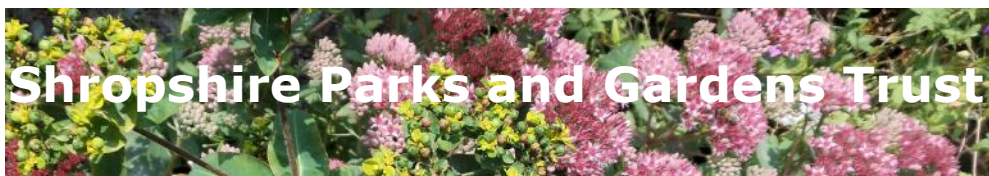




SHROPSHIRE
PARKS &
GARDENS
TRUST

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Letter from the Chair

This strange year has brought gardens to the fore as we find new ways of living with the virus that has gate-crashed our lives. Our own gardens, our friends' gardens, historic gardens and public parks, have all become lifelines as we have sat in them, exercised in them, and met our friends in them as never before. We asked for your experiences of your time at home and you responded magnificently, as this edition of our magazine shows. Did we fear we might have nothing to report? How wrong we were, and how busy you have all been. Your reports have provided us with a great read, and I hope that this is some compensation for the loss of this year's summer and winter programmes of visits and lectures. It is sad that we have no SPGT lectures to look forward to this winter, but social distancing rules them out. I am however encouraged that so many gardens have already been able to open to visitors again, and confident that Covid-safe garden visits will be possible again next year. I look forward to seeing you all soon.

Mary King

EVENTS PROGRAMME COORDINATOR NEEDED

Volunteers needed! We will only be able to have a programme of garden visits next year if we can find a new Events Programme Coordinator to organise them. After nearly 20 years in post, Kathy Herbert is retiring, and we are looking for someone (or even a small group of someones) to replace her. You will not start from nothing: a draft programme is in place for next summer and Kathy is offering help and support, as are other members of the Committee. It is a great way to get to know other members and owners of gardens in Shropshire. Please give me a call if you would like to know more. Mary King 01743 271824

An appeal for articles to compensate for the lack of lecture and visit reports was swiftly answered. Many thanks to all. Here we have some pieces of general interest. We'd love to have more for the next edition.

'Essex Girl' to 'Shropshire Lass'

I joined the Shropshire Parks & Gardens Trust in autumn last year in the expectation of moving from Essex to Shropshire in time for Christmas 2019. Unfortunately, it was not to be, and my dreams of exchanging my suburban garden for an acre or two with room for a separate veg plot, greenhouse, cutting garden – as well as space to experiment with meadow planting, have been on hold.



leave behind, as we now may make it to Shropshire by THIS Christmas!

I have an MA in Garden History, and spend many hours (when not gardening) with my nose pressed to the

pages of the horticultural press from the late Victorian/early Edwardian period – and write a monthly blog for the Essex Gardens Trust on a variety of subjects related to interesting subjects I find amongst those pages.

By following the NGS for Shropshire, I have now accumulated a substantial list of gardens to visit next year, and look forward to becoming an active member of your Trust in the near future.

In the meantime, if anyone is interested in reading my blogs they can be found at <http://www.essexgardenstrust.org.uk/chronicles> and I've just started on Instagram as *gardenhistorygirl*

Paula Sewell



With the advent of 'lockdown', and the wonderful spring weather, I spent most days working in my Essex garden, and it's looking the best it's ever done during the 20 years we've been here. Hopefully, a good send-off for the beloved garden I'll have to



Update from Eyton Hall

Two years ago this autumn we welcomed the SPGT to Eyton Hall to share our 'work in progress'. At that point we had restored the Porter's Lodge and had re-built missing walls and a mushroom/germination shed, both in the walled garden. Since then, we have been busy developing planting schemes throughout the garden and finishing major structural renovations connected to the walled garden.

Three major developments connected to the walled garden were completed by the end of 2019. The external north facing walls were home to a row of derelict sheds at the time of your visit. As part of the project to replace the glass house on the other side of the wall, we decided to restore what turned out to be an old boiler house,

which was much larger. Old photographs and whitewashed walls indicate that it was probably twice as large as its replacement. We incorporated a potting shed into the



Site of original glasshouse

eastern end of the new structure. This in turn leads into the old boiler house giving us good access to the back sheds and the bothy.

Our most satisfying project was the excavation of the old pit houses, the outlines of which were visible in the lawn. Again, an old photograph indicated that there were two houses and that one was connected to a small boiler house. As the digging progressed on the larger of the two, we were dismayed to find



Backsheds pre-restoration

a double-roomed storage facility, not unlike those found on the external walls at Attingham Park, and the gardener's bothy. We also discovered a second chimney in the external wall which suggests the walls may have been heated at some point.

