

HARTLAND ABBEY NEWSLETTER APRIL 2010

This is a very late spring newsletter! There has been so much to do since Christmas that the time has just flown by. When we close at the end of September there seems so much winter ahead to achieve everything but it goes in a flash.

However there have been three main achievements; firstly, all the chimney stacks were falling down and just about to fall through the roof or had trees growing out of them! Urgent repairs were necessary to take them down and rebuild them at, unfortunately, huge cost with no apparent benefit! Most of the chimneys in this house were blocked up years ago; the upstairs ones have a horizontal chimney linking them together which was always seen as a huge fire risk by my father-in-law. The only fireplaces that still work are in the Library (very essential on a cold night), the Front Hall and the Drawing Room. It is rather a pity but we would have to be Russian billionaires to be rich enough to have them mended! Our local builders have done a marvellous job.



The second visible achievement this winter has been the rehoming of the old range in the Tea Room. About twenty years ago it was found at Hartland Quay Hotel in the chimneybreast behind the Aga which was being taken out. It had languished in a shed here since then while other things took priority. We were really worried that it would be stolen so this winter our marvellous Leighton Jeffery spent a few weeks putting together what was essentially a very difficult jigsaw puzzle! We are thrilled with the result and it looks as though it has always been in the Old Kitchen. I think it does remind us of all the cooking that went on downstairs and all the food that had to be carried up to the Dining Room, quite a task!



Last but certainly not least has been the restoring of the path leading to the Gazebo from the Blackpool Mill drive. As I write the bluebells, violets and primroses are out of this world and walking along this little track high up in the wood is a wonderful experience. During the winter Leighton dug out about 200 yards of gorse and my husband and I cut down ponticon rhododendrons, had bonfires and pulled brambles. It was backbreaking but so worthwhile to be able to experience somewhere that hadn't been walked on for nearly 100 years! The path finishes just below the Gazebo with a wonderful view of the sea in the background. Descending to the Blackpool Mill drive, the zig zag has the most beautiful display of violets, the best I have ever seen. This path had last been used before the First World War and is part of an intricate

network of small paths which zigzagged their way from the Walled Gardens to the Gazebo, through the Bog Garden and across the hillside in the park above the front door. It must have been so lovely when they were all well kept up but once war broke out in 1914 all the gardeners



went to the Front, most never to return. The whole estate fell into an unkempt state and many of these paths are still to be restored, if ever. On the way to the beach they linked two follies, the Gazebo which we restored in 2005 and a little summerhouse which we are hoping to work on during the summer. It was lived in during the war by Lady Fortescue who was escaping the bombing; she wrote 'Perfume from Provence' from the little house. My husband and his sisters had great fun playing here in their childhood. He and I have been clearing undergrowth in the lovely spring weather and we are very excited that soon our visitors will be able to walk up yet another restored path and perhaps sit inside and look out of the bay window as others did many years ago!



Now for the sad news. Bertie, our Labrador and dear friend, died a month ago of old age. He was 13 and well known to many of our visitors particularly in the courtyard where he would sit under the tables hoping for titbits. He was a really lovely character, very kind and loved children. We will miss him so much. For years visitors have bought the postcard of him, painted by our daughter, from the shop. The original hangs in our kitchen, keeping an eye on us! We have also lost 'Mr Bridge' our oldest peacock.



We had a very busy Daffodil Day on March 21st. It was another beautiful day and after a lot of crossing fingers there were plenty of daffodils out. After such a hugely cold winter it has been so difficult to predict when particular flowers would be out but all the early daffodils and narcissi obliged; extraordinary really as normally they would be over and the late ones at their best. Nearly 700 people came with nearly as many dogs! People really do appreciate being able to bring their dogs as so many open gardens don't allow them. We have a wonderful collection of

very early (old) daffodils here, most planted well over 100 years ago and unnamed. Slowly we are beginning to name them; they are absolutely beautiful. We were also lucky enough to have been able to dig up and replant here a lot from Moreton, lately Grenville College, a former Stucley home in the process of being sold by an institution for development.



Again, with our first Bluebell Sunday on April 18th it was a nail-biting time beforehand but there were plenty of bluebells to see and as I write the second one is approaching next Sunday. The primroses and violets have been better than ever this year, they really are a wonderful wild sight, so much better than any gardener can put together!

Everyone has worked so hard this winter to improve and maintain the house and gardens. We are so lucky to have such a marvellous team and our thanks go to them. The garden has taken quite a battering from the wind and the intense cold; we have lost a lot of cistus and 'Bowles Mauve' perennial wallflowers. The melianthus and euphorbia mellifera have both been reduced to ground level by the frost for the second year running and again the echium pininanas are very thin on the ground. All three of these plants are very much part of the Walled Gardens but hopefully next winter will be kinder. One garden disaster is the bulb people sent the wrong tulips (with the right label)! To our horror some perfectly ghastly pink tulips with a yellow base appeared when they were supposed to be pale purple; I can't wait for them to be over! Visitors must think that our taste is even worse than it really is!

Finally, on the family front there are no more grandchildren to report! Eight it is and I don't think we are going to get to the twenty-two my parents-in-law notched up! The eldest, Thomas, is now ten and the youngest, Billy, just one. They are all a joy to us. We are very lucky.

We do hope you will enjoy your visit to Hartland Abbey; thank you for coming such a long way.

Angela Stucley April 2010