

Home from Home? Bothy Living in Nineteenth- Century Gardens

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During the nineteenth century an increased number of garden apprentices, improvers, journeymen and foremen, mostly single men in their teens, twenties and early thirties, travelled from garden to garden in search of work and experience. These men needed housing and so the bothy system was introduced where single gardeners were provided with accommodation of their own. A bothy was also needed in a garden where the heat and humidity in glasshouses needed to be regularly monitored and adjusted, a job usually undertaken by apprentices and other young gardeners. Living in garden housing was not always a comfortable experience as many bothies were built on the north side of the kitchen garden and were little more than store sheds that had been converted to basic accommodation. Whereas a great deal of money was spent on purchasing and housing plants in prestigious gardens, the living conditions of their carers left a lot to be desired. Bothies were frequently dark, damp and poorly equipped. Even as late as 1929 at Norman Court in Hampshire, the bothy had insufficient chairs for the number of gardeners (six), no furnishings in the sitting room and no running water.¹

In 1902 an *Editorial* in *The Garden* began an attempt to encourage owners and head gardeners to improve bothies in which men lived:

*Many, perhaps most, owners of large places are fully aware of the great benefit that a well-arranged bothy is to the lads and young men, to whom it is a home for perhaps a couple of years of their life, at an age when good housing, away from temptations, and in addition, some kindly leading and careful watching may make the whole difference in the bent of a life.*²

This inspired a flurry of letters to the Editor describing the experiences, most of them poor, of bothy inhabitants. As many of the correspondents did not want to be recognised, they were afraid to put their current and future positions in jeopardy, and therefore used only their initials or pseudonyms when signing letters. These men suggested improvements to the bothy system many of which were not luxuries but basic necessities.

A bothy was an asset to a garden where someone needed to be on the spot to attend to boilers, or to ventilate glasshouses as necessary, where a delay might have resulted in harm to plants. At night, 'men on [greenhouse] duty had to be up every four hours which took about an hour to register temperatures of various houses'.³ Despite set hours of work, bothy gardeners were effectively 'on duty' for twenty four hours a day, and when not at work were expected to undertake some form of

study. The employers' attitude to bothy living, endorsed by many head gardeners, was that the discomfort endured in their accommodation was somehow character strengthening. The independence of living in a bothy was supposed to teach men to be 'careful and provident'.⁴

*The chief drawback perhaps, setting aside the question of expense, is the fear of making things too easy at the outset of life, which must needs be difficult in the long run, at the risk of weakening individual character and effort.*⁵

It was as if the career of gardening was sufficient reward in itself and basic living standards were deemed unimportant. This attitude was galling to many gardeners as the plants they cared for lived in much better conditions than they did themselves.

R.B. was one of the first gardeners to respond to the editorial explaining:

*The original Scotch bothy was rough in the extreme - a mere shelter in most cases, where the farm lads, with national frugality and independence, fared for themselves as best they might ... A bothy nowadays means something very different and very rightly so and well managed is an admirable institution.*⁶

The problem was that too few were well managed. R.B. explained the dilemma of a bothy from the point of view of the employers, seeking to excuse the poor living conditions. He talked of the agricultural depression which had forced landowners 'to reduce their outlay' suggesting that 'a suitable building, simply, but adequately equipped' was a 'costly addition to the working expenses of a garden'. He went on to maintain that gardeners preferred an independent life. He suggested that, where a bothy could not be provided, a building be set aside for use at meal times and 'as a reading and recreation room in the long winter evenings'.⁷ From the tone of the letter, it suggests that this was written by a head gardener, who would have been ultimately responsible for the well-being of gardeners in his charge. His reasoning that the agricultural depression was to blame for the poor quality of bothies is invalid as complaints had been made about poor accommodation for young men before the depression. Alexander Somerville in 1848 had written:

*Outside the bothy, all was flowery green, and ornamental... yet behind the bricks in that floral paradise, the greenhouse, there was our sleeping place, as odiously unhealthy as it has ever been my misfortune to know a sleeping place to be.*⁸