The glasshouse stands on the foundations of the original glasshouse



Excavations of old pit houses



Victorian display house & new glass house

that the original glass roof and other building rubble had been bulldozed into its cavity. Further careful excavation, though, revealed an ornamental floor made of black and white Victorian tiles. Also, at the western end of the house we found a humidity tank that was originally covered by perforated square earthenware tiles. Some of these we managed to

salvage. This pit was connected to a system of pipe work that was housed in a mini boiler room that was also connected to the main glasshouse.

We decided to leave this unexpected and wonderful find as we found it. The existence of the ornate floor, remnants of steel shelf struts and the humidity tank indicate that it may have been a Victorian display house for perhaps ferns or orchids. To date, we have found no historical records for the walled garden to indicate its purpose.

The second pit house was newer, made of concrete and had no remarkable features. Similar to its larger cousin, it too had been bulldozed before being turfed over. As such, it now serves as a raised vegetable bed, as does a much smaller (badly damaged) adjacent structure.



Refurbished back sheds

We finished off the excavations by adding a surrounding border of step-over apples and pears, underplanted with greens and herbs to define this area as our 'productive' quadrant. The diagonally opposite area has the beginnings of a small fruit orchard. The west wall of the walled garden has been given over to fanned and espaliered fruit trees, cutting and propagation beds.

The walled garden has come full circle at the moment. The east walls are beginning their third season with bulbs and herbaceous perennials and we are coming to the end of summer.

Kathy Moynes

SPGT Research

At the beginning of 2020 a group of enthusiastic members of the SPGT were gearing up for a meeting at the Shropshire Archives with Giles Carey. The project was to add to the hard work undertaken by Dr Paul Stamper and others in the 1990s in identifying Shropshire's heritage of Parks and Gardens. The records are incomplete, and two strands of research have been identified: work needs doing on ascertaining parkland boundaries through the use of historic mapping, and the second project is finding so-far-unrecorded buildings and structures within parklands. However, with the onset of Covid, obviously the initial orientation meeting for the volunteers never took place, though we have every hope we will be able to commence in the new year.

In order not to get bored, I personally went on a voyage of discovery for the cost of £35, undertaking an online course on garden history at 'Learning with Experts'. These courses are very well designed, easy to access and cover a wide range of topics. There are many gardens and gardening courses, but also courses on cookery, photography, crafts... and any form of pastime or hobby, including chocolate making! But this is not to belittle the content, as the courses are highly informative.

I enrolled on 'A history of garden design' with Dr Toby Musgrave. This comprises four 'lessons' that you undertake at your own pace. There are well constructed videos, with good illustrations and copious written notes. For each lesson there is a short

assignment which is peer-assessed or, if you pay £125, you can have personal tutorials with the course tutor.

Although somewhat superficial, they do make you aware of the basics. The first lesson being:

'Of the ancients and the east', covering the early gardens of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Minoan Crete, Greece and Rome.

The second was 'Man, God and the Garden', which examines the aftermath of the fall of the Roman Empire and the rise of Islam, the European medieval garden and the Renaissance garden from its genesis in Italy to its spread across Europe.

The third was entitled 'Turning the Wheel of Fashion'. This lesson examined the Baroque garden where nature was dominated by man, moving on to the English landscape garden and the Picturesque.

'Art, Craft, Nature and Modernism', the final lesson, explored the diversity of the 19th century gardens through to Modernism and post Modernism.

What I liked about the course is that the materials will always be available, and you can dip in and out in your own time.

Another 'Learning with Experts' course that is of great relevance to our SPGT researchers is Audrey Gerber of the Gardens Trust's course on Garden Conservation. The four topics discussed are

- The ethos of conservation
- Researching a heritage site



Reconstruction of Pliny the Younger's garden (61-c.112 AD). Pliny wrote detailed accounts of his Villa Tusci (a Villa Urbana) at Tifernum Tiberinum (now Citta di Castello, Tuscany) between 97 and 107 AD.

- Writing a 'Statement of Significance'
- Managing change

Garden style is defined by a dynamic relationship between fashion and function over time. Influenced by politics, art and socio-economic trends, historic gardens provide us with opportunities for simple recreation or complex education from which we can learn about past cultures, horticultural techniques and patterns of life. Historic gardens are not living museums; they are enriched and challenged by change. Understanding the origin and influence of these changes, and recognising our capacity and responsibility to sensitively manage change, is the essence of the 'Conservation of Historic Gardens' course on the 'Learning with Experts' website.

In addition, if you scan the 'Learning with Experts' website you can find basic gardening courses on Roses, Fruit growing, Trees, Pruning or undertake the RHS Level 2 qualification.

Meanwhile, during the spring and summer, the Gardens Trust has been very active sending out remote learning packages so you can explore gardens and garden history on your own, using their very helpful resources. Their autumn series of lectures started in September, now all online, including a series on great 20th century gardeners and featuring our local Percy Thrower. Do take a look at their website and be inspired, as they have a very full list of events and lectures with topics ranging from the use of pulhamite stone in 19th century rockeries, to the impact of slavery on 18th century gardens and estates in England.

Despite all these online marvels, nothing beats a good walk around a beautiful park or garden, so let's hope we can meet and walk, look and learn soon.

