

Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Bickham House - February



A small, but select, group gathered at Bickham House to see the snowdrops. They thoroughly enjoyed their visit seeing banks of purple crocuses, daffodils, camellias and even rhododendrons in the middle of February.

The weather was kind and very pleasant for a stroll round. They reported that the teas are as good as ever, no difficulty in relaxing over the cakes and having a good catch up!

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Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Higher Cherubeer - April



Normal service resumed with this visit - a delightful garden, sunny and warm weather and a friendly, chatty group of Members. The garden was easy to find - once some of us had got past extra wide loads - and parking was straightforward. We were warmly welcomed by our two hosts who were very generous with their time and wandered round the 1.75 acres with us. They explained the history of their garden and showed us all the work which had gone into it, all Tom's stone wall building - in

the Devon style with vertical stones - new paths, new beds, new lawns. All done by just the two of them.

They hold the National Collection of cyclamen species, hellebores and over 400 snowdrop varieties. We were too late for the snowdrops but there was no shortage of other plants and bulbs in flower. There were numerous varieties of hellebores and some wonderful erythronium in many different colours. As usual with many of us there were several plants that we'd not seen before and had to ask what they were - and then promptly forgot! Shrubs and trees added to the overall picture, many in flower and some very unusual. The whole garden was a sea of colour.

We were shown their alpine collection in one of the greenhouses, again, very impressive. Raised beds for vegetables were all set out neatly ready to plant up. The orchard had many different varieties of fruit tree and the path dividing the two had an avenue of coppiced trees. It all looked like a lot of work but the results were very impressive.

Tables and chairs had been set out on the patio so we ended our visit with a very welcome mug of tea and a piece of cake (or two, there was a need to "tidy up"!) sitting in the sun and chatting away. A very enjoyable visit.

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Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Bishop's Palace and Kilver Court - May



Well, it was Day 2 of the County Show and traffic the previous day had been dire, but, for some reason, Friday was, in some places, lighter than normal and, as a consequence everyone arrived early - some very- and we left early. A first!

After a tour of Wells looking for the drop off point we alighted very close to the Market Square and the entrance to the Palace through an intriguing gateway called The Bishop's Eye (1450). Here we boosted our numbers by one to 33 and tucked into coffee and cakes as a reward for the early start.

Thus fortified we were divided into two groups for our tour of the Palace and Gardens.

We had an excellent guide who took us through the fascinating history of the different buildings and the contribution the various Bishops had made. There are the striking remains of the Great Hall built in the 13th century by Bishop Burnell in the hope and expectation of a royal visit, sadly that never materialised. In the 16th century Bishop Barlow sold the lead from the roof to meet a request by the king for monies. Without its roof the Hall fell into disrepair and in the 19th century Bishop Law, a keen gardener, removed two of the walls to open up the vista and improve the gardens. We were taken into the chapel and asked to sit on the one side while the history and features were pointed out. One of the most surprising was to discover that the home towns and villages of the craftsmen who had carved the pews were to be found on them if you looked very carefully. I'm quite sure we'd never have spotted this without our guide.

From here we went out into the 14 acres of gardens. One of the amazing things was to learn that



Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Bishop Law had had the level raised by 18" to combat the marshy conditions.

The grounds include St Andrew's Spring which supplies St Andrew's Well from which water from the Mendips emerges at a rate of roughly 48 gallons per second. There's a beautiful square Well House next to the spring which was built in 1451 and has three channels to direct the water, one to the Palace, one to the Market Square for the citizens of Wells and one to the moat. Bishop Law created a pool by the spring which provides the iconic view of the Cathedral and, on a still day, a mirror image of it. There's a kitchen garden, a parterre, an arboretum, the Garden of Reflection and, outside, a deer park.



I'd been warned by other Uersa members who'd been recently, that the renowned swans (first introduced in the 1870s) had flown after the death of the male had left the female and her cygnets on their own. However, just a week before our visit a new pair had been installed in the moat and were undergoing bell ringing training. Apparently the female was learning faster than the male... With that reminder of food we headed back to the Bishop's Table for lunch or picnicked in the grounds.

We returned to the pick up point to find another coach taking up the whole space. Particularly galling as we were all on time but their occupants most definitely weren't! After a bit of negotiation and promises of "just 2 secs" the driver was persuaded to move up and let ours squeeze in behind thus releasing the queue behind him which fortunately was of cars not larger vehicles.

On to Kilver Court where we again boosted our numbers by one. A 3.5 acre garden full of character and colour and interesting plants. The backdrop is the Charlton Viaduct built in the 1870s for the Somerset and Dorset Joint



Railway. As we thought, it was widened in 1892 to provide a double track. This is why half is built from red bricks.



The gardens were formed at the beginning of the last century by Ernest Jardine who ran a lace making factory on the site for his employees. Later it was taken over by the Showering family of

Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Babycham fame. Now Mulberry.

Our visits were in the dry, occasional glimpse of the sun but a bit chilly if in the wind. However shelter could be found in the cafes and shops.

We did have to queue on the A30 to get back into Exeter but not for long. It was a very enjoyable day and we all behaved ourselves on the coach!

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Hillersdon - June



It was a day of sunshine and showers, umbrellas and sunglasses. We did have one spell of rain just as we started our tour but it then dried up and tea was taken in quite hot sunshine. It then poured down on the way home!



