

RCMG South West Branch

Summer Away Day at Abbotsbury Sub-tropical gardens, Dorset

On a lovely sunny day, nineteen of us gathered in the Pavilion in the amazing garden at Abbotsbury and were greeted by Head Gardener and Curator, Steve Griffith. Steve has been at Abbotsbury since 1990 when he was brought in to sort out the damage wrought by the hurricane that hit the South West peninsula three years after the South East was decimated by a similar storm. The destruction was also an opportunity to replant and re-design the garden which had lain rather neglected for many years. Steve gave an illustrated talk on the history of the gardens which has been in private ownership since the monastery on the site was leased to Sir Giles Strangways in 1541. William Fox-Strangways, 4th Earl of Ilchester introduced many exotic species in the 1800s and by the end of that century there is a catalogue listing over 5,000 species growing in the garden which had expanded greatly. The very benign microclimate has been exploited by Steve and his team so that exotic and tender plants sit within a beautiful design with features including an Oak pavilion and a rope bridge which a few of our number dared to cross. Steve had cleverly cut a viewing hole through trees and shrubs to reveal a view of the ruined monastery in the distance which is quite magical. He has also decided to bring in the Jurassic coast by making a wide avenue to the top of a hill from which one gains extensive views of the coast.

After Steve's talk, some of us had brought material to talk about for the Bring and Tell session. This is always good fun and allows members to talk on any plants that have taken their fancy. Andy Fly talked of his experience of growing *Vireya rhododendron*s, Caroline Bell spoke about the foliage possibilities of her *Camellia Sasanqua* hybrids. Russell Beeson brought two hydrangeas, both varieties that have been around for many years; *White Wave* and *H. serrata* Grayswood, both excellent and reliable plants holding their own against the plethora of new hydrangeas flooding the market at present. Flamboyant *Begonia Romance* is apparently quite hardy at the tuber so can overwinter outside as the top growth is cut down by the first frost. John Marston brought specimens of *Carpinus fangiana* with its intricate and long catkins, *Tilia japonica* 'Ernest Wilson' whose flowers spread their scent far and wide, *Dodonea viscosa* 'Purpurea' with its attractive winged pink seeds and a flowering branch of *Cladrastis sinensis* looking a bit like a lilac from afar but its pink pea flowers show that it is a legume. Finally Keith Rushforth brought a mysterious white scented rhododendron from an area of North India abutting on Bhutan and Nepal where there is much interbreeding and still some sorting out to do with the rhododendrons in that area.

After lunch, the members' plant sale produced many very reasonably priced treasures, snapped up by our attendees, some of whom had also explored the large plant sales area of the garden.

After this, Steve led us through the amazing sub-tropical gardens full of treasures and tender trees and shrubs. We noted the Group's large leaved rhododendron collection in memory of John Bond which was, on the whole, well labelled and the commemorative notice was in place. Steve has maintained the tropical ambience in many parts of the garden with tree ferns and large leaved plants, and has stocked the garden with golden pheasants (instead of the peacocks which decimated the new growth) and for sonic effect the outrageous squawks of a pair of Kookaburras! As in Madeira, the verges were filled with self seeded agapanthus and pink watsonias making a wonderful patchwork effect.

It is a tribute to Steve and his team that the garden is so well maintained and so full of wondrous plants.

We presented Steve with a plant of *Buddleia salviifolia* 'Alba' and *Mallotus japonicus*, and thanked him for hosting such a wonderful day for us.

John Marston