



MID-ATLANTIC GROUP

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HPS Abroad 2014: UK Gardens Galore

by Jim Smith

An enthusiastic group of 23 HPS members gathered at the Manchester airport to board the bus and begin yet another garden adventure of a lifetime—this time to the English Lake District, Chester, and northern Wales. Many already knew our guide, Maurice Wilkins, from previous British Isles trips. A magnificent countryside awaited us. Wild-blooming flowers dotted the roadsides. Sheep and cattle, even a few horses, and the occasional flock of free-ranging geese grazed in the adjoining fields. Stone walls were as much a part of the landscape as the giant oaks, chestnuts, and sycamores. The summits of the steep, sloped fells and mountain passes had mere grassy pastures and huge rock outcroppings, the tree line far below, with wayside heather and ferns in the higher altitudes. Ribboned rivulets cascaded from every direction.

There were gardens aplenty to visit with every plant imaginable native to this part of the world, plus many nonnative imports in the various gardenscapes. Even a few palms, tree ferns, and monkey puzzle trees grew in sheltered microclimates, protected from winter winds and cold.

Pear Tree Cottage, a $\frac{1}{3}$ -acre private garden, features an amazing wealth of garden ornaments and plants with an emphasis on ferns (Pteridophyta)—well over 100 fern varieties alone.

Hilltop Farm, the cottage studio of Beatrix Potter, was true to her books—we saw Peter, Mopsy, and Flopsy triple-fold in all the adjoining fields and pastures.

Chapelside was a wonderful example of gardens combined with artistic pieces, placed discreetly among the plantings, a small pond with a moss surround, woodland paths, and a unique gravel garden, all demonstrated the artistic flair of the owners—a treasure of artistic design.

At **Hutton-in-the-Forest**, Lady Cresida Inglewood greeted us and discussed the history of the estate. A formal walled garden contained a modern day version of the Garden of Eden right down to the mature apple trees.

Victorian to the core, **Nunwick Hall**, with its clever, half-hidden sunken garden, was a perfect setting to enjoy the tea and cakes offered by the owner.

Levens Hall, with topiaries in every shape and size imaginable (including a 'top hat' yew tree looking a bit like the Mad

Hatter), is the oldest and most defined topiary garden in England, begun in 1690. Amazingly, over that centuries-long tradition, there have been only ten head gardeners on the estate.

The gardens of **Yewbarrow** are new, established in 1988. Due to its location by the sea and with a forested windbreak to the back of the hillside property, unusual nonnative plants, including palm trees, survive here. Getting there was an adventure—the bus driver handled a winding narrow, steep road with pure expertise.

Gardens prevailed, but there were other diversions as well—a steamer boat ride on Lake Windermere was a fun attraction and a tour of the **Honister Slate Mine** was quite the bonus. Long abandoned when a young entrepreneur bought it, in addition to educational history tours of the mine, sections have reopened as locations for movies, social functions, and renewed slate mining for local workers.

In Chester, we walked the ancient city walls, inspected old Roman ruins, and attended Evensong, performed by a visiting choir, at Chester Cathedral.

Holehird had a tantalizingly extensive hydrangea bed leading up to the main garden area. From this lookout point, the views toward the mountains beyond the lake were breathtaking.

Continued on page 6

HPS Abroad 2014: UK Gardens Galore

continued from page 1

Dalemain in Ullswater developed over centuries to include a 16th-century knot garden, a 17th-century terrace, an 18th-century summerhouse, and a 19th-century spiral garden. The estate is known for its jams, many varieties available for sale. Taste testing the jam samples proved chancy—bees were bomb buzzing the open jars en masse.

Lowther Castle, a ruin in Penrith, is currently being restored by a charity and will become a tourist attraction and event venue once completed. In Norse, “Gresgarth Hall” means “Boar Yard,” and a sculpture of a boar marked the entranceway to the house. The yew hedges were immaculately maintained and trimmed, setting off the more formal gardens near the castle. The remaining gardens were less formal but still nicely organized in terms of color schemes and designs.

