

July 2014 - Visit to North Wales

We saw sunshine every day on our annual weekend break to North Wales this year. Our first stop, though, was in England at Biddulph Grange to be precise - described in a recent TV programme as a garden of 'much interest' having being lovingly restored over many years by the National Trust. It was made in the middle of the 19th century by Darwin contemporary James Bateman, garden designer, plantsman and writer. The garden had dozens of microclimates, rooms, follies - you name it....

But we felt that our holiday really began when we arrived at Caernarfon and began our trip around North Wales. Portmeirion lived up to our expectations - a magical Italianate fun village complete with coloured buildings which would not have looked out of place at Portofino. Built by Sir Clough Williams- Ellis we were mesmerised by the beauty of the Glaslyn estuary with the mountains behind. On to Clough's private beautiful gardens at Plas Brondanw where we met the shy Head Gardener aptly named Dylan and enjoyed our first taste of Welsh cakes. This was a classical garden of vistas, viewpoints and perspective - a photographer's dream with Snowdon providing a dramatic backdrop.

Next day saw us exploring Wales's answer to the Hidden Gardens of Heligan called Plas Cadnant. The present owner bought the property in 1996 and began the energetic and enthusiastic restoration of the historic garden and grounds. We were treated to a tour of the woodland, the herbaceous borders and a walk through the picturesque river valley. Yet more Welsh cakes ended our very special private visit.

We made time for lunch at the seaside town of Beaumaris before taking in Plas Newydd, the ancestral home of the Marquess of Anglesey. Here was a lovely garden enjoying a beautiful position sitting on the shore of the Menai Straits with George Stephenson's Britannia Bridge off to the left and in front across the water the wooded shore of the mainland with the mountains of Snowdonia rising behind. And there is a bonus - Plas Newydd is famous for its association with Rex Whistler and contains his exquisite romantic mural and the largest (and excellent) exhibition of his work.

All too soon our stay in North Wales was coming to an end but still we had two more places to visit. Firstly we were privileged to visit Crûg Farm nursery owned by modern plant-hunters Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones, famous for their collecting expeditions which have taken them to places such as Korea, Japan, Laos and the Philippines. They have won gold medals at Chelsea for their displays of unusual plants and at Crûg we were able to see some of the new and wondrous plants from their annual visits to remote corners of the globe.

Our final visit was to Bodnant Gardens - where my husband and I were inspired to join the National Trust over 30 years ago! The charm of the gardens remains and I can smell the fragrance of the roses in the many rose beds as I write this article. From its position above the valley of the River Conwy, Bodnant combines formal terraces with extensive woodland plantings on the grandest of scales.

All too soon we arrived back in the villages, tired but still smiling.