

WHPS Trip to England—Part 2

This is part 2 of A. Hort Hound's observations on the WHPS trip to England this past summer.

Tuesday, June 15

Well, the departure from the Felix Hotel was a little delayed this morning. We had settled the issue about the cooked full English breakfast, but the hotel got the last laugh. I mean, can you imagine waiting two hours for a couple of poached eggs? There was no breakfast buffet and the hotel was not sufficiently equipped to cook breakfast for 28 people who all had a departure time of 0900! Needless to say, Franki had some further "words" with the management. Her standards are very high and she does not tolerate the slightest deficiency in hotel services. She did get the hotel to supply us with cookies and drinks for a late morning snack as a sort of peace offering. (Despite all this, the place was really outstanding—I took Mrs. A Hort Hound to dinner there later in late summer!)

Anyway, though everyone did not manage a full cooked English breakfast, we were off for to first garden of the day—Cottesbrooke Hall. This was a magnificent estate, which opened just for our group that day. Owned by the MacDonald-Buchanan family, it was said to be the setting of Jane Austin's novel **Mansfield Park**. Two very famous English garden designers had been involved in the 20th century reworking of the gardens, Dame Sylvia Crowe and the late Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe.

The house was built in the early 18th century of rose-colored brick with local Duston stone on the ground floor level. The entrance drive passed over a stone bridge built in 1780, which gave you the best overall view of the manor house. The view from the entrance gate extended for three miles and sited perfectly the steeple of the Brixworth Church, the oldest and only extant Saxon Church in all of England, built in 680 A.D.

We were met by the head gardener of five years (who used to work for the National Trust) dressed very casually in blue jeans and a plaid shirt. He gave us an introduction to the garden and turned us loose to enjoy the immaculately kept grounds. I headed immediately for the wild, less-formal garden, which was created along a stream crisscrossed by a series of bridges and dotted with sculpture, gazebos and fantastic woodland plants. Back at the manor house, there were many formal garden rooms to be explored, all towered over by a pair of 300-year-old cedars of Lebanon, which taken by themselves would have been worthy of a stop. It had a Dutch Garden, a Pool Garden, a Statue Walk, a Gladiator garden (containing a statue of a gladiator), a Philosopher Garden and a Secret Garden, all connected by charming gateways in the walls and hedges, with perfectly framed views of a bench or statue. Even the entrance to the manor house was very elaborate, with a stone courtyard, statues and urns. One of the gardeners told us they had just brought out the pots of "aggies" (agapanthus) from the green house. I was very impressed by the magnificent tree-lined vistas, which stretched from the house to the horizon in every direction, including the one to the ancient Saxon church. This garden was one of the biggest surprises of the trip, as it had been previously unknown to all of us.

After regretfully departing Cottesbrooke Hall, we passed by Naseby, the site of the famous battle of 1649, where Oliver Cromwell and the Roundheads defeated Charles the First, who ultimately lost his head in the English Reformation. Unfortunately, the next couple of hours were not so scenic as we passed through the environs of Birmingham, with motorways choked with lorries and bordered by ugly apartment blocks that appeared to be much like low-income settlements you see in the U.S. We did make a motorway stop, just managing to get there before the "Crinklies" (an English euphemism for the retired, older crowd). It included a KFC and a Burger King, with prices exactly twice those in the U.S.—a meal with a whopper was \$9, not \$4.50.

During the afternoon coach journey, we were entertained by a video featuring the creation of the most avant-garde, tradition-breaking garden entered in the Chelsea flower show this year. It consisted of a giant Easter egg pavilion of metallic, brilliantly colored balls and a path of lollipops (grown from seed, no less) by the contemporary Irish Garden designer Dairmuid Gavin. The story of the garden was a television sensation, and it was the most visited garden at the show. It actually won a medal for its innovative use of plants—all foliage without any flowers. All of the color was provided by the lollipops and the giant, beaded Easter egg.

In mid-afternoon, it suddenly clouded over as we entered North Wales, with its rugged mountains, slate quarries, fields of sheep and quaint villages. The roads were narrow and winding and we all took in the beautiful countryside. Wales is a

small "country"—170 miles long, 60 miles wide—but one of intense nationalism. Children are only taught Welsh in the first few years of school.

We didn't arrive at our second stop of the day until 5:00 p.m.—Crug Farm, the nursery and display garden of Bleddyn and Sue Jones. The garden even had its own brown and white official road sign marking it as a "destination." Bleddyn gave us an hour tour of the garden, which was like visiting an exotic plant zoo. It was a jungle of rare plants, not really a garden in some ways. We were overwhelmed by the new and exotic species of disporums, polygonatums etc., mostly from the Far East. Bleddyn and Sue are plant collectors extraordinaire. Their most recent expedition had been last November to North Vietnam with Dan Hinkley. They have also traveled on expeditions with Darryl Probst, the Arnold Arboretum staff, Galen Gates of the Chicago Botanic Garden, etc. Though they do not do mail order, they had a wonderful sales area.