S.P. from Hertfordshire had no concerns about the employers' point of view and complained that 'well-arranged, home-like bothies' were 'like high wages in gardens, few and far between'.⁹ He had a litany of complaints from the lack of a good housekeeper, to the shortage of beds, and the only bathroom 'the stove tank with perhaps enough water in it to cover your ankles, if it is filled by what falls off the roof'.¹⁰

The most common complaints about bothies were regarding living conditions. Gardeners criticised accommodation which flooded, or which was difficult to get to: 'to reach my room which served both as kitchen and bedroom, I was obliged to enter the stable and climb a ladder to a trap-door above'.¹¹ One bothy was:

*...at the extreme end of a long row of sheds abutting the vinery walls and facing north, through a stoke hole, through the mushroom house, a tool place and another shed.... A corner room, low lean-to roof, a miserable bed with conglomeration of clothes, the sheets as black as the black coverlet.*¹²

A lack of running water was felt very strongly. Very few bothy gardeners, even at the end of the century, seemed to have had basic washing and toilet facilities. A shortage of furniture led

to some men sharing beds and chairs.¹³ An example of the sparseness of furnishing is shown by the list of items in the Lodge at Streatham Court. These included an iron fender and ash pan, a meat safe and bench in the kitchen, a wooden table and stool in the main room and two wardrobes in the bedroom.¹⁴ There was little privacy, especially for study or when someone was ill.¹⁵ J. asked, 'How can a man be expected to study in an ill-ventilated, ill-lighted, ill-heated bothy or all three?'¹⁶

In order that gardeners' work time should not be cut short through undertaking domestic duties, many estates paid a woman to come in to care for the single men living in bothies. She cooked breakfast and a midday meal, and was responsible for basic cleaning and laundry of bed and household linen. Laundry was a perk of many servants' wages.¹⁷ Mrs Marley (1875), Mrs Coles (1878), Mrs Crocker (1878) and Mrs Couch (1901), wives of gardeners, were variously employed for cleaning at Streatham Hall, being paid 1s 3d per week from the garden account, and Mrs Roberts was paid 5s a week in 1901, but it is not known whether they were actually cleaning for bothy gardeners or not.¹⁸

One of the most frequent complaints was about the food. Not the fact that bothy gardeners often had to provide their own provisions, but about the women who cooked for the men:

*It is easy to buy good food for ready money, but not so easy to get it decently cooked by the bothy domestic, generally some poor old body that has served her time sweeping up leaves and pulling weeds in the garden, and has got too old for the job and is sent into the bothy to clean up in a sort of way and to spoil the food. When they are supplied by such food-spoilers, is it to be wondered at that young gardeners wear a worried and hungry appearance?*¹⁹

It was not surprising there were complaints: Ann Tanton was seventy-seven when she was 'cooking in kitchen garden'.²⁰ The system of using an older woman as bothy cook seems to be universal and was apparent in bothies in France as well as all over Britain.²¹

However, not all men had a woman to come in and cook for them. C.J.H. wrote from Cheshire that his bothy cook was 'a boy who knows as much about cooking as cooking knows about him. He is allowed one hour to prepare dinner'.²² J.M.B. thought it was 'up to the men to make the bothy comfortable.... But that the men could take turns being allowed time off to cook for the rest'.²³ However, another gardener argued against this view saying 'Men don't want to spend their time looking after the bothy, cleaning up after themselves, as their days are short enough already'.²⁴ A fear also expressed was that, when a bothy was an example of good accommodation, there might be an expectation of unpaid overtime from the owner or head gardener: 'he [the bothy inhabitant] does not complain knowing his bothy life is comfortable'.²⁵

The correspondents also complained about the rules of living in the bothy and of having their living quarters inspected and fines imposed if not sufficiently tidy.²⁶ Bothy rules included having to be in by a certain time of night usually 10 o'clock. No friends or women were allowed to visit. Bothy men were required to refrain from making a noise and were not allowed to sing.²⁷

