

Garden Visits holiday around Eastbourne: 10th-14th May

By Sandra Evans

YOU DIDN'T have to be a gardener to appreciate the beauty of the gardens we visited on this holiday.

Our first visit was to Great Dixter, the home of Christopher Lloyd, gardener provocateur, so named by Alan Titchmarsh because he pushed the boundaries of colour and planting. There was a surprise around every corner and through every doorway, clashing colours and an eclectic mixture of forms and textures.

Bright scarlet Tulips mixed effortlessly together with bright lime green euphorbias and mysotis (blue forget-me-nots) carpeted the ground below the huge black bamboo stems all blending in a very pleasing manner, The huge herbaceous borders were ablaze with colours, a feast for the eyes, as for the plant sales, I dare not even look.

This garden is now dedicated to education, and has students from around the globe, but for me personally, one to dream of, especially the row of huge yellow Paeonies, nicknamed Molly the Witch because of its virtually unpronounceable botanical name.

We could not have imagined seeing something so totally different in one day, but Pashley Manor Gardens lived up to all expectations. Having held a Tulip Festival the previous week the extent of the planting was exceptional, and the variety unbelievable. There were thousands of blooms in every tint, tone and shade. the colour wheel was running wild.

There were planting in clashing as well as complementary colours, and themed rooms with monochromatic colour schemes, all beautifully adorned with some amazing sculptures with names, including Mrs. Bennett's daughter standing by the lake, looking very prim in her bonnet. The bluebell wood was so peaceful and the scent amazing. The back of the house was dripping with Wisteria which was complemented with huge pots of delicate pink Tulips, a winning combination, oh and did I say how delicious the cream tea was? What a stunning garden, Tulip paradise.

Sheffield Park is a National Trust property and is beautifully landscaped with four lakes as the centrepiece, a very calm, tranquil place to wander around. The lakes were edged with huge Rhododendrons and brightly coloured foliage all reflected in the still water, together with selection of shrubs in full flower. The National Collection of Ghent Azaleas is held here so you can imagine what a variety of colour there was and again these were mirrored by the water thus giving an extra dimension to the vista.

Around one particular corner we were hit by sizzling, shocking pink bushes over eight foot high, it was like jumping into a bag of candy floss. There were also swathes of bluebells throughout the park, but I would imagine that in Autumn this park will be stunning.

I didn't visit the Leonardslee Lakes and gardens, but from the pictures and books I saw and the comments of everyone, it was absolutely spectacular in every way. This is a Springtime garden with deep ravines leading the eye to the lakes in the valley below. The Rhododendrons and Azaleas looked amazing, and the colourful rock garden beckoned you down to the glittering lakes in the lower garden. (Our group are very fortunate to have seen this garden as it has now been sold and may not be opened to visitors in the future.)

Finally Wisley, the flagship garden of the RHS, 240 acres of delightful and interesting and unusual planting. Where to begin? The huge rock garden tumbling down to the valley floor where, a rippling stream was spanned by several rustic bridges garlanded with Wisteria? The peaceful walled garden, planted mainly with white flowers, leading on to a bridge spanning the lake?

The cottage garden, huge beds of spring flowers, apple trees in full blossom, absolutely delightful, a fascinating circular herb garden housing all the toxic plants in an enclosed area, with a gate to protect the children?

The most unusual huge bumble bee created with wicker and wire, model gardens with new and innovative, and sometimes strange ideas, reflecting changing styles and new techniques? A container garden, possibly my favourite, packed full of colourful planting schemes. including unusual pots, grouped together for maximum effect with all manner of mixed planting from pansies to tulips, and including shrubs too. The most concentration of colour was here; I loved it.

Dare I visit the plant centre, well you have to don't you? I could not resist a quick look, Oh my word, what a fabulous selection of new and unusual plants, I just sat on a seat and absorbed it, trying to fix it all in my mind.

Thank you so much to everyone involved in this fantastic holiday; the Garden Group, particularly Janet, Karen, and Marion, certainly came up trumps with this tour, and Margaret for organising the hotel and transport.