The coach returned for us promptly at 6:00 p.m., having dropped off our luggage at the beautiful Seiont Manor Hotel, a small (28 rooms), exquisite hideaway at the foot of the Snodownia Mountains of North Wales. The long, narrow lane into the hotel, lined by huge oaks, chestnuts, and beeches, as well as parallel hedges of cherry laurel, was a coach-driver's nightmare, but Max came through with just a few skirmishes with the overhanging branches. It was a lovely place surrounded by gardens and magnificent views from every window, a bubbling brook and lots of singing birds. Each of the rooms was named for one of the 600 castles in Wales. We had a wonderful dinner in the restaurant Llwyn Y Brain (don't ask me what this means), with a menu offering a choice of Welsh delights and plenty of good wine.

Wednesday, June 16

This morning we had a wonderful cooked English breakfast, done very efficiently compared to the Felix, only the hot water boiler had given out during the night and no one could have hot shower. We dreaded Franki's arrival in the breakfast room!!!

Our first garden was across just the Menai Straits on the Isle of Anglesey. We approached the Port Britainia Bridge, with its massive rectangular pylons, and enjoyed the fine view from the bridge towards the island. Though overcast with low clouds, there were occasional bright periods which promised more sunshine later in the day, so that the Welsh mountains could be viewed on the horizon.

At Plas Newydd, we were met by the head gardener, John Dennis, an hour before the normal opening time. The bones of this 169-acre estate had been laid out in 1798, though considerable improvements had been made to the property since the Marquis of Anglesey turned it over to the National Trust in 1976. Mr. Dennis had been the head gardener for 25 years, and we started off through a spectacular grove of the giant Monterey cypress (*Cypress microcarpa*) just over the Ha Ha that bordered the entire area of built up gardens. We were taken with large specimens of *Pinus Radiata* and *Thuja Plicata*, also from North America.

The growing season we were told was 250 days. That explained the immense size of the woody plant material. There were marvelous views out to the Straits and the Welsh mountains on the opposite shore, if we could have seen them. There was a very large rustic treehouse built from scrap by the children of the Marquis in an enormous sycamore-beech. We were told that of the 16 tree houses owned by the National Trust, this was the only one made out of scrap—quite charming compared to the formality of the castle. The parklands were heavily planted with azaleas, rhodies and hundreds of hydrangeas, but unfortunately we had arrived during the "June gap" (no hydrangeas in bloom yet)! We were then lead through the arboretum, which was known as Australasia, meaning all the woody material was from Australia, unique to all the gardens in the National Trust. It was here that we learned of an easy way to convert centigrade to Fahrenheit: 10 degrees C = 50 degrees F; 16 degrees C = 61 degrees F; 28 degrees C = 82 degrees F.

We eventually ended up at the magnificent Terrace Garden below the castle, which had been restored by the National Trust into a very formal area, and a real treat. It was in the Italianate style and was topped by a trellis garden house where a Victorian greenhouse had once stood. We picked up sandwiches and light refreshment in the restaurant before re-boarding the coach and heading back across the Straits.

We then proceeded to Carnarferon around the NW corner of Wales towards Plas Brodanw. Here we were met by Linda Davis, who told us about the eccentric Welsh architect Sir Clough Williams Ellis, who was not knighted until the age of 93, the oldest age at which anyone has ever been knighted in England. He had been born in 1883 to a middle class family, and the Plas had been given to him in 1908 by his father as a birthday present. He extensively restored the buildings and grounds in a more or less Arts and Crafts style, though this was certainly in a different vein than the house and gardens of

Lutyens and Jekyll seen on previous WHPS trips. Most of the decorative ironwork, including the garden furniture, was painted in Port Meirion green with yellow highlights. Port Meirion green, a pale green-blue, was Ellis's favorite color, and we would see more of this as the day went on. (Personally, I much prefer Kiftsgate blue, a darker blue-green color.)

The Plas grounds had wonderful hardscaping of gray Welsh stone and many fine topiaries, though they were somewhat less than perfection. Flowers were not a strong feature, but the setting and feeling of the place were enchanting. Across the road, most of the party made it up the hill to Clough's lookout tower for a marvelous view of the countryside. The tower had been a wedding present to Clough from members of the Welsh Guard. We didn't get tea at this place, which would have been a culminating event to the visit.

