

A Devon Garden and the Lady from Kew: Harriet Hooker, Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer, Gardener and Artist

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The work of the Devon Gardens Trust includes recording information about interesting and significant trees growing in domestic gardens. In May, 2005, Trust Tree Recorders visited a garden on the Bere Peninsula, which lies between the rivers Tamar and Tavy. The garden, area 0.4 hectare, sloped gently westward to the Tamar, almost to river level, and was associated with a substantial 'cottage', purported to be, at least in part, Elizabethan, but much modified by succeeding owners. Hard features of the garden were stone walls, variously described as relicts of garden or field boundaries, and a range of outbuildings. Design was informal, lawns and trees, the only attempt at formality appearing in a small walled area with a pond surrounded by plants, suggesting a Japanese theme.



Lawn with trees, adjacent to the Cottage.



Ginkgo biloba,
height c.20 metres

The merit of the garden lay in its trees, diverse in species and age, suggesting careful selection over a number of years. The most interesting, mature specimens occurred on a lawn adjacent to the house, selected for good summer flowering and splendid autumn colour. They included the Handkerchief tree, *Davidia involucrata*, the Maidenhair tree, *Ginkgo biloba*, the Sweet Gum, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, the Norway Maple, *Acer platanoides*, and the Japanese Maple, *Acer palmatum* "Osakazuki". In more distant parts of the garden there were smaller trees, of more recent planting.¹

Close to the house were two notable accent trees, less commonly found in domestic gardens. One planted at the margin of a patio, the Pendulous Pagoda or Scholar tree, *Sophora japonica* 'Pendula', its well-developed twisting pendulous branches giving a solid dome effect. Today this form is recommended as a medium sized patio tree, well adapted to restricted soil areas, tolerating drought but liking full sun. Propagation can be from seed, which breeds true, but it is generally grown as a graft on *Sophora* stock, the height of which will determine the eventual height of the tree, hence increasing the difficulty of deducing age from height. The weeping Pagoda or Scholar tree was the official memorial tree during the Chinese Zhou dynasty (1030–220 BC), planted at the graves of scholars, and first seen by the western collector, Robert Fortune, in Shanghai 1853. Now grown by a few nurseries, it is surprising not to be more extensively used in urban planting, as its habit is compact and it is tolerant of pollutants. The second 'accent tree', Chinese Necklace Poplar, *Populus lasiocarpa*, was planted a small distance from the Pagoda tree, forming a visual backing. It can reach a height of 20m, but in this case was c.12m. Its outstanding appearance is due to massive slightly leathery leaves, male catkins up to 25cm in length, and in typical poplar style, the release of clouds of fluffy seeds in mid-summer. These two trees make an immediate impact on any viewer coming out of the south side of the house.



Sophora japonica 'Pendula'
at edge of patio



Sophora japonica 'Pendula',
pendant branches

A garden may reflect the interests and tastes of both past and present owners, so attribution, date and provenance are often difficult to determine. In this garden, of its successive owners, one appears particularly interesting, and may throw light on the provenance of the trees: in 1931 the property was acquired by Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer, née Harriet Hooker.

The nineteenth-century Hooker family history, with two Directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is pertinent to the character and qualities of Harriet Hooker. Devon was home for many generations of the Hooker family, descending from John Hooker M.P., first Chamberlain of Exeter, and Editor of the second edition of *Holinsbed's Chronicle* (1587). Seventh in descent was Joseph, who having been taken into the Woollen Merchant House, Barings, was sent to Norwich to learn the trade and set up a bombazine business. In 1782 Joseph married Lydia Vincent. Their second son, William Jackson, inherited a love of plants from his father, artistic ability from his mother's family,² and a considerable property in Kent from his godfather, William Jackson, a relative of the Vincent family. The Devon connection was reinforced when, on coming of age, William Jackson Hooker travelled to Exeter with his father, Joseph, who claimed the Freedom of Exeter, so becoming Joseph Hooker, Merchant's Clerk of Norwich, Freeman of Exeter.

