

Real lives

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SOCIAL SHOPPING SITE MAY MAKE STILL MORE OF US SHOPA-HOLICS

SHOPA is a website and app that lets users share their favourite fashion items, creating collections for other users to browse and buy.

"Shopa mirrors the fun and excitement of shopping with friends on the high street, while bringing all of your favourite items and brands from around the world right into your hands," says founder and CEO Peter Janes.

It's not unlike Polyvore or Pinterest, the digital pinboard site, employing a similar clean, white interface, but with one key difference: for every purchase, the recommender gets a commission.

For that reason, buying is done within the site (rather than linking out to retailers), borrowing the model of affiliate marketing, commonly used by fashion bloggers to monetise their style tips through links to ecommerce sites.

It's notoriously difficult to make money off affiliate links, because the payouts are minuscule - often pennies per item - whereas you're looking at about 10 per cent of the price for each Shopa sale.

It's a decent incentive, and people with a fervent online fanbase - model Cara Delevingne, for instance, who just hit 10 million Instagram followers - could rake in the cash.

If the Duchess of Cambridge, who causes clothes to sell out within hours of her wearing them, set up a Shopa account, she'd probably make a killing. But it's pretty certain Palace rules prevent this sort of thing.

Plus, her (and indeed anyone's) success will largely depend on more retailers signing up, because unlike Pinterest, you can't pick any old photo or pair of shoes to post.

At the moment 400 brands are on board, but it's still quite a limited range that includes a lot of designer labels.

Teens and twenty-somethings are often early adopters on social sites, but it's unlikely they can afford a £2,000 Valentino coat, no matter how many people 'like' it.

Shopa isn't the first site to attempt to combine shopping and social media. In 2011, Facebook's Storefront let users open shops within the site, but it failed to take off.

Likewise, Twitter's 'buy' button hasn't had much traction, so can Shopa buck the trend?

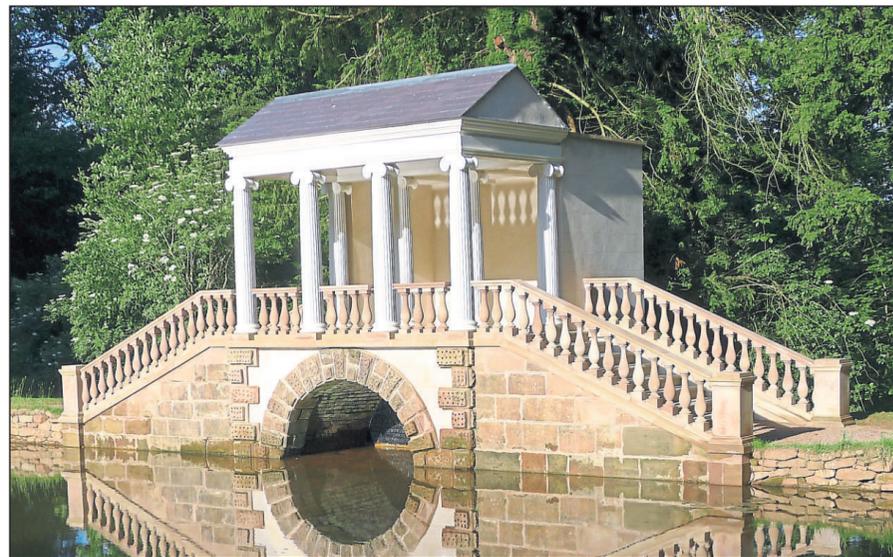
With £7 million of funding behind them and plans to expand into the lucrative Chinese and Indian markets, they've certainly got the confidence.

Boasting an easy-to-use site, appealing reward system and a healthy dose of digital buzz, Shopa has all the ingredients of a successful start-up.

If it can reach that crucial tipping point in terms of retailers and users, if big names come on-board, then it could well go the distance and create a nation of Shopa-holics.

Recreating a dream by restoring one of England's greatest landscape gardens to its former glory

NATALIE PRIOR meets the man behind ambitious plans to restore 290 acres of parkland at Worcestershire's Hagley Hall and turn it into a major tourism attraction



The Palladian Bridge after its restoration from its weed-infested, overgrown state, below.



AS Joe Hawkins describes unearthing ancient buried cascades and opening up long-forgotten views and vistas, it's impossible not to be swept away by the passion of the man tasked with breathing new life into the 18th-century Hagley Park.

As Head of Landscape, Joe is realising Lord Cobham's dream to restore George Lyttleton's park to its former glory, allowing future visitors the opportunity to experience its natural beauty through the changing seasons on a series of scenic walks.