It was just a short distance down the road to Clough's masterpiece, the village of Port Meirion. Fortunately, just as we arrived at this magical village, the clouds lifted and the skies became solidly blue, as if a magic curtain had opened across the landscape. Sunshine on the pastel buildings of this fairyland gave you the impression you were somewhere on the Italian Amalfi Coast, not on the coast of Wales. Having traversed a number of the dark gray villages of Wales (dark stone houses, dark slate roofs with minimal decoration and rare window boxes of flowers), I could see where an eccentric architect would long for this magnificent folly!

As the coach approached, the ladies in the group immediately spotted the Port Meirion pottery seconds shop, famous for its botanical china pattern. Several of the group disappeared in there only to reemerge when the bus departed. The tea facilities were rather disappointing, but a number of us enjoyed the Welsh cakes with raisins and currants. The Port Meirion green was everywhere, and there were wonderful small plazas in which to sit and enjoy the sunny afternoon. The decorative details on the buildings were enchanting, and I was very glad to have my telephoto lens. The village was full of beautiful flowering shrubs and pots of decorative annuals.

We were led by guides over the steep hills surrounding the village into a dense forest of exotic trees and shrubs. We were told about the dreaded *Rhododendron ponticum*, which had originated in China and was extensively planted on English estates for harboring wildlife, especially pheasants. Now the woody plant is a terrible nuisance, reaching 30 feet in height and making dense impenetrable groves, and they are being removed across England and Scotland at a cost of more than 50 million pounds. It was easy to see why it was a primary source of firewood in the mountainous parts of China. The other two pests from the Far East are *Impatiens glandulifera* (policeman's helmet) and Japanese knotweed (*Polygonatum cuspidatum*). Our guide was non-talkative. The other group's was quite loquacious, but without the guides we would never have found our way through the forested rocky crags to the shores of a tidal estuary, which at low tide stretched to the distant horizon. It was bisected by tidal rivers and streams shimmering in the sun—truly a memorable sight.

We had a beautiful ride home (along with all those packages of Port Meirion pottery) along the NW coast of Wales with the Welsh mountains as a backdrop in the Snowdonia national park. We got a fine view of Mt. Snowdon, the highest point in England and Wales. (At least we thought so anyway.) That evening, we had drinks in a fine sunny courtyard at Seiont Manor, and then a delicious dinner. This was memorable for me for the main course of risotto with laver (a seaweed) bread, a specialty of Welsh cuisine. For dessert, I had slices of fresh pineapple with fresh ground black pepper corns over vanilla ice cream topped off with a sauce of maple sugar—delicious. After dinner, we requested that chef Martyn Williams come to our table, and we congratulated him for his efforts. He was a very entertaining Welsh man, and though native to North Wales, had grown up in a cottage inside the Westonbirt Arboretum. He was delighted to hear that we would be paying a visit there in the coming days.

Thursday, June 17

After another hearty cooked English breakfast which included black pudding (blood sausage), we boarded the coach for a rather late departure—0900. The weather was mostly cloudy and described by the locals as fresher (read colder) than the day before, with brisk northerly winds. But, at least it wasn't raining.

Our first garden, a short distance away, was Penrhyn Castle. We were greeted by Phillip Makin, the charismatic assistant head gardener, with a marvelous sense of humor who immediately commanded everyone's attention. He had been on the staff for 14 years. The castle and its 45 acres of garden and parkland were reached through a massive entrance portal, then up a long dark, winding road through dense woods, where suddenly the castle with its battlements looms before you. It was built in 1837, the beginning of the Victorian period, the very year Queen Victoria began her reign, which lasted until 1901. The castle was built in the neo-Norman style, and was built to impress. The every imposing edifice said to the Victorians "here I am, look how successful I have been, and look how much money I have made." I couldn't help but think of a very similar trend set by the "starter" castles popping up in American suburbs at the present time. In the car

park area was a large Wellingtonia, planted by Queen Victoria herself in 1854, and a very large turkey oak planted by one of her daughters. The castle was not presently lived in, but contained many treasures, including a Vermeer painting of the Burgermeister of Delft, which recently sold for \$8 million. The gardener joked that perhaps the castle would have much more charm if it were a ruin with vines creeping all over it.

