



# Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

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# News LETTER

## FROM NURSERY TO GARDEN CENTRE

**In October, members heard a talk by Julian Ranson, Garden Centre Manager at Notcutts, Shirley.**

Mr. Ranson, who had worked for the company for twenty-two years, began by outlining the history of Notcutts, still a family-run business, which, over the many years it has existed, has witnessed many changes in the horticultural industry, not least the evolution of the garden centre from the nursery.

The name originates from Somerset; in 1724, the Rev. William Notcutt moved from Somerset to Suffolk, where the family set up a legal practice in Ipswich, which continued until 1990.

In 1870, Roger Charles Nottcutt, a sickly child in need of outdoor employment, was bought a very small nursery just outside Ipswich by his father; here, by the age of eighteen, he was growing prize-winning vegetables and chrysanthemums, eventually specialising in different varieties of chrysanthemums, including "Edith Talbot", which he displayed at shows and offered for sale.

By 1897, having decided that he needed to expand, he bought a larger nursery at Woodbridge, just outside Ipswich, where he numbered the owners of large estates amongst his customers, many of whom were also clients of the family's legal firm.

(When, in 1958, the present Garden Centre was built on the site of the original nursery, it was one of the first purpose-built garden centres in the country, thereby marking the point when nurseries began evolving into garden centres)

Roger Notcutt, whose particular interest was in ornamental trees, stimulated trade by inviting owners and head gardeners to visit his nursery and by providing foremen for their estates. He also trained local journeymen-gardeners.

Roger's son, Tom, was an academic and studied at Cambridge University. Nonetheless, he was expected to enter the

family business but was first sent to the Botanical Gardens at Edinburgh to learn the trade.

His son, Charles Roger McFerguson Notcutt, the present president of the company, was born in 1934. Appointed OBE for services to horticulture in 1993, he was presented with the Royal Horticultural Society's coveted Victoria of Honour in 1997.

Charles's son, Roger William Notcutt, appointed Group General Manager in July 1999, represents the fourth generation to be engaged in the family business

As further evidence of its horticultural pre-eminence, Notcutts has won Gold Medals every year at the Chelsea Flower Show, where it has exhibited at every Show since 1913, and been awarded the prestigious Lawrence Medal on three occasions.

To maintain its position in the horticultural world, Notcutts has, like other garden centres, learnt to adapt, reflecting developments in modern gardening practices and changes in taste and fashion (Roses, for example, once a popular product which, in the 1950s, sold by the million each year, suffered a setback when the passing of the Clean Air Act in 1967 reduced the amount of sulphur in the air, but have undergone something of a revival in the last ten or twelve years, not least because of the introduction of new varieties, though sales continue to fluctuate).

The aftermath of World War II saw the break-up of large estates and the emergence of smaller gardens, so that the grand projects of the past had to give way to more modest schemes suitable to more compact sites and shallower pockets.

At the same time, local authorities became important customers.

Part of the response to this new situation was the rise of the mail order business which, at one time, saw 20,000 catalogues dispatched

each year (the policy of requiring money to accompany order meant that, not only was more stock moved, the company's cash flow improved!), only for it to be hit by the postal strike of 1971.

The company no longer sold large trees, which took between five and six years to grow. The range of fruit trees and bushes was reduced, too (Where once the catalogue listed a hundred different varieties of apples, now there are only fifteen, and where once there were fifty varieties of gooseberries only three are available now).

These days, plants are raised in containers, a technique introduced from the United States, and are imported in large number from Holland. There is far less dependence on growing one's own products, the emphasis having moved from nursery to garden centre.

Nor can garden centres rely any longer on just plant sales and garden accessories, and most have diversified into non-horticultural products, including pet animals, the most popular of which, perhaps surprisingly, are not, as might be supposed, rabbits, but chickens!

From its humble beginnings as a single nursery, the company has over the past century expanded to the extent that it now owns thirteen centres, predominantly in the Midlands, East Anglia and the South-East, and employs 1200 staff, many of whom have benefited from the company's own training programme.

