


THE BOTANY GARDEN - HOW IT CAME ABOUT

Basil Fox

riginally there was a small greenhouse on the roof of the main College building on the sea-front in Aberystwyth. The Botany Department was then housed in the Main College and this greenhouse was useful as a ready supply of plant material for classwork. It was, however, soon found to be inadequate.

The next development was the use of about a quarter of an acre of allotment next to the Edward Davies Laboratories on the Buarth, and there were also two small greenhouses which occupied what is now the site of an extension to the Laboratories. When the area was being cleared one exotic plant that was abundant in the tumbling structure was the pretty pale yellow trailer Asarina procumbens.

In consultation with Professor C. T. James, the front of the Laboratories was planted by Professor Lily Newton, so that we might say the first Botany Garden was on the Buarth. At the end of the Second World War two girls who had trained in Llandinam for the Land Army, Miss Bottomley and Miss Curtis, cultivated the garden and started a collection of plants.

It was in 1946 that a move was made by Principal Ivor Evans who approached Dr. Alban Davies who in turn provided the money that made it possible to develop the Botany Garden on its present site. With his money the College purchased the Penglais estate which would otherwise have been used for a housing project.

Plas Penglais became the Principal's residence and it was urged by Mr. Alban Davies that the 25 acres of grounds and woodland surrounding the house should become a Botany Garden.

When first taken over the estate was derelict so that the first task was a tidy-up. Various people helped in this operation and names ^{that} will be familiar to members

of the C.H.S. are Tom Gwilliam, later to become Head Gardener of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station, and a founder-member of our Society; also Clay Jones, the well-known Broadcaster, who has spoken to us on more than one occasion.

During the clearance operation many trees were felled and later there was reason to believe that this had been overdone, as the salt winds began to penetrate the remaining woodland. Trees were felled, rather than extracted, and this left a lot of hard work at a later date removing stumps and combating the resulting Honey Fungus that still causes trouble in many parts of the garden.

The first Head Gardener was Harry Hart, who came down from the Royal Botanic Garden at Edinburgh in 1947. Together with Professor Newton, plans were made to develop various features but as the garden was exposed to the South Westerlies shelter-belts were planted; first chestnut palings were used, and hedges of beech, sycamore and one of Cupressus macrocarpa were planted with an assortment of trees to the lee of these shelter-hedges.

Harry Hart wrote an article about his endeavours which was printed in the Journal of the Royal Botanic Garden Guild. Regarding the various features that he envisaged he wrote as follows - "The first section to be developed will be the centre one which will include a vegetable garden, order beds, rose garden, herbaceous border and shrub lawn. Plans have also been made for a woodland garden plus peat walls and rootery, rock garden, alpine meadow, bog and water garden, but some years will elapse before work is even begun on these sites". He concluded his article by quoting Rabbin Burns - "The best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley".

All his plans did not go agley, however. Harry Hart left in 1951. He was later in charge of a Botanic Garden in Sheffield, and when we were last in touch with him he was working in the University Gardens at Bristol.

Professor Newton had the first greenhouse unit built in 1950 by MacKenzie & Moncur of Edinburgh. It comprised three glasshouses orientated north and south from an east-west corridor, and running at different temperatures, a stove-house, an intermediate house, a propagation house, and the corridor for temperate plants. This was accompanied by frames for growing-on hardy plants and accommodating a collection of mosses and liverworts, and the whole unit supplied all the needs of the Botany Department at that time.

During the same period a number of other features were developed. A vegetable garden, an orchard, a Winter garden, formal order beds and a small nursery plot were started. Borders around Plas Penglais were planted, using plants raised at the old garden on the Buarth, as well as material bought in.

Professor Newton praised the generosity of places such as Kew and Wisley as well as other Universities. There is a record that seed was obtained from the Ludlow and Sherriff 1949 expedition to Bhutan, but although we know that nearly all the plants were planted in the area we ^{call} Pantycelyn Field, none of the labels went with them so their value is greatly reduced as the seed collecting locations can only be guessed at. The nursery in which these plants were raised is now the tennis court; the orchard was moved to improve the landscape and now takes the form of more manageable dwarf pyramids elsewhere. The formal order-beds were moved for the same reason and are now arranged informally in a three-acre field close by.