We passed down a long woodland walk, past the ruins of the 14th century church with its pet cemetery, to the formal wall garden of stark formality. The entrance was through a small wooden door much like the one in the Secret Garden, the wall itself overgrown with flowering climbing hydrangeas, kiwis, and passion flowers. Inside, we were struck by the Chusan palms and the massive cordylines in full flower, used as accent plants. Along one side was a long iron pergola, covered with a red and purple fuchsia (*Fuchsia magellica* hybrid), dotted occasionally with a large flowering white clematis. Below the wall garden was my favorite garden, the bog garden, which was one of the largest we had seen in England. It was dominated by great masses of *Gunnera manicota*, with their massive five-foot wide leaves. Around the edges were Japanese red maples, purple *Corylus* (*Corylus maxima* 'Purpurea') in front of which were planted bright green New Zealand tree ferns. All of this was surveyed from a rustic thatched belvedere, which was something you might expect to see in an old Tarzan movie.

Returning through the woodlands to the front of the castle, which overlooked the Straits of Menai, we marveled at the spectacular views of Puffin Island, the great headland of Orme, and mountains of Snowdonia. The Castle itself was stark place in the landscape, without any horticulture adornment other than some Virginia creeper climbing up the facade in places.

From Penrhyn, it was but a short ride to Bodnant, the most famous of the Welsh gardens, and certainly one of the finest gardens in all of the British Isles. If you can see but one garden in all of Wales, this is the one. Owned by the Aberconways, whose lordships include two previous presidents of the RHS, the Bodnant Manor House, built in the Victorian style, is magnificently situated just above the River Conway looking across a wide valley to the Snowdonia Range. Near the house are a series of seven formal terraces, which lead you down gradually to the magnificent Dell garden, entered through the reconstructed Pin Mill, now a stunning garden house. The mill dated from 1730, and had been rescued by the Late Aberconway from Woodchester in the Cotswolds, where it was falling into ruin.

We had a marvelous introductory tour of the grounds by Martin Puddle, the third in a line of gardeners from the same family stretching back to 1920. As he told us, the gardens of Bodnant, though now a National Trust property over which the Aberconways uniquely remain in full control, were the creation of just seven persons—three Puddle gardeners and four members of the Aberconway family. There was never a grand plan and no designer gardens. It all just sort of evolved and underwent continuous improvement and expansion. The soil was very poor, sometimes as little as two inches of clay over solid bedrock. We were overwhelmed by the 55-yard Laburnum walk near the entrance, the finest in the British Isles, as well as by the magnificent convoluted trunk of an ancient Japanese maple.

We gradually worked our way down the seven terraces (no central staircase), which included a marvelous wooden pergola. Even the decorative urns on the tops of the wooden latticework were constructed of wood. It was covered with roses, clematis, etc. A man-made stream flowed down through the center of the terraces, and was used to form a water feature on each level. The views looking back up at the Bodnant manor House were stunning. Passing along the final terrace and through the Pin Mill was Bodnant's hallmark garden, the gorgeous ravine, or dell garden, which was entered by a winding path seeming to fall hundreds of feet below to a meandering stream, from which it wound back up again. The views of the stream and waterfalls, seen from many different angles, took the breath away.

Though the azaleas and camellias were out of bloom, there were epimedium-lined paths and rivers of pink foxgloves flowing down the walls of the ravine. There were towering Wellingtonias and *Thuja plicata*. There were large clumps of blue hostas that literally engulfed wooden benches, and gorgeous clumps of ferns. Everything was absolutely enchanting. There was a series of bridges and at the very bottom another old mill.

Going back up the ravine, we happened upon the "The Poem," the mausoleum of the Aberconway family. We passed through the shrub borders on the way back to the house and were struck by the flowering dogwoods, including a stunning specimen of the pink flowering *Cornus florida* 'Cherokee'. Many of us felt that this had been the finest garden of the trip so far.

After a short drive along the coast, we arrived at Bodysgallen Hall in time for an early afternoon high tea. This hotel and spa was built of the local rosy pink sandstone, which picked up the color of the pink *Centranthus rubra* growing out of the garden's stone walls. The tearoom in this 17th century manor house, with its views of Snowdonia and the distant

Conway Castle, was one of those elegant, stuffy English affairs with stuffed furniture and dark wood paneling. The sandwiches and cakes were memorable, especially the Welsh cakes with clotted cream (well, not quite as thick as Devonshire clotted cream, which is typically thick enough to use as mortar between bricks).

After tea, we were treated to a tour of the grounds by the head gardener (never did catch his name). The gardens had been restored to their 1913 appearance. The formal wall garden was perhaps the most memorable, with its formal box parterres and stone walls dripping with gorgeous climbing roses and the two-foot-tall pink spikes of centhraanthus (the most beautiful display of the latter I have ever seen on these tours). There was a series of walled rooms, including a pool garden, a rose garden, and a very large kitchen garden. Along the outer walls, there were a 100 yards of trimmed boxwood hedges (two feet tall) flanked by espaliered pear and apple trees on the stone walls. At the entrance to the rose garden was a magnificent pair of umbrella-shaped silver pear trees that knocked your socks off.

