

7 - 10 June 2019 – Gardening Club Visit to Dorset

Friday 7 June

Our first stop was at **West Green House** in Hampshire. In 1990 the property was badly damaged by an explosion and the gardens were in a neglected state. The National Trust (NT) nearly demolished it but thankfully decided to do some repairs and sell it on a long term lease of 99 years to someone who would bring the gardens back to their former glory. The property has been transformed by Australian Chelsea Gold Medallist and garden designer Marylyn Abbott. We soon shared her view that this was a real gem! The NT does not contribute any funding to the house or gardens, all of which have been restored and maintained by Marylyn through personal investment and extensive fundraising.

We have to thank Henry Hawley for the splendid almost perfect Georgian house but sadly we could only appreciate the outside. We will draw a veil over "Hangman Henry" so named for his brutality to the defeated Scots Highlanders after the Battle of Culloden in 1750. However there must have been a softer side to his character as we spotted in the garden a tombstone for his dog, Monkey - "the best black spaniel tha' ere wag'd a tail"

The gardens are known for their theatricality and colour throughout the year - not surprising as Marylyn has a dynamic personality and is an ardent opera fan having worked at the Sydney Opera House. Our summertime visit enabled us to enjoy a spectacular walled garden, restored to its former glory with narrow, low box hedges bordering flower beds in full bloom, fruit trees, clematis..... Meandering paths took us through woodland with such splendid trees. The serenity of the lake was equalled only by the sighting of a baby 'swoose', whose parents were a swan and a goose! Another path led us to a contemporary garden of the five bridges with its serpentine ribbon of Iris Siberica crossed by chinoiserie inspired bridges. At the end of this path was the theatre lawn. Here in the summer months you could enjoy live music or watch a film in the open air while you picnic. Alternatively operas are performed in the Summer Pavilion in a lovely glass-sided pavilion.

A lovely start to our tour.

On to our hotel in Bournemouth, comfortable in every way although one of our party endured a room change in the middle of the night after rain came through the ceiling! Rain lurked in the background all weekend but luckily we were able to look around all of our chosen gardens without taking shelter or using our umbrellas!

Saturday 8 June

Today began with a visit to **Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens** - 20 acres of magnificent rare and exotic plants and just a (long!) walk away from Chesil beach. In 1756 the Countess of Ilchester built a castle with a one acre kitchen garden. Sadly the castle is long gone but the colourful walled garden remains now full of a wonderful mix of brightly coloured, tender, exotic plants with 100+year old Chusan palms towering above them. We have to thank the botanist member of the Ilchester family - one William Fox-Strangways for collecting plants from all over the world and bringing them back to Abbotsbury. Such plants loved the shade, moisture and warmth of the Abbotsbury woodlands. Much later

Joseph Benbow was appointed Head Gardener. He brought with him the experience of doing a similar job at La Mortola on the Amalfi coast, so it was only a matter of time before he began experimenting with Mediterranean plants. We all loved this garden - a few brave souls even crossed the Burma Rope Bridge! Others delighted in the many special photographic experiences such as spying in the distance the local church framed by trees.

Another splendid garden awaited us at **Kingston Maurward**. We were fortunate to be shown around by long term Head Gardener Nigel Hewish. He was pleased to tell us about his experience at the recent Chelsea Flower Show where Kingston Maurward won a silver-gilt medal. But for him this honour was matched by meeting Lady Hanbury and reminiscing with her the 'old days' when the Hanbury family (of La Mortola fame!) had owned the property. During World War 2 the estate had been taken over by the American armed forces and the garden became a wilderness, the lake silted up and the parkland used as a storage depot for the D-Day landings. Nigel had spent most of his life restoring the gardens and was indispensable as a lecturer at the now college for agriculture students. He enthusiastically showed us around every nook and cranny of his beloved garden. We particularly liked the Crown Garden with the hedge in the shape of a crown and the Penstemon Terrace with the flowers just about to bloom.

Sunday 9 June

Off bright and early to **Compton Acres**. Here we were divided into two groups for our tour of the necklace of separate gardens - each with its own unique style. Our group was led by a keen, knowledgeable young man who had been a successful student at Kingston Maurward College.

