GOGG HOLIDAY TO WESSEX, 2017

A party of 27 members and friends set off on the morning of 1st July to visit gardens in Dorset and Somerset.  The morning started cloudy, but with the promise of sunny and warm weather to follow for the rest of the week.

Our first call was to visit the gardens at Sherborne Castle which was built by Sir Walter Raleigh and has been the home of the Wingfield-Digby family since 1617.  The gardens were designed by Capability Brown and are dominated by a large lake surrounding the Castle and its gardens on two sides.  An area of grass contained many wild orchids and around the lake many wild fringe plants like yellow loosestrife had been allowed to grow attracting a variety of damsel and dragonflies.  Colourful herbaceous planting was contained in borders near the house and from these is a romantic view across the lake to the ruins of the original medieval Sherborne Castle.  After lunch at the excellent café setting in the sunshine overlooking some of the colourful planting, we moved on to our second garden of the day at the Upwey Wishing Well Tea Gardens.  We enjoyed an excellent cream tea and then wandered around the garden formed around the spring of the River Wey which flows from here down to Weymouth to where we followed to our hotel the Prince Regent Hotel on the seafront about a mile from the harbour and town centre.

The next morning in beautiful sunshine, we set off for our first stop at the Abbotsbury Swannery.  The swannery contains the only managed colony of nesting mute swans in the World.  The swannery is set in the wetlands around The Fleet which is the area of water behind the long pebble ridge of Chesil Beach.  In addition, to the swans, there were many other wild birds and we particularly enjoyed watching the colony of common terns which nest there. From the swannery, we moved on to the Sub Tropical Gardens in Abbotsbury village.  Opening out from the stylish Colonial Restaurant, the gardens contain an outstanding collection of sub-tropical plants taking advantage of the micro-climate of the gardens.  Originally the kitchen garden of the nearby castle, the gardens have developed over the years and contain many rare and exotic plants brought to the gardens by plant hunting descendants of the Countess of Ilchester who established the original gardens in 1765.  Of particular interest was a colourful trail of hydrangeas in the woodland area.

After lunch at Abbotsbury we moved on to our next house and garden at Mapperton.  This is the home of the Earl and Countess of Sandwich and after an excellent tour of the house, we descended to the beautiful gardens set out in a valley below the house.  At the top of the gardens is a croquet lawn and below this is the Italianate garden laid out in the 1920s.  An orangery has been added in the Italianate garden and below the formal garden is a fish pond and a wild flower garden with shrubs and trees, and a woodland walk.  In the colourful Italianate garden are many old roses and much topiary with a steep border which had been left uncut and was home to a number of butterflies.  After some tea at the café we returned to our hotel for the evening.

Day 3 started with a slightly longer drive into Somerset to visit the National Trust - owned Montacute House and gardens.  First stop for many members was the excellent café for coffee (and cakes!) before visiting this lovely Elizabethan House originally the home of Edward Pheips.  An additional bonus was a collection of portraits loaned by the National Portrait of leading figures of the Elizabethan period.  The gardens at Montacute are based round the house with a traditional feel to match the house.  The East Court is a walled garden below the entrance to the house with colourful perennial boarders with other areas surrounded by high hedges all excellently maintained by the Trust.  After lunch, we returned south back into Dorset to the suburbs of Weymouth tovisit Bennetts Water Gardens.  These gardens which hold the national collection of Water Lilies, have been created around old clay pits of up to 50’ depth created for brickworks which became flooded when the brickworks were closed in the 1950s. From the entrance a walking route has been devised visiting the various ponds each filled with a selection of water lilies and other wetland plants including our native brandy bottle water lily with its yellow flowers and flask-shaped seed pods.   The gardens are home to a great variety of our native damsel and dragonflies and in beautiful sunshine we were able to watch plenty of activity of these fascinating insects in the different ponds. They were usually fast moving over  the water but occasionally one rested long enough for people to photograph them at rest.  In the centre of the gardens is a replica of a Monet-style bridge linking up various sections of the route and many photos were taken either looking at, or from the bridge.  The owners kindly kept the café open for us and before leaving we were able to enjoy more tea, cakes and local ice cream (not altogether!) before returning to the hotel.

