

An American in Scotland

Deborah McMillin travelled a long way to join the LHS tour of north-west Scotland – from Virginia Beach, USA to be precise.

Here she describes how it came about and her experience.

Early last fall I sent an e-mail inquiry to the Lakeland Horticultural Society requesting information on gardens to visit in Scotland. The question led to an unexpected May venture into the Highlands of north-west Scotland with 54 British cousins.

My husband David and I were planning a May trip from our home in Virginia to visit our daughter Cara and son-in-law Chris who were living in Manchester. The use of the British Rail pass, public buses, and sturdy walking shoes on three previous trips had enabled us to visit numerous historic sites, gardens and garden centres from Cardiff to Edinburgh. On this trip I wanted to expand my garden visits beyond Edinburgh.

It was George Feather who returned the answer to my inquiry with a listing of the gardens that LHS members had visited the year before in south-west Scotland. At that time George said he was working on an itinerary for a trip to gardens of north-west Scotland for the coming May. There was included in the email an unexpected welcome from across the pond: 'If you wish to join us, we would be delighted to welcome you.' George guaranteed some of the 'finest hill scenery in the British Isles, which would be accompanied by the most active midges and not the best weather.' David said, 'This is your trip.' He obligingly turned his role of tour guide over to George. Cara, who was aware of my propensity for getting lost, offered to travel to Windermere with me for a visit to Holehird on Wednesday, the day before the trip was to begin. I had visited the Holehird Gardens twice, both September visits, so it was with anticipation that I looked forward to the late spring visit to Great Britain.

The weather was cooperative with sunshine for Cara and me on our train travel from Manchester to Windermere. Frances Davenport provided a ride for us to Holehird and sandwiches for the weekly noon meal. With an after-lunch coffee, I sat in on a spirited meeting with the Wednesday working members. In the afternoon I introduced Cara to a garden that I had taken such an immediate fondness for several years previously that she had obtained the yearly membership for me as a birthday gift. As we walked away from the garden in the late afternoon Cara commented that she could see why this garden was so special to me.

I left Green Gables Guest House early Thursday morning trying to be as quiet as possible lugging an overweight suitcase down a narrow stairway. It was an uphill walk on deserted streets to the Windermere railway station where the coach was scheduled for a pick up. I had never been on a tour before and did not know what to expect. I sat alone on a bench in the early morning mist. George had emailed me that my room partner would be Shirley Dean. He wrote that she had been a lecturer in biology and travelled widely on trips with an interest in wildlife and botany. As an amateur gardener, I was intimidated.

George had our seats assigned on the coach and Shirley joined the trip at the next stop. It was a warm welcome from Shirley as she greeted me as the 'American

John Davenport



Ted Maden

Left: Deborah on right with Shirley Dean. Right: the group at Dundonnell House.

Woman.' I quickly found common interest in our conversation on the long ride to the Royal Hotel at Ullapool and my inhibitions left me. Throughout the trip I would ask Shirley questions about the flora and fauna of the Scottish Highlands, which she had been familiar with since her childhood vacations there.

We left the Royal Hotel on Friday morning with sunshine and a clear view of boats anchored in the Loch Broom harbour across from the hotel. A visit to the garden of Dundonnell House in Wester Ross was the first destination on the eight-day itinerary of a dozen different gardens. With the energy of the beginning of a new adventure, I joined with the group around Will Soos, gardener of Lady Jane Rice's estate, while he gave a brief history of the walled garden. He stated that the yew tree, a centrepiece of the garden, was estimated to be 200 years old according to the circumference of the trunk. Grey clouds began to cover the surrounding peaks of An Teallach as we explored the formal Scottish Garden that Lady Jane, under Will Soos' guidance, had meticulously restored. Fortunately the rain showers were light and sporadic and did not effect my enjoyment of the garden. There was an unusual display of the laburnum trees with the pendulous yellow clusters trained to form an arbor. The beautiful spring blooming tree so popular in Great Britain is appropriately nicknamed the Golden Raintree.

The hardest of the rain that day was while we were travelling on the coach to the House of Gruinard. Mature trees and shrubs (olearias, azaleas and rhododendrons), provided a natural windbreak in the garden. A mass of candelabra primulas in colours of pinks, lavenders, yellow, and orange, spread from crevices in the rocks, where natural, miniature waterfalls followed the drifts of colours down to the boulders scattered on the bay. The winds from the Atlantic carried into Gruinard Bay the smell of salt water which reminded me of home in Virginia Beach. When we returned to the Royal Hotel in the late afternoon, the harbour was shrouded in a dingy mist, the boats barely visible. This day was the beginning of George's prophecy of 'not the best weather'.



