The Rhododendron Story

200 Years of Plant Hunting and Garden Cultivation

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RHODODENDRON, CAMELLIA & MAGNOLIA GROUP

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Chapter 15

Rhododendron Lovers in the British Isles

Cynthia Postan

It is clear that up to the mid-19th century the cultivation of rhododendrons was a hit and miss affair. Little was known about suitable growing conditions and quite hardy plants were often killed by being over-cosseted. James Bateman at Biddulph Grange, in his efforts to simulate a Himalayan ‘ravine’, failed utterly to achieve a satisfactory environment. And so it went on right up to the time when the Chinese rhododendrons arrived. The plants sent by the French missionaries to Franchet in Paris all died through ignorance.

However, after the Himalayan species had been established in the milder areas of the British Isles, the fortunate owners had a taste of things to come. Sir John Lemon of Carelew, ‘one of the fathers of gardening in Cornwall’, encouraged his friends to experiment with Joseph Hooker’s species. Mary Forrest has shown how they gave gardeners experience in a favourable environment. James Veitch, the first nurseryman to grasp the potentiality of plants from Western China, and Ernest Wilson, his collector, brought to this country in 1900 a large number of seeds of the new Rhododendron species. James Veitch invited John Charles Williams, (see figure 18) who had been growing rhododendrons in his garden at Caerhays since 1885, to experiment with Wilson’s seeds; 25 sorts were bought from the first collection (these were planted out in 1905-6) and 15 from the second collection. A number of these introductions first flowered at Caerhays. It was no wonder that this garden became the focus of interest in the new species.

More new species came from George Forrest’s expeditions in Yunnan, financed initially by another nurseryman, A K Bulley, but in 1905 and later, partly by J C Williams. Percival Dacre Williams, the cousin of J C Williams, whose garden at nearby Lanarth was equally favourable, was also growing rhododendrons. Other gardeners and friends began to follow this absorbing activity. One in particular,
Charles Eley, had from 1909 onwards been deeply engaged in raising the new flowering shrubs and trees from China. Unfortunately, he gardened in East Anglia, a harsher and dryer climate although this did not prevent him from trying to grow rhododendrons. The scene was thus set for a momentous coming together of gifted amateurs with the leisure and space required to pool their acquired knowledge.

**The Rhododendron Society**

On a visit to Lanarth in 1915 Charles Eley had suggested to his friend, P D Williams, that they should form a group whose aim would be to share experience on a regular basis, but his suggestion was not then received with much enthusiasm. Later his scheme for an informal group of friends contributing regular notes to be privately circulated bore fruit. On his next visit, Mr John Guille Millais, of Compton Brow, Horsham, was present and PD Williams straightaway introduced Charles Eley as 'the Promoter', announcing abruptly – 'we are the Rhododendron Society and Charles Eley is the Honorary Secretary.' This momentous occasion and subsequent events are recounted by another friend and founder member, George Johnstone of

Charles Eley of East Bergholt in Suffolk, the so-called 'promoter' of the Rhododendron Society. He was its honorary secretary and editor of the Rhododendron Society Notes from 1916 to 1931

George Johnstone of Trewithen in Cornwall. With his neighbours, J C Williams of Caerhayes and P D Williams of Lanarth, he was a founding member of the Rhododendron Society and its unofficial historian
Trewthen (Rhododendron and Camellia Year Book, No. 22, 1958, pp. 9-22), to which Charles Eley himself has added his own witty and self-deprecating memories (ibid, p. 22).

It is sad that 80 years have no connotation in the measurement of time to indicate their significance in man's progress, because 1916, the date of the foundation of the Rhododendron Society, was truly memorable for our chosen genus. Rhododendrons now grow all over the temperate world, honoured and nurtured by specialist societies in many countries, but in 1916 the British Society was the first such and became the channel for cooperation between four groups of people. Each was to play a vital part in the story. Pride of place must be given to botanists and collectors, for without William and Joseph Hooker the door might never have been opened. But nurserymen and private gardeners, representing commercial and amateur status, also played an essential part.

