

VISIT TO WATTS GALLERY & CHAPEL AND LOSELEY HOUSE & GARDEN

At least 25 years ago a friend and I were driving down a leafy lane near Guildford when we came upon a small art gallery and cemetery chapel. We had, of course, heard of George Frederick Watts but associated him with Holland Park, not the Surrey countryside. The gallery was open and the curator turned out to be Wilfred Blunt, brother of the more famous Anthony. However, it was so dark it was difficult to see the paintings, which were from Watts' own private collection. He and his second wife, Mary Seton, a potter, were living nearby (his first marriage had been to the actress Ellen Terry). Though not particularly well known now, he had been a real celebrity in his lifetime (1817-1904) here and abroad, and among artists and public alike.

We both rather forgot about it until the BBC's Restoration programme a few years ago, when the Gallery had fallen into a parlous state. They came second, but as our guide on the Music Club visit of 27 July said, never under-estimate coming second. The huge publicity helped with future appeals for money and £10m was raised, though a further million had to be found as the family firm doing the work went bankrupt during the recession.

The result is a complete transformation – light, airy, and with the works beautifully displayed. As well as the original collection, there were two small exhibitions of work on loan, including from the Tate, which could not have happened before. The real “wow” was perhaps the Sculpture Gallery, with huge casts of “Physical Energy” (Kensington Gardens) and Watts' friend Lord Tennyson.

We had been very late arriving due to horrendous traffic in London, so it was rather a gallop to try to see it all and climb the hill to the Cemetery Chapel, designed and made by Mary with the help of local villagers, but it was certainly a rewarding and unique experience with the elaborate mixture of Celtic and Byzantine decoration. It was built on land purchased from the nearby Loseley Estate, and the house – known to many people from the ice cream cartons – was our destination for the afternoon, though the herd of Jersey cows has now been dispersed.

It was a fascinating house, built of stone from nearby “dissolved” Waverley Abbey for a visit by Queen Elizabeth I, who had declined to visit the small medieval house previously on the site, even though Sir Christopher More had been one of her more trusted advisers. She must have approved of this one, apparently staying for four months the first time! James I and his queen followed in her footsteps. The family, now More-Molyneux, still live in the house after 400 or so years, and it certainly did have a warm feel despite the panelling, painting and grand rooms.

Serious renovations had also been necessary here, both in the past and after WW2, when the then owner discovered broken windows, no running water or electricity – a huge challenge to which he seems to have risen magnificently, even devising a double-glazing system long before this was common, and managing, with the dairy herd and a business plan involving the export of prefabricated buildings all over the world, to put the estate back on a sound economic footing. Now 92, he has handed over the running of the estate to his son Michael, and the magnificent rose garden we saw after the guided house visit was a birthday gift to his wife Sarah. So our two apparently quite different destinations had one thing in common – very successful restorations.

Our thanks go as usual to Rosemary Frischer for a very interesting and enjoyable outing.

Margaret Wood