



Shepherd's Dene at Riding Mill has been transformed under the guardianship of George Hepburn, pictured right.

Photo: 0201127; 031193

George retreats from living life on the front line

Lifestyle

By GEMMA BROWN
gemma.brown@hexham-courant.co.uk

MAINTAINING the peaceful charm of a Tyne Valley retreat house while turning it into a profitable business is no easy task.

But that's exactly what George Hepburn, director-turned-warden at Shepherd's Dene in Riding Mill, has managed to achieve in just over four years.

Now George, who lives in Mickley and was appointed in 2009, has announced he will step down at the end of this year.

The country mansion had been owned by the Newall family for decades until Geoffrey and Ethel Newall took the decision to part with it almost 70 years ago.

Gifted to the Anglican church in 1946, the house is an impressive and imposing property nestled in over 20 acres of grounds.

"The beauty of the house is its location," said George. "It had been enjoyed as a place of rest and reflection for many years. Yet there were large parts of the estate that had never been seen by guests."

Opening up the grounds for more people to enjoy became a key priority for George and the small, close-knit team of staff who have helped him transform the house into a venue fit for the 21st century.

As former chief executive of the Newcastle-based Community Foundation, where he spent more than 20 years, George was awarded an OBE in 2005 for his services to charities in

the North-East.

So the 62-year-old knows better than most the funding challenges facing organisations across the board.

"What I immediately saw here was a wonderful place that had so much potential and could be much more fully used," said George.

"With the backing of the trustees and increased support from both the Newcastle and Durham dioceses, we've been able to turn things around. "Shepherd's Dene is now sustainable and profitable.

"We're busy and there are even times when we have to turn people away." As with many things, the process was kick-started with a significant investment.

A five-month, £400,000 refurbishment got under way in the early part of 2009, with two of four lodges in the grounds sold off to fund an extensive scheme of work.

"People in this day and age expect the modern-day comforts and facilities like wi-fi," said George. "So that's what we've tried to introduce."

En-suite bathrooms were installed into the 17 bedroom property, while seven bedrooms were given a

makeover and a fully-accessible entrance for the disabled was created. Rewiring and re-plumbing work was also carried out to rejuvenate the much-loved building.

A Tibetan cherry tree was planted by the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, to mark the second phase of the refurbishment programme in 2010.

It began with work on the upstairs meeting room in the house, which included the installation of state of the art projection equipment and new tables and chairs suitable for boardroom meetings and training sessions.

Outside, an old gas tank storage building has been turned into a prayer house, and was officially opened by the Archbishop of Canterbury – then Bishop of Durham – the Rt Rev Justin Welby.

It joins a summer house in the grounds which is regularly used by guests.

Regular volunteering days, led by the Friends of Shepherd's Dene, have seen woodland walks through the vast site created and maintained.

Stretching for around half a mile down to the edge of the Marchburn, the walks also take in some 600 new native species of tree, including oak, rowan, alder and willow, which have been planted in the grounds.

An imposing Cedar of Lebanon tree, which had shrouded the entrance to the house in darkness for 75 years, was removed to make it more welcoming. But it was reused to create a 14-ft



high sculpture, which depicts a man emerging from the woods and striding purposefully towards the house, by artist and sculptor Richard Caink from Ryton.

It now has just as prominent a position in a newly-created garden outside the main doors to the building.

Hours of work have been put in to create a grass labyrinth in the gardens, based on the design of the famous pavement labyrinth at Chartres Cathedral in France.

"Many people spend time deep in thought just following its path," said George. "It's a wonderful addition to the place."

Work by Riding Mill artist Jenny Mather, on a labyrinth theme, is the latest in a string of local art exhibitions based at the house.

"We've developed a busy programme for those people who are interested in the spiritual life," said George.

"More and more people these days are keen to take time out from their busy lives to reflect on what makes them tick."

"To that end we now host more retreats and events, including serious, silent retreats and activity weeks."

Most recently, new signage and a new drive from the Sinsley road was installed to provide safer and easier access for guests and suppliers, which makes a much more attractive approach to the picturesque house.

In keeping with the style of the Edwardian mansion, the drive curves through the woodland to conceal the house from the road and create an element of surprise as guests turn the final corner.

The complete transformation now means that inquiries about using the house have gone through the roof, with one third of all bookings not connected with the church.

Charities, the NHS, councils and various business groups hire the venue for meetings and staff training events.

George and the team of admin, gardening and kitchen staff have even welcomed guests from the other side of the world.

"The wonderful thing to witness has been the reputation of Shepherd's Dene becoming a national and even international one," said George.

"We've had a steady stream of guests from around the world, including from Portland, Oregon and Australia."

"It's been a difficult decision to leave it all behind, but I do feel I've done what I set out to do and I'm ready for a bit of a rest."

But after picking up where he left off with his hobbies, including walking, George plans to do some consultancy work in the charitable sector.

"I'd like to be useful for as long as I can," he laughed.

Meanwhile, George is working with the trustees of Shepherd's Dene to appoint a replacement, who will officially take the reins in January.

"What I immediately saw here was a wonderful place that had so much potential and could be much more fully used."

George Hepburn



Volunteers clearing an area of the grounds at Shepherd's Dene in Riding Mill ready for 500 new trees to be planted.

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