

WKGN Forum held at Dyffryn Gardens, Vale of Glamorgan  
Saturday 1st October 2011

Theme: Publicly owned walled kitchen gardens

Sixty delegates and speakers from the length and breadth of the country, and offshore islands, were welcomed to the 2011 Forum by Susan Campbell and Fiona Grant, founders of WKGN, on what turned out to be the hottest October day on record.

The speakers represented a range of different projects taking place in walled kitchen gardens owned by local authorities

John Isaacs was once a head master, a role that now stands him in good stead for his current position as Chair of the Insole Court Community Garden Group. Insole Court was once an extensive mansion built by James Harvey Insole, from wealth derived from coal mining. Begun in 1856, it underwent several stages of development and expansion throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century up until the 1st WW. The Community Garden Group and the Friends of Insole Court are working together to regenerate the walled garden for the benefit of the local community. Although the garden has only two walls it is still considered to be walled garden. One wall shows an interesting feature: V shaped projections built on the inside of the wall, with a gap where the two angles meet. None of the delegates were able to provide a possible explanation.

John outlined the chequered history of the kitchen garden: an earlier garden was built on when the house was extended, with a greenhouse placed on the remainder, the present garden was then relocated further away from the house. In 2009 work started on the restoration, beginning with the removal of scores of tree stumps from self-seeded sycamore. Unfortunately, unless the Friends can obtain a 10 year lease, funding is out of reach, however they have received some help from Environment Wales.

The next three speakers each represented one of the groups which make up the partnership working to restore the walled kitchen garden at Eastcliff Park, which was given to the town of Teignmouth, Devon in the 1980s.

Sian Avon is a Senior Ranger for Teignbridge District Council which manages 28 sites, including Eastcliff Park. As well as a walled kitchen garden there is a sub-tropical garden built by Belgian refugees. The walled garden is most unusual, being circular and shaped like an amphitheatre, with the walls built in several different materials: cob, stone and brick, with solid coping.

Tacy Rickard, Chair of Friends of Eastcliff Park then outlined the history of the property, the house was built in 1795 by Banker Babbage, whose son Charles invented the first prototype of a computer. It was thought the walled garden was built by 1825, on sloping ground, with a plentiful supply of water. There are no glasshouses remaining, but map evidence shows that there were once several, mostly outside the circular walls, however there was one within the garden, built in a curvilinear shape against the inside wall.

Fran Hamilton, of Teign Estuary Transition explained how they were trying to develop a system of sustainable permaculture, given the isolated position of the garden with no vehicular access. However it is not so isolated as to deter helpers; in fact many came because it is so special a place to the residents of Teignmouth.

There was then a coffee break and delegates took the opportunity to catch up with news from their fellow delegates, as well as enjoy the welcome sunshine.

Paul Quigley has been the Walled Garden Ranger and part of the Education Team for Norton Priory Walled Garden, Runcorn, Cheshire since 1988. His talk described how the historic site is managed by a registered charity, the Norton Priory Museum Trust, and is mainly funded by Halton Borough Council. The Priory was established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, its status raised to an abbey in 1391 until its dissolution in 1506. The site was purchased in 1545 by the Brooke family who retained ownership until 1921. The walled garden is believed to have been created between 1757 & 1770. The property was given in trust for public use in 1966, and opened to the public in the 1970s. However the walled garden became neglected, until 1980 when the Runcorn Development Corporation and the Manpower Services Commission funded a project to restore the garden as it was considered to be of significant horticultural and historic interest. Norton Priory Museum Trust took over the management from Cheshire County Council in 1987.

The garden is now a popular visitor attraction, as well as housing the National Collection of twenty-four varieties of Tree Quince (*Cydonia oblonga*), it grows many old varieties of Cheshire apples with evocative names such as Withington Welter, Mr Bennett, and Arthur Barnes 1902 – named after the head gardener of Eaton Hall. The kitchen garden is divided into several areas: an orchard; a croquet lawn which is used for events and theatrical performances; herbs for culinary and medicinal use; old varieties of vegetables; soft fruit and herbaceous. There are ninety volunteers, with twenty devoted to the walled garden. Amongst the visitor attractions are trails created by local artists. One of the most popular is a ‘snail trail’ - large decorated concrete snails for children to follow, and the autumn apple juice sales are very popular. There is also an unusual resident: an elusive blonde hedgehog which has attracted welcome publicity for the garden.

Gerry Donovan, Project Manager and Site Curator for Dyffryn Gardens gave a summary of the history of the Estate and the trials and tribulations involved in the restoration of the walled garden and glasshouse, these being familiar to us all. The estate comprises 55 acres, (originally 2,000) and was purchased by the Cory family in 1891, whose wealth came from coal and shipping. Reginald Cory inherited the property in 1906, as well as an experienced plant hunter, he was a talented horticulturalist and plantsman. In the same year he employed garden designer Thomas Mawson to lay out the ornamental gardens. These were laid out as ‘garden rooms’ - several years before Hidcote. In 1997 the Grade I listed garden was bought by the Vale of Glamorgan Council. With the help from the Heritage Lottery Fund, work began on the Mawson garden rooms in 1998, and more recently on the walled garden, which predates Mawson’s involvement.

The walled garden is a long rectangle, made up of two compartments, the smaller one at the east end is planted with espalier fruit, with vegetables in the quarters. The larger area has, so far, one quarter under cultivation. Here a large aluminium lean-to range runs the length of the north wall. The central atrium houses a collection of cacti from a Yorkshire collector, to reflect Cory’s horticultural interests. The eastern wing is an orchid house devoted to exotic ornamental plants, it is intended to grow vines in the western wing. One innovation is the use of muslin panels for shading the orchid house, another is the use of rainwater storage tanks beneath the display benches.

Gerry concluded by giving the following hard-learned advice: keep fallow areas maintained and under control, otherwise wildlife and weeds will multiply and overwhelm, making restoration even more difficult.

The Forum delegates took a break for a delicious *al fresco* buffet lunch, under the welcome shade of trees, and enjoyed convivial conversation. Afterwards, the delegates toured the gardens with various tour leaders: Gerry Donovan (restoration), Ceridwen Davies (cultivation and fruit training) and Clare Hart (under glass propagation).

The Forum then reconvened to hear Jonathan Williams, a garden historian, outline the history of the Pen Pont estate and its unusual method of forcing Sea Kale, described in JC Loudon's *Gardeners' Magazine* of 1828. The sea kale was grown in a specially adapted bed, and was forced with artificial heat from buried flues, heated by a furnace. The location of these flues has yet to be established.

Dr Stephen Briggs then spoke on his findings between 1991 and 2001 regarding glasshouses built at Penllergare, Clyne and Dyffryn between 1830 and 1920. Dr Briggs was until his recent retirement Head of Archaeology at the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales. He emphasised the importance of alerting public servants that (1) they are accountable for publicly owned assets; (2) they should support horticultural schemes for long term sustainability and (3) ensure continuation of government support that exists for research and recording of our heritage.

Delegates then showed their appreciation for all the speakers who had given varied and fascinating insights into their projects and applauded the unbounded enthusiasm with which they undertook their specialties and interests.

The 2011 WKGN Forum was then declared closed with the hope that the WKGN team would see everyone again at the 2012 Forum.

Marion Prescott