Notcutts has survived the sudden death of key personnel, harsh winters (in 1962/63 the ground remained frozen from Boxing Day till March) and long periods of drought, and it has even, at its lowest ebb, teetered on the brink of bankruptcy, yet undoubtedly it has the expertise and vigour to survive economic downturns and continue to provide plants, gardening products and advice to both experienced and aspiring gardeners.

# VICTORIA PARK: The First Hundred Years

Julian Ranson's talk was followed the next month by a talk on the history of The Victoria Park, Stafford, given by Neil Thomas, Publicity Officer of The Friends of Victoria Park, summarised below.

A hundred years ago, Victoria Park did not exist. Where it now stands was a marshy wilderness, grazed by cattle and subject to flooding, and used in the late nineteenth century as a rubbish dump.

But the Victorian era was an age when attention turned to providing public amenities, and, led by Alderman William Peach, who, in 1890, was the Mayor of Stafford, the idea developed

that this marshy barrier between the town centre and the railway could be turned into a pleasure ground.

At first, the proposal was highly controversial, but on Monday, June 15th, 1908, the first section of what was called the Victoria Pleasure Grounds, consisting of flower beds, a bandstand and walkways, was open along the bank closest to the railway station. So controversial was the

project that there was no official opening, though the North Staffordshire Band gave a concert in the evening.

However, the hundredth anniversary in 2008 saw more of a party! Attended by hundreds of people, its highlight was a bowling match featuring seventy-two contestants which was so successful that it may well become an annual event. An event took place on every Sunday between June and September and included balloon artistry for children.

The years between had seen many changes, not least the extension of the park first to the eastern bank closer to the town centre, which now accommodated a bowling green, and then a final section, completed in 1930, which included a paddling pool, playground and tennis courts.

The original cast-iron conservatory, where once flowers were grown for display in the Civic Hall, is no longer there, demolished in the 1980s, but the aviary, built in the 1950s, is still full of exotic birds, and there is now a bowling green with two thatched pavilions.

A third pavilion, the Venables Pavilion, was erected in 1970.

Victoria Park was awarded the coveted Green Flag for the first time in 2007 and again in 2008. It is one of only four parks in the county to receive this award.

Never badly neglected, like so many municipal parks, it is now the subject of a £3m regeneration programme which is intended to cater for all ages. Already it offers a paddling pool for the younger generation and a bowling green for the town's older citizens, but there is at present no activity



The greenhouses in the background contain a collection of exotic plants open to the public



This shelter was presented by Alderman J. Mottram, Mayor 1905

# HAWKESYARD PRIORY, NEAR RUGELEY (also known as Spode House, Armitage Park)

**Reports of visitors to this garden at various times in the nineteenth century all describe remarkable rock works which were very extensive and included caves and tunnels.**

In 1853, "The Cottage Gardener" describes "a visit to Armitage Park, seat of Joseph Spode" by Thomas Appleby.

In the usual manner of horticultural journalists at this time, Appleby describes the hot houses in the garden – "the Victoria House & Stove Aquarium, vineries, peach, nectarine & orchid houses" under the care of head gardener Mr. Bolass.

He then goes on to describe the pleasure grounds which included "a beautiful circular greenhouse standing upon a rock with rocks of various sizes dispersed around & about, all covered with hardy ferns. The greenhouse is a unique thing set upon walls hewn out of solid rocks – a flat rock for the central stage the sides of which are covered with more tender ferns, elegant mosses & lycopods. The heaths & other plants were in pots set upon the rocky stage & platforms, it looked like fairy land."

In 1872, "The Journal of Horticulture" reported that "The mansion and grounds are on the north side of a sandstone hill. The stone has been cut out at one place to form a grotto or cavern and at

*"It looked like  
fairy land"*

another appears to be quarried. These two ravines form the best outdoor fernery I ever met with. Rustic paths intersect them, now ascending, now descending, at one time passing underneath an arch, at another through a dark tunnel and on emerging at the other side, a fresh scene is brought to view".

In 1890, "The Gardeners Chronicle" described the rock garden and stated that "it was formed when a quantity of stone was excavated some years ago for building walls etc." A later version has it that this garden was "constructed by Mr. Spode to give work to the miners of the neighbourhood at a period of unemployment". If this is correct, the garden was constructed after 1844, when ownership passed to the Spode family.