William Jackson Hooker (1785-1865), an expert on ferns, and an avid specimen collector, founded a botanical dynasty which coincided with the reign of Queen Victoria. He married Maria, second daughter of Dawson Turner, a banker and also a specimen collector. He was appointed Professor of Botany at Glasgow University; and later, in 1841, Director of Kew Gardens.³ He supervised the reformation of the Gardens, sent out gardeners and collectors, edited and contributed to various journals, and initiated public access to the Gardens. His second son, Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817-1911), was the greatest plant collector sent out from Kew; the material he sent back, particularly the rhododendrons, made a huge impact on the gardening world. His artistic ability enabled him to execute



water colour illustrations in the field. From India, sketches were sent back to Kew, together with collected specimens, and worked on by Walter Hood Fitch, who produced magnificent plates for the publication *Rhododendrons of the Sikkim Himalaya* (1849-51). He was Assistant Director to his father for ten years from 1855-1865, and succeeded as Director on William Jackson's death in 1865. In 1851 Joseph married Frances Harriet Henslow. They had four sons and two daughters. Harriet Anne was the second child, the first daughter.

Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer,
c.1880

Harriet (1852-1945), developed a reputation for 'green fingers', being able to grow and nurture difficult plants that gardening staff at Kew, and others, had been unable to do. D'Arcy Thompson records an occasion when he sent her a specimen:

Once upon a time I happened to find Goodyera repens growing large and plentiful in a Polish forest; I pressed some between old newspapers and sent them to her as herbarium specimens, and she grew them!

Part of her education involved instruction in drawing by Walter Hood Fitch, the official artist at Kew for some forty years until he retired in 1877. He illustrated many of the specimens sent home from Kew collectors abroad, for *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*. A consequence of a disagreement between Fitch and Joseph Hooker over pay was the immediate resignation by Fitch, leaving the illustration of the *Botanical Magazine* to be carried out at a moment's notice by Hooker's daughter. It has been judged that she probably saved this publication, no other artists being immediately available. Her first illustration for the *Magazine* was *Magnolia stellata* 'Rosea'; between 1879 and 1880 she produced nearly 90 illustrations for publication. A later dedication in the *Magazine* assessed her ability:

In her early life she had a longing to become a botanical artist, and possibly, had she not been precluded by her social and other duties as the daughter of one Director of Kew and the wife of his immediate successor, she would have made for herself a career in delineating plants for which she possessed much natural ability.⁴



Magnolia stellata 'Rosea', Curtis's *Botanical Magazine* No. 6370, 1879



Rosa xanthina, Curtis's *Botanical Magazine* No. 7666



Acacia sphaerocephala, Curtis's *Botanical Magazine* No. 7663

in dealing with storks breeding in the Gardens had been requested: in response to a query from the Director, Sir Arthur Hill, in 16th July, 1936 she wrote: '...there was so much bother over them, that he (Sir William) begged me to take them in hand, which I did and I kept a very good collection when we retired'.

In 1905 Dyer resigned his Directorship, surprisingly early, as he was only sixty-two. He and Harriet retired to Whitcombe,

In 1877 Harriet married William Turner Thiselton-Dyer (1843-1928), who had become Assistant Director in 1875. Her father, Joseph, evidently approved of the marriage^{5,6} and when Hooker retired in 1885, Thiselton-Dyer was appointed Director. He was an able administrator and supervised many changes to the Gardens during his twenty year Directorship. He was knighted in 1899. It appears that his family also, during his directorship, had some effect on the Gardens: William Dallimore,⁷ who came to the Gardens in 1891 as a gardening student and proved particularly able, later in life becoming an authority on the conifers, recorded a problem with Lady Thiselton-Dyer, who took charge of the water fowl in the Gardens, and with Miss Thiselton Dyer who caused some difficulties with the stables: 'We could not understand why the Director allowed his women folk to interfere with garden matters'. Dallimore was not married. However, from later correspondence it appears Lady Thiselton-Dyer's help

Gloucestershire, Dyer's family coming from that county; and renamed their house 'The Ferns'. William died in 1928; they had been married for fifty-one years.

