

## *“The Gardens and Park at Ashridge: their Evolution and Continued Development”*

Our Spring Lecture this year was given by Mick Thompson, Gardens Manager at Ashridge Business School. Mick has an MA in Garden History and is currently pursuing a PhD on the subject of *Humphry Repton and the Architects*<sup>1</sup>. He spoke at the 2018 national Repton and Horticulture Conference in Sheffield about Repton's development of the Flower Garden.

Mick spoke very knowledgably and passionately about the gardens and park for which he is responsible. He also included several comments and anecdotes about the personalities, challenges and developments at Ashridge over the centuries including the relationship with the National Trust, which administers the majority of the wider estate's woodland with public access and references to the recent change in formal ownership of the estate.

The gardens at Ashridge surround the college's largely Georgian buildings which are Grade 1 on Historic England's Register of buildings. Having been built on the site of a mediaeval priory, the buildings were used as part of Charing Cross Hospital during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War; with army training camps in parts of the grounds. After an interlude as a 'finishing school' for young ladies, Ashridge subsequently became an international management training college, with a separate restoration fund for the gardens.

Mick brought to life the trials and tribulations of garden historians and those seeking to restore, develop and maintain gardens which have been allowed to decay. 'Golden nuggets' can be identified using archival material, Ordnance Survey and estate maps, plans, artworks, correspondence and happy, often coincidental discoveries via contacts, for example, the Paul Getty Institute across the Atlantic. He also paid tribute to Kay Sanecki, a previous garden historian who was Registrar of the college in the early 1970s and became its archivist in the 1980s. Kay was well-placed for her role at the college, also being a Fellow of the Institute of Horticulture, Fellow of the Linnaean Society and a Vice-President and one of the founders of the Garden History Society, publishing a book about Ashridge in the late 1990s.

Much of the gardens as they exist today is the result of gradual restoration over the last 30 years, revealing the Monks Garden with its flowery parterre with the centre-piece of a cast-iron Holy Well cross and the treillage and rosarie or rose garden, created by the garden designer and watercolourist Humphry Repton.. As a special treat, Mick bought along a full-size facsimile version of the original Ashridge Red Book (famous for his scenes of 'before and after' landscaping), only recently discovered in the US. He also referred to those who carried on work on the house and gardens in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century following carriage accidents suffered by both Repton and Jeffry Wyattville, his immediate successor, around this time.

From the 1850s onwards, the Brownlow family were responsible for the creation of an arboretum with holm oak, cypress, and the famous, much depicted, avenue of *Wellingtonias* and *Rhododendron ponticum*. Matthew Digby-Wyatt, Secretary to the Great Exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace also added a fernery, which also became a fashionable Victorian garden feature and enlarging the entrance to the *souterrain* or grotto, which it is quite an experience to traverse today. In the 1860s, Ashridge benefited from mains water which made fountains and a lake with a moat feasible while Armorial beds with box clipped to represent the 4 families then associated with Ashridge replacing the flower parterre. An Italianate garden completed the Victorian additions to the garden which was in place by 1861 and painstakingly restored in 2000 following archaeological work which revealed the layout of paths and beds, despite problems caused by box blight, in addition to box also being a feature associated with the challenges arising for gardeners as a result of climate change.

Berkshire Gardens Trust is indebted to Mick for his comprehensive and entertaining lecture and hopes to be able to re-arrange its scheduled visit to the gardens for a guided tour followed by tea which was due to take place in May 2020 in the future.

1 Available to read via the Garden History 47: Supplement 1. <http://thegardenstrust.org/repton-and-horticulture-issue/>