

'A Valley of Delight': an Introduction to the garden at Lower Coombe Royal

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Background

The Combe Royal estate (spelt historically with one 'o'), near Kingsbridge in South Devon, occupies a very favourable site above the town of Kingsbridge, at the head of the Salcombe estuary. The sheltered valley, nearly three hundred feet above sea level but protected from the prevailing south-westerly winds and blessed with spring-fed streams and ponds, is well-suited to the growth of exotic plants. The estate was acquired by the Luscombe family in the early eighteenth century. Polwhele describes the main house, Combe Royal, as 'a modern-built house';¹ and today it appears largely Victorian, as the house was much altered in the mid-nineteenth century. Major improvements were undertaken in the garden by the Luscombes during the nineteenth century.



Watercolour of Combe Royal, dated 1859 but depicting the earlier house (reproduced by kind permission of John Elliot)

The house after 'Victorianisation' (photograph reproduced by kind permission of John Elliot)



A smaller house, now known as Lower Coombe Royal, was built in the early

1900s in the valley below Combe Royal. Shortly after that, in 1912, the estate was divided and sold; the nationally significant citrus wall remained with the main house, but the larger part of the garden, eight acres of established and important planting, went with Lower Coombe Royal. Both houses have had a chequered history and over recent decades neither garden has received the love and attention they deserve. Coombe Royal is now owned by Devon Social Services (see preceding article). Lower Coombe Royal functioned as a nursery for a while in the late twentieth century, but is now in new ownership in private hands. Fortunately the garden there, which has a real horticultural history, still contains a wealth of special plants, and there is now real hope for restoration and revitalisation.

Combe Royal

In the early nineteenth century Combe Royal was owned by John and Sarah Luscombe. John, having inherited the estate from his uncle, changed his surname from Manning by royal licence in 1813 (the *Journal of Horticulture*² suggested, somewhat fancifully, that the Devon surname 'Luscombe' derived appropriately from the Anglo-Saxon for 'a valley of delight').

John Luscombe was awarded the R.H.S. Banksian Medal for his famous citrus fruits (see Helen Langley's article). On his death in 1831 the Combe Royal estate passed to his son, another John who, like his father, was a keen horticulturalist. Under his guardianship many new, rare and tender trees and shrubs were planted in the garden, where they flourished in the micro-climate of the sheltered valley. The lengthy article in the *Journal of Horticulture* contained a detailed description of the garden and the planting, citing, amongst many other species *Acacia dealbata*, *Desfontainea spinosa*, *Opuntia rafinesquiana*, *Eucalyptus*, *Cycas* and *Arbutilon vitifolium*, for example, as doing well at Combe Royal.

John Luscombe was especially interested in hybridising hebes and rhododendrons and, building on hybridisation research carried out by men such as Isaac Anderson-Henry of Edinburgh to create improved varieties of hebe such as *Hebe x andersonii* (a cross between *Hebe stricta* and *H. speciosa*, bearing lavender-blue flowers), he began his own hybridisation programme. One success, *Hebe* 'Devonia', was distributed through the R.H.S. ballot scheme in 1859 and 1860, when demand exceeded supply. The last known reference to this cultivar was in the Veitch nursery catalogue of 1895. If found now, it would probably be regarded as a free-flowering form of *Hebe elliptica* (a small to medium-sized shrub with comparatively large, white flowers).

His first, un-named, rhododendron hybrids were raised from R. arboretum, probably during the 1850s (in 1863 he noted that they 'have not bloomed as freely as usual'). He corresponded regularly with Sir William Hooker, Director of Kew and received seeds of many of Kew's new plants for a number of years. According to the *Journal of Horticulture*, these included 'Sikkim Rhododendrons [such as] Thomsoni, niveum, and Blandfordiaeflorum ... Rhododendron Wightii ... and the Japanese Rhododendron Metternichii'. From these he raised a hybrid of *R. griffithianum* which he named 'Coombe Royal' and which received an R.H.S. Award of Merit when shown by the Veitch nursery in 1900. He also crossed *R. thomsonii* with *R. fortunei* to produce *R.* 'Luscombei' and *R.* 'Devoniense'. Other Devon cultivars of John Luscombe's include *R.* 'Luscombe's Scarlet', 'Luscombe's Sanguineum' and 'Luscombe's Splendens'.