Harriet was a prodigious letter writer, promptly responding and acknowledging plants sent to her; it is fortunate her letters addressed to Kew were preserved. She maintained a considerable correspondence with the Director, Sir Arthur Hill,⁸ Assistant Director, John Gilmour,⁹ Deputy Keeper of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Edinburgh, Sir William Wright Smith,¹⁰ and Director of the Botanic Gardens, Singapore, Henry Ridley.¹¹ From her correspondence in the Archives at Kew it is clear Harriet had no intention of staying at Whitcombe after her husband's death. Perhaps she found the garden an increasing challenge? In 1930 she was seventy-six years old. She seems to have moved around a lot visiting friends, and appears to have been unwell, suffering from arthritis, particularly in the right arm and shoulder.

While staying in Saltash with Captain and Mrs. Nicholson she wrote to Dr. Hill on 4th June, 1930:

The Ferns alas! is still on my hands but all my neighbours are in the same predicament I am not hopeful, this government is simply out to ruin our class, and homes are a drug on the market. I was sorry to leave Dounderry¹² it was such a restful spot, and all the country and all the surroundings looking so beautiful, but it was becoming very relaxing ... I am looking for a home again I detest living in my trunks I have to deposit some in Pickfords' here as I cannot drag all my winter things about.

And later to Dr. Hill on 20th September, 1930:

I have not quite decided where I shall go for the winter but most likely Dounderry again as I was very comfortable there, though I do not think the sea air is very good for me. I want continually to be near the moor as it is more bracing.

It might have been her stay with the Nicholsons at Saltash that interested her in the possibility of living in the Tamar Valley area, so returning to the Hooker county. Letters at Kew do not give a reason for her final choice of a house at Weir Quay. She acquired the cottage in August, 1931; and in December she wrote to Sir Arthur (Dr. Hill) telling him about the start of renovation of both house and garden:

The house is not quite ready and my principal sitting room has need of a new staircase as it comes with it I want a nice wood and absolutely nothing at a reasonable price has been forthcoming in Plymouth except deal so I am waiting to get teak as the 'Defiance' is being broken up, and is full of it. And it will be sold fairly cheap I am told¹³... My garden has been a problem for it is 2 gardens all in a shockingly neglected state and I am practically scrapping everything except apple trees and small fruit but it lends itself to being made charming, for it rises uphill and has some remains of old mining works, one like a gutted cottage I mean to make into a rockery ... I am having the ground cleared, it will take a long time of course as I can't afford labour but I have a very hardworking man. I am collecting all I can for a nice shrubbery and I am wondering if I may venture to ask for some plants from Kew?... They would be a real boon if you could send some, things grow here in an astonishing manner, and I am so sheltered I think I can grow really delicate plants.

This request was the first of a series to which Kew responded and recorded in the *Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, Goods Outwards* addressed to Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer. She obtained plants from friends, but sometimes purchased: 'I found a plant of *Viburnum pagnans* (?) in Plymouth and was fascinated by it and felt extravagant enough to order it.

I have to be careful as there is so much I have to get for the house and like everyone I am touched by taxation and dividend atrophying'.

During the 1930s there was correspondence with John Gilmour; in a letter to him 24th June, 1935, she thanked him for 'the most generous collection of plants' and referred to planting out *Meconopsis* and *Primula*. Later that year, on 9th November, she thanked him for trees: 'I am more grateful than I can say, and I got all planted in conspicuous places at once and shall I know be very proud of them'. This comment of appreciation, planting out in conspicuous places, and future pride, is perhaps an indication of the collection on the main lawn at the cottage. Almost a year later she wrote thanking him for his offer of *Magnolia stellata* 'Rosea'. John Gilmour was particularly helpful; perhaps it was a job for the Assistant Director?

By 1937 it appears she had become more specific in her requests; possibly the garden had been well planted up by that stage. In a letter to Sir Arthur in July, 1936, she refers to *Carpentaria* which he sent to her when she first settled in the house, as flowering for the first time; but maybe not so welcome was this later request for a rose:

I wonder if you have at Kew a sweet briar of which I left 2 good plants in the rose borders at the end of the lawn. I was asked to get it named and cuttings were sent to me which I grew and when it flowered I showed it to.....who said it was a very old briar called Janet's pride. I have been trying to get it again.