Sybil Maden

Above: The House of Tongue and its walled garden

Saturday's destination was the House of Tongue, an isolated northerly garden, with a coffee stop at Scourie Lodge. Owner Gerald Klein welcomed us to the walled garden in which grew New Zealand cabbage palms and rows of apple trees. Outside the hillsides were covered in gorse. The scenic drive along the coast of north-west Sutherland included commentary by George on the geological formation of the mountainous region and the wildlife that inhabited the Highlands. On the mountainsides groups of birch, oak, rowan, aspen and other native trees were seen in the distance. Shirley explained that they were planted by the Forestry Commission to increase diversity and variation in an area that had been a monoculture with evergreens. While Shirley looked for sea otters along the coast, I turned my attention to herds of red deer grazing on the granite crags. We all looked for the sighting of a Golden Eagle. My knitting project remained in my travel bag. George had guaranteed some of the 'finest hill scenery in the British Isles' and I was not going to miss it.

As I stood on the beach of Kyle of Tongue, there was a hard wind and rain. Even though it was mid-May, there was a winter chill which reminded me of the cold, flat farmland of central Illinois where I once lived. Richard Rowe, gardener of the estate, told us that stone from the beach built the 12-foot high walls of the garden in the 1600s to keep out deer and fierce winds, and to provide a microclimate of warmth. Without the walls there would not be lupins of blue and violet, roses trained to climb the stones and peony blooming as a companion with meconopsis. So far north, remnants of early spring still remained with daffodils blooming on the hillside garden. As we were leaving the rain cleared. Patches of light skirting gray clouds gave a clear view of Ben Loyal and Ben Hope across the bay.

Sunday morning the rain clouds suspended over Loch Broom obscured mountain peaks and small fishing boats anchored in the harbour. The overcast sky and drizzle would follow us throughout the day as we travelled to Inverewe Garden, situated on a rocky peninsula along the north-west coast of Loch Ewe. The garden's existence



Left: Deborah has to wait in line while George turns down a Shetlander.
Right top: Attadale
Right bottom: the Cuillin Hills and wild flower spotters

was made possible by the Gulf Stream, which allowed a collection of temperate plants from the northern and southern hemisphere to thrive. A walled garden ran along the sea with perennials and vegetables. The woodland display of rhododendrons and azaleas, shared the damp ground with meconopsis, erythronium, and astilbe. Stone walls and trees were used as windbreaks to protect the garden. Unfortunately, the windbreaks and walls were not barriers to keep 'active midges' from penetrating the woodlands. A bottle of Stop Bite was pulled out of Shirley's purse. We quickly sprayed ourselves with the herbal mixture of fresh bog myrtle, lavender and rosemary. Desperately we endeavoured to disperse the biting gnats that swarmed in front of our faces.

We travelled a short distance from Inverewe to Garden Cottage Nursery that specialized in coastal garden plants, Asiatic primulas and a large variety of other plants that knowledgeable gardeners of Holehird were interested in. The tiered nursery beds were brightened by the scattered colours of turquoise, white and red raincoats bobbing among plants. Checking out was efficient with plants boxed or bagged, marked with names and carried to the coach. Andrew, the coach driver, began to load the merchandise, olearia shrub in pink to the *Primula bulleyana* in golden orange and lavender. Andrew knew that he would be adding suitcases to the hold tomorrow morning, but did not seem sure as to where they would go.

We left Ullapool in a downpour the next morning, heading for Kyleakin on the Isle of Skye. A visit to Attadale Gardens on the west coast was on the itinerary for the afternoon. Andrew had meticulously packed a combination of suitcases and boxes of plants in the hold. George decreed that there was no more room for plants. At our coffee stop at Ledgowan Lodge a Shetland pony tried to join the coach!

As the coach moved on the narrow road to Attadale, I would catch quick glimpses of small, fenced gardens by modest limestone cottages. The mainstay of these gardens was *Syringa oblata*. I recalled the memory of the perfume of lavender lilacs that I grew, started from cuttings from my mother's lilac bush. The lilacs relished the cold winters of my family garden in Moweaqua, Illinois, but I found that lilacs languished in the

Sybil Maden



Ted Maden



heat and the humidity of the south.

It was umbrella weather when we first reached Attadale Gardens. The warm Gulf Stream current and steep cliffs and hills that provided a protection from north winds, allowed temperate plants to thrive. Rhododendrons that were planted in the early 1900s were the size of trees and had survived severe storms in the past. Nicky Macpherson, owner of Attadale, walked the garden with us. She had used her artistic ability to design the garden with views, and her interest in art was demonstrated in the

numerous sculptures strategically displayed throughout the garden. The waterfall from rocky cliffs formed a woodland stream with a heron sculpture reflected in the water. In the woods a bronze chameleon was a surprise on a tree above my head. As I walked back to the coach, the sky lightened. From a popular hillside outlook in the garden, Loch Carron with the Isle of Skye hills beyond was now visible.