Harriet Devlin, Research Coordinator

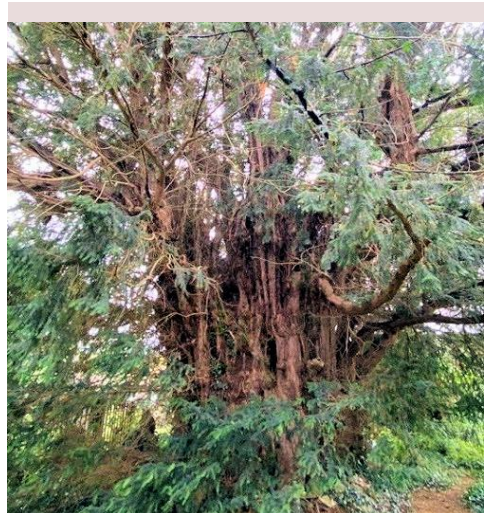
The Norbury Yew



View from the road

I was intrigued by a reference in one of our winter talks concerning the Ancient Yew in Norbury Churchyard. The talk was in January by Harriet Carty, entitled the Beautiful Burial Ground, and was subsequently the subject of an article in the last Magazine by Harriet Devlin.

At some point post-lockdown, we made a diversion from a walk at Mitchell's Fold to visit the village church and its ancient tree, lying south of the Mynd in glorious quiet rolling countryside. The tree pre-dates Norbury church itself and could have been planted for its cultural significance to a pre-Christian population. Are Yew trees amongst the oldest living things on earth?



View from the churchyard - the girth measures 10.06m

Yew trees *Taxus baccata* are difficult to age since they often split, their trunks becoming hollow and their wood famously good at regenerating. The normal method of girth measurement thus becomes problematic. There is a certificate, dated 2001, in the porch of the church which certifies that the Norbury tree is estimated to be 2,700 years old. The certificates were issued through a conservation campaign instigated by David Bellamy to raise awareness for these nationally important trees. More recently others have taken up the baton and at present there is an on-line petition led by Janis Fry, to gain legal status for Ancient Yews.

This date, for the Norbury tree, would take its planting back to the Iron Age, with a population who largely lived by agriculture and also built the hill forts. Yew wood was famously used for the English longbows in the medieval period and since the best wood came from Europe, may have been a contributory factor in this country retaining the greatest number of ancient and veteran Yews.

The 'Ancient' Yew trees of Britain number at least 158, and we have the largest number in the world, a Yew is considered to be 'ancient' when it exceeds 800 years and 'Veteran' when its age exceeds 500 years. We have many in Shropshire and they certainly merit our continuing interest and protection, the Ancient Yew Group website provides a platform for much information, recording and research of these fascinating trees.

Liz Handley

Taxus baccata, 600 years and counting

I feel myself extremely privileged to have shared the last 40+ years living alongside a most venerable and majestic example of the above species. This period, of course, represents a considerable percentage of my whole adult life-span, yet only a mere fragment in time for the yew!

It stands sentinel by the side of my driveway gate, overhanging both it, a large length of the garden fence, and half of the lane too. It's a significant landmark, being visible for miles, to aid direction for any visitors attempting to locate my house for the first time!

I have it on very good authority that the tree's age is 'at least 600 years'!

Who says so?... Well, some 30 years back, my son, Nick, was watching the television programme 'Blue Peter', as per usual. On this occasion, Prof David Bellamy (he of hirsute features, and extravagant gestures, remember?), making one of his frequent appearances on 'tele', was appealing for nationwide information on large/old yew trees, and "... if we had one, or knew of one, could 'junior' provide some important details eg height, girth, canopy shape, integrity etc, and forward these to Prof B c/o BBC, as soon as possible please".

Nick needed no second bidding - he was out with my old 30 metre tape, had measured the yew's girth, and was shinning up the tree to estimate its height, as I came home from work!

We carefully collated, checked and sent all the data, with photos, to 'Blue Peter'. In due course there came a letter from Prof B congratulating us on our wonderful, and 'priceless' treasure, and exhorting us to protect it, and cherish it. He also sent a signed certificate verifying the tree's age, from our data, as being 'at least 600 years'. It was all a most worthwhile effort, and we have loved the tree all the more ever since.

Many creatures find the yew very conducive to setting up home. Among the birds which regularly nest in it are nuthatches, various finches, and great spotted woodpeckers. It also provides cover and shelter for species as different as sparrowhawks and goldcrests.

Every year, too, in summer, a swarm of bees dominates the tree, and honey can sometimes be observed flowing



out of crevices and down the trunk in profusion.

At its 600-year age, the tree can be considered 'perfect' in shape for a yew. It has a well-rounded and closed canopy, and considerable height as the trunk has not yet started to suffer fungal breakdown, which gradually happens as yews reach much greater ages.

Lastly, why is it there as an apparent one-off, and what 'significance' has it been able to exert in the vicinity, to survive over such a long period?