On a visit by the Trust in 1994, the remains of these rockworks could still be seen, although eroded and overgrown.

SVG  
January 09

## FOR THE FUTURE

The Annual General Meeting of the SGPT will take place at Enville Hall on Saturday, May 9th, 2009.

There will be a visit to Little Onn Hall on Saturday, July 11th, and the second part of the guided tour of Shugborough garden and grounds, including the Arboretum, will take place in September on a date to be arranged.

The Council of Management is also exploring the possibility of arranging a study day in September or October on "Trees in the Historic Landscape".

Details of these and other visits will be sent to all members shortly.

## Can you help?

From time to time requests are received from local organisations for a speaker from the SGPT to give a talk on Staffordshire's historic gardens.

These requests usually come from gardening guilds, Women's Institutes and afternoon clubs, who are willing to pay a speaker's fee of between £20.00 and £30.00. If you like to take the opportunity of sharing your enthusiasm for historic gardens and at the same time promote the work of the Staffordshire Gardens and Parks Trust, please contact Bryan Sullivan on 01543 684965.

# AT RISK

**Two buildings of historic importance have been deemed at risk by fellow conservation trusts – Hartlebury Castle, in Worcestershire, and Ruperra Castle, in the County Borough of Caerphilly.**

Hartlebury Castle, the home of the Bishops of Worcester for eight hundred years, whose state rooms, library, chapel and lakeside garden were once open to the public, is for sale by the Church Commissioners, and the Hereford and Worcester Gardens Trust fear that it could be sold to a commercial developer and its famous library dismantled and removed.

The Hartlebury Castle Preservation Trust has been formed to acquire and manage the Castle and preserve it for the future. The Trust, which will be shortly registered with The Charity Commission, already has the support of all the major heritage bodies, including English Heritage and The Georgian Group, as well as many local groups and organisations and concerned individuals.

The HCPT has drawn up a business plan for the Castle which it believes will secure the building, its contents and grounds for the benefit of the public and is urging all interested parties to write as soon as possible to Worcestershire County Council at Phillip Gretton County Hall, Worcester WR5 2NP or by email to [prgretton@worcestershire.gov.uk](mailto:prgretton@worcestershire.gov.uk) or to the Church Commissioners at Church House, London SW1P 3AZ in support of its plans to acquire and manage the Castle.

Ruperra Castle, a Grade II\* listed building near Cardiff, has been described by Mark Giraud as one of only four 'pageant' castles remaining in the UK "and the more

valuable for that".

In the CADW/ICOMOS Register of Gardens and Parklands of Special Historical Interest in Wales, it is described as "the survival of an unusually early Jacobean mock castle of exceptional historical importance with its attendant deer park and structural remains of contemporary formal gardens".

Built in 1626 and rebuilt after a fire in 1785, it was destroyed by a second fire in 1941 and has been left as a romantic ruin, subject to further deterioration, ever since.

It is now the subject of a planning application, first submitted in 2005, to turn the castle into nine flats and to build fifteen new houses in the grounds. This application goes before a Public Inquiry on April 21st, 2009.

The Ruperra Castle Preservation Trust has been set up to raise funds so that it can be legally represented at the forthcoming Inquiry. A young London barrister who specialises in environmental matters has agreed to carry out all the preparatory work 'pro bono' and not charge until the Inquiry actually starts, but this still leaves the Trust with the task of raising £10,000, and it is seeking to increase its membership as one way of meeting this challenge. Further information can be obtained by checking the website: [www.ruperracastle.blogspot.com](http://www.ruperracastle.blogspot.com).

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## Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

President: Sir Patrick Cormack, FSA, MP

### Council of Management

Chairman: Alan Taylor

Members: Sarah Ashmead; Ann Brookman; Jim Earle (Treasurer) Andy Goode; Margaret Foster; Sue Gregory (Archivist); David Jacques; John Philips; Margaret Richards; Bryan Sullivan (Membership Secretary)

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suitable for teenagers, some of whom have been lobbying for a skateboarding area.

