

The Topiary Garden at Levens Hall & Gardens

The Topiary Garden at Levens Hall & Gardens is probably the best-known feature at the independently run visitor attraction, being a Guinness World Record holder, as the world's oldest topiary garden.

The Topiary Garden was founded in 1694, when Colonel James Grahme commissioned Monsieur Guillaume Beaumont to create a topiary garden at Levens Hall. Biographical details are in rather short supply when it comes to this mercurial Frenchman, but we do know he had worked for King James II and is thought to have studied with the well-known landscaper, Andre Le Notre, who designed the gardens at Versailles for Louis XIV. Beaumont was also the creator of the Wilderness Garden at Hampton Court.

Colonel Grahme was James II's Keeper of the Privy Purse and Master of the Buckhounds and wanted a garden worthy of his status. Beaumont's mission was to create something at the height of fashion in the late 17th century – a well-planned, structured garden, with a formal topiary garden and parterre. The garden he created was designed to allow Colonel Grahme to take pleasure from his garden, when viewing it from the Hall's first floor.

Beaumont arrived at Levens Hall in 1694, having worked for Grahme at Bagshot Lodge for at least five years. Grahme had owned Levens Hall since 1689 and had committed to building a south wing and brewhouse in 1692. The gardens were to become another improvement at his second home.

Beaumont was impressed with the depth of soil and the quality of the land at Levens Hall and it is said that he left not one stone in situ, as he began to bring his vision to life and build on work that had already started to take place, such as the demarcation of the boundaries to the east and west, including the creation of a sunken, stone wall – the ha ha.

References in early documents to "the Greens next the Flower Garding" probably point to the development of the Topiary Garden. Yews were sent up from Bagshot and the parterre was soon planted in the Topiary Garden – a pattern of grassy paths around flower beds, punctuated by topiary.

In the summer of 1699, Grahme made Levens Hall his principal country house and it was not long before a house was being built for Beaumont, overlooking part of the garden and at the south end of stable block. With the help of the new 2022 audio guides, visitors to Levens Hall can identify this building today.

Beaumont's work on the entire Levens Hall gardens, with the Topiary Garden as its centrepiece, went on for many more years, with Beaumont only dying in 1727, despite having been of ill-health from 1723 onwards. During these years, Beaumont shaped much of what can be seen today – pathways, the huge beech hedges and Beech Circle, the fruit-tree planting and the herbaceous borders being just part of his legacy. The reimagined Fountain Garden is also created to original plans drawn up by Beaumont, which lay lost for 100 years and the design of which lay under a tennis court and then flower and vegetable beds, in the 20th century.

In 1778, the early travel writer, Thomas West, described Levens Hall as having "a curious specimen of the old stile of gardening ... as laid out by the gardener of King James II." In the course of less than 90 years, the fashions had changed. Luckily for Levens Hall, whilst many formal gardens of its kind were ripped out and replaced by more natural and wild planting, its

owners loved the romanticism of the gardens. It may also have been to its benefit to have passed down a female line for a couple of centuries, with its women owners having appreciated the gardens that Beaumont had created and perhaps not having had the financial means to plan any major overhaul.

Beaumont's Beech Hedge can be viewed as the stable 'core' of the Levens Hall garden, defining its geometry and being a visually dominant feature. The topiary, on the other hand, can be viewed as 'stable', intriguing or just plain whacky.

Some of the trees in the topiary garden are over 300 years old, whilst at least half are over 150 years old, with head gardeners who have followed in Beaumont's footsteps having all contributed to over 100 pieces of topiary that we can see today. To date, there have been just 10 head gardeners at Levens Hall, the current post-holder being Chris Crowder, who has managed the huge task of trimming and clipping the magnificent topiary pieces and Beech Hedge, for over 30 years.

This task takes months, traditionally beginning in September and seeing Chris, and various other members of staff, continuing their work right through to March time. The larger pieces require the use of cherry pickers and scaffolding, in order to complete their trim, with battery-powered hedge trimmers and hand shears being the tools used for the task.

Whilst trimming the topiary is challenging enough, Beaumont's legacy of the Beech Hedge and Beech Circle, presents an even tougher gardening challenge. The 50-metre hedge's top simply cannot be reached without mechanical aids and the willingness of a gardener to work whilst leaning out of a basket. The gardeners first tackle the trimming of the top and then work their way down the sides, to keep things in the pristine form that visitors can enjoy the moment the doors open, which happens in April each year.

Visitors can today revel in a variety of geometric shapes, topiary of different hues of green, and a large number of topiary pieces that are shaped to suit a particular theme or represent a particular person, animal or object. The garden boasts a Judge's Wig, chess pieces, Queen Elizabeth I and her Maids of Honour, four peacocks, a Jug of Morocco Ale – and even amusing and contemporary pieces such as Darth Vader and Homer Simpson.

There is also a Howard Lion – to represent the coat of arms of former owners – and everything from a Toppling Wedding Cake to the Great Umbrella Tree that was voted one of Britain's 50 Great Trees, in a Tree Council survey to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee.

There is no other garden, probably worldwide, that offers the visual effect of that at Levens Hall and Gardens, particularly when the topiary is also set off beautifully by spring flowers and exquisite rose planting, which again began in the time of Beaumont. Intoxicating scents add to the ambience of the garden and are bestowed by a charming mix of old-fashioned rose varieties.

Furthermore a Gingko biloba (maidenhair tree), planted in the central bed in the 1950s, and a dawn redwood, also planted at that time, provide a nice contrast to the clipped box and yew.

In 2021, a new Christmas event was staged in the Topiary Garden for the first time at Levens Hall and Gardens. The property briefly re-opened, in mid-December, to allow visitors to explore the Hall by candlelight and witness the Topiary Garden illuminated, with the sharp shapes casting strong shadows against a darkening winter skyline and the grey pathways.

This reimagining of the topiary, under coloured lights, won many fans, in what was a sell-out event.

The whole Topiary Garden is empathetic to the era in which Levens Hall came of age – a time when additional wings and facilities were built on to what was originally just a Pele Tower. It is truly an evergreen garden and one that holds as much charm today as it did back in Beaumont's time.

Fittingly, Levens Hall has leveraged its unique position in the world of topiary to found World Topiary Day – an annual celebration taking place on May 12 each year, on the date that was traditionally earmarked for Levens Hall's Radish Feast. The garden's place in history has been reinforced and lives on; its ability to ignite interest in the art of topiary remains undiminished.

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Editors' notes

Levens Hall and Gardens opens Sunday to Thursday (closed Fridays and Saturdays) to October 6, 2022. Gardens' opening hours are 10am to 5pm, with last entry at 4pm. The Hall opens at 10am for tours (subject to availability on the day) and at 11am for general admission and is open until 3.30pm (last entry at 3pm).

Levens Kitchen opens every day, from 10am to 5pm to October 6, 2022 and then closes one hour earlier thereafter, through to December 23, 2022. The gift shop opens from 10am to 5pm until October 6 and then opens from 10.30am to 3pm until December 23, 2022.

Adult entrance costs £14.50 for Gardens and tour of the Hall. A child's ticket is priced at £5 and a family ticket at £36. Gardens-only tickets are priced at £10.50, £4 and £26, respectively. Hall and Gardens tickets currently have to be bought on the day, but Gardens-only tickets can be purchased online at www.levenshall.co.uk