

Revolution or evolution?

It all started in February 2016. It all started fairly innocuously. But it finished in style. I had reached the Duckery (a woodland garden with a pond), on a garden walk with Lord Cholmondeley, and we had reached the bottom end where the ruin sits amongst its white stemmed Birches. There was a big wall of Laurel behind this, being the point at which renovations had stopped 8 years previously when the Duckery was opened up and became part of the wider garden.

“I would like us to remove these”, Lord Cholmondeley said pointing at the Laurels, “before we open.”

The garden opened the following week for our early season preview, but not being the kind to shirk a challenge I said “Consider it done.” And so we began.

So in a week we chopped down the 4m high wall that opened up a bed running roughly 40m x 10m, removed the stumps, burnt them (it took all week to burn), and prepared the bed ready for planting. The plan was to plant the selected trees and shrubs, with some added herbaceous material to the front edge that spring, and gap fill later in the year with the plant material we used at Chelsea. The other reason for not fully planting being that within the Laurels was an old garden tip that would be full of weed seeds and roots that would need a season of spraying off first for ease of maintenance. Working with Lord Cholmondeley on the plant list, this new area would have lots of good woody interest with lots of flowering Cornus, Styrax, Halesia, and Hydrangea ‘Macrophylla’. Added to this unusual shrubs and trees such as Stewartia pseudocamellia, Acer ‘Viper’ with amazing red striated bark, and Parrotia subaequalis. The under-planting was to have a very natural feel with lots of Euphorbia characias, Geranium ‘Samabor’, Polypodium vulgare, Helleborus argutifolius and many more Helleborus hybrids and ferns to name but a few. Pleased with how the initial project turned out the remit became “when you have time we will continue on the south side.”

The south side borders the parkland and beyond the existing 3 woodland style borders was an even larger, longer and deeper wall of Laurels. It also contained many straggly looking Sycamores



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amongst the much grander Oaks. Too good an opportunity to refuse.

When I say this was a larger area it really was, so much so that my initial thought was to do it in two stages, with half removed in Autumn 2016 and the other half a year on. So we chipped away at the first selected half in two stints during the late summer as and when we had time. However the further into the work we got, the more we (I say we it was all my fault really), thought we should do it all in one go and have it done with. So after the garden closed for the season at the end of October we pulled the chainsaws out once more and spent a further 8 days felling Laurel and Sycamore. Four bonfires burned that week, all week. This felling started to open out superb views through the Duckery out into the wider landscape and to majestic specimen trees. The whole garden became completely transformed not just in the view, but also in light penetration and air movement, both of which will help our usually damp soil on the south side become much more workable. In the second week of January this year a large digger came in to remove stumps and grade out the soil. Growing through the Laurels was the invasive Bamboo *Sasa palmata*, and at the drive end snowberry had taken a strong hold. Covered in soil these wouldn't burn on the bonfire and rather than run the risk of them invading the estate following removal to elsewhere, we buried them deeply. After this a couple of days of raking levels and final dressing took place before all was completed. A quick turn around all things considered and only achievable with a team as good as ours.

Of course after this the real fun began as with the site now completely clear and graded we were able to properly consider our planting options. This new area roughly measures 20m x 80m. One end will be blended into the neighbouring arboretum with a continuation of the meadow grass with some new and exciting tree introductions, and through which a grass path will lead you onto new woodland beds. At the opposing end we will be able to complete all planting, continuing in a similar theme to the first area described above. Lots of rare trees and shrubs will be included as well as the naturalistic under-planting. In line with all this the existing south borders will be revamped for this spring

with all existing herbaceous material lifted, divided and spread around the new borders. However the middle section will need a longer time to settle in. This season we will plant the trees to start getting them established, but due to the likelihood of the bamboo re-emerging we will need to leave lots of space to treat this before we introduce the rest of the planting. The trick with the planting will be to create the same full woodland borders, with lots of interest, whilst not blocking off all the park views as when designing on this scale the borrowed landscape is all important. At the time of writing the full plant list is still being finalised. Of course the name Duckery no longer does this area justice and we are seeking approval of an official name change.

However this is not all. At the time of writing (early Feb) we are putting the finishing touches to our new look Rose garden, which has been completely re-worked, and is awaiting the arrival of around 300 new roses! Adjacent to this we have removed the old tennis court and have installed a croquet lawn for garden visitors to pay upon, which has been hedged in with English Yew. Finally, Lord Cholmondeley and his family have decided to pay the ultimate homage to their mother, Lavinia, who was the leading figure in the gardens development for over 60 years. Groundworks are already taking place for a new double herbaceous border running almost 100m between the temple garden and the rose garden. These borders are currently under design, with planting being completed for Spring 2018.

For fear of waffling on and on I had better leave it there. The garden continues to go from strength to strength, as we usher in a new and exciting era of development and creativity. I admit all this does seem quite radical but these new works are in keeping with the rest of the gardens, and more importantly in the spirit in which Lady Lavinia created them. All that can be added is to say what a privilege it is for myself and the gardens team to be able to carry out such new and exciting projects. But words can only say so much, come and see us, and join us on the journey.

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