And the former head gardener at Staffordshire's Shugborough Hall couldn't be more delighted to be spearheading the work on the grade one-listed park.

"For me, this is a dream job - and we are making real progress on the restoration," he said. "We have recently been thinning trees around Hermitage Park which have not been managed since the 1960s.

"During the project we have found remnants of a scythe mill and a glass factory which reveal the area's rich industrial history.

"When we are finished, people will be able to enjoy up to five miles of walks, each with a different atmosphere.

"We are restoring a green space which will be here for eternity."

The park is undoubtedly one of Worcestershire's best kept secrets as, in its heyday, it was considered among the greatest of all English landscape gardens. It was designed

to inspire poets and painters and was visited by American presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who compared it to Blenheim and Stowe.

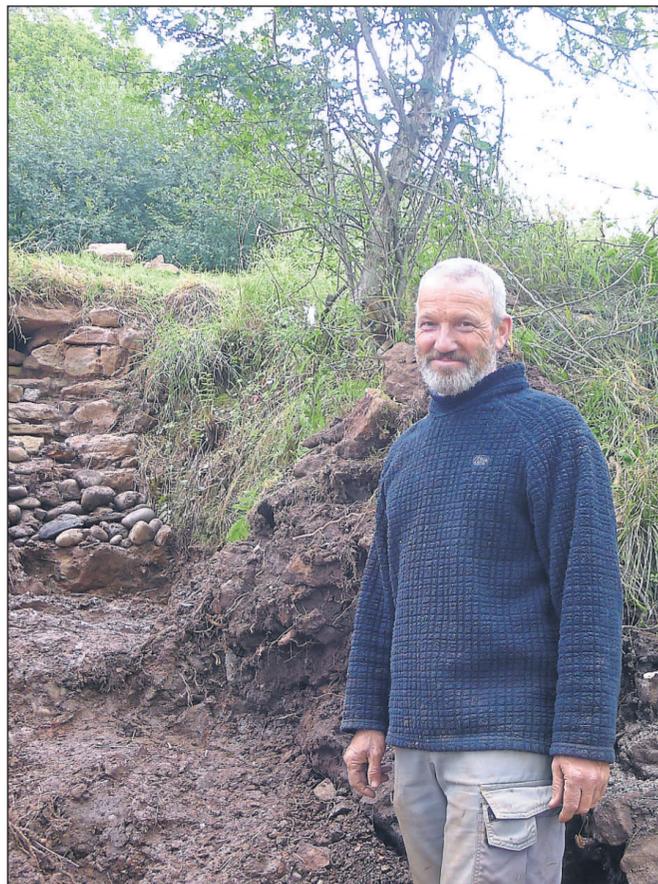
After almost a century and a half of neglect, the Hagley Hall Estate, English Heritage and Natural England have joined forces to reinstate the park's famous features.

Although not officially scheduled to reopen until spring 2016, a large amount of work has already taken place. Walkways have been cleared and reinstated, and water features dredged and repaired, while the Palladian Bridge has been completely rebuilt and Wychbury Obelisk restored.

Work has also taken place to restore the Rotunda after it was vandalised. As a result, the grade two-listed building has been taken off English Heritage's buildings at risk list.

The estate was last summer short-listed for an English Heritage Angel Award in recognition of its restoration efforts and the ambitious project also featured in an episode of BBC1's Countryfile show last September when presenter Matt Baker helped put an ancient cascade back together and release some of the 100 traditional Golden Rudd fish into the restored pond.

Lord Cobham has lodged plans for a

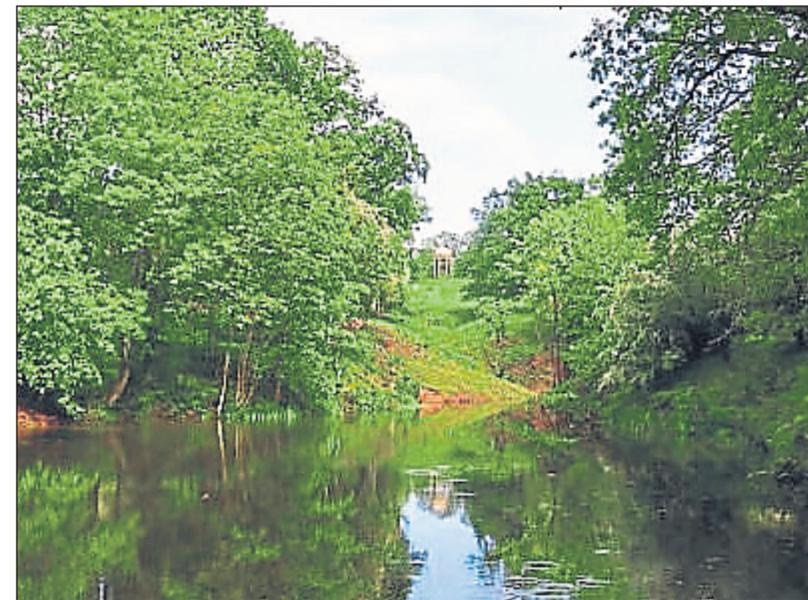
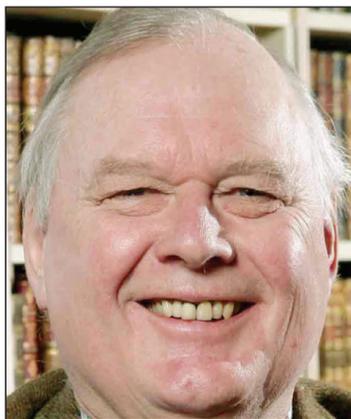