Arthur Hooper wrote about the rules of bothy living imposed by those who shared accommodation, or by a foreman or head gardener. These encompassed social living and included the need to share everything from the cost of food to facilities. Dividing up the bothy duties was part of the bothy law. Gardeners were responsible for cooking and cleaning up after their evening meal (in their own time). Other duties included

fetching in coal and wood, lighting fires and keeping them burning, cleaning and refuelling oil lamps. Sometimes these duties would be shared between the men, or they took it in turns to undertake 'bothy duties' on a rota basis.²⁸

Despite the fact that some correspondents to *The Garden* may have exaggerated poor bothy conditions, it seems that the editors took the letters seriously enough to say:

*...we fear that the discomforts prevailing in many bothies are fairly represented...such conditions cannot fit a young fellow for his work and must be a bad influence on forming his character and habits.*²⁹

As they were loud in their complaints, gardeners were equally clear in what they would like in an ideal bothy. These included:

*... a suitable housekeeper ... a capable middle-aged married woman from some neighbouring cottage, well acquainted with the needs of working men who could come in daily to attend to the necessary details of cleaning and cooking.*³⁰

A bathroom was the most popular demand as J.M.B. commented, 'legally and morally a gardener has just as much right to have his house made comfortable and sanitary as any other worker'.³¹ 'Somewhere to read and study, with books to assist their learning, was also in demand:

*...a good library is essential. True, we have a good and cheap weekly horticultural press, but the gardener of ambition takes higher flights, and he must become acquainted with the theory and practice as described by the ablest horticultural authors of the day!*³²

One correspondent requested 'a teacher one evening a week to give lessons in botany, drawing, chemistry, land surveying' and similar.³³ Some of the larger estates provided an instructor one or two nights a week to teach botany, technical drawing and Latin,³⁴ but this provision, obviously, was not available to all. Requests were also made for leisure facilities. These included access to a cricket pitch. A frequent demand was for a meeting room where lectures could be held and where the men could meet with friends or gardeners from other bothies in the area.³⁵

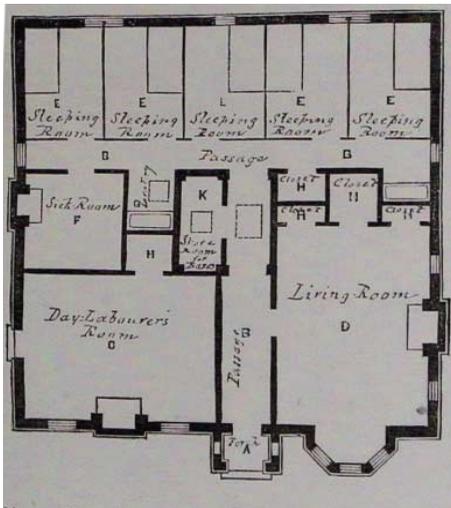
Bothy men received an allowance for fuel and vegetables as part of their wages. They supplemented their food with a bartering system with estate staff, or by poaching after dark to supplement their meals with rabbits, pheasants and duck. The gamekeepers turned a blind eye in return for fruit and vegetables. This system worked with the dairyman, where eggs and cream were swapped for garden produce, and with the kitchen staff where flowers and hothouse fruit were exchanged



Bothy at Knightshayes Court

for apple pies, ham and bottled fruit. Wild mushrooms were also collected to supplement both meals.³⁶

Census returns show that at Bicton, single gardeners were housed in lodges with between three and six men sharing accommodation. Castle Hill had a bothy house in the gardens which housed five gardeners in 1851 and six trainees aged between seventeen and twenty-seven in 1891. There were also bothies at other gardens of any size and importance such as at Bystock Court, Haldon House, Oxton, Powderham Castle, Eggesford, Knightshayes Court (see Figure 1) and Sidbury Manor. At Maristow the garden bothy, which backed onto the glasshouses, was still lived in in 2003.³⁷ The youngest gardener in the bothy at Knightshayes in 1891 was Frederick Sowden aged fifteen. He shared accommodation with Peter Barnes, twenty-seven, John Green, twenty-two and Ernest Tucker twenty. Frederick came from Witheridge which was only nine or ten miles from Knightshayes, but other young gardeners had travelled much further. Sydney Day, Thomas Hudson and Henry Faulkner all aged nineteen, came from Oxford, Ireland and Surrey to work at Bystock, Bicton and Oxton.³⁸ Homesickness must have been a problem for those youngsters who lived far away from home, although the companionship of their peers may have helped alleviate this.



