

## Lodge Park

Hunting has always been a social occasion. Not for the fox or the hare, of course, but for the hunters themselves. The presence of venison or game pies on the table afterwards was a pleasant bonus, but the chief attraction of the sport of kings was the camaraderie, the toasts and tipples, and the gambling.

Hunting, be it on horseback or with dogs, served to glue together the country gentlemen and ladies, and to confirm their mastery of the landscape. And the ability of the host to provide good sport and happy hunting was a test of his means and social standing.

There can be no better place to see this lifestyle physically manifested than in the Cotswolds, more particularly near to the village of Sherborne. A couple of miles outside Sherborne, and seemingly in the middle of nowhere, stands the magnificent Lodge Park. It is as if Inigo Jones's Banqueting House has gone on a weekend break from the middle of London, and somehow got lost.

A banqueting house is, indeed, partly what Lodge Park is, as well as a grandstand, a viewing platform and a show of wealth.

The building was created for the 17th-century owner of nearby Sherborne House, known as John "Crump" Dutton. It may have been Crump's grandfather, John Dutton, who had first purchased the land, but it was the grandson who gave it its most distinctive feature.

You can pass the time of day with Crump Dutton amid the family monuments in Sherborne parish church. Crump stands in a niche in his winding sheet, looking a little like John Donne, who is similarly depicted in St Paul's Cathedral. And if the former dean's world-weary sanctity is, in part, an apology for his earlier high life as a love poet, so is Crump's.

John Dutton was, by all accounts, a high liver himself, who, on one occasion, was only prevented from gambling Sherborne House itself on a game of cards by his butler, who picked up his master on his chair and carried him from the room.

During the 1620s and early 1630s Crump Dutton had been extending and stocking his deer park at Sherborne, and Lodge Park was, in more ways than one, the icing on the cake. It was operational by 1634, though there were to be later improvements and additions.

The concept behind Lodge Park was the hunting lodge, an idea that went way back to Tudor and Medieval times. The inconvenience of charging around the countryside in all kinds of weather in pursuit of game was mitigated by a little home from home. A place to dry off, eat and drink and socialize.

Lodge Park was to be a complete hospitality complex under (and over) one roof. In the basement were the kitchens, on the first floor a great room for socialising and on the roof an elevated space to watch the sport.

The sport concerned was deer-coursing with dogs. The course itself was a flat piece of grass, one mile long, stretching from what is now the A40 to just past the lodge. At its widest it was a little over 200 yards, narrowing to 90 yards or so near the end. The funnel shape helped to direct the deer.

This was all about gambling, of course, a pastime close to John Dutton's heart. The fallow deer were released at the top of the course, and pursued by a terrier or "teazer". Then the competing dogs were slipped from their collar by a "slipper", and off they went in pursuit. Directly in front of the grandstand was a ditch, so that the spectators could see which dog was closest to the deer, when they sailed over it. Finally, at the end of the mile was a deeper ditch, which the deer could leap and dogs could not. Here the deer could be captured and lead away to whatever fate had in store for them. Money then changed hands in the direction of the winning owner and the successful punter.

They called this a "breathing course", in that the deer survived the encounter. There was also, for much higher fees and bets, a "fleshing course" in which the dogs were allowed to catch the deer with inevitable results. So brutal a diversion in so tranquil a spot.

A surviving manuscript, probably compiled from earlier documents in the 18th Century, explains the procedure and the prices at the "paddock course at Sherborne". At that point, half a crown was the entry fee for the breathing course, and £20 for the fleshing course. The rules also stated that no race take place in frost or snow. Dogs and deer slipping and sliding would make a lottery of the outcome. And it would be chilly up on the roof of Lodge Park.

The fact that we still have this remarkable building to enjoy today is a testimony to the National Trust, which now owns it, and to the research carried out in the Gloucestershire archives on its original construction.

Once deer-coursing fell out of fashion in the 18th Century, Lodge Park was converted to other uses no less than three times in the space of a century: to a single, two-storey, house, to a row of cottages, and then to a dower-house. It was still lived in - by Charles Dutton, 7th Lord Sherborne - right up to the 1980s. All the internal furnishings and structures had gone by then.

Removal of a swimming-pool from in front of the lodge has helped to return the course to something like its original appearance, even if it is no longer a mile in length. The Trust has, I gather, no plans to reintroduce deer-coursing here.