The Rhododendron Society was formed with the minimum of organization – a chairman (J C Williams) and a secretary (Charles Eley), both honorary posts – and few rules (of which no written record now exists). The founding fathers (J C Williams, P D Williams, J G Millais and Charles Eley) rapidly drew up a list of garden owners who were to be invited to join. These were: Major A Dorrien-Smith of Tresco, George Johnstone of Trewthen, Dame Alice Godman of South Lodge, John Guille Millais of Compton Brow, Horsham, was staying with PD Williams when Charles Eley unfolded his scheme for a society. He was one of its most energetic supporters and the author of the first book on hybrids.
Gerald Loder (Lord Wakehurst) of Wakehurst Place, Sir Edmund Loder of Leonard'slee, Lieutenant Colonel Stephen-son Clarke of Borde Hill (see figure 11), Edward Magor of Lamellen in Cornwall, Kenneth McDouall of Logan, Lieutenant Colonel Rogers of Riverhill in Kent, Sir John Ross-of-Bladensburg, in Northern Ireland, Sir John Llewellyn of Penllaergaer in Wales (died 1922), John Nix (died 1922) and Charles Nix of Tilgates in Surrey. Two more joined in 1916 – Sir Herbert Maxwell of Wigtownshire and H Armytage Moore of Rowallane in Northern Ireland. Four more in 1917 – the Earl of Stair, Lochinch, Sir John Stirling Maxwell of Pollok, near Glasgow, the Marquess of Headfort of Kilmacurragh in Ireland and Sir George Holford of Westonbirt (died 1926). Mrs Cuthbert of Beauffort Castle joined in 1919, Lionel de Rothschild and Eustace Wilding of Wexham Place in 1920 and Sir John Ramsden of Muncaster in 1922. Finally, Henry McLaren (later 2nd Lord Abercon-way) of Bodnant in Wales and J B Stevenson of Tower Court joined in 1923, making 25 in all, although there were deaths during the early years.

Almost immediately the crucial decision was taken to elect as honorary members professional botanists from the two great Royal Botanic Gardens where so much of the work was being done – Professor (later Sir Isaac) Bayley Balfour, Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (RBGE), and W J Bean, Curator at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (Kew); they were soon joined by the two great collectors, E H Wilson and George Forrest, and one eminent older gardener, Clara Mangles. These honorary members were elected for obvious reasons, but the list soon had to be enlarged again; Sir Frederick Moore, Director of the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin in Dublin, Sir David Prain, Director of Kew, and Professor Charles Sargent of the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. But the total number of ordinary and honorary members was always jealously controlled by election, at least partly because the information distributed to members was considered to be confidential until the illiberality of this policy was pointed out by Ernest Wilson.

The Society was immediately active, for all members were bound by the Rules to play a part. Each ordinary member, who by definition cultivated rhododendrons, had to submit every year a short piece describing what went on in his or her garden and what experience had been gained. These reports were published in a multi-volumed publication entitled *Rhododendron Society Notes* and edited by the Honorary Secretary, who carried on throughout his term of office a voluminous correspondence with his fellow members and others. A series of these letters received between 1922-24, preserved by his great-grandson, Rupert Eley, gives a vivid picture of the interests of garden owners in the 1920s. Sadly, few if any of
J C Williams and George Johnstone comparing notes in the wood at Caerhayes. They were frequent contributors to the Rhododendron Society Notes and played a crucial role in establishing the Chinese species in cultivation as well as contributing to the information needed to classify the flood of new species sent back by Forrest and Wilson.
Charles Eley's own letters have survived.  