In a letter to Sir Arthur on 10th November, 1937 she wrote:

I wonder if Kew can spare me one or two shrubs? I badly want Acer dissectum rubra. Escallonia montervidaneous Disanthus cercidifolia, Acer primula(?) - any of them you can spare, in any which colour in the autumn I should be most grateful for.

From Harriet's correspondence there can be no doubt that the garden was developed from plants largely from Kew, partly from Edinburgh, from where Professor Ridley sent parcels regularly, and from various gardening friends. She sent cuttings and seeds to Kew, often fuchsias, in which she had a particular interest; and sometimes asked for identification of specimens. She had help from a regular gardener, occasionally from Tom, her gardener at 'The Ferns', and from Tutin¹⁴ and his friends. She suffered frustrating periods of ill health: as well as arthritis; she wrote of having bronchitis and shingles, all causing frustration at being unable to go outside to garden. Her letters were interesting, informative and friendly, sometimes passing on the names of young men who hoped to become gardeners at Kew, or to obtain a position - at a time of depression. She requested foreign stamps from Kew, duplicates to be exchanged with friends and neighbours. Some correspondence was concerned with encouraging writers to contribute to a biography of her husband, Sir William Turner Thiselton-Dyer.

Her later years were war years. She recorded raiders dropping bombs and, in a letter of 10th October, 1941, described a huge explosion that shook the house, suggesting that as, an enemy plane had been overhead a few nights before, it might have been a time bomb. She was not immune from the effects of the bombing of Plymouth as she took in evacuees before billeting took place, and in the same letter was anticipating the number to rise to nine. She must have had great resilience to cope with such an invasion of Plymouth people, of whom she wrote kindly. When her health allowed she continued to garden, and was gardening the day before she died on 16th December, 1945 shortly after the end of the second World War on 7th May, 1945.

From her correspondence, Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer appears to have been a kind, thoughtful and talented woman, with a

happy home life, and a wide circle of friends. Her life was greatly determined by the achievements of her family, but her own talents were restricted by the conventions of her time. In an obituary in *Nature* D'Arcy Thompson described her as 'a très grande dame'.¹⁵ The garden Harriet created at her cottage was clearly stocked with the horticulturally desirable, of which the herbs and shrubs would have long disappeared, through ageing or the preferences of subsequent owners; but some of the trees could have survived. It is just possible the group of trees on the lawn, in particular the large *Ginkgo biloba*, represent specimens received in 1935 with which she was so pleased. The transient nature of Harriet's garden contrasts with the permanent nature of her artistic work. Her remarkable ability to delineate plants, to illustrate essential structural features, yet retain the beauty and vibrancy of the subject, ensures her an enduring high reputation amongst plant illustrators.