Could there be a religious connotation?... (although it is a long way from the nearest church in Leebotwood), or maybe a pagan one?... as its evergreen habit may have ensured the continuation of life through the darkness of winter? Who can say?... I'm sure I'll never know, but I'll delight in it being part of my life for as long as possible. *Paul Jackson*



Lockdown: the lockdown

Our appeal for articles elicited a number of lockdown-specific stories. Here we offer your diverse and entertaining responses, from front lawns to back gardens, tank engines to topiary. Come the spring issue we will need more, so please keep them coming.

Lockdown viaduct project

Trust members who visited Alan Terrill's inventive garden in the Hope Valley in 2017, on a glorious 12th of August, will not be surprised at this account of his continuing creativity.

In 2019 I bought a robotic lawnmower to cut my large lawn, which has three areas and several slopes. The mower copes with most of it magnificently, but on a couple of the steep slopes it tended to slide down too fast when the grass was damp and then it would get stuck. So I decided to build a wall along one of the steepest parts and fill up the back with soil so as to make a new flat terrace that would be easy for it to cut. (I nearly said 'he' as our mower acquires a personality after a while, based on his tendency to wander around at random in the manner of our tortoises!).

I bought a load of cheap bricks in October and started to build a wall when the weather permitted. I got a lorry load of soil in, just before everything stopped in March, and started to fill the void at the back of the wall. The cheap bricks didn't look too good, so I hatched the idea of painting arches on the front and making the wall look like a viaduct curving across one side of the garden. I made some wooden templates and



printed the arches on. Then I thought about adding brick slips to the front to improve the appearance. I discovered some on eBay, made from acrylic resin, that looked exactly like bricks but only 5mm thick, and they were flexible and easy to cut. I ordered a load and set about cutting them into quarter brick sizes so that the arches would look more in scale with the height of the wall. Cutting 600 bricks into quarters and then cutting some to a taper for the arches passed many





The completed project (left side)

days indoors during lockdown and foul weather in March.

In April, when the weather improved, I went outside and started sticking them to the wall with tile adhesive. It was hard on the legs as I was squatting on a steep slope which was often slippery, but watching the arches emerge was quite satisfying. Half way along I ran out of brick slips, only to discover that the seller was from Poland and had returned home due to the lockdown. I was puzzling as to how to finish the wall, when the seller came back online, selling them directly from Poland, so I was able to finish the project with the same type of brick. I used some slate slabs to cap the top of the wall and then decided to add a model train. I couldn't find anything on the market that was big enough, so decided to make my own. I'd discussed it with my wife, and one morning she woke up saying she'd dreamt of making a train using plumbing parts from Screwfix, and then got up and flicked through the catalogue telling me which parts she'd dreamt of. So a streamlined steam train was created, made entirely of

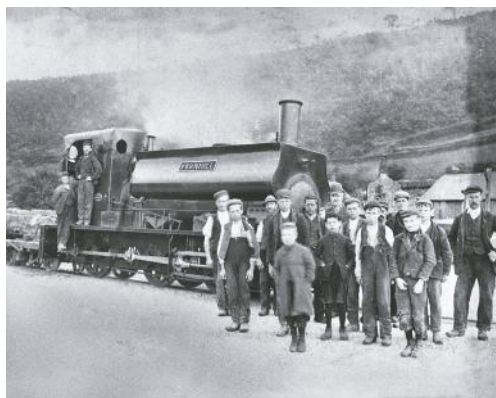
plastic, encompassing soil pipe, a 90 degree bend, a length of electrical trunking and some guttering for the roof of the carriage. After all that, some actual gardening was required to tidy up the muddy mess I'd made from squatting on the bank. I dug over the soil and put in some new plants on the slope between the viaduct and the lawn. The viaduct was complete by the end of June and the newly seeded grass on the top already thick and level. The mower is now happy.

Alan Terrill

Only connect

What is the connection, albeit tenuous, between Alan Terrill's locomotive, the photo below (possibly taken in the 1880s) and our next item?

Within two miles of Alan Terrill's viaduct lies Snailbeach District Railway (long disused). In 1881 John Henniker Lovett and his fellow directors of the SDR purchased a new locomotive and named it 'Fernhill' after Lovett's house near Oswestry. It is from there that our next contribution comes.



Of Birds, Beasts and Meteorology

I have been busy trimming some of my Box and Yew topiary animals recently - thought they might be suitable for the magazine! They were all planted and shaped by me and this is just a small selection!

The pruning of box in the shape of clouds is pretty much done, but terribly hard to photograph, and is actually about 12' at its highest and 10' wide, so quite a big piece of topiary.

The Yew duck is definitely work in progress and actually has only been two years in the making once I cut into the top of the hedge.