_The Rhododendron Society Notes_, published between 1916 and 1931 in three volumes and 15 annual parts, survive in the elegant edition printed for members (the copyright was purchased by the Pacific Rhododendron Society of America in 1976 and has been reproduced in a smaller-format facsimile) and they provide a feast of material about every aspect of species and hybrids, all of which broke new ground at the time. Much of what appeared in these _Notes_ has formed the basis of today's received knowledge and practice. Some of the most memorable contributions were J C Williams' list of the species he grew at Caerhays and the reports of the two lectures given to members of the Society by Ernest ('Chinese') Wilson and George Forrest themselves in which they gave first-hand accounts of the natural conditions in which the species were growing.

By 1925 there was a feeling that not all members could sustain or provide a useful annual contribution and Mr Gerald Loder (afterwards Lord Wakehurst) reported on the various changes that might be contemplated. The most important of these was that, in spite of the strictly limited membership, other gardeners and interested parties had become aware of the Society's activities and benefits and were clamouring to be allowed to join. At this juncture it was decided to open ranks to admit whoever wished to join (subject to election), and to agree a formal constitution with appropriate officers and a fixed subscription. The new body was to be known as the Rhododendron Association and was incorporated in 1928. All the functions of the Society, except one, were transferred to the Association and the Society itself became a purely private group who met at intervals to dine and to exchange views. Membership, however, remained fixed, and there was always keen competition for election whenever a vacancy occurred. It was not finally disbanded until 1951.

It must not be thought that this short account covers all the activities of the Rhododendron Society. But as these form a continuum with those of the Rhododendron Association, an account of them will be, with one exception, postponed until later. The exception, the first botanical monograph devoted to the genus _Rhododendron_, was so important that due credit must be given to the individuals whose brain-child it was.

The first formal botanical description of the species should be recognized as the 'lasting monument to the Rhododendron Society'. It should be remembered that in 1925 new species were still arriving from both Wilson's and Forrest's expeditions. Wilson had already introduced a large number of new species and Forrest was still sending back more.

These were hastily assigned at Edinburgh into what Sir Isaac Bayley Balfour always considered to be a temporary arrangement of series of species with similar
characteristics. This story is told in Chapter 2 by Professor and Dr Philipson. However, the number available to gardeners was becoming confusing. The first attempt at making an orderly list came from Sir Isaac himself. His card index was presented after his death to the Society by J C Williams in 1923 and for ease of consultation was lodged in London. At the Society’s Annual General Meeting in 1925 Sir Arthur Hill, the then Director of Kew, suggested drawing up an illustrated descriptive list of species. J Hutchinson, the Kew botanist, followed up this suggestion in greater detail. During the next two years three botanists compiled single-page botanical descriptions of each known species grouped into series. They were H F Tagg, RBGE (lepidotes), J Hutchinson, Kew (elepidotes) and Alfred Rehder, Arnold Arboretum (azaleas). The crucial task of editing the work of these experts was put in the hands of J B Stevenson, a member of the Society since 1922 and later Treasurer of the Association. He has been described as ‘forceful character’, and with his experience of building up his own species collection at Tower Court, he was well qualified to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

The *Species of Rhododendron* published by the Society in 1930 was the first attempt at a botanically reputable monograph on the genus and remained valid for many years – in fact probably until the appearance of Dr MacQueen Cowan’s and Mr Davidian’s revisions in the post-war editions of the *Rhododendron and Camellia Year Book*. As a publishing venture it remained the sole responsibility of the Rhododendron Society who paid for all the costs of printing and distribution. This was a formidable undertaking for a Society with no funds beyond its 30-odd members’ subscriptions, and so, a bank guarantee to cover printing costs was required. Even then, several of the more affluent and generous members were called upon to contribute privately. As each species was described individually in appropriate botanical terms *The Species of Rhododendron* must not be confused with the *Rhododendron Handbooks* for the use of gardeners referred to below. Thirty-eight de luxe copies were printed for the members of the Society and the authors, and a large number were printed for sale to the general public.