Some of us loved the Grand Italian garden with its statues, formal pool and Venetian bronze lanterns bearing the winged lions of St Mark, the patron Saint of Venice - even though it would probably have looked at its best a few weeks later when the summer bedding plants had settled in. Others preferred the tranquil wooded valley. However there were no surprises that everyone loved the Harbour View Cafe with its spectacular views over Poole Harbour, Brownsea Island and the Purbeck Hills. The raised bed here was planted afresh every summer with a new theme - this year it was the 'Circus'. Our young guide had not only chosen the plants but also made the unusual(!) props contained therein!

I should mention, too, the Japanese garden, designed and built by a Japanese architect with 'ornaments' especially imported from Japan. The design followed strict rules - plants are all positioned to represent the human link with the natural world and the journey through life. Sadly we could not enter the thatched summer house which in the past represented the tea house, so we admired from afar!

Our second visit of the day was to the National Trust's **Kingston Lacy** - a huge property which needed far more time that we could devote to it. Ralph Banks, the reclusive last heir of the estate had retreated into just four rooms' before his death so that when the National Trust were gifted the property in 1981 they were faced with a huge task. Rampant dry rot had consumed the house and daylight was visible through the collapsing roof. It was difficult to believe this story as now the home really is an example of a grand Italianate palazzo and is filled with one of the finest private collection of paintings. Time and space will not permit me to describe the wonderful contents.

The house was full of treasures - do go and see for yourself the paintings by Van Dyke, Tintoretto, Velazquez, the Reni frescoes, the Dresden china, Louis XV furniture, the unique collection of enamel miniatures, the signed photograph of King Edward VII who strained his ankle when stumbling on a rabbit hole but we were here for the gardens! Unfortunately time was limited so not every inch of the estate was covered. We tried hard to take in the lovely rose garden, the fernery with 40+ varieties reflecting this Victorian

passion, the Cedar Walk with trees planted by the Duke of Wellington, Kaiser Wilhelm 11 and Prince Charles to name just a few famous people, various Walks, yet another Japanese Garden, a Kitchen garden and many more. We were in our element here!

Monday 10 June

All too soon we were off to visit Athelhampton, our last garden and what a garden! It was Alfred Lafontaine who began not only to restore the Grade 1 listed manor house, built in 1493, to its early Tudor roots but also to create a garden to match. He engaged the services of Reginald Blomfield and Inigo Thomas. Thomas was a trained architect, and a landscape designer. Inspired by the Renaissance, Thomas created "outdoor rooms" and walled areas encircled by the River Piddle which have now matured into one of the country's great attractions, and one of the finest examples of this style. These old weathered walls now support fruit trees, roses and clematis and enclose fountains and pavilions and through gateways create vistas of balustraded terraces and ornamental features. By the main entrance is the Great Court with its famous giant yew pyramids set around a sunken pool and in front of the 19th tollhouse. The lawn to the west is dominated by an early 16th century circular dovecote now fully restored and renovated, its oak hammerbeam roof and cedar lantern intact with landing stages for forty doves. There is room inside the dovecote for up to 1500 birds to nest

We - well !! - could feel the spirit of Thomas Hardy as we toured the 15th century manor house where Thomas, a regular visitor to Athelhampton, set parts of his short story 'The Waiting Supper' by the river and in the garden. He refers to the house in his diary, recording that he was dining there when war was declared in 1914. Between the wars the house was owned by the Hon Mrs Esmond Harmsworth and enjoyed a degree of celebrity status as some stars of the time including Aga Khan, Douglas Fairbanks and Noel Coward were all entertained there.

Now, the property is up for sale! Anyone interested in its purchase?

We ended our visit with a very enjoyable communal lunch - we had escaped the rain throughout our weekend but as soon as we left the restaurant, the heavens opened and we endured the rainy journey home whilst reflecting on another glorious weekend.

Farewell to you dear readers - this is my last tour!

Mary Duff - Chair F&TGClub