By 1881 Luscombe had some hundreds of seedlings waiting to bloom. Although few of his original plants are still in cultivation (*R.* 'Luscombei Group' is still listed in *The R.H.S. Plant Finder*, albeit with only two suppliers),³ his contribution to the development of both species cannot be underestimated.

Lower Coombe Royal

According to the 1912 sales particulars,⁴ the gardens at Combe Royal (the greater part of which accompanied the smaller house, Lower Coombe Royal), contained a 'luxuriantly timbered pleasure ground' with named varieties of trees, an 'Ornamental Water', the 'American or wilderness garden', parkland and three walled gardens. 'The Water Supply', the particulars continued, 'is abundant, obtained from springs on the estate which have never been known to fail. The combination of shelter, good soil and water provides an environment where plants flourish seemingly effortlessly'. Sadly, the gardens were at their peak at the time of the sale and gradually declined during the twentieth-century. In the later 1900's there was an attempt to run a commercial nursery from Lower Coombe Royal specialising in hydrangeas and camellias; but, eventually many of the plants were neglected and left in rows in their pots until their roots forced their way through the bases. Extraordinarily, some of these, notably the camellias, are now three to four metres tall. In 2005 Lower Coombe Royal was bought by Paul and Susi Titchener as a family home. They embarked on a restoration project of both house and garden, although by this time parts of the garden were almost impenetrable.

Briefly, the layout of the garden today is as follows. Approaching the house, the bank above the main road is planted with mature trees and shrubs, including a good range of intensely blue hydrangeas. Beyond that, the original layout of the garden is still discernible and much of the early planting remains, although severe cutting-back has been necessary. Drives run laterally along the top of the garden and the valley bottom and paths criss-cross the slope. A formal garden is currently being constructed on the lawn above the house; and in the valley below, making use of the stream in the valley bottom, is the water garden, where streams and a pond are surrounded by magnificent magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias. Just beyond that, on the other side of the valley, lies the American Garden. The paths continue deeper into the garden, through shrubberies dominated by large trees, before winding back towards the house.



Sketch of the garden layout (provided by Susi Titchener)

Throughout the garden there are framed views and little glimpses across the valley. Rare

and unusual trees and shrubs are revealed at every turn: there is a Judas tree (*Cercis silquastrum*), a silver fir and a Japanese elm (*Ulmus davidiana japonica*), for example. The rhododendrons and camellias (over a hundred varieties) are flourishing, and some of the specimen trees and shrubs from the nineteenth century plantings are now amongst the largest of their species in Britain (there are fifty foot high rhododendrons). However, many of them were planted too close together initially and, responding enthusiastically to the mild climate and plentiful water supply, have outgrown their space. Even in 1904, the *Gardeners' Chronicle* noted: 'Here [in the deep dell or American Garden] were also trees of *Sequoia gigantean*, some 60 feet high, with stems about 4 feet 6 inches through at the base; the plants are, however, much injured by the proximity of some trees of *Araucaria imbricatæ*.⁵



Rhododendron arboreum
(Terry Underhill)

Rescuing this splendid garden is an important part of the Titcheners' plans - albeit also a financial drain. Money generated from the development of the outbuildings as luxury self-catering accommodation will



Magnolia x soulangiana
(rhododendron behind)
(Terry Underhill)

aid the enterprise, but it is a considerable task. Detailed research into the garden archives and careful documentation of the surviving trees and shrubs would be a fascinating and worthwhile project.

Acknowledgement

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References

1. Richard Polwhele, *History of Devonshire (1793-1806)*, III, p. 472
2. *Journal of Horticulture, Cottage Gardener and Country Gentlemen*, 31 August, 1871, pp. 162-4
3. *R.H.S. Plant Finder*, 2004-2005, London, 2004, p. 609
4. DRO, 547B/982
5. *Gardeners' Chronicle*, 2 January, 1904.