

BERKS AND BUCKS: THE ANNUAL EXCURSION, 1968

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SUMMARY

An account of the Whole Society Meeting held in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire from May 5 to 10, 1968 on the first day of which the Society was honoured with a visit by Her Majesty the Queen.

In addition to the Crown Estate gardens and woodlands visits were also made to the Hampden Estate, Yattendon Estates, Dropmore and the Forest Products Research Laboratory, Princes Risborough.

The popularity of these annual excursions is such that only the larger centres of population, or those which cater for tourists, can provide hotel accommodation enough to cope with us all. Hence the choice of Reading, a town not generally rated in the top-twenty for beauty or historic connections, for our headquarters. In the event, it proved a highly convenient centre and the hotels, although collectively enjoying a somewhat meagre total of stellate insignia, were adequate and certainly gave us good service.

The first day, Monday, May 6, was an historic one for the Society and a delightful occasion for its members, for Her Majesty the Queen joined us in the Valley Gardens, Windsor Great Park to make the first visit of a reigning sovereign to a meeting of a forestry society.

We had gathered at Blacknest Gate at 10.30 a.m., 150 strong, in fine, sunny weather which, both the local seers and the oracular pronouncements of the Meteorological Office, reckoned would hold until well into the afternoon. They were right for, although black clouds ranged round about and (so we heard later) did their worst in many places nearby, the sun shone, except for one little lapse, throughout the royal visit.

From the gate we drove up to the edge of Smith's Lawn and a grove of deodars overlooking the Valley Gardens to await the Queen's arrival. Her Majesty had expressed a wish to meet members of Council and their wives and, especially, forester honorary life members and the oldest member in the Society, Mrs. Alice Pollock who was to be 100 in July. Of the four forester honorary life members, all of whom have been members for 50 years or more, three, Messrs. H. Mounsey, H. R. Munro and A. Wye, were able to come down but unfortunately Mr. N. McGregor who lives in Kincardineshire was unable to make the journey. So, when the Queen arrived, and was received by the president, Mr. Johnston Edwards and the director of gardens, Sir Eric Savill, the fortunate ones were all drawn up under the cedars to be presented. Her Majesty had a word with everyone to their lasting pleasure and pride. Then came the other important business of the morning—the walk round the Valley Gardens led by Queen and President.

The term 'valley gardens' covers a number of separate entities



H.M. the Queen with members of the Society, Valley Gardens, Windsor Great Park.

including the Heather Garden, the Pinetum Valley, the Valley Garden itself and the famous 'Punchbowl' of azaleas. Under and round about mature trees on the slopes leading down to Virginia Water these gardens have been created over a period of 30 years or so. The conception has been highly imaginative, the results a delight to behold.

We set out through the Heather Garden, started in a disused gravel pit a decade or more ago and now an extensive collection of heathers interspersed with dwarf and slow-growing conifers, and stopped at a view-point overlooking the Pinetum Valley. Many of the trees here had been planted in 1939 and, if the growth rate seemed somewhat slow, account had to be taken of the low rainfall (23 ins.) at Windsor, and the soil. Near where we stood was a grove of some 200 dawn redwoods, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, in a pure stand, some original seedlings, others vegetatively produced over the last 15 years, and all exceptionally neat and elegant in their new spring foliage. That other new member, as it were, of the conifer club, the Leyland cypress, *Cupressocyparis leylandii*, was also represented by some shapely specimens, although barely 30 feet height growth in as many years is slow stuff for this tree.

Neat specimens of Koyama's spruce, *Picea koyamai*, Alcock's spruce, *P. bicolor*, the oriental spruce, *P. orientalis* and the Nikko fir, *Abies homolepis*, were some of the other noteworthy trees to be seen. Most of the hilltops in the vista spread before us supported groups of Scots pine, highly valued for their age and ruggedness.

On our way down the valley we stopped for a few minutes whilst Her Majesty planted a magnolia, *M. sprangeri* 'Diva', to commemorate her visit to the Society's meeting and the gardens, then we went on past the finest beech in the Great Park, standing at 105 feet, and on to a most attractive view of a subsidiary valley running down to Virginia Water which, incidentally, defines the county boundary between Surrey and Berkshire. Fine specimens of the Serbian spruce, *Picea omorika* and the Chinese fir, *Cunninghamia lanceolata* were noted with pleasure.

The 'Punchbowl', that remarkable collection of many thousand evergreen Kurame azaleas was a breath-taking sight as we looked down upon this great pink, red and yellow amphitheatre—an irresistible diversion from our quest for trees. Indeed we were often diverted, for who could pass the Camellia Garden, the rhododendrons, or the evergreen and deciduous azaleas in the Azalea Valley without being entranced by such floral beauty? In fact the trees often provided an essential foil to these concentrations of colour and none did it so elegantly as a group of Serbian spruce, 50 feet tall and 32 years of age which stood beside a new collection of camellias.

Near this point the Queen left us to return to the castle. She had talked to many members as we walked round and had showed great interest in our activities. Her gracious presence certainly gave an historic start to our week of meetings and will long be remembered by all who were fortunate enough to be there.

In the short time left before lunch we saw a great many more trees. The group of five Cyprus cedar, *Cedrus brevifolia*, was particularly noteworthy, for the species is not common of any size and two of these were more than 45 feet tall. The half dozen or so Douglas fir, *Pseudotsuga menziesii*, are believed to be amongst the first planted in this country but they are no advertisement for the species and show how little attention had been paid to seed source, even for such an exalted site.