An early owner of **Tatton Park**, on a trip to America, became infatuated with Remington's work and simply bought a handful, a rather large handful. The house has one entire corridor devoted to Remington watercolors.

Ness Botanical Garden, owned by the University of Liverpool, contains 65 acres of groomed gardens including a terraced garden with an extensive rockery, and a field of red Flanders poppies—planted to commemorate the victims of WWI on this centennial anniversary of the start of the war in 1914.

As we moved from region to region, slate roofs were replaced in part with thatch roofs or tile roofs. Even the all-stone houses of the Lake District gradually changed to half-timber homes. In still other areas, there was a preponderance of brick homes with tile roofs. What a contrast in construction styles and all within 100 miles.

The **Dorothy Clive Garden**, begun in the 1940s, features a reclaimed gravel quarry, imaginatively planted and making full use of the multilevel terraces.

Cholmondeley Castle (pronounced Chomley Castle) belongs to the 94-year-old Dowager Marchioness, wife of the late sixth Marquess. On rare occasions, groups are allowed to visit the gardens. We followed the

head gardener around the grounds (the teeniest part of the extensive gardens) and did get a chance to see a small portion of the exterior of the castle and manicured beds up close.

Mt. Pleasant Garden was an amazing maze, a labyrinth within a labyrinth, with interlocking plants and sculptures of stained glass, metal, carved stone, and chainsawed wood, all on a steep hillside, with paths meandering back and forth through overgrown plants and trees—very lush, with partially hidden cul de sacs.

Powis Castle, a National Trust property, has steep-terraced gardens fronting the castle with every imaginable flowering plant and shrub, surmounted at the top with enormous trimmed conifers. Peacocks shared space in the courtyard.

Glansevern Hall, a small mansion compared to many of the others, has majestic 750-year-old oaks.

A narrow gauge cog train took us up **Mt. Snowdon**. Leaving the valley, we gradually reached the tree line, then nothing but sheep-shorn fields sporting enormous boulders and rock outcroppings, interspersed with massive patches of heather and gorse. At the summit, picturesque, but so windblown and cold, most of the group, after quick photo snaps, sought the warmth of the souvenir shop and shelter.

Plas Brondanw is a small, contained garden, partially underwritten by Welsh opera singer Bryn Terfel. We learned that he lives within 20 miles and sang at a gala held at the estate just three years ago. This garden presented astounding views of the surrounding mountains. Location, location, location...

Portmeirion, an intentionally developed village in Mediterranean style, built in the early 20th century, is a fantasy creation, much beloved as an excursion destination and recognizable as the surreal setting for the 1960's TV show, *The Prisoner*.

Bodysgallen Hall in Llandudno, a hotel/spa with magnificent wood-paneled reception lounges and rooms, fireplaces with elaborate mantles, and oil portrait paintings lining every wall, is Olde English to the core—evok-

ing the elegance and opulence of ages past. We enjoyed tea and cookies, dispensed by elegantly-attired servers, before touring the immaculate gardens, which included a knot garden and perfectly pruned fruit trees.

At **Plas Newydd**, we visited the gardens, as well as the house (again a castle) with its 58' floor-to-ceiling mural.

At nearby **Treborth Botanic Garden**, part of Bangor University, the head curator treated us to an hour-long lecture on several species from the different greenhouses, but focused mainly on carnivorous plants. He also demonstrated the ingenious apparatus used to capture and release, then rigorously catalog moths and other nocturnal pollinators. The Rhizotron, one of only 12 such laboratories in the entire world, allows students to study plant roots and underground biomes.

As with so many other gardens, **Bodnant** is also attached to a veritable castle, descending a steep incline were five distinct gardens: the top rose terrace, the croquet terrace, the lily terrace, the lower rose terrace, and the canal terrace. After each awe-inspiring garden we saw, along came another to top the previous one—a gardener's dream.

Our last visit was **The Garden House**, a small privately owned garden of just a few acres, which holds one of the national collections of hydrangea. A bonus afterwards was a visit to **The Boat**, a nearby charming pub dating back to the 1200s, near a former hand-operated chain ferry crossing the River Dee. A great ending to yet another great HPS trip!