
My First Visit

Deborah McMillin remembers the first time she discovered Holehird while she was on a visit from America to her daughter

When the visitor centre in Windermere advised us that there was no bus transportation to our destination, Holehird, a mountainside garden which my husband David and I had been given the impression was not far from the rail station, David insisted (his spend-thrift Scottish blood dominating our modes of transportation) that we hike to the garden rather than pay a cab fare. Since the weather had improved that Wednesday from the overcast skies and sporadic rain showers we had encountered on our first Lake District trip two days earlier, I was agreeable to a leisurely scenic morning walk after sitting for two hours on the train from Manchester where our daughter Cara lived.

Verbal directions were clearly given to us at the visitor centre for a two-mile walk, but as Americans inexperienced in roundabouts, an inconspicuous sign for an exit to the right did not register as a highway. We bypassed the right turn off the mini roundabout and continued walking downhill following the A591 road. Eventually with the realization that we were headed to the town of Ambleside, we stopped at the nearby Sun Inn at Troutbeck for directions. We were told to take the road behind the building. It would eventually connect us to the A592 road which would take us to the garden. A nearby mailman on his route verified those directions to David, pointing upwards to a narrow one lane road. 'Oh no!' was my thought. It was a steep skyward walk on a road void of traffic. We were breaking sweat on a day that may have been unusually hot towards the conclusion of a British summer. I was not sure if our 50s plus hearts would make it to the garden. Our naivete of British traffic patterns had made our approach to Holehird more challenging than it need to have been.

Cara had found the garden, advertised as 'Blooms with a View!' on the internet: a ten-acre garden maintained by volunteers. Visit on Wednesday if you want to chat with the gardeners at work! The volunteer work resonated with me, being a member of the Master Gardeners Association in the States, a volunteer organization established in all 50 states and 8 provinces in Canada. Now I was not sure that we would reach the garden

in time to chat with any gardeners. Furthermore, I was not sure what would be in bloom towards the end of the summer months in a garden advertised for promoting horticulture in the Lake District.

Reaching the A592 we found that it was a precarious walk with heavy traffic on the narrow two-lane road. For a distance it was bordered by dry stone walls on each side, allowing only a fraction of additional space for pedestrians. Cars whizzed down the mountain, windows down and drivers smiling. In my mind, they were the Holehird gardeners with garden tools in the boots of their cars. They were headed home after a morning of work that would elevate any gardener's disposition. It was with relief we reached the entrance drive of Holehird Gardens and followed the continuous line of hydrangeas in various shades of pinks to reds, blues, mauve and pure white. The view of Windermere was below, and in the distance we saw the Langdale Pikes against a sky without any threat of rain. This was the entry pathway to 'Blooms with a View!'.

It was late morning by the time we finally walked into Holehird's garden and, yes, the volunteers were still there. Frances Davenport, working in the Ornamental Grass Bed, was the first person I met and had questions for. While she was planting, she explained briefly how the gardens were

Below: blooms with a view - the Hydrangea Bed



organized by the members. In the Rose Beds she had worked to rejuvenate them and had added numerous species of roses that were best for the conditions at Holehird. Frances and her husband, John, had been running trials on the David Austin roses (familiar as popular in the States) for their suitability to grow in Lake District's often cool, moist and overcast weather. She told us that Lake District conditions were similar to those of our State of Washington but not as cold.

It was the noon hour. Frances politely disengaged herself from this excited American visitor, explaining that she needed to leave for the members' lunch and meeting in the main building. David, with camera in hand, and I were left to explore on our own.

Now, 14 years later, I can recall my first visit to a garden that displayed plants that were familiar to my gardening experiences in the United States (the Midwest and the Eastern Seaboard) as well as an introduction of flora new to me. After several visits to Holehird over the years, it remains my favourite garden. Here I share memories and photos from that 19 September day in 2007.