Wildlife is an integral part of the life of the park: it is home to two families of swans who last year successfully hatched seven cygnets, five of whom survived. (A word of advice from the RSPB: always feed birds with brown bread, rather than white).

To combat the dangers of flooding to which the park has been prone, Severn-Trent introduced a flood defence project, completed in 2004. It has not been without its critics, but it does include a wild-life corridor on the western side of the river intended to encourage water-loving plants such as iris and purple loosestrife to grow at its edge and water voles to make their home in its banks.

A number of decisions need to be taken. Though the park does not suffer much vandalism, to how much would it be exposed if it were left open overnight or, if it were to remain open, should the lighting be improved? Should the paddling pool be more closely supervised? Could the mill, at one time within the curtilage of the park, be once more incorporated?

For travellers arriving in Stafford by train, Victoria Park is their first view of the town, so it is vital that their first impressions should be favourable, but in bringing it into the twenty-first century, a balance must be struck between preserving its historic character and the requirement to meet the recreational needs of the public for a space where people of all ages can go to enjoy their leisure-time.

The Friends of Victoria Park was formed three years ago to involve people in the future of the Park. Its mission is "to consult, campaign for and promote Victoria Park, Stafford, on behalf of, and for the benefit of the people of Stafford Borough and to provide a public forum for information, opinion and debate on all matters relating to The Park".

Anyone who would like more information about the group should ring 01785 619514.

# JOHN WEBB who's he?

## Part 2 Trials and Tribulations of a Georgian Landscape Gardner

In my first article introducing the Staffordshire landscape gardener John Webb (1754-1828) I concentrated on the range of places that Webb visited and undertook landscaping or architectural commissions, in this article I shall be looking at some of the problems he encountered with suppliers, staff and materials. The information has been gathered from surviving correspondence and accounts in the Aqualate, Newnham Paddox, Eaton and Locko Park archives, the records span a 10 year period from 1795 to 1805 and from 1818 to 1820.

The scheme at Locko Park in Derbyshire (1792-5) was supervised by Webb for William Emes with on site management provided by a foreman, Mr Brand. In September 1805 Mr Brand was in charge of the work being carried out at Aqualate and threatening to quit the job due to the 'unsuitable lodgings' provided. Webb wrote in support of his foreman who 'has been in my service for thirteen years' and was successful in arranging more suitable accommodation for him.

The foreman for the work at Eaton Hall (c1804-5) was Mr John Moody, who appears to have caused concern to the estate agent, Thomas Whitby, by selling 'the Thorns for his own use which is cut down at Belgrave out of the hedge that guards the plantations there.' He was subsequently held to blame for accepting 'bad' trees and of visiting various nurseries in search of 'presents' for ordering from them.

At Newnham Paddox in 1821 the foreman, a Mr Howley, seems to have been altering the plans on his own account and claiming that work was completed when perhaps it wasn't carried out thoroughly. The problems resulted in Lord Denbigh's solicitor writing to Webb requesting him to visit the site to see for himself

the state of the works at Newnham "which you no doubt intended should have been done in an effectual manner under the direction of your assistant Mr Howley but I am sorry to say many of the Drains made by him are insufficient even to carry off the surface waters in consequence of which the Lands have been inundated and many of the other works are certainly not completed to answer the ends intended tho they were stated by Mr Howley on his leaving Newnham to be fully complete".

An important element of any landscaping programme is the plants and Webb continued to use the Birmingham nurserymen Brunton, Forbes and Hunter which he and Emes had used at Locko. In 1805 Webb was still dealing with Hunter for the schemes at Aqualate and Eaton; however, the company was also responsible for the supply of the 'bad' trees referred to above. If they could supply them there was a potential order for 20,000 trees at Aqualate, and Webb was concerned that the number required at Eaton would 'empty many small nurseries'. To rectify this Webb had asked Moody to 'go to Baitson and Cunningham Nursery in Liverpool'; the alternative appeared to be 'go to Scotland for them and I should be sorry to plant such trees as they in general send from thence.' At the same time another foreman at work at Tabley, Alexander Macgregor, was 'well supplied at Chester and the neighbourhood.' Another important material was bricks which were needed in large quantities to build walls and were often made on site, their quality caused Webb great concern at Eaton. He raised this with Earl Grosvenor in a letter dated 26th August 1805

"In regard to the Garden there are no Bricks which can with advantage to your Lordship or Credit to any other person be put to the outside of any of those walls, and I wish to wait for better Bricks (to be made next Spring) to face the Sunk fence and Park Walls and to put those now made into the inside of Walls".