Joe Hawkins is realising the dream of Lord Cobham, right, to restore George Lyttleton's 18th-century park to its former glory.

£2.5 million visitor centre as part of his vision to turn Hagley Park into a major tourist attraction - opening it up to the public for the first time.

The proposals include a restaurant, gift shop, study rooms, a three-bedroom ranger's house, children's play area and car parking for up to 180 vehicles. It is anticipated that the new attraction could draw up to 100,000 visitors a year, with the revenue going towards the restoration of the park.

Lord Cobham said: "It's very important to bring back the 18th-century park and Joe has brought a fresh new look to the landscape. It'll be good for the area. It's such an important garden."



Some of the parkland at Hagley Hall has not been managed since the 1960s.



Lord Cobham has lodged plans for a £2.5 million visitor centre at Hagley Park, above.

This article first appeared in Limited Edition, a new free lifestyle magazine. It is published by Newsquest and is distributed to 8,000 homes. It is also available at local pick-up points like Becketts Farm Shop and Restaurant in Wythall, David Lloyd Leisure at Sixways Worcester, Wye Vale Garden Centre Fernhill Heath, Hagley Coffee Lounge, Morton Restaurant and Post office Cutnall Green. It can be viewed on line at www.limitededitionworcestershire.co.uk. Watch out for the next issue in May.



CULTURES ONLY RARELY BELIEVE AN ECLIPSE TO BE A POSITIVE EVENT

THROUGHOUT history, solar eclipses have been viewed with dread and associated with myths and superstitions. Even today, in the 21st century, some cultures consider them a bad omen.

It is not completely surprising that the phenomenon has been such a source of fear.

During a total eclipse, unlike the partial one the UK will witness on Friday, darkness falls, the sun's shimmering corona becomes visible, and a chill enters the air.

Spookily, birds stop singing, confused by the apparent sudden transition from day to night.

To ancient people who relied so heavily on the life-giving sun, it must have felt like the end of the world. This is reflected in a plethora of legends.

In Vietnam, people believed that a giant frog was devouring the sun, while in ancient China a hungry celestial dragon was thought to be responsible.

According to ancient Hindu mythology, the demon Rahu is beheaded by the supreme deity Vishnu for drinking the nectar of the gods. His head flies across the sky and swallows the sun.

It was common practice for people to bang pots and pans and make loud noises during an eclipse to scare the demon away.

Korean folklore tells of the sun being stolen by mythical dogs, while in Europe, the Vikings blamed wolves for consuming the sun. The ancient Greeks believed a solar eclipse was a sign that the gods were angry, and that it heralded disasters and destruction.

Among modern superstitions is the belief that solar eclipses can be a danger to pregnant women and unborn children. In some cultures, young children and expectant mothers are asked to stay indoors during an eclipse.

In parts of India, people still fast during a solar eclipse because of the fear that any food cooked during the event will be poisoned.

A few superstitions offer a positive slant. In Italy some believe that flowers planted during a solar eclipse will be brighter and more colourful than at any other time.

The Batammaliba people from Benin and Togo in West Africa have a legend that during an eclipse the sun and moon are fighting. The only way to stop the conflict, they believe, is for people on Earth to settle their differences.

Professor Richard Wiseman, from the University of Hertfordshire, a leading expert on superstition and psychic phenomena, said: "A solar eclipse is a very unusual event. It's easy to understand how it could be ascribed to some sort of external agency.

"Psychologically we don't like randomness. We like to think things happen for a reason, and if we don't know what the reason is, we make one up. We say the gods are angry. The search for an explanation leads to superstition.