

Marwood Hill (April 2007)

The first visit this year was to Marwood Hill. A wonderful day with clear blue skies which came to an abrupt halt on the approach to Barnstaple and a queue which would have prompted lesser mortals to 3 point turns. However we are made of sterner stuff, so upwards of an hour later we emerged on the other side of Barnstaple and the challenge of the lanes round Marwood following online instructions. We were though early enough to enjoy a lunch and welcome new members. We were then given a talk by the Head Gardener on the history of the garden and the plants/trees we should look out for. There was much to admire, some magnificent magnolias and camellias and also a camellia tunnel which housed many unusual varieties - just the right time to see it! Some of us succumbed to the plant sales area, others to the cakes and teas. Fortunately the journey back was relatively queueless.

Abbotsbury (May 2007)

30 of us boarded the coach and set off for the gardens (yes, not the Swannery, mention Abbotsbury and most people assume you are going to see swans). A comfort stop on the way turned into an ice cream stop for some.

At Abbotsbury we took lunch in the Colonial Tea Rooms, checked out the plant sales and then gathered for the guided tour. For some reason – perhaps we looked like trouble! – they gave us 2 guides which was wonderful – one at the front and one bringing up the rear, so wherever you were you could hear one of them. They were very informative and patiently answered all our questions. Part way through a group of us broke away and walked (actually, those who were in training with the Walking Group pretty well ran up) a wide ride to view the coast from Chesil Beach to Berry Head. Returning we were treated to a tour behind the No Entry signs to see their recreation of their medal winning entry for Chelsea. All in all, a very happy visit to a very impressive garden.

The Orangery (June 2007)

As the weather worsened through the week I began to wonder if our luck would finally run out. Sunday dawned dry and occasionally sunny and by noon it was sunny and crystal clear, particularly important as the views from the Orangery were breathtaking, taking in a wide vista of the Exe Estuary and coast. A really magnificent setting with matching trees and particularly impressive cedars. The Orangery itself is set snugly into the hillside with the gardens and lawns sweeping down in front of it. An unusually sited feature was a beautifully shaped lake right at the top of the site, above the Orangery. We watched the blue damsel flies (I thought they were small dragon flies so you learn something new!) skimming over the surface.

Throughout the estate there were sculptures, some part of an exhibition and for sale, but beautiful though some were, university pensioners had to content themselves with caressing them given the price tags!

Even though it was really lunch time we rewarded ourselves with the cream teas and cakes seated on the lawn by the church.

There had been a well thought out one way system which was a great relief – it would have been fun meeting cars going back the way we came – and we left via Mamhead House and Mamhead Castle, both usually hidden from view on the private road. A truly memorable visit.

Winsford Walled Gardens (July 2007)

Setting out in weather and with a forecast that indicated that an Ark would be the only sensible form of transport I feared that our weather luck would finally run out, but all was fine up to and through Okehampton, indeed, the Moor looked splendid.

Approaching Halwill Junction it started to rain and the road turned into a river, then it eased off and I made it down the track to the garden. Being early I sat and waited and it rained solidly for 20 minutes, drumming on the roof. By this time there were two of us sitting marooned in our vehicles, but at the witching hour of 2 o'clock, the rain stopped so out we got. Then another five brave souls – we're a hardy lot – turned up. The sun came out and for the next two hours we meandered round this lovely garden being accompanied by our two hosts who explained all that they had done since 1999. We admired the Victorian greenhouses and contents, and the new Alpine House. Needless to say we ended up in the conservatory for tea and biscuits.

This really is a summer garden and well worth visiting, the website is also very comprehensive and has a discussion forum.

Pine Lodge Gardens and Nursery (August 2007)

A group of seventeen set off for Pine Lodge. We enjoyed a nice view over the Tamar and then rather a lengthy view of the vehicle in front as we crawled through yet another of Cornwall's set of roadworks. We thus arrived about an hour later than anticipated and so rushed straight in to lunch. The food was good and just to make sure, we went back at the end for teas – always wise to double check these things!

The gardens were a delight, very varied and with new plantings on quite a grand scale. Needless to say, the weather was perfect. We pretty well had the place to ourselves so could wander at will. Several members succumbed quite badly to the nursery which certainly lived up to its reputation of stocking some unusual plants (and some very expensive common ones).

As we left the owner thanked us for our visit and told us more about the place. We felt suitably chastened though when he told us a) how old he was, and b) that the only gardeners were his wife and one other person. It must be down to layers of bark laid by the maintenance men!

All in all, a very successful visit and a place which many promised to return to.