was originally an aviary built again in the 19th century. This said however when Princess Elizabeth walked the gardens, she had a deep passion for our feathered friends. It is said that she had the first menagerie in Warwickshire

and that it was predominantly different varieties of Birds sent to her by friends from all over the then known world. We do not know where her original menagerie and aviary was, but we do know that she eventually employed a widow and her family to look after all the animals, even going to the trouble of having a little cottage built for them.

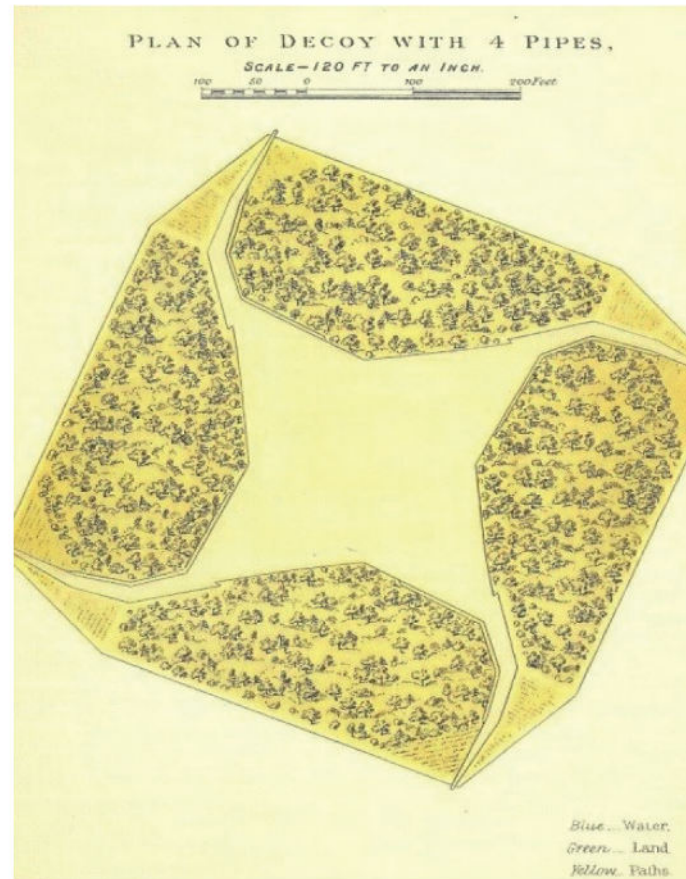
Arboretum

The inspiration of Countess Craven, the arboretum took not only years to plant but a lot of her wealth to source the trees themselves. We can not be certain but there might be a wistfulness in her planting scheme or at least a strong inspiration for being back home in America. As well as the Giant Redwoods you can find Sweet Gum, Black Walnut, Incense Cedar planted alongside the more well-known English Oak, Holly and Ash trees.



Duck Decoy

Built by William Skelton in 1843, the duck decoy was a way of making sure that there was always fresh food on the table of the Abbey for the family. The arms of the decoy are still visible as well as some of the original iron workings. Originally the arms of the decoy would have had a wicker frame over them that narrowed as you came to the end of the arm. A now extinct hound dog similar in looks to a fox was used to herd ducks and geese down the arms so that the game keeper could catch them and then take them to the kitchens of the Abbey.



Pinewood plantation

As you stand in the middle of Wratums field and look around you will still see the pine wood plantations. These were planted by Miller during the 19th century as a cash crop for the estate. Pine is a relatively fast-growing tree species and is used to this day as a cash crop for many of our wooden based items. For Miller however, these were sold as pit props to the local mines some of which were owned by the Craven family. During the second World War the Woman's Timber Corp better known as the 'Lumber Girls' worked on the estate again using the pine wood plantations for pit props and other areas of the war effort.

Bird Hide – View of Boat House

The Bird Hide itself is a modern feature of the park being first put up in the 1980's. The Hide was placed at this spot as it is the ideal place to see into the Special Site of Scientific Interest and the Heronry. The Heronry itself is one of the largest in the Midlands. As you sit and look out over Coombe pool you will see a wooden building on the opposite side of the lake. This is the original capability Brown Boat House.





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