**The Rhododendron Association**

The structure of the new Association set up in November 1928 remained unchanged until 1939 and the outbreak of World War II. The Constitution adopted was the model for that of the autonomous Rhododendron and Camellia Group revived in 1976 (see p.197). Officers elected were the President (Mr Lionel de Rothschild), the Vice-President (Admiral H Walker-Heneage-Vivian), the Honorary Treasurer (Mr J B Stevenson) and the Secretary (Mr Gurney Wilson). The latter was the only one to receive an honorarium. All these officers retained their positions until
1939. They were supported by an elected Council, E J Crosfield, the Marquess of Headfort, G W E Loder (Lord Wakehurst), the Hon. H D McLaren (2nd Lord Aberconway), F Gomer Waterer, E H Wilding, P D Williams. The Constitution governing membership and the conduct of business was printed in the first Year Book of the Association (1929). The subscription was set (and remained until 1945) at One Guinea (£1.1s 0d). The aims of the Association were brief: 'to encourage, improve and extend the study and cultivation of Rhododendrons by means of publications, the holding of Exhibitions and otherwise'.

The membership, now open to all, increased rapidly. By 1929 the numbers had already risen to 182, of which 13 were the original 25 founding members. There were six honorary members (including JC Williams, who held no office), two botanists (Professor W Wright Smith, RBGE, and W J Bean, Kew) and three plant collectors (George Forrest, Frank Kingdon-Ward, and Ernest H Wilson). Many ordinary members of the RHS joined and the full strength during the next decade hovered around the 350 mark and in the last years overtopped 400.

The new President brought with him the resources of his estate at Exbury and contacts in the wider world, both of which proved invaluable for managing the increased scope of activities. Indeed, the Association’s success and international renown during its relatively short life was due in great part to the energy, generosity and dedication of this one man. Close collaboration also developed with the Royal Horticultural Society whose President, since 1931, the 2nd Lord Aberconway, was by good fortune another of the Rhododendronphiloi. Together, these two friends made Rhododendron species and hybrids almost a British monopoly and a model for the gardening world overseas.

The day-to-day business of the Association brought with it a heavier burden for the secretary, and the Association was fortunate in the incumbent, Mr Gurney Wilson whose previous experience had been with The Orchid Review. He had much to offer the Association when it came to producing the famous Handbooks (see below). The Association also took over the organization of the annual Rhododendron Show, started by the Society in 1926.

The first important innovation was undoubtedly the new Year Book, edited by Lionel de Rothschild himself, offering members a different content from that of the old Notes. The main contents, apart from basic information such as the names of the officers, the constitution and the membership list, included some memorable articles on the characteristics of the species by Lionel de Rothschild and guidelines for would-be hybridizers based on his own experiences. In addition, it printed an up-to-date description of species in their series, compiled by W J Bean and J B Stevenson, and included new species as they were received and allocated by
Lionel de Rothschild of Exbury Park, Southampton, (1882-1942), President of the Rhododendron Association from its beginning in 1928 until 1939. His leadership and generosity were crucial factors in promoting international interest in rhododendron cultivation

RBGE. It was, in the words of the President, compiled 'entirely from the garden point of view' and was 'of no interest to the botanist'. (The delightful addition of the anglicization of the Latin names was provided by E H Wilding from his book The Names and Addresses of Rhododendrons). But the format was the same as that of Part One of the Rhododendron Handbook, or 'Guide to the Rhododendron Species in General Cultivation', later published jointly in 1956 by the RHS and the Rhododendron Group. It also contained the first list of hybrids available from the principal nursery gardens. This became later Part Two of the Rhododendron Handbook and both parts will be referred to again later in the post-war section of this chapter (p. 197). Gardeners had never before had this information in such a compact form. It was also the first attempt at rating hardiness as well as the
garden worth of hybrids. This last criterion did not always meet with the agreement of all members and to some extent was bound to reflect the personal taste of the assessors and the special climatic conditions of the British Isles.