SPGT member



The clouds



The fat rabbit

The Yew duck

NGS Garden, Edge Villa: Opening during Covid-19

We arrived in Shropshire in 1979 and did up a house and 3/4 acre garden over 25 years. We propagated lots of plants from this garden and had a plant sale once a year in May and made lots of money for the League of Friends of the Shrewsbury Hospital. Then in 2003 we moved house, 100yds down the road, to a smaller house and 2 acres of garden, and started again. It was much easier this time round as we were 58 and knew better what we were doing. Also, it was a blank canvas which makes it even easier. The farm next door generously gave us 40 tons of cow muck and off we went. We were meant to give up propagating but it is addictive, and we had bought lots of cuttings from the old garden to give the new garden a head start. Our main priority at first was the vegetable patch as we have been self-sufficient in veg and fruit since our twenties. In 2005 Chris became County Organiser for the National Garden Scheme and two years later we opened for NGS ourselves, even though everything was quite new. We hoped that people would want to come back to see how it had progressed; and they have over the next 14 years. If you think about it, herbaceous plants bulk up in a year, shrubs in two or three years and

trees grow quicker than you think. Start with trees and hedges, then shrubs and then the fancy stuff. We are now removing some of the trees, as we planted too many close together, and raising the canopy of some of the others.

Opening for NGS

Usually we open two or three times a year and propagate about 900 plants to sell. Some shrubs, lots of herbaceous and some annuals such as *Nicotiana*, *Cosmos* etc. This year we had to cancel our April opening having got 300 spring-flowering plants ready to sell. At this point, all garden openings were cancelled, but Head Office worked hard to plan a way of opening once strict lockdown was eased. In the meantime, we were all encouraged to make short five-minute videos of our gardens and send them in. These had a huge response. People



were encouraged to give a donation to NGS if they had enjoyed them, and over £230,000 came in, which was amazing. It was calculated that over 300 million people had watched them all over the world. Normally NGS donates over £3 million pounds to designated nursing and caring charities but this year, sadly, that won't happen. In July a method of opening was created so that gardens could once again open with social distancing. The day was divided up into time slots and had to be booked and paid for at Head Office. Special signage was created and distributed to garden owners. Hand sanitizers were there for people to use and we had 30mins between each slot to tidy up, clean handles etc.

At this stage there were no teas on offer, or loos. The second time we opened, in August, things had relaxed a little more and we could do DIY teas with cakes all individually wrapped. We filled the Burco and hoped people would use their common sense. We had enough china to wash all the cups and saucers etc between each slot. We sold plants at each session. Bill sterilized all the small change in meths before each opening and handed out any paper change with a pair of surgical forceps (liberated by Chris's father-in-law from the Germans in Italy during the war!). All money handed over by

the customers was put into a shoe box and left for 72 hours before counting. Altogether we made about £3,000 for NGS nearly as much as we would normally have made. The downside of this way of doing openings was that we were on our feet from 11am to 5pm without much of a break – so quite tiring, but we needed less car-parking space as entrances were staggered; we also needed fewer helpers except on the plant stall. Kind friends made cakes and wrapped them individually, 72 hours beforehand, but didn't have to come on the day; most of our helpers are over 70, so a bit vulnerable. The booking system was popular and some garden owners would like to continue this. Almost all gardens filled all their slots, although this to some extent was because people hadn't been able to go out much before this.

We hope lots of you will support NGS openings in whatever form next year.

Chris & Bill Neil



Mynd Hardy Plants 2020: the lockdown season

'2020': it has a lovely ring to it, so we were filled with enthusiasm, plans and optimism. We returned from our holiday in the Far East [Richard probably with coronavirus but it was not popular in January!] looking forward to the new season. The herbaceous beds in the Walled Garden had been cut back, grass edges trimmed, shrubs pruned and it was all looking very tidy and organised. Our plants, both in the garden and for sale, had survived the torrential rain and relatively mild winter weather. Storm Dennis hit and we spent a morning retrieving the remains of our polytunnel from the garden and nearby fields. An opportunity we thought! This 'opened up the space' so we removed the metal structure and created a new sitting area with *Verbena bonariensis* growing within the gravel. Little did we know that this would provide us with the necessary 2m distance between tables.

We attended our first plant fair at Ness Botanic Gardens in March - an excellent event, catching up with other plant stall holders and fellow gardeners keen to put their plans into action. Lockdown started the following day. The remaining fairs were cancelled until late August but we chose not to attend the last few.

The nursery was closed for the first two months of our season in compliance with the lockdown rules as plant nurseries were not considered an essential retail outlet. This was frustrating as everybody was out enjoying their gardens, and buying plants from our local supermarkets. Ironically, we subsequently discovered that we could have been open during

lockdown as we are licensed to sell wine (this is classified as an essential service). We could have sold plants at the same time, as long as we only opened during our licensing hours!

We do not offer a mail order service and chose not to start one during lockdown as it was almost impossible to obtain delivery slots or guarantee delivery times. Our programme of talks, group visits and Walled Garden & Hall Garden open days were either cancelled or postponed until 2021.

All these closures and cancellations left us with more time to maintain and develop the garden, particularly early in the season.