In 1986, this garden had been a wedding present to the former owner. There was also a small, walled rock garden and a large wedding tree (variegated pagoda dogwood) seen just beyond the walls. Beyond the kitchen garden was long walk that meandered through the woods, with occasional views of the distant waters and the nearby Conway Castle. It was with regret that we left this lovely place, as we had to get back to Seiont Manor by 5:00 p.m. for Max and Franki to take in the Euro Cup match between England and Switzerland at 5:30 p.m.

That night at Seiont we had a very fine traditional Welsh dinner in the restaurant Llwyn Y Brain (I did learn on this trip that the Welsh pronunciation has no relationship to the spelling of the words). I had the chicken apricot and black pudding terrine with apple chutney, pot-roasted lamb shank on Rwdan Stwnch with Glazed Parmesan shavings, and for dessert—ah dessert—bread and butter pudding with toffee-rum sauce. Hmmm, delicious! The chef, Martyn Williams, briefly popped his head out after dinner and we congratulated him one last time.

After dinner, we were entertained by a charming Welsh choir of mostly older women, who sang lovely songs in Welsh, including the Welsh national anthem and the song "Come Home to Wales." I am afraid Bob Berends was so taken with the performance, that he embarrassed us all. He had the bravado to introduce as the WHPS singing group and we were forced to perform rousing renditions of "Varsity" and "On Wisconsin." As it turned out, at least half of us did not remember all of the words to either song. Oh well, it was good for laughs!

Friday, June 18—The Longest Day

We regretfully waved good-bye to Seiont Manor after our hot-cooked English (Welsh?) breakfast in the sun-filled dining room. This began our seven-hour odyssey over the mountains and coastal roads of Wales towards the cathedral city of Gloucester. It was slow progress on the winding roads of Snowdonia National Park, but the scenery was awesome. We had a mid-morning stop in the village of Dolgellau for coffee and the loo, and Franki picked up some sandwiches for later in the day, made up especially for us by the village baker. Getting out of the village was a major feat, as at one particularly sharp corner those of us on the right side of the bus had our noses plastered into the cold gray stone wall of a two-story building, as Max inched back and forth repeatedly until, miraculously, the coach rounded the corner. Needless to say Max got a good round of applause.

It was nearly 2:00 p.m. by the time we reached the first garden of the day—Bryan's Ground. This is the garden of David Wheeler and Simon Dorall, who publish the literary garden journal, *Hortus*. David is the editor and Simon does the illustrations (black and white drawings). We were greeted by Simon, who gave us a brief introduction to this wonderful garden, perhaps my favorite of the entire trip. This was a true artist's garden that, as one of us put it, poked fun at many of the formal gardens of England. It was a fun garden whose delights were obviously the joy of its makers.

The house was built in 1911 in the Arts & Crafts Style, and the hardscaping done by the present owners to enhance the setting was fabulous. This included a two-story mortise and tenoned dovecote, which matched the house, the second floor of which was used for candlelight dining. The entrance courtyard was through an orchard of small pollarded apple trees, underplanted with blue Siberian iris and tall white daisies. In the surrounding fields, the sheep were bleating, which enhanced the bucolic scene.

The main part of the garden was divided into about 20 rooms by walls and hedges. Just to the right of the front door was a courtyard named St. Ann for Ann Raver, the garden columnist of the *New York Times* who had written a piece on the garden. Directly behind the house was a courtyard not of boxwood, but of boxed yews (yews enclosed by wooden frames shaped like obelisks for a stunning effect). Flowers spilled out from everywhere into the paths, and there were many artist whimsies to demand your attention. One of my favorites was the garden building referred to as the Sulking House, whose

bench was backed by a wall of vintage wardrobe items. I was particularly impressed by the pots of single martagon lilies in full flower at the entrance—what an elegant touch.

There was a small Edwardian greenhouse full of scented geraniums in full bloom, all growing in antique hand-thrown terracotta pots. There was a more formal courtyard with a hedge on stilts (a la Hidcote) around a reflecting pool, at the head of which was a statue of a Dalmatian. This room was referred to as "Dalmatia." Another room, called The Lighthouse, focused on an odd tower-like contraption that had been used to dispense gas for lighting homes around 1900.

Outside of the central three acres of gardens was a newly planted five-acre arboretum with allees of rather newly planted trees lining up stunning views of the Herefordshire hills. Back on the coach, we were all abuzz with "did you see that?" type of conversation, and of course this garden had so much to offer that we all missed things!