References

1. Trees currently in the garden: *Acacia dealbata*, *Acer palmatum*, 'Osakazuki', *Acer platanoides*, *Aesculus indica*, *Chamaecyparis* sp. *Catalpa bignonioides*, *Cydonia oblonga*, *Cupressus* sp., *Davidia involucrata*, *Fagus sylvatica* 'Heterophylla group', *Ginkgo biloba*, *Juglans nigra*, *Larix decidua*, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, *Magnolia soulangiana*, *Magnolia stellata*, *Morus nigra*, *Parrotia persica*, *Salix caprea* 'Pendula', *Sorbus aria*, *Sophora japonica* 'Pendula', *Tilia tomentosa* 'Pendula', *Trachycarpus fortunei*.
2. The Vincent family had an artistic strain. George Vincent was one of the best of the Norwich School of painters.
3. His collection of specimens was moved from Glasgow to London by five ships, and transferred to Kew by lighter. Initially he settled in a large house a short distance from the Gardens, but later moved to a smaller house on the south side of Kew Green, which became the official residence of the Director. From this house he was able to enter the Gardens directly from his own garden.
4. *Curtis's Botanical Magazine Dedications, 1827-1927*, 'Portraits and Biographical Notes', pp. 311-312.
5. Her father, Joseph, evidently approved of the marriage, for in his correspondence with Charles Darwin, May 29th 1877, he wrote: 'I never had ambitious desires for my sons or daughters, and a good scientific man though poor ... is the best of all matches in my eyes. Not that Dyer is poor ... he has some £750 of income and will have a few thousands when his mother dies... What especially pleases me is that he is just the sort of Brother in law I should like my sons to have...'
6. J.D. Hooker maintained a correspondence with Darwin, being interested in Darwin's ideas on natural selection.
7. William Dallimore, a very able student at Kew, where he was quickly promoted, Keeper of Museums, Royal Botanic Gardens. Curator National Pinetum, Bedgebury. *Handbook of Coniferae and Ginkgoaceae*, W. Dallimore and A. Bruce Jackson, Edward Arnold Ltd, 1923.
8. Sir Arthur Hill (1875-1941), Assistant Director RBG Kew 1907, Director 1922-41. KCMG 1931.
9. John Gilmour, Assistant Director R.B.G. Kew 1931, Director R.H.S. Gardens Wisley, 1946, Director Cambridge University Garden 1951.
10. Sir William Wright Smith (1875-1956), Government Herbarium Royal Botanic Gardens. Calcutta, Deputy Keeper Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, Professor of Botany, knighted 1952.
11. H.N. Ridley (1855-1956), Plant Geographer and Economic Botanist. Director Botanic Gardens, Singapore.
12. Donderry, a coastal village several miles west of Saltash.
13. Letter to Sir Arthur Hill, 29/12/31, 'sitting room has to wait for a new staircase as it comes with it'. No door separating the two. H.M.S. Defiance, launched 1861, last of the wooden battleships, was moored in the Hamoaze,

used as a shore training ship. After decommissioning, was sold to S.Castle, June 1931 and taken to Millbay to be broken up.

14. T.G.Tutin, later Professor of Botany, University of Sheffield, President British Ecological Society, President of the Linnean Society.
15. D'Arcy Thompson, Professor, Obituary in *Nature*, Vol. 157, 1946, p. 186.

Appendix

Royal Botanic Gardens Kew - Goods Outwards - sent to Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer

13.01.32 *Prostranthera rotundifolia*, *Leptospermum scoparium*, *Jasminum primulinum*, *Salvia Gregii*, *Azara Gillesii*, *Camellia rosaeflora*, *Myrtus lusitanica var.tarentina*, *Feijca Sellowiana*, *Carpenteria californica* (quantity 11) *Viburnum fragrans*, *Viburnum Carlesii*, *Rhododendron micronulatum*, *Erica melanthera*.

19.06.35 *Iris* (12 varieties) *Primulus seedling*, *Mecropsus* (Meconopsus?) seedling, *Penstemon ovatus*.

06.11.35 *Eucommia ulmoides* young tree 6-7ft high, Japanese cherries (incl'g *Prunus subhirtella*) 3 plants.

27.10.36 *Magnolia stellata rosea*, *Cistus* Silver Pink, *Ceanothus Burkwoodii*, *Caryopteris clandonensis*, *Cytisus* Goldfinch. All of this date - shrubs

18.11.37 *Acer dissectum rubrum*, *Acer Ginnala*, *Escallonia montevidensis*, *Disanthus cercidifolius*

30.11.38 Crate of plants (6 plants)

16.03.39 Collection of shrubs and herbaceous plants

(info. Vol.5 on disc) see file 4/T/1 '28/&454/

17.03.39 See list and letter d/d 12/339 on file

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Acknowledgements

As a consequence of field work by the Tree Recorders of the Devon Gardens Trust, the Trust commissioned two searches of archives at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to establish information about Lady Harriet Thiselton-Dyer, her garden, her time in Devon, and the provenance of some trees currently in the garden. The searches were carried out by Archivist Helen Broderick, along the lines suggested by the Trust.

Quotations from Lady Thiselton-Dyer's letters, illustrations from *Curtis's Botanical Magazine*, and the portrait of Lady Thiselton-Dyer, are reproduced here, with the kind permission of the Director and the Board of Trustees, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.