

Taking the plunge at restored woodland

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THIS is the newly restored fountain at spectacular Hackfall Woods near Masham in North Yorkshire. It is the first time this serene plume of water has played for the public for almost 200 years and is one of the final pieces in the jigsaw that reveals this remarkable site restored to its original glory.

"When we started, the pond surrounding the fountain was a silted-up mass of dead trees and the view to the folly up completely obscured," says Patrick James, managing director of The Landscape Agency.

"I think it looks pretty good."

These 117 acres of ancient woodland grow in a steep-sided rocky gorge that plunges 120 feet to the Ure that flows through in a series of sweeping bends. From 1750 and 1767 it was the big idea of William Aislabie, the owner of Studley Royal, to create a wilderness as a setting for a series of follies, fake ruins, water features and surprise views. His aim was to offer his guests a destination at the end of a jolly seven-mile jaunt.

It was a singular place that embodied the Romantic imagination and enthralled poets and painters who came to see it such as Wordsworth

and Turner. But the 20th century was not kind to Hackfall. Its trees were chopped down and it fell into obscurity until a champion appeared in the shape of James Ramsden. He came to live half a mile away when he was elected Tory MP for Harrogate in 1954 and he discovered 18th century cascades, rustic temples, ruined castles, grottoes and ponds either badly damaged or apparently lost forever under a mass of vegetation.

Following the efforts of an American academic who mapped the ruins and published a mass of data, James Ramsden set up the Hackfall Trust and eventually the Woodland Trust became the owners. The Heritage Lottery Fund stumped up £1m – about 90 per cent of the cash needed – for restoration.

The York-based Landscape Agency, masterplanners for the Royal Horticultural Society Gardens, were tasked to make it all happen, engaging conservation architects, landscape historians, hydrologists and ecologists who spent six years working on designs. The woods are now listed as Grade I on the English Heritage register of parks and gardens of historic interest.



FOCAL POINT: The Hackfall Woods fountain.