Following discussions regarding their production it was reported in July 1806 that 'The Garden walls are getting on a pace and I expect will be finished in a fortnight or in three weeks if the weather permits.'

Next time, how potatoes are the key to successful tree planting.

**Ann Brookman**

# INGESTRE ORANGERY AND LONG WALK

Ingestre is a small village in a Conservation Area and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty near to Great Haywood, Stafford. Ingestre Orangery is adjacent to the recently restored Grade I Ingestre Church; Grade II\* Ingestre Hall; Grade II Ingestre Old Stables; and Grade II Ingestre New Stables. The Orangery is of immense historical importance and architectural significance both as part of this important complex and because it was built from a design by James 'Athenian' Stuart by Samuel and James Wyatt circa 1770. This was built at about the same time and to the same design of James Stuart as those at the nearby Blithfield Hall and Shugborough Hall.

Ingestre Orangery is a fantastic building that lies sadly neglected in a corner of the grounds of Ingestre Hall. The Long Walk is a sloping pathway, passing through Yew Tree arches, which is a wonderful feature of the approach from Ingestre Hall. It leads the visitor on, to reveal the hidden gem of the Orangery. Its former glories can be seen in photographs from earlier times.



Internal metal window fittings we believe from the late 1800's

Ingestre Hall, Orangery and grounds are owned by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council (MBC) and used as a Residential Arts Centre for young people. They are frequently hard pressed to find money to maintain the buildings and grounds and focus on the most important aspects of their maintenance and safety. However, the Orangery and Long Walk have fallen into disuse and disrepair and require urgent restoration as you can see in photographs. It must be restored before it is lost forever.

Local residents recognise that the site of the Orangery, its surrounding garden and Long Walk have fantastic potential to enhance the unique collection of wonderful buildings in Ingestre village. They are currently liaising with Sandwell MBC to explore ways in which this former beautiful building, of historical importance, and its grounds can be restored and brought back to life and sustainable use. They have support from the Parish Council, local Stafford Borough Councillors, listed building and planning officers of Stafford BC and listed building and planning officers from Stafford Borough Council.

Gill Broadbent

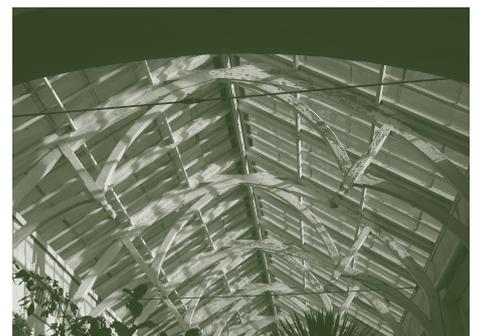
*(The meeting about the possible restoration of the Orangery was well attended. Subsequently the Staffordshire Gardens and Parks Trust have offered their support and expertise. A committee will be established in February to steer and develop the project further. Currently they await a report and decision from Sandwell Borough Council and the outcome of (their) application to change its listing to Grade II\*. - taken from the Ingestre & Tixall Parish Council News - January/February 2009)*



Floor showing original metal grating covering the hot water pipes providing heat and the original curb retaining the soil for the plants



Further details of the roof trusses, original ventilation and, of unknown date, strengthening bars

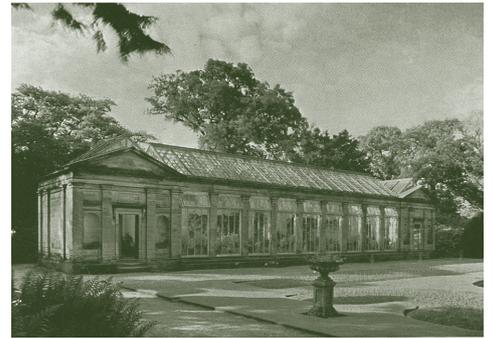


Roof trusses of unknown date – possibly late 1800's

*THEN Circa 1950*



Down the Long Walk to the Orangery



*NOW 2008*



Looking up the Long Walk



# Review

The SGPT has recently received two publications produced by the Devon Gardens Trust, *A Short History, 1988-2008* and *The Journal Issue 1, September 2008*, copies of both are available by contacting the Trust directly ([devon-gardens@btconnect.com](mailto:devon-gardens@btconnect.com)).