Jill's mother came to stay with us for the five months of lockdown, rather than be isolated, and was usefully employed watering during





the unseasonably hot weather in April and May. We created an exclusion zone where many of our plants were stored and she could water safely, whilst chatting to customers. As a result of Covid-19 she has decided to up sticks and move to Ludlow to start a new life. Little does she know she will be usefully employed to water again next year!

Once the nursery/garden opened to the public, we saw a marked increase in visitor numbers, especially during the holiday season. This was a combination of people having been working in their gardens, weeding and creating places for new plants; others getting into gardening for the first time; and those on holiday visiting Shropshire instead of travelling abroad.

However, the most pleasing aspect of the crisis, was the number of visitors who were shielding, but felt sufficiently confident to come to the garden.

Whilst not able to offer tea and cake, we actively encouraged visitors to bring a flask and a sandwich and simply enjoy the garden in relative safety. The number of positive comments made all the work and hardships worthwhile.

Since the SP> visit in 2019 the newer plantings within the display garden have bulked out and are looking particularly colourful late in the season.

Do come and visit us next year when the opportunity arises and let us hope 2021 brings better times for everybody.

Richard and Jill Rallings



Hodnet Hall Gardens...Gardening during Lockdown

2020 will linger long in the memory and if one word could sum it up it would be 'uncertainty'. Gardeners are used to working with some measure of uncertainty. The vagaries of weather, climate and season are a gardener's bread and butter.

This year the garden was due to open in March and I think I speak for many when I say that the vague rumblings of a new virus in China that we heard in the news that spring didn't seem like it would affect our own corner of Shropshire. Once it became apparent that this was not to be the case, it became a matter of how we would open rather than whether we would open at all. I don't think that we were prepared for the imposition of a lockdown that would force us to close. All of our morning meetings were dominated by speculation of the 'will they - won't they' kind. This reflected the general lack of consensus at the time on just how dangerous Covid-19 would prove to be and the threat it posed to the health infrastructure. Realisation that the operation of the garden would be affected in some way dawned slowly with the increasing scientific consensus about the novel coronavirus. As the government introduced national restrictions, when it became clear that we would be unable to open at all, the implications of a continuing closure became more real. The most obvious was a loss of the revenue that the garden derives from visitors, but opening a garden to the public also imposes a weekly deadline which is a sort of discipline that can be helpful in



deciding what to do. Suddenly, finding ourselves without a visiting public was a strange sensation to begin with, but we soon began to appreciate having the garden to ourselves. It did leave us with the need to step up our efforts on social media to show people what we were doing and to try to make sure that we weren't forgotten by the time that visitors were able to return.

In many ways, our day to day work is indifferent to human affairs. Grass still grows and needs cutting, and weeds still need pulling as well as all of the other tasks large and small that are a gardener's lot. This often left us feeling that we were living in a benign bubble, as the gardening team was able to work throughout the lockdown with no interruptions. Perhaps the lesson of this year was to appreciate this normality more.

Generally, every winter the gardeners undertake a new project. In the winter of 2019-2020 we had removed a rather depressing conifer which had opened a new and spectacular view from one of the highest points of the garden. We had created a new raised bed and built a stone retaining wall and a new seating area. We had also ripped out the entire herbaceous border the previous year and it was now ready for replanting. As businesses began to close, so did plant centres and nurseries and the movement of plants came to a standstill. This meant that we had a huge amount of newly prepared soil and nothing to go into it!

Finally, after a lot of telephone calls, we found a nursery who were willing, not to say grateful, to supply at least

some of the plants that we needed, even if they were in smaller sizes. Also, as nurseries began to return staff to work and begin mail order services, there was a scramble by locked-down gardeners for plants, including us! All that was missing were the people to enjoy our efforts.

As the lockdown was gradually eased, we began to plan for the welcome return of visitors. By this time it had become clear that the loss of a significant part of the annual revenue for 2020 would have a lasting future impact. Planning to re-open involved thinking through every step a visitor might take and making sure that we could put in place safety measures. Risk-assessments were done on every aspect of the visitor experience from arriving at the ticket office to using the





restaurant and walking the garden. Hodnet is fortunate in this respect. The size of the garden meant that people could spread out once they were here. Three pinch points were immediately apparent, at the entrance, the restaurant and in the walled garden. We introduced contactless payment at the entrance as well as in the restaurant, where a one way system was put in place and safety screens put up to protect staff and customers. The caterer simplified the menu and switched to a takeaway service. In the walled garden we introduced a one-way system. Sanitiser was available for people to use, and whilst all of this made it possible to open safely, it added considerably to the costs of opening.

I think that we were all nervous the first weekend that we were able to re-open as it would be the first true test of the measures that we had put in place. It was also a true test of public confidence and whether we had been forgotten about during lockdown. It was a huge relief when nearly 300 people turned up that first Sunday and attendance on subsequent openings regularly exceeded 200. Though we had been unable to hold our usual plant fair it was great to be able to open for the NGS in September.