What must be noted here is the part played by the secretary in putting together the material for the descriptions of the species and the names and parentage of the hybrids. The Association owed an enormous debt to Gurney Wilson. He used his experience of similar publications on the Orchidaceae, and more particularly that part dealing with hybrids. This method of presenting the material came to be known as the ‘Stud Book’ on the analogy of bloodstock breeding (see p. 197).

The first special ‘Rhododendron’ show also dated from this time. Held at the RHS Floral Hall, the show was organized by the Society on 26 April 1926 and subsequently by the Association who provided the judges and prize money. The first show was an unqualified success from the public’s point of view, although its successor was affected, as many shows have been since then, by adverse weather in the weeks before. The Association received gate money from the attendance, but the Annual Accounts do not reveal that it contributed to the hire of the hall or to other expenses of the RHS so we must presume that it was part of the regular succession of shows staged by the RHS. However, what the accounts do tell us is that the shows, together with the printing and distributing of the Year Books, were the main responsibility of, and a heavy drain on, the somewhat precarious resources of the Association. It was necessary more than once for an appeal to go out to members to contribute something extra. The appeal was never in vain, although the number of those who responded was smaller than the total membership.

However, the shows at Vincent Square have been a permanent fixture for the last 70 years and are still a great attraction. Many cups and medals have been presented over the years and are still keenly competed for. These include Challenge Cups for the best amateur and the best trade exhibits presented by Lionel de Rothschild; the Crosfield Cup for six hybrids raised by the exhibitor; the De Rothschild Cup for eight species; the Loder Cup for one hybrid truss; the McLaren Cup for one species truss; and the Roza Stevenson Cup for one hybrid spray. Awards to individuals still presented today include the Loder Rhododendron Cup presented by Lord Wakehurst in memory of Sir Edmund Loder, a founder member who died in 1920, to an individual who had contributed to horticulture; and the Alfred Waley Medal to a working gardener who has contributed to the cultivation of rhododendrons. Many of these awards date back to the 1920s and the old Rhododendron Society and had been transferred to the Association. Gold, silver gilt, silver and bronze medals with the Society’s own Rhododendron phillox logo.
were also awarded annually and are still treasured by the recipients.

There were many other innovations. One of the most original and influential for gardeners and nurserymen alike has been the Trials of new hybrids. The President generously offered space at Exbury in the early years. Plants from trade and amateurs alike were monitored regularly during the growing season by teams of experts, and those most suited for garden decoration were recommended to the RHS. The trials began in 1929 and continued until 1938 when they were transferred to the Society's garden at Wisley, as being more accessible for what had to be frequent visits. They were resumed after 1946 and continue up to the present day.

The trials were yet another example of the growing collaboration between RHS and Association and may have been one of the reasons why it was thought useful to have a mixed body representing both the RHS and the Association. Whatever the reason for the initial push, a Joint Committee began to meet in 1938 to regulate trials, consider awards to individual plants (the RHS had been making these for many years) and to judge the competitions at the specialist shows. It is today a Standing Committee of the RHS (known as the Rhododendron and Camellia Committee) with an equal representation, although it has no direct connection with the present Rhododendron Group. After 1945 it assumed even greater importance, as will be told later in this chapter.

The RHS Group
The Second World War of 1939 to 1945 inevitably caused a complete break in the activities of the ‘Rhododendron’ fraternity and the affairs of the Association went into hibernation for the duration.

When British gardens awoke from their slumber, things were, alas, never to be quite the same. Lionel de Rothschild, the Association’s President, whose name had become practically synonymous with the Rhododendron Association, had died in 1942 aged only 60, and sadly none of his colleagues felt able to assume his mantle. His friendly rival in the hybrid business, Lord Aberconway, was committed to leading the RHS itself. Indeed, as I mentioned above, the Association’s activities had in many respects become so closely entwined with the RHS that it seemed illogical to incur the extra expense of administration merely to maintain a separate identity when so many of the Association’s concerns were already being managed by the Joint Committee. The sensible solution seemed to be to wind up the Association and to allow all members who so wished to register without subscription for membership of a ‘Group, whose main interest would be rhododendrons’. Such membership would be open to all other RHS members at their will.