It was short drive to our second garden of the day, Lance Hattat Design Garden (formerly Arrowhead Cottage). The previous owner had moved to Budapest, Hungary, to be with the British Embassy, and the charming couple, the Martins (he was an air traffic controller based in London), who purchased the property had closed on it only two weeks before our visit. This was a lovely designer garden, in stark contrast to the previous garden, and perhaps enjoyed to lesser extent by some of us. We all agreed in later conversation that the new owners had no idea what they were in for when it came to the maintenance that was going to be required. There was a natural stream coursing through this small garden, which was crossed by a dainty blue painted bridge. There was a gravel area with a stone-paved central circle from which erupted a startling jet of water. More water ran down a 170-foot rill, rigidly enclosed between very high hedges. There were many richly planted borders, and a small kitchen and white garden.

From this last garden it was an hour or so to our hotel, Hatton Court, perched in the hills overlooking the city of Gloucester. Enroute, we had a fine view of Gloucester's magnificent cathedral. It was our third time on these trips to stay in this country hotel, and once again we marveled at Max's ability to negotiate the iron and stone gateway into the hotel grounds. Between the coach and the stone of the gate there was not enough room for a single finger.

We had a delightful dinner in the hotel dining room, with its fine views out over the city. I remember having salmon as both the appetizer and the main course, and a wonderful slice of lemon custard for dessert. After a long day's coach journey, I think we all went to bed early that night and did not venture down into the charming village of Upton St. Leonard's.

The next morning, after a cooked English breakfast, we had time to pose for a group picture on the steps of the hotel. It was rather amusing seeing the hotel manager taking photos from a pile of about 15 cameras! He did remarkably well and must have done this type of thing before. Then we were off on our final day of gardens.

The coach proceeded towards the village of Tetbury. We passed St. Mary's church in the village of Painswick, whose grounds contained 99 sculpted yews. Painswick is a charming Gloucestershire village of Cotswold stone dry walls towering up to ten feet, stone shops and houses, often with roofs of split stone. At the center of the village was a gem of a church, with a single tall, very thin spire. There were antique shops galore, many with garden items visible in the windows. We passed The Snooty Fox, a charming hotel, which has always appealed to me as a place to stay someday.

Just outside the village is High Grove, Prince Charles's country estate. He purchased the estate about 20 years ago and has 300 acres of formal gardens and park lawns managed with organic techniques, about which he is quite proud. Needless to say, this led to discussions about Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, as this seems to be their favorite residence. There is a polo club nearby and a famous hunt club. In fact, we were told that Camilla went riding with the hunt club on alternate days. Of course, this area of England with royalty about has become very popular with the English upper class, many of whom now have country places in the immediate vicinity of High Grove.

By the way, we did apply to visit this garden two years ago, and eventually received a reply from the garden manager that our group had been placed on the list, and perhaps we would be able to visit High Grove sometime in the future. We heard from Franki that the letters are occasionally put into a basket, from which one is occasionally selected, and the group is called and invited to come the next day. I suspect we will never see this garden!

Anyway, just down the road from High Grove was the famous national arboretum, Westonbirt. With its 600 acres, 18 miles of paths and 18,000 trees there was plenty to see, even if it did not include Camilla and the Prince in their polo outfits. The original plantings were done in 1820 as a private arboretum, and it had been passed to the government in 1950 as part of the "death duties." Someone came on the coach to give us a brief introduction, which was not up to our

usual standards. Franki said that our group had been slighted, as we were not even given a map of the garden. The facilities were very impressive, including a restaurant called The Maples, with a stone and sedum covered roof, and a wonderful store, The Forest Shop.

Most of us went immediately to the "Festival of the Garden" area. Here we saw the third annual competition of England's festival of contemporary garden design, modeled after the avant-garde festival of gardens at Chaumont-sur-Loire in France. Combining art and the garden, it raises the question of where art installation starts and where the garden begins? We were told that artists from all over Europe submitted 200 designs for this year's festival, from which 20 were selected for installation. The designers are limited to a maximum plot size of 200 square meters, and the only instruction is to create "ideas to steal." Most of us spent some time here, pausing to read the introductory description of the various gardens. One of my favorites was a "Ha Ha" in reverse, for this garden was created at the base of the Ha Ha and not visible until you looked down over the Ha Ha itself. Another garden was literally a five-meter "hole in the ground," with steps going down into it and an elegant suspension bridge crossing over it. It was one of the few gardens with brightly colored flowering plants, however.