It is too soon to say what the long-term implications of 2020 will be, though I do believe that working in relative isolation has made us stronger as a team. Let's hope for a better 2021 for all gardeners! *Ross Underwood*

Lockdown on the allotment

During this terrible year for everyone, I was glad that I had my Council allotment, because for most people the slogan 'Dig for victory' was again very relevant.

Coronavirus, and the Government's lockdown directive of March 2020 onwards, had a considerable and obvious impact upon most gardeners with the supply and availability of seeds and fertilizers etc being erratic and unpredictable at best, and often just not available.

Personally, for the past 30 years, I have rented a council-owned allotment at Sutton Lane, Shrewsbury, initially from Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council and since 2009 from Shrewsbury Town Council.

In March 2020, I reasonably thought and expected the local council to close all the allotment sites in their control and ownership.

However, Shrewsbury Town Council pragmatically recognised that its allotments provide both physical and mental benefits for its tenant gardeners, and that wherever possible this should continue, subject to lockdown conditions.

The conditions imposed by Shrewsbury Town Council were that allotment holders should strictly follow all material Government directions and guidelines, and that in addition, there should be no more than two gardeners allowed upon each allotment plot at any one time; that any children visiting the allotment site should be



supervised and restricted to their own plot; that all communal facilities, including tool sheds and composting toilets, should remain closed; that all gardeners should use their own tools and not share with others, and that gloves should be worn on the site.

Shrewsbury Town Council reasonably reserved the right for its staff to visit all allotment sites throughout the lockdown to ensure that all Government rules and guidelines were being adhered to and, that if for any reason the rules and guidelines were not being followed, the Council reserved the right to close the site in question without notice.

Thankfully all was well at Sutton Lane and our site has remained open throughout. Encouragingly, I have noticed that several of my fellow plot holders have been more adventurous in the type and quantity of vegetables they have grown this year in comparison to previous years, and I can only put this down to them having more time on their hands due to furloughing and the lockdown generally.

Eric Downton

Plant life: observing and recording with paint and pencil before and after lockdown

Thanks to wondrous technology most people take fantastic photos with ease, which can be tremendously rewarding. But sometimes, attempting to paint what you see can give you much satisfaction on a completely different level. It's all about looking, focussing in for longer, studying closely, and consequently discovering more. OK, the results don't always turn out as you'd hoped, but it's the process that's the buzz. This was the premise behind setting up with a group of interested people, to explore and appreciate the complexities of all things growing.

We began early last Autumn, and had been meeting up since then once a week until 11 March. About six members of the group would attend typically. Right from the start, I decided it was not going to be a 'how to paint in watercolours' course. I suppose what was on offer was more akin to botanical illustration, which understandably is a very precise discipline which takes years to perfect. 'Think of it more as exploratory studies... there are no rules, no correct ways to do things'. I could only show how I go about it, give some guidance along the way, and hope that this will be just the starting point for everyone.

18 March... A WhatsApp group was set up, and we continued with the same format ie doing themed studies in my sketchbook before the session, ready to show and explain with the rest of the group; only now I would put it together as a short video and send it out to everybody. Throughout

the following week, photos of individual work would be sent in for all to see, and all to comment on. What has been an interesting outcome is that all the work has had much closer scrutiny and constructive criticism than before, and as a result, I (and they) have been pleasantly surprised with the increasingly confident studies produced.

Now, just these last two months, we've been meeting up again in a lovely spacious garden, which has obviously been most welcome and enjoyable. But it's getting colder, so time's limited... In preparation, I've finally joined Zoom. We'll probably give that a try, but if my technological incompetence intervenes, I'll return to the previous format.

I know there are keen gardeners among us, and sometimes it can be a difficult choice between say, studying a truss of tomatoes, or side shooting the plant! Not a huge dilemma in the bigger scale of what's going on in the world, but when we do commit to a session of looking and recording, we can get completely absorbed in the wonderment of it all, and the choice that nature provides, is seemingly infinite. A great escape...

Mary Rickards



You asked for stories, photos, prunings, weedings, thinnings and gleanings: here goes

Well, all of those took place in one way or another in our lives over the past few months!

Garden improvements which were not 'on the list' escalated immediately, with a kindling shed, an arbour, a rose pergola and two boxed vegetable beds, all built out of gleaned, offered and some bought pieces of wood, and most constructed with help, whilst remaining at a safe distance of 2 metres.

Homes were given to plants neighbours had lost interest in: a Quince tree, a sizeable Fig plant, a huge *Pieris* shrub which has amazingly survived and, when we were finally allowed out, we celebrated by buying an orange berried *Sorbus*. It looks stunning as I write; having temporarily lost the label, it's now called the 'Covid tree'.

The much unloved rockery has been vastly improved by dividing it with a set of rough sandstone steps snaking through, making better planting opportunities and a change to the feel of it. We have a good supply of stone around as our 1930s house is built on the old Vinery in part of the garden of The Mount, Darwin's house. No dressed stone was used in case anyone is interested in looking at it.