Not a plant I was familiar with or would be successfully grown in the hot humid climate of Virginia Beach was in the Gunnera Pool in the lower garden walk. *Gunnera manicata*, holds bragging rights as the world's largest herbaceous perennial with its spikes of red florets that look like a bottle brush. I was sure I could have stood underneath the leaves of the plant if had it been on dry ground rather than on the edge of a pool. A purple-leaved elder bush (*Sambucus racemosa* 'Black Lace') provided deep contrasting colour to the gunnera display. The stream bed with a slate bridge added a picturesque completion of the pool scene.

My fear that garden displays in England would be headed for a decline in mid-September was proven baseless once I walked into the Walled Garden at Holehird. A *Cornus controversa* 'Variegata' was an outstanding elegant specimen tree on the lawn, even though it was past the season for its creamy white wedding flower clusters.

At the time of our visit, the Island Beds in the Walled Garden featured a continuum of colours, both subdued and bold. My favourite were vibrant reds, oranges and golds of the familiar rudbeckia, helenium, crocosmia and dahlias.

Along the walls of the garden were hardy and half-hardy perennials, trees



Views in 2007
Top: the Gunnera Pool
Centre: Cornus controversa 'Variegata' now sadly deceased
Bottom; an Island Bed in the Walled Garden



and shrubs. Asters, penstemons, rudbeckia, anemone, osteospermums, sedum, and the shrub *Cotinus* 'Grace' were just a few of the numerous plants in the Walled Garden that are shared with United States cousins.

Above the Walled Garden on the wooded hill (or Fellside), a grouping of small blue flowers caught David's photographic eye. Perhaps it was the unusual colour that drew his attention away from the polystichum ferns to the floor of the garden, where *Gentiana nivalis* (currently an endangered plant from Asia and the Himalayas) were protectively surrounded by moss-covered rocks. It was later that I learned that William Groves (estate owner from 1897-1927), personally planted the gentians in the garden.

Framing the flowering heather bed were two monkey puzzle trees (*Araucaria araucana*), probably planted at Holehird Estate during the Victorian era. Once commercial nurseries were able to grow the imported seeds, this Chilean tree became popular in the landscape of wealthy estates of that day.

When I asked David recently what his favourite garden display was at Holehird, he said, 'The alpine garden. I was blown away. I had never seen anything like that before!' In garden travels, we have not seen an extensive

Below: a bed in the Walled Garden in 2017



Left: *Gentiana nivalis* in the Rock Garden
Centre: summer heathers
Bottom: alpines beds





Above Deborah by the heathers and Deborah and David in the Walled Garden

display of alpine rockery or heather beds that, as David would say, has the 'Wow' factor of the upper mountainside at the Holehird Garden.

Mid-afternoon we found our way back to the Walled Garden and Reception where David took a rest on a bench as I shopped in the visitor centre for notecards with art work by creative Lakeland Horticulture Society members. The purchase of the *LHS Guide to Holehird Gardens* (with an impressive photo of the Astilbe Collection and a scenic overview) provided after-the-fact reading material on the train ride back to Manchester as well as provoking thoughts of a spring visit.

A few members were still nearby to visit with, including Frances and John Davenport who offered us a ride to the Windermere rail station. After a day on our feet, the offer was welcomed. John and Frances suggested we visit Larch Cottage Nursery and Royal Horticulture Society Garden Harlow Carr which did become a delightful addition to our travels.

I do not recall now what conversation I had with Cara that evening when I returned from our day trip to Holehird. It must have been enthusiastic as she eventually decided that a membership of the LHS would be my November birthday gift. In the spring of 2011 and 2012, Cara returned with me to the Gardens. As we took a late afternoon hike leaving Holehird for Windermere on her first visit, she said she could see why this garden was so special to me.

Oh, and about those ecstatic, heavy foot on the gas pedal drivers on the A592 road that we had to dodge that morning. After becoming familiar with UK weather in subsequent visits in May, June and August, I realized why they were high and grinning; the sun was shining that day.