**Devon Gardens Trust,  
A Short History 1988-2008**  
24 pp, A5 size, £3.50 (inc. post and packing).

Published to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the Trust, this is a comprehensive account of its establishment and the issues and personalities involved in its gestation and subsequent development. Short biographies of past and the present Chairmen are included. The Trust operates through a series of sub-committees, each of which are given a section detailing their work together with a list of Chairmen. Working through links with other local organisations, Devon has been successful in adding 15

sites to the English Heritage Register of Parks & Gardens of Special Historic Interest, a further 19 have been recommended with decisions pending. It is illustrated with numerous colour photographs of relevant people and places and concludes with a look at the way forward written by Sir Malcolm Field, the current President of the Devon Gardens Trust.

**Devon Gardens Trust,  
The Journal, Issue 1,  
September 2008,**  
34 pp, A4 size, £7.50 (inc. post and packing).

Intended as the first of an annual series, *The Journal* contains 13 articles written by members on a range of topics relating to garden history in Devon. It has been published in the same cover design style as the history booklet and is well illustrated with colour photographs, paintings and maps. The scope of the articles appear to cover all areas of the county through a mixture of site specific (e.g. Rousden, Langdon Court, Ford Park Cemetery) and generic topics (e.g. sale catalogues, bath houses) and a range of historical periods (nineteenth century

allotment gardeners to Plaz Metaxu, Alasdair Forbes modern narrative garden).

The articles are based on original archival research and site visits which demonstrate the depth of knowledge and enthusiasm within the DGT membership. The county has a host of well known gardens but *The Journal* reveals many other less famous but fascinating sites. The National Collections of wild origin Birch and Alder are held at Stone Lane Gardens, a 5 acre arboretum established within the Dartmoor National Park by Kenneth and Jane Ashburner. The article 'Brunel's Hidden Kingdom' revealed an unexpected link to Staffordshire when in 1848 Brunel lured Alexander Forsyth away from laying out the park at Alton Towers to work for him at Watcombe Park near Torquay.

The first issue has provided an interesting, educational and entertaining set of articles I look forward to the second issue for further insights to the county's designed landscapes.

Ann Brookman, December 2008

## NEWS FROM THE COUNTY RECORD OFFICE

The Sutherland Papers Project, to the funding of which the SGPT made a contribution, has been completed and the documents are now on line at [www.sutherlandcollection.org.uk](http://www.sutherlandcollection.org.uk), making available a wealth of information of interest to local historians and family historians alike.

The Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent Archive Service's 11th Annual Day School will take place at The Kingston Centre, Stafford on Saturday, February 28th, 2009, from 10.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m.

Its subject will be "Staffordshire and Its Landscape", and there will be lectures by Debbie Langley, Paul Everson, Dianne Barre, Tony Phillips and Chris Wakeling, who will be covering a wide range of topics, including an examination of the mutual interest between historical geography and archaeology, the gathering and analyses of information to produce an overview of the evolution of the Staffordshire landscape, and a chronological exploration of selected sites in Staffordshire showing how various landowners created attractive water features in a designed landscape.

## ...AND FINALLY SOME GOOD NEWS

**A £1.3m project to return The Leasowes, visited by members last summer, to its former glory has finished ahead of schedule.**

The Beechwater Dam and cascade, along with the High Cascade and the pools in Virgil's Grove, are amongst those features which have been carefully restored following the drawings of its eighteenth-century owner and designer, the poet William Shenstone.

Both Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, who initiated the project, and the team responsible for its implementation are to be warmly congratulated.