

Built in 1688, Petworth House has stood for almost 350 years, yet it's the parkland's ancient trees – some almost 1,000 years old – that steal the show



**DAY OUT:** Petworth House and Park, West Sussex

## ARTISTS, DEER AND VETERANS

Discover a tree as old as the Norman Conquest on a ramble through Petworth Park, says **Adrienne Wyper**

**E**ven if you ignore the four-mile National Trust circular trail to wander at will, you can't miss the gnarled bark and contorted branches of Petworth's impressively aged tree specimens.

The park blends into the surrounding countryside with its winding waterway, copse-crowned hillocks and a grassy meadow, bordered by trees, that sweeps up to the back of the 17th-century house.

The scene may look natural but it was created by landscape designer Lancelot 'Capability' Brown between 1753 and 1765. He replaced formal gardens with grassy expanses, a serpentine lake and belts of trees.

The oldest tree is an English oak growing near the Upper Pond. Estimated to

be 940 years old, it was a sapling when the Normans invaded. Hollies now grow from rotting wood in its cavities. As its acorns fall, the leaves turn golden.

### LIME AND CHESTNUT

There is a common lime specimen in the park thought to be 500–600 years old. It is easy to spot, not only for its heart-shaped leaves but also its split trunk, which is wide enough for you to walk through.

Sweet chestnuts were originally introduced to the UK by the Romans and there are lots here, some up to 500 years old. Above their swirly bark, the long serrated leaves turn golden, as prickly yellow-green husks fall, splitting to reveal the chestnuts inside.

Among the most striking autumn specimens are the red oaks and scarlet oaks, both North American natives. As their names suggest, they turn stunning shades of red in autumn.

The beauty of wood is also seen in felled or fallen trees and branches. These sculptural forms look as if they have been deliberately placed. There are stacks of mossy lichen logs and vast trunk slices, all havens for wildlife.

### ART AND ANTLERS

The Upper Pond has been restored to how JMW Turner saw it in the 19th century when he painted *Dewy Morning*, *Sunset*, *A Stag Drinking* and *Sunset, Fighting Bucks*. The artist was invited here many times by George Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont, who

commissioned 20 paintings in the 1820s and 30s – all on view in the house.

When they're lying down, the antlers of the 700-strong fallow deer herd resemble fallen branches. Deer have roamed these 700 acres for half a century and were reportedly hunted by Henry VIII. You will notice that low branches have been trimmed to a horizontal line some two metres above the ground – the work of nibbling deer.

In October's rutting season, young bucks stock up on acorns and chestnuts before bellowing, head-butting and antler-locking in a bid to win over the most females.



**Adrienne Wyper** lives in Kent and loves walking, cycling and kayaking.

