

Reports on Gardens Group visits in 2009

We started the year with a visit to **Caerhays** Castle and Gardens in **March**. As we drove past Dartmoor and over Bodmin Moor the mist came down and by the time we stopped at Jamaica Inn we were running from coach to inn and vice versa. However as the sea hove into view so did the sun and apart from one very brief shower it remained dry.

We had a fascinating tour of the castle, built by Nash, and then a very satisfying lunch and then on around the gardens. The height of some of the magnolias was very impressive, it seemed we had chosen exactly the right moment to see them at their best. The range of colours was good, one very dark purple one, grown from seed in 1924, was particularly fine.

Some bought plants but they were a bit expensive though excellent quality, as one would expect from Burncoose. We wandered down to the beach to admire the view before leaving. This was a full coach load and everyone seemed to enjoy the day.

Anne Mayes finally managed to arrange a visit by the Gardens Group to **Highgrove** on **May 29th**. Unfortunately, because she had already visited the garden, she was not allowed to go again, so she asked Celia and John Boyle to lead the group. 25 of us travelled up the M5, stopping at junction 22 to grab a coffee etc at the Wyevale Garden Centre. As we were told that we were due at noon, but not more than 10 minutes earlier, we picnicked on the coach. Everyone presented photo ID to the security police, before we were met by Chris Colton our guide and ushered in to see HRH's welcoming video. In my previous existence as organizer of industrial visits for students to oil refineries, chemical and sewage works, I had had to encourage participants to ask questions of their guides. At Highgrove there was no such problem and an environmental contrast.

Chris Colton was a retired medical academic and I suspect that the administrator had chosen him for the challenging job of looking after us. He provided a pithy, erudite and humorous commentary and was unfazed by any of the questions from different members of the group. We passed along the edge of a wild flower meadow, lined with alliums and camassias, and full of corn cockle. We saw that by planting hostas, the national collection, close to a pond from which the frogs with the assistance of hedgehogs could control the slugs and snails, which normally reduce hostas to tattered remnants, the hostas could develop uneaten. For those in the party, who enjoy tree ferns, the collection of 60, looking like overgrown birthday candles, to celebrate HRH's birthday was a delight.

After the garden tour, we refreshed with tea and cakes, before being ushered into the shop, from which the profit goes to assist the prince's charities. The coach journey back on a busy M5 was slow. I think that most who went will have retained many mental images of different parts of the garden, which for many of us far exceeded our preconceptions. Our thanks went to the coach driver for a safe journey and to Anne for arranging the visit.

May's alternative option for those of us not on the Highgrove visit was to **Knights Hayes**. It was a hot day but various parts of the gardens provided welcome shade. It all looked magnificent and after an intensive session of trying to remember names of well-known plants, we retired to the refectory for a light lunch. The caterers seemed not to be expecting many so

the choice was not extensive or plentiful.

After lunch we investigated the walled kitchen garden where the main fruit crop seemed to be rhubarb, they won't run out of that!

The Garden House and Wildside.

These were the venues for the **June** visit. A disappointingly small number came – just eight of us – but it was good to see some new faces and certainly very pleasing to be able to introduce everyone to the delights of these two gardens. The Garden House was true to form, a colourful inspiration, literally a riot of colour with poppies, kalmias, dieramas etc. Interestingly, there was a group from S'ton University retired staff visiting too.

After a very pleasant lunch (and a productive visit to the plant shop) we set off in convoy for our 0.7 miles due west to discover Wildside. This is a new garden still being developed by the previous Head Gardener at the Garden House. It is only open one afternoon a week, it does sell plants but nothing else at the moment. It was fascinating to see the garden evolving and the massive earth works which have taken place. We talked to the owner about the site, soil and plants.

These two gardens really do give you a wonderful day out, the journey over the moor on such a clear day affords far reaching views and Princetown always sends a shiver down your spine. We were told that we had chosen the best time to visit which was another bonus!

Cadhay House and Gardens

Having visited Cothay House and Gardens in our first year, back in 2005, we have now added Cadhay. This visit followed a fairly normal pattern – the heavens opened half an hour before causing concern and putting off a handful of members. However 22 of us ploughed on and were rewarded by the stoppage of rain at our meeting time, such luck cannot go on!

We were divided into two groups, the first taking the tour of the house whilst the Head Gardener gave the second a tour of the gardens and allotments. Both groups had really good guides; the lady who took us round the house was a mine of fascinating information and imparted her real interest in the house. So much so that she overran by half an hour. Meanwhile the Head Gardener was taking the other group round, talking through the changes that have taken place this year. Unfortunately the overrun meant that the second group for the gardens had to make their own way round, but were not deterred in any way.

There was a new garden area for this year and also the community allotments within the walled garden. This is a really good idea; they are open to those living within 3 miles of Cadhay. The allotment holders are clearly spurred on by the setting, the competition and the public appreciation.

Finally we succumbed to tea, a highly recommended treat, indeed some said they would go back just for that!

All in all a very enjoyable visit to a wonderful house and garden.

Holbrook Nursery and Gardens

August saw 13 of us head for Sampford Peverell to visit this RHS recommended garden and nursery. I regret to reveal that, for the first time in 5 years, our luck ran out. Instead of raining on the way and then stopping, it did the reverse. This did rather dampen (literally, many of the plants were shoulder high on very narrow paths) our spirits. It was a real wanderer's garden complete with ducks and an elderly dog who led us round until he retired to a drier place as the

rain became heavier. We did try to get to some of the poly tunnels but didn't find the open ones until the rain had almost stopped, typical! The nursery plants were tempting and some did succumb, but many said they would return when it is drier.

(Unfortunately it was not just our luck that ran out, one of our members only got as far as Cullompton, where she had her car written off by a trailer that broke loose and hit her. Thankfully she is uninjured.)

The last visit of the year was to **Burnham Orchids** near Newton Abbot. They are consistent winners at the Chelsea Flower Show and certainly know their orchids. We were able to have a brief tour, which was very informative. I think we were too awed by the prospect of looking after some of these magnificent specimens to actually buy any, look but don't touch!