19 of us arrived to make our way through three sets of electric gates and to be welcomed by the owner and his staff. Cordial was offered which some took up. We were introduced to the Head Gardener who explained what had been done to various parts of the garden and grounds since the current owner had arrived just a few years ago. He then took us round telling us the history behind the lawn, the site of the earlier house and then into the walled garden. He explained that any weeds were there because the bees had lost their queen and were a bit angry so they'd had to avoid that part! The walled gardens were huge but were still work in progress. From there we moved into a

Gardens Group Reports - 2019

wild spring garden and hence to their Stumpery. This was quite magnificent, a fascinating feature. Some goats came to look at us.



What was then left were the ponds and a lake. To get to these we had to cross the deer park admiring a mother and her tiny foal racing away from us. At the Lily Pond we found a figure of a large hippo overlooking it.

We made our way back up to the house where tea awaited. This could be taken either out on the terrace or inside in luxury. The owner chatted to those of us inside telling us how much work they'd done to the house, really stripped it all out. Apparently the house had been divided into flats so major work was needed. The owner was flying back every month from Kenya for a couple of days to oversee the work.

Everyone agreed that this was an excellent visit and that we were made very welcome by everyone there. They were very generous with their time, it was nearly 5 pm before we left.

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Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Middle Well - July



This was a very well supported visit, 24 of us were fortunate enough to have chosen to make this visit. Middle Well is a truly magnificent garden - or rather gardens because the owners have created several distinct gardens.

A first for us, lunch was offered and 12 of us took advantage of this kind offer to start the visit. We had a choice of homemade and home grown soups which were delicious and seconds were very popular. Focaccia accompanied the soups and to follow, our hosts provided a large bowl of fresh fruit. At this point there was a lively discussion on the optimal ripeness of a banana!

The rest of the group arrived to join us and our hosts very kindly offered to guide us round, they'd provided a laminated map and descriptions but we gratefully accepted their offer.

They moved here 17 years ago and started to transform the 4 acres of fields - it had been a farm - into a series of gardens. Much thought clearly went into planning and designing their overall vision. Walls were built, streams diverted to form a beautiful rill through the formal gardens and left as natural streams through the wet woodland, supporting posts to corner arbours were moved and a summer house built. Work is still in progress though with a wildflower meadow, arboretum and orchard with rare fruit trees. There's a large kitchen garden, looking very productive, and a walled garden. Some members walked through the field containing



Gardens Group Reports - 2019

the geese but found them a little too friendly and retreated rapidly! No one else ventured that way after that.

There were plenty of seating areas and, given the fantastic weather, the temptation to sit and admire the view was impossible to avoid, especially when tea of lemon drizzle or ginger cake was offered. I think several of us could have quite happily have sat for longer in or just outside the summer house! As one would expect the garden was packed with a wonderful array of plants, shrubs and specimen trees (there was a very colourful cornus in full bloom) all looking very healthy despite the lack of rain - they haven't watered except for some vegetables.



Our hosts were very hospitable and welcoming and, a good sign, suggested that we make a return visit at a different time of year. I'm sure that the garden has an abundance of interest and colour at any time of year, it's so well designed, constructed and planted.

24 very happy and contented members reluctantly left knowing that this was a real gem, one of the best gardens we've had the good fortune to be allowed to visit.

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Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Chevithorne - August



Those of us who came ten years ago were able to see what changes had taken place and also to see it at a different time of year. The first thing we noticed was the scent from the flowers on the lime trees in the farmyard where we parked. Then, on entering the gardens you picked up the scent from the sweet peas and were able to admire the huge catalpa tree in full flower on the first terrace.



We were approached by the garden curator who has been associated with the gardens for many years. It transpired that he'd spent several years out in Nepal so an animated conversation ensued about numerous topics not directly connected with the garden! Chevithorne is renowned for its trees, it has many rare specimens and a National Collection of Quercus (oaks). The garden is suffering losses though and there's a worryingly high percentage of expected losses in the next ten years. The incidence of various tree diseases is taking its toll. This is a very varied garden, some older parts near the house, terraced and walled with lots of stone work and steps, the woodland area, orchards and then, by the open air swimming pool, some more formal borders. These were very colourful and were attracting lots of butterflies. In the background here were several varieties of eucryphia, many in flower. Teas were served on long tables, mostly in the barn, one table out in the open. There was a choice of a cream tea or cakes. Thus fed we found our way back, another enjoyable visit.

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Gardens Group Reports - 2019

Brocton Cottage - September



Our last visit of this gardening year was much enjoyed by those who were successful in getting there, four unfortunately suffered various setbacks on the day. We were welcomed by our hosts who explained that they'd moved in 8 years ago and had to clear leylandii and other less than attractive trees and shrubs from a very run down and overgrown garden. Huge numbers of rhododendrons being the latest to

go. It is now a wonderful garden, large, 1.3 acres in all, very varied in planting from a productive kitchen and vegetable garden, to a woodland garden, orchard, meadow and formal borders. All enhanced by a panoramic view. The day before had been a real shocker weather wise with torrential rain and flooding in some parts of Devon but Tuesday was fine and sunny, we were very lucky. Our host, Naomi, was very generous with her time and was on hand to explain her ideas and to refresh our failing memories with names of plants we know we know but can't just place at the moment! The garden was awash with butterflies which was refreshing to see. The herbaceous borders were full of colour and were ideally placed to be seen from the house.

There were several places to sit and admire the views although I think only one tried the swing! We did though all gravitate to the terrace where we sat soaking up the sun, admiring the views,



catching up with each other and indulging in really delicious cakes. Naomi kindly revealed the secrets of the chocolate cake - I think a few of us will be trying to replicate that! Here's to next season, hope to see you all then!

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