The Association was thus wound up and the assets were transferred to the RHS. The new Rhododendron Group was formed on the lines of the RHS Lily, Daffodil and Fruit Groups. In September
1945 a meeting of the Association passed a resolution to this effect. The existing Joint Committee, now a Standing Committee of the RHS, took over the adjudication of the shows and competitions; the awards and the supervision of the programmes. The Year Book also became the responsibility of the RHS through the Committee. An Editorial Board was set up to plan the dissemination of new information on classification, propagation, cultivation and hybridizing, hitherto the responsibility of the Association, by an RHS official team, in particular, Patrick Synge and N K Gould. The immediate result was the appearance in 1946 of the first of a series of 25 elegant, green-bound volumes, beautifully printed for those austere days, and lavishly illustrated, entitled The Rhododendron Year Book. The contents of the new Year Books far outstripped the old Notes of the Society or the cheaply produced Association’s Year Books. The most cursory glance through the pages reveals articles by most of the acknowledged experts on every topic that a reader’s fancy might light upon, many of which still make thoughtful reading today. The 1949 issue, Number 4, printed all the papers read at what must be counted as the first Rhododendron Conference ever to be held, attended by many friends from abroad, more especially the USA and Canada. It included a survey of the genus by Dr MacQueen Cowan, a paper on rhododendrons in the wild by Frank Kingdon-Ward and another on propagation by Mr Francis Hanger, lately head gardener at Exbury. This kind of standard was maintained throughout the 25 years of its existence and make the series a permanent record worth consulting by botanists and horticulturists alike.

The same number also described a post-conference tour of nine major rhododendron gardens from Exbury, through Dorset to Cornwall and north west to Bodnant. This pattern for organized tours gradually became established, starting with one-day tours but eventually branching out into tours lasting up to a week. They were all organized by the Joint Committee’s secretary, Robert Adams, and proved very popular, introducing a wider circle of gardeners to specialized rhododendron gardens. By 1966 they had become, with the annual shows, and the awards, important aspects of the Rhododendron Group’s programme.

Membership was open to all RHS members and the numbers were about 300. The Committee already dealt with camellias and this genus was incorporated into the Group by order of RHS Council in 1957. Year Book No. 8 became the first Rhododendron and Camellia Year Book.

Of great importance was the publication of the material which had previously appeared in the Association’s Year Books. Parts One and Two of The Rhododendron Handbook were first published in 1947. Part One – Rhododendron Species in General Cultivation - was the successor to the Association’s Year Books for 1929 to 1939.
It made available to the general public a list of rhododendrons in their series; an alphabetical list of *Rhododendron* species (with synonyms); other species not in general cultivation; and, finally, lists of collectors’ numbers from 1910 through to 1956. Revisions of Part One continued to be published until 1980. Part Two, *Rhododendron Hybrids*, the ‘Stud Book’, contained an alphabetical list of *Rhododendron* hybrids with their parentage and raisers (with dates). Another list gave the name and progeny of the different species. A third list gave names of hybrids usually available in the British Isles with stars for excellence and hardness rating.

Unfortunately, these publications, particularly the *Year Books*, although sold at the lowest possible margin, were never to cover their costs, even though they were valuable contributions to horticultural knowledge. At the 1971 Annual General Meeting of the RHS, the President announced that the *Year Books* (including the Daffodil and Lily versions) were to be discontinued, as he admitted, entirely because of inflation and rising costs. The Treasurer also gave details of the gap between printing costs and sales. Looked at like this, the President pointed out that the main body of Fellows (as members were called in those days) were subsidizing a minority group and that this could not in equity be justified. In fact, it was the grave financial position of the RHS itself which turned the balance against the so-called ‘minority interests’.