Plan of the Young Gardeners' House at Wimbledon Park. Source: *The Garden* 13.01.1872, p. 175.

With good reason bothies came to have a mixed reputation among gardeners. Some men liked the independence and companionship of living in a bothy and when they advertised for a position would

state 'bothy preferred' or 'bothy not objected to'.³⁹ However, while bothies provided much needed accommodation, many were very primitive places indeed and must have influenced a gardener's decision to stay in one household or to move on. There were some good bothies such as the one illustrated. David Taylor Fish, who acknowledged how poor accommodation could affect a gardener's attitude to work, commented, 'place young men in such a house [Wimbledon Park bothy] as here set forth and the chances are that their conduct will be, or will become worthy of it'.

The bothy system reflected the attitude of owners to their gardeners where they were little more than economic units. Staff indoors frequently wore livery or uniform which reflected the hierarchy within a country house and identified them with the household. Gardeners however, were expected to remain in the background and complete their work unobtrusively. The head gardener was the only member of staff to be visible to family and visitors. Money was spent firstly on plants and their needs such as accommodation in glasshouses. The needs of young gardeners were a secondary consideration.

References

1. Arthur Hooper, *Life in the Gardeners' Bothy* (Suffolk, 2000), 71.
2. Editorial, *The Garden*, LXI, (1902), 65.
3. AGC, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
4. AIB, *The Garden* LXI 08.03.1902, 163.

5. RB, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
6. RB, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
7. RB, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
8. Alexander Somerville, *The Autobiography of a Working Man* (London, 1848), 149; See also Charles McIntosh, *The Book of the Garden Vol 1. Structural* (Edinburgh & London, 1853), 486.
9. SP Herts, *The Garden*, LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
10. SP Herts, *The Garden*, LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
11. GCJ Berks., *The Garden* LXI 15.03.1902, 179.
12. Experientia Docet, *The Garden* LXI 15.03.1902, 179.
13. SP Herts, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117; A Foreman, *The Garden* LXI 01.03.1902, 146.
14. Devon Record Office (DRO) Z19/20/36.
15. *The Garden* LXI 01.03.1902, 145.
16. *The Garden* LXI 08.03.1902, 163.
17. Five people were paid 'washing' money at Castle Hill. This amounted to 13s 3d a month for one, 8s 10¹/₂d for the other four. DRO 1262M/E1/63.
18. DRO Z19/20/36.
19. SP Herts, *The Garden*, LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
20. Census PRO RG12 St Giles in the Wood, 1891.
21. AGC, *The Garden*, LXI 01.03.1902, 145.
22. CJH, *The Garden* LXI 22.03.1902, 196.
23. JMB, *The Garden* LXI 22.03.1902, 196.
24. *The Garden* LXI 29.03.1902, 212.
25. GCJ Berks., *The Garden* LXI 15.03.1902, 179.
26. AGC, *The Garden*, LXI 01.03.1902, 145.
27. JHC, *The Garden*, LXI 01.03.1902, 145.
28. Hooper, *Gardeners' Bothy*, 7.
29. *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
30. RB, *The Garden* LXI 22.02.1902, 117.
31. JMB, *The Garden* LXI 22.03.1902, 196.
32. Quo, *The Garden* LXI 22.03.1902, 196.
33. Experientia Docet, *The Garden* LXI 15.03.1902, 179.
34. *The Garden* 29.03.1890, 300.
35. JHC, *The Garden*, LXI 01.03.1902, 145.
36. Hooper, *Gardeners' Bothy*, 129.
37. Pers communication. There were two bothies at Maristow, one in the garden, which backed onto the glasshouses and another near the Middle Lodge.
38. Census PRO RG12 Withycombe Raleigh, 1891; PRO RG10 Bicton, 1871; PRO RG9 Kenton, 1861.
39. *Gardener's Chronicle* 20.08.1887; *Devon Weekly Times* (DWT) 19.04.1895, 4a; DWT 21.06.1895, 4a.