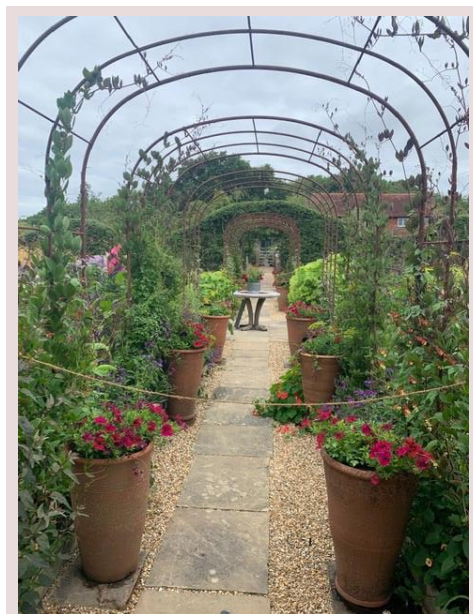
The first plant in was a 5ft *Hoheria*, a small tree/large shrub from New Zealand; it had been waiting for its final position for a couple of years.

Low orange-flowered *Crocosmia*, creeping mauve *Campanula* and deep violet flowered *Agapanthus* from a recent division of a monster, have helped change the focus amongst the

ferns and acers and a few very large conifers have gone in the green bin!

Much vegetable growing took place, with vegetable seedlings being sent to my little sister in East Sussex, who has finally had to deal with her 2 acre garden. I had daily enquiries and she is now very interested, though I feel there is a long way to go. She can now recognise a *Hosta*.

The seedlings I sent her were mostly from Sarah Raven, and life really improved when I realised they lived 10 minutes apart. When Sarah Raven released tickets to the general public to visit her garden I was hot on the trail and we whizzed down in our campervan to visit... my sister first of course. It was an exceptional experience and the garden taken as



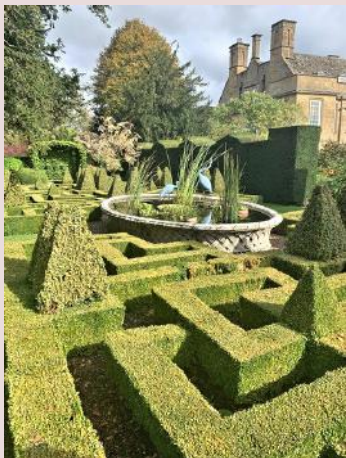
In Sarah Raven's garden

a whole was awe inspiring, with the cutting garden deserving of the word beginning and ending in W but which is much overused.

The experience was highlighted partly because of the excitement of being 'out and about' and having coffee and cake in a gorgeous garden, but with Sarah Raven quietly clearing tables, she seemed to be nicely shy



Bourton House



whilst being very caring of her helpers. Quite a day out.

Our recent three-day garden tour of the Cotswolds led us to Bourton House, Bourton on the Hill. Our campervan lost tyre rubber as we drove past; it wasn't on our list but we managed to fit in a magical hour (see photos) before our appointment at Sezincote, Historic Houses Association.

Superb autumn colour, the tallest Ginko we have seen, Temples, Grotto and Tennis Pavilion, linked pools meandering beneath the Indian Bridge, magnificent trees and the house... Indian in its design and a charming curved Orangery and almost empty; perfect!

We tucked in Snowhill Manor and Blenheim and ended in a visit to Rousham, last visited 25 years ago when we were renovating a Grade 2* property in mid-Wales and were visiting every style of garden we could to help us understand what we had.

We appreciated Rousham from a different perspective this time, and could see how the layering and use of green material worked, creating the interest. Wide Laurel hedges cut low attracted the eye across to the next vista. We had originally gone there because of the allure of a 'green garden' and the connection with William Kent. It was just as thrilling 25 years later, although the lady of the house didn't invite us in for an 'extra £2' as before!

One rarity arrived in our garden during lockdown and is coincidentally featured on the latest issue of the Royal Mail's stamps: the Marmalade Hoverfly. We took its photo as it sat on the side of a plate on some marmalade



Elephants at play in Sezincote



Rousham

and then identified it with an insect app!

Angela Hughes

PS: Shropshire Historic Churches Trust sadly had to close all 22 Gardens until mid summer when three Gardens bravely opened: Bitterley Court, Sambrook Manor and Nash Court, raising £3,047 between them; the Trust is extremely grateful to them. Next year's programme is already being worked on, with delayed printing of the Gardens Open leaflets to allow for last minute changes.

Cuttings and graftings

It may be of interest to members to know that one of us, Kate Nicoll, former head of Gardens Training for the National Trust, is now running residential courses in horticulture and field studies from her home in the Welsh borders.

Please see below brief details of these, together with a link to her website for further information.



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Mystery photo

Where?

What?

When?

Why?

Answers on the back page



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Please note that the opinions expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent the views of Shropshire Parks & Gardens Trust or the production team.

Front cover picture: Angel Azrael, Hodnet Hall Gardens

Back cover picture: The Dovecote, Hodnet Hall Gardens

Mystery photo: Mansion Coffee House, Attingham, during Covid restrictions