**The Autonomous Rhododendron, Camellia and Magnolia Group**

Thus, once more the *Rhododendronphiloi* faced crisis, and this time it threatened to be terminal. A number of people on the Joint Rhododendron and Camellia Committee were not prepared to accept this fate and determined that the Group should not die. A quick dip into their pockets ensured that the 1972 number of the *Year Book* appeared on time. It did so in a slimmer, altogether different although cheerful, format, with the encouraging words of the Chairman, Sir Giles Loder: ‘this modified edition can . . . keep readers up to date with recent introductions’ and produce ‘articles on how rhododendrons and camellias thrive, both at home and abroad’.

Mr Alan Hardy became the Honorary Editor whose responsibility it was to assemble the *Year Books* contents, and it was largely due to him that the series continued to appear regularly each year and to fulfil its essential function as the flagship of the *Rhododendronphiloi*. At the RHS Elspeth Napier and James Platt gave him support in its production.

From 1973 to 1976 the *Year Books* were the only sign that the Rhododendron Group had survived. But in the background another generation of enthusiasts was equally determined that the Group should have a corporate existence. Early in 1976 a small committee of former members met to discuss taking over the administration from the RHS officials. A list of
former members was circulated to know if they would be interested; 169 individuals replied in the affirmative and they became the nucleus of the new autonomous Group. For the first time since 1939 they were required to pay a subscription. For this £3.00 they were to receive the Year Book and a new bulletin. A committee was formed: after some early changes the Chairman was Walter Magor, the Honorary Secretary John Waugh Owens and the Treasurer David Farnes. Walter Magor also took over as Honorary Editor in 1974. The Bulletin was edited from 1978 until 1981 by Kenneth Lowes. He was later succeeded by Bruce Archibold, who in 1986 became Chairman of the Group, a post he still holds. In 1994 he was awarded the Loder Cup for services to horticulture in the field of rhododendrons.

Thus was the Rhododendron Group 'born again' and took charge of its own destiny. Although it never again controlled shows, competitions and trials, those who judged and sat on the relevant committees were inevitably also Group members. In this way close contact and sharing of responsibility with the RHS was maintained and still continues to the mutual advantage of both.

Since 1977 membership has increased to over 750, many members coming from overseas. Considerable activity now takes place within the regional branches (now numbering 10), who organize local lectures, shows and plant exchanges. This helps to mitigate the difficulties of visiting London, far away for many. But for the future, better liaison between the branches themselves and with the centre would certainly be to the Group's advantage. However, this is not history and does not concern us here.

Cynthia Postan has been a member of the Rhododendron Group since the early 1950s and has edited the Year Book since 1988
Figure 9 (top left): the Vireya Rhododendron *jasminiflorum* was first exhibited in 1850. The strangeness of the flowers led to a comment that it was ‘probably no Rhododendron at all’ (see Chapter 7). Figure 10 (top right): R. ‘Humboldt’, one of TJ Rudolph Seidel’s cold-hardy hybrids (see Chapter 9). Figure 11 (above): Borde Hill, the Sussex garden of Colonel Stephenson Clarke, a prominent member of the original Rhododendron Society (see Chapter 15)
Figure 15 and 16: R. simssii, found in a Shanghai nursery by Robert Fortune, was sent to Standish & Noble at Bagnhot in 1851 – (top left) an engraving of the plant from Curtis's Botanical Magazine and (top right) a living plant (see Chapter 13). Figure 17 (above left): R. 'Lem's Cameo', Halfdan Lem's superb American hybrid, (see Chapter 11). Figure 18 (above right): John Charles Williams of Caerhays, one of the first Englishman to grow Chinese rhododendrons and Chairman of the Rhododendron Society 1916-27 (see Chapter 15)
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