During the first few years a number of trees were planted, and these include a group of Alnus incarna in the Dingle which provided a dappled shade for the more recently planted large-leaved Rhododendrons.

Various people connected with the College planted trees and a number were planted to commemorate the Coronation. Professor Newton remembered planting Liriodendron tulipifera at that time and this can be seen off the south-west corner of the tennis court. Professor Newton retired in 1958 but she was to plant one more tree in the garden. At a ceremony to commemorate her eightieth birthday she planted a Durmast Oak, Quercus petraea that had been raised by seed from the oak wood at Pen Deri.

Professor P.F. Wareing succeeded her as Professor of Botany in 1958, and a new phase of development began when I was appointed Curator of the Botany Garden and College Grounds in 1960. So far as the Botany Garden is concerned the main developments at the time were as follows.

A two-acre nursery was established, not only for teaching and research, and raising plants for the garden, but mainly to build up stock for planting the Campus. Next, the order-beds were moved from a small formal layout in front of Plas Penglais to an adjacent three-acre field where they were increased in size and arranged informally. The borders surrounding the field were planted with miscellaneous plants of botanic interest, then large-leaved Rhododendrons were planted in the Dingle below and a small pinetum in the centre of the field that also served to provide a shelter for the beds on the east side. These changes took place during the time that Principal Thomas Parry was at Plas Penglais.

Dr. Parry retired in 1969 when Sir Goronwy and Lady Daniel took up residence. Lady Daniel took a keen interest in plants and later became President of the C.H.S. With her co-operation a number of changes took place.

The retaining walls in the Plas Penglais garden were simplified for ease of maintenance, and at the same time many interesting plants were added. The Cistus palhinhae that are a feature of these retaining walls in the late Spring were raised from seed that Lady Daniel brought back from Portugal. The terrace to the west of Plas Penglais was re-designed with a grass walk through it, and includes a lily pool. The borders and wall were planted with as wide a range of plants as could be expected to grow reliably. Needless to say some more exotic and tender things were tried as well, and a few of these have also succeeded.

Professor Wareing in a Plant Physiologist and throughout this period there was an expansion in the area of glass to accommodate the increasing number of research projects in hand, the main requirement being for a large number of plants to be kept in continuous growth by the provision of 'long days' for them. There is still development in this area and a new large greenhouse was erected in 1977. This structure is for teaching purposes where plants are grown for students who carry out their own practical work. Now, in 1981, the original old wood glasshouse unit has been replaced by one large structure that is to house the collection of teaching plants, and make further room for research.

Miss Fairclough, another Land Army trained girl, cared for the glasshouse plants throughout the fifties and early sixties, and now, of course, Don Parker our Vice Chairman is Horticultural Technician. Don actually worked in the grounds for a short time in the early fifties, and then came to work in the glasshouses in 1959.

Tom Gwilliam was Foreman of the Garden in the fifties, and he was followed by David Edwards throughout the sixties, then on his retirement by Albert Sharples. At the present time John Corfield has this responsibility.

As all members of the C.H.S. know, John has other responsibilities too, and I must grab this opportunity to blow a trumpet on behalf of one who has done a lot of good work, but is very modest.

The College is suffering from financial cuts so that we now have to plan for easy maintenance due to cuts in the labour force and make the most of technological aids. Staff may be cut but plants keep growing. We now have good shelter, and standing in the order-bed it is hard to believe that all the trees have grown in twenty years. The best example is a specimen of Nothofagus procera planted in 1962. It is little wonder that this species has been suggested as a replacement for the Elm for this one is now more comparable in size with the woodland trees of the old estate than with those planted by the College.

The old Penglais estate, owned by the Richardes family was largely parkland and woodland and almost entirely of native trees. It must have been well kept, as I am told that it was open to the public for a small charge, and that there was a tea-house at the lower end, now Dan-y-Coed. Having gone through a state of dereliction and finally developed as the Botany Garden, the aim now is to maintain it at this level and hope that as the various features mature they will become easier to maintain.

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The C.H.S. boat
Will surely stay afloat
So long as Basil Fox
Is Cox.