In the center of the festival of gardens was one entitled "Wind Shore." Planted to look like the seashore, over which were stretched ribbons of shiny plastic (the same plastic strips used to bind up large boxes you might receive from the UPS truck). These ribbons literally shimmered in the sunshine, and when the wind was just right gave out a mysterious sound like someone twanging a single string on a harp. Another garden consisted of a stone ramp which lead into the earth, on either side of which arose green grassy banks gradually shrinking your view of the countryside and limiting your vision to the blue sky and the tallest tree tops. It was called a "Dust to Dust" meditation garden, why I don't know, for at the very bottom of the path was a pile of shredded black rubber mulch, not dust!

My favorite garden was a Celtic Labyrinth done in rocks covered with wire, leading you to monsters in the depths of the nearby woods also created from wire sculptures stuffed with pieces of Cotswold stone! Another garden had potted agaves planted within wire rectangles filled with lovely water-smoothed rocks. Just off the main area and hanging from the low branches of an enormous conifer was the "Sounds of Sunlight," which gave off prehistoric moaning sounds from time to time. The sounds were created by sunlight reflected off of spinning aluminum disks, which was then converted to low voltage electricity to make the weird noises.

Though I enjoyed the Festival of Gardens very much, when push comes to shove, in my own mind nothing replaces the sheer artistry and beauty of the plants themselves, and I will take the sounds of birds and a bubbling brook in the garden any day! Unfortunately, we only had a couple of hours to spend here. Most of us spent the remaining time in the old part of the arboretum, which included a main drive and a half-mile-long specimen walk, which was just as you might imagine. I believe the enormity of the Wellingtonia, Scotts pines, black pines, Douglas firs, Monterey cypresses, and *Pinus radiata* made a lasting impression as they towered high up into the sky above the walk.

I made an excursion into the Maple Glade. Every once in a while the serenity of the place would be interrupted by the sudden juxtaposition of another Festival of the Gardens entry, like a blazing aluminum covered garden house, or a "formal" table setting in a grassy opening, of broken pieces of mirror and gold apples on a gold lame table cloth.

We left this wonderful place all too soon and proceeded by Coach towards London for our final garden of the trip—Wisley, the main show garden of the Royal Horticulture Society. From the M-4 Motorway along the way we got a very fine view of Windsor Castle, which at this time of year was likely to house the queen, with horse races going on at nearby Ascott. Wisley's 250 acres of gardens include a fine restaurant, a fabulous shop with a terrific selection of books, and a large plant center. Needless to say, those of us who had been here before (most of the folks) knew that three hours was not nearly enough time to see the grounds, but we managed to scurry around to check out our favorite venues. There was some dismay on entering the car park, which was overflowing with cars and a long row of coaches, but after all it was a gorgeous, sunny, Saturday afternoon.

Most of us made a beeline for the double herbaceous borders leading up to the top of Battelson Hill, with a side trip through an adjoining archway to see Penelope Hobhouse's Country Garden in full flower, with its central square of calla lilies in full bloom. There were also spires of the blue *Aconitum* 'Bressingham Spire' everywhere, which could be the delphinium replacement for Wisconsin gardens (Flower Factory does carry this one, at least early in the season). There were many different colorful geraniums spilling into the pathways in a typical English cottage garden fashion.

Another archway led me to the new rose garden, which had been under construction on our previous visit in 2002, and to my eyes was not as impressive as the old rose garden further afield. In the shrub borders up the hill, we marveled at the

various Japanese maples, the fabulous *Sambucus* 'Black Beauty' (dark black foliage with pink flowers) and several stunning martagon lilies, for which I could find only one label—*Lilium martagon* 'Brocade'. It was a beautiful deep pink one—to die for.

Over the top of the hill, the test gardens came into view with a long bed of delphiniums in glorious flower, which never fails to impress even the repeat visitor. There were also rows of sweetpeas, snapdragons (tall and short), hardy geraniums, taller pinks, seed dahlias, etc.

I did find the test area for the genus *actea* (which now includes all of the *cimicifugas*, as this genus has been incorporated into *actea*), a genus I could relate to in my Wisconsin shade garden. All of the purple-leafed forms were lined up in a single row, and several of us agreed that 'Hillside Black Beauty' (Connecticut origin) took top honors! I finally found the basilar *acteas* side by side that I had purchased at We Du nurseries ten years ago. The one with smaller shiny leaves is *Actea japonica*, which has a late summer flower display of 50 or more upright, 18-inch candles. This one has self-sown, and many of you have purchased this at our plant sales over the years. The other, with much larger but non-glossy leaves, is *Actea biternata*. I was delighted to finally identify this one, as Richard Weaver (one of the original owners of We Du) had been unable to identify it exactly. Of course, this never stops me from buying a good-looking plant. I also discovered a new basilar form in the test area, *Actaea heradeifolia*, with even larger, more palmate and glossier foliage than *Actea japonica*. It has now moved to the top of my "must have list." just below *Iris lavezgata* 'Variegata'.