Day 4 opened with a visit to the gardens of the Kingston Maurward House just outside Dorchester.  The estate is now owned by Dorset County Council and is used for a variety of agricultural and gardening courses.  A walled garden is situated beyond the original manor house (privately owned) and a route has been laid out to this attraction via a variety of interesting and colourful gardens including a penstemon border, red garden and herbaceous border.  The only disappointment with the gardens visited personally was the lack of any vegetable growing and as we approached the walled garden, we confidently expected to find it filled with fruit and veg.  Unfortunately, only a small section was devoted to an interesting trail of various growing methods which seemed to show the superiority of no dig gardening with an annual top dressing of compost (a biased view perhaps as this is our method).  The rest of the walled garden was however filled with a variety of interesting plants and proved well worth the walk from the visitors centre and it was lovely to sit there in the warm sunshine looking over the gardens and countryside beyond.  We returned to the visitor centre via the far side of the large lake and were also able to look at the farm animals in the animal park.  These included very friendly and large pigs and a rather proud looking Llama who was kept with some sheep for company, after the death of his partner.  After lunch, we travelled over to visit Minterne Gardens, in the chalk downs on the other side of Dorchester.  This is a Capability Brown - inspired garden created by a member of the Digby family.  However, although in the heart of chalk downland, the valley gardens are on sandy soil and this has enabled planting of acid-loving plants including massed planting of rhododendrons and azaleas many brought back by Ernest H. Wilson. Unfortunately by the time of our visit these had largely finished flowering but there was still plenty to see in the woodlands where there are many interesting plants with a tumbling stream within the Himalayan Garden.  This is a tranquil spot full of wildlife and after our mile long circular walk we returned to the house for a lovely cream tea on the terrace overlooking the lake and hills beyond.

Our last day began with a visit to Athelhampton House and gardens.  The earliest parts of the beautiful Manor House date back to Tudor times and it is still lived in by the Cooke family.  The formal gardens were designed in 1891 and 4 ham stone Courts were added in the Elizabethan style.  There is a great deal of topiary and also water forms an important feature of the garden with the Rive Piddle flowing through one side of the garden.  Despite its name, this is a beautiful chalk stream and we saw a number of dragonflies and damselflies including a number of beautiful demoiselles (Caloptrix virgo) along its length.  There was also a canal which had been taken over by an Emperor Dragonfly (anax imperator) whichpatrolledconstantly up and down giving *a* clear view of his blue colouring and slightly curved Body.  There is also an attractive kitchen garden built before the Great War which is being restored to its former glory withfruit trees, herb borders and vines (and some veg!).  The gardens have a restaurant andbar but another coach party had already booked lunch and they were unable to cater for our party.  This was a pity as this is the first garden I have ever visited which had a proper bar with hand pumped real ale (Palmers IPA) and I was only able to enjoy a “swift half” before rejoining the coaches therefore stopped at Blandford Forum for lunch on our way to our next garden Cranborne Manor. Blandford is a handsome Georgian town but by now the weather had become very hot and we could do little more than find a suitable pub or café to eat.  Cranborne Manor gardens are only open on a Wednesday and are reached via a plant centre which occupies part of the walled garden.  The remainder of the walled garden contains fruit trees, some vegs and flowers including a hut-shaped structure surrounded by sweet peas.  Outside the walls there were various gardens including a magnolia garden and cottage garden and also a large area of grassland had been left uncut which was full of pyramidal orchids.  Walking round the outside of the house an interesting feature the sundial garden where a sundial has been placed on a mound surrounded by lavender which was attracting many butterflies including a handsome comma.  On the other side of the house is a large kitchen garden and apple orchard which was full of vegetables in addition to the apple trees.  After returning to the cafe in the plant centre for some more tea cakes and ice cream we rejoined the coach for the journey back to Gloucestershire.

Weymouth is an interesting seaside resort with a long sea front, an interesting harbour at the mouth of the River Wey and an old town centre.  There are also nature reserves behind the town and to the north along the seafront.  The surrounding chalk countryside is very beautiful and the journeys to and from the various took us through many lovely areas of countryside.   Our hotel is owned by another coach company and was catering for 2 more coach parties in addition to ours.  This meant that some of our party were allocated rather substandard rooms and this had to be sorted out by our driver.  The food provided was of a good standard with some tasty vegetarian options although these were all cheese based. Unfortunately the bar did not have any real ale so we had to walk the mile into town or to the northern end of the seafront to find real ale pubs, But strolling along The Prom was very pleasant and some members of the party were even brave enough to take a paddle or two during the stay.

The only disappointment about the trip was the low number after several members had to drop out on health grounds.  I hope this short report will encourage more members and friends or relatives to think about joining us next year for our visit to Derbyshire and the Peak District.  We will be visiting lots of lovely gardens and travelling through beautiful countryside staying at Sheffield.  It isn’t essential but if you do like to eat lots of cake you will surely be in for a lovely time!

Finally we were most grateful to Amanda at Barnes for making the administrative arrangements and our driver, Sheralyn, who looked after us so well as usual and does much to help make our trips such a success.