

Berwickshire Naturalists' Club

Arniston House and Gardens

Friday 25 April 2025

The first field trip of the 2025 season on a bright, sunny day, was to Arniston House, which is situated 2.5km south west of Gorebridge, Midlothian, and lies on the east bank of the River Esk. Only a short distance from Scotland's capital city, a view of which can be enjoyed from the northern elevation, it was ideally situated for successive generations of the Dundas family, which had been tied to the Scottish legal profession and, indeed, the courts.

The estate was originally used by the medieval Scottish kings for hunting and, having changed hands several times, it was then owned by The Knights Templar, whose Scottish base was at the nearby village of Temple from the 12th century until their suppression in the 14th century. The lands passed to the Knights Hospitaller before being surrendered to Mary Queen of Scots following the Reformation. The last Preceptor of the Knights Hospitaller, James Sandiland, later purchased a Royal Charter whereby the lands were granted to him as a hereditary barony. In 1571 the main part of the lands was purchased by George Dundas, the 16th laird of the Dundas estate, and his wife Katherine Oliphant for their son, James. It is still owned by the Dundas family and Arniston House remains a family home.

Arniston is described in the Lothian volume of *The Buildings of Scotland* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2023, pp. 129-230) as "*...the archetype of the Scottish classical country house where the prerequisite of symmetry was achieved by remodelling an existing tower house, with an eye to economy and an acceptance of the permanence of existing stone and lime construction, through a duplication in the manner of Bruce's Holyroodhouse.*" Acquired in the 16th century, the first house, U shaped in design, dated from around 1620 before William Adam was commissioned to create a house with a rectangular plan with pavilion wings. On his death in 1748 the work was continued by his son, John, who, observing the change of fashions, altered the double height apartments in the west third of the main block and replaced them with the dining room and drawing room.

The original Adam building is three storeys high with a nine bay front elevation above a low basement. Single storey wings connect to twin service pavilions, each two storeys high with three bay front ends. The large porch, in Baroque Revival style, was added in 1872 by Wardrop & Reid while R. Rowland Anderson raised the single storey corridors to the pavilions to two in 1877.

Much of the house was ravaged by dry rot and, from about 1950, half of it was inaccessible. The rooms of the west wing had been stripped and their original design could only be described from estate records. When Althea Dundas-Becker inherited Arniston in 1970 she embarked on a life-time project to save and reinstate the house. While that work has not yet been fully completed we were able to appreciate the wonderful architecture of the house and compare the contrasting styles of the Adam family. William Adam's Great Hall, with plasterwork by Joseph Enzer (who went on to work at Yester House in Gifford), and the Library are particular highlights, along with the collection of paintings, including some by Sir Henry Raeburn and Alexander Nasmyth, china and furniture.

Our group was privileged to have Althea Dundas-Becker and her daughter Henrietta as guides for the morning. Along with full descriptions of each room and the remedial works carried out they provided anecdotes and explanations of the family connections with some of the items seen on the visit.

After the house tour the group was able to take their picnics into either the Orangery or the gardens and then walk through the immediate policies. William Adam made a plan in 1726 for the grounds being a semi-formal system of avenues with a parterre on the south side of the house. The overall scheme was altered by Thomas White in the manner of Capability Brown in 1791. In the walled garden there are fragments, including the pedestrian gateway, of the original Parliament Hall in Edinburgh.