After spending some time in the test garden, I wandered over to the avenue of idea gardens, a number of which were new since our last visit. I was taken by the pot garden (well, what would you expect?) and the display of English terracotta. As it turned out, all of my favorite pots were made by Whichford Pottery in Warwickshire (they always have an advertisement in *The Garden*), my absolute favorite being one sold as the RHS Jekyll Flowerpot, with an inlaid floral designs of darker fired clay. You know, we have never visited an English pottery maker before, and perhaps we should do this on our next trip! And, perhaps we should convince The Garden Room in Shorewood, Wisconsin to import a supply of these pots for Wisconsin gardeners who want something really special!

Most of us made it to the famous rock garden, which is undergoing a progressive reconstruction of the water course, and I was surprised to see how severely some of the 100-year-old conifers had been pruned. Up above the rock garden, I marveled at the jewels in the alpine houses, with their security alarm system. I was only later to realize that I completely missed the new Piet Oudolf grass garden just beyond (isn't that always the way, when you get back on the coach and hear the chatter, you are made to feel that you missed the best part of the garden?). I did not make it into the tropical glass houses with their fabulous displays of fuchsias, begonias, and exotic *impatiens* this time, but perhaps on the next visit!

I spent most of the last hour looking at books in the shop, and managed to view the Whichford pottery display of terracotta in the Plant Center (yes, definitely we will have to visit this pottery). I even managed to have a coconut cake and a cup of coffee in the new eating place now tacked on to the book shop.

From Wisely, we managed to navigate the dreaded M-25 (ring road around London) and made it to the Copthorne Hotel near Gatwick in less than a half an hour. We said our good-byes to Max, who promised to accompany us on our 2006 tour of English gardens!

Later that evening in the hotel dining room we had a champagne reception courtesy of the Felix Hotel in Cambridge (for some transgressions which included a horrific group check-in procedure and some confusion over our breakfast entitlement), and then our pick of the buffet tables in the Carvery Restaurant. It was a rather noisy affair, but as there was a big wedding party across the hall we did not seem too out of place. We said our good-byes to Franki and our fellow travelers and turned in for the night. It was not a quiet night, as the wedding revelers were running around the hotel until 4:00 a.m. Some of us did manage to see each other again at breakfast before our departure for the airport.

For those of you who have followed these epistles and have been along on one or even all of these trips, I suspect you have a your own ideas of what constitutes a "great garden." We have seen many. Ed Hasselkus purchased a book at the Wisley bookshop entitled **England's 100 Greatest Gardens**. I understand that we have visited 30 of these on our four trips to date. But a "great garden" is truly an individual thing. Sometimes, a great garden exists only in our distant memory.

The first "garden" that really made an impression on me belonged to a great aunt who lived in the Catskills somewhere near West Point, New York. I only visited her garden once. I was but four years old and had come to attend an uncle's marriage and graduation from West Point, the first week of June.

I remember a long gravel drive up to a house on the top of the hill, overlooking the magnificent Hudson River Valley, cut from the surrounding mountains. The drive, planted on both sides, was my first double herbaceous border done in the English style. I vividly recall the overwhelming fragrance and the sheer beauty of the flowers, but, best of all, my great uncle, sensing the appreciation of this exceptional four year old, walked me along the drive while cutting me a huge bouquet of the flowers I particularly admired. I was in heaven and still remember my aunt's look of dismay at her husband's transgression when we made it back into the house. (Fifty-five years later I can appreciate things from my great aunt's point of view!) The next morning as we drove away, I can still visualize the border framed by the back window of our old Ford. This was a garden viewed but for a few milliseconds of my life, but it will always be one of the "greatest gardens" I have ever visited.

For me a great garden is one which I am inspired to write about after a visit. On entry, you must get a feeling of excitement with the very first impression, which then leads to the great anticipation of what is going to follow. And what follows should not disappoint, but lead to a succession of oohs! and aahs! The garden becomes crystallized in your memory after leaving it, and over a fine glass of wine or a gourmet dinner that evening or on many subsequent occasions, engenders wistful conversation.

Well, what are the four greatest gardens I have seen on these trips? Only if you twist my arm until I cry "uncle," my four most memorable gardens from these four WHPS trips are (drum roll): Sissinghurst Castle, Preen Manor, York Gate, and Bryan's Ground. Of these four very different gardens, only one is not in Ed's book, Preen Manor.

—A. Hort Hound