Our scenic tour of the Isle of Skye the next morning started with sunshine and dry weather. As we headed toward Dunvegan Castle home of the MacLeod clan, George told us stories of ancient duels, the MacDonalds vs. MacLeods. At one time the coach stopped for a moment so we could observe a white-tailed eagle soaring close. As we travelled higher into the Highlands, the prickly, yellow gorse bushes that dominated the landscape transformed into dwarf trees. I was beginning to wonder what – if any – other local flora the Isle had to display. We pulled off on the side of the road at the Cuillin Hills to take photos of the rocky mountain range. Walking in the hillside Shirley pointed out to me why my co-travellers were crouched on the ground. The hillside was abundant with plants not visible from the roadway. Looking closely



Above: one of the huge sequoias at Cluny Gardens

there were ferns, common milkwort in blue and yellow, bird's-foot-trefoil. It was too early for the heather not yet in bloom.

The garden at Dunevegan Castle was our last visit to gardens along the north-west coast of Scotland. Natural waterfalls formed a stream with a riotous display of yellow, blue and orange poppies and dwarf rhododendrons alongside its banks. The walled garden at Dunevegan was formal with yew hedges as dividers and fruit trees trained to grow on the walls. With limited time, the garden took priority over a tour I could have taken of the authentic Scottish castle that sat on rocks by the sea.

George's planning of the trip had us just ahead of a cold front and high winds approaching the upper Highlands on Wednesday as we left Kyleakin. We headed inland towards sunshine and the town of Pitlochry, located in the heart of Scotland. The drive took us along the shores of Loch Ness where we stopped at Abriachan Garden Nursery, situated on a hillside overlooking 'Nessie's home'. The Davidson family, Donald a meteorologist and Margaret, a horticulturist, had lived in New Zealand and the Falklands. They brought numerous plants from those countries to incorporate into their woodland garden. I climbed to the top of the terraced garden where there was a clear view of Loch Ness. There was no sight from that vantage point; I would have to take a photo of Nessie home on a postcard.

Our arrival at Pitlochry was early afternoon with a visit nearby to Cluny Gardens, the 'Magical Woodland' garden. The original creator of the garden, Bobby Masterton, obtained seeds from the 1949 Ludlow-Sheriff expedition to Bhutan, to start the garden. His daughter Wendy and son-in-law John have continued the care of the garden. The acid soil, moderate rainfall and altitude favour Japanese, Himalayan and a variety of North American plants and trees. Red squirrels used the two giant California sequoia as their highway through the garden. Leafmold, three years in the making, was used

as an organic soil conditioner. The masses of vibrant colours of the poppies, primulas and other spring flowering woodland plants created a garden, magical and exquisite.

The role of the Scottish plant hunters was revealed early Thursday morning on our visit to the Explorers' Garden in Pitlochry. The Scots took great pride in the expertise and toughness of the early explorers. The theme of this young garden was to provide the biography and history of individuals with a display of the plants that they brought back from all parts of the world.

There were two gardens to visit in Perth that would conclude our tour. The first visit was Branklyn, under the National Trust for Scotland. The garden was originally created as a small private garden in the 1920s. During the 1940s the garden benefited from seeds collected by Ludlow and Sherriff. Alpines were a major display when I first entered the garden. The backbone of spring gardens, rhododendrons and azaleas, hugged stone steps leading up to the top of the terraced garden.

The conclusion of our trip was a picnic lunch in the garden of LHS members Jim and Hilary Young, who live close by Branklyn Garden. The weather had cooperated with sun and warmth and we spread out with chairs and tables throughout their garden. The scope of the landscaping and planting in this garden was to me, a beautiful representation of two people working together with a common interest and goal.

After lunch and conversation we left the last Scottish garden on the tour. The coach headed home towards Cumbria. Boxes and plastic bags carrying plants from Abriachan Nursery, Branklyn, Cluny and the Explorers' Garden, sat on laps or the floor between feet.

I left the coach at Windermere relieved that it was a downhill haul back to Green Gables. It was early evening, quiet, clear skies, a good time for a reflective walk after a non-stop adventure of eight days.

I was envious of Holehird members who lived in The Lakes surrounded by hills and historic gardens that I could only visit occasionally. From Holehird Gardens to Dunevegan, I had been introduced to new plants, and reminded of others that I could not grow in the summer heat, high humidity and lower rainfall of Virginia Beach.

David and I had been impressed by the courtesy and helpfulness of the British on our previous travels and I was not disappointed on this trip. Lengthy evening dinners (always with potatoes), dessert, tea or coffee afterwards, gave time for conversation with other members. I learned of a variety of activities that individuals engaged in that contributed to the success of the LHS as an organization. We would talk of the gardens we had visited that day, sometimes comparing them to Holehird Gardens. There are members who had passion and knowledge for a particular plant. That specialty would be their donation to the garden. Several members had visited the States on their vacations (Shirley included) and were very knowledgeable of my country.

I was looking forward to a few more days that I had to visit with Cara and Chris in Manchester. By taking the Friday morning train out of Windermere, I'd have a late lunch with Cara. Leaving the B&B, with my hand on the door-knob, I knew that I would be back to The Lakes next year.