

# The National Botanic Garden of Wales

## Middleton: Paradise Regained - Reclaiming a Regency Rarity



### Background

It may be the youngest national botanic garden in the world, but the National Botanic Garden of Wales occupies a site of planting that goes back more than 400 years. Chosen as the location of one of Wales's three major Millennium Commission projects, the Garden is set in 568 acres of rolling parkland in rural south-west Wales and comprises a botanic garden of 140 acres, the remainder being given over to a National Nature Reserve (designated in 2008) and a working organic farm.

The early 1800s saw the heyday of the estate when, in the ownership of Sir William Paxton, it was amongst the finest late 18<sup>th</sup> century landscapes and water parks in Britain. His house too, was described as one of the finest in south Wales and both house and park were created by two of the leading designers of the age, the architect Samuel Pepys Cockerell and the landscape designer Samuel Lapidge, 'Capability' Brown's professional heir. Lapidge's independent work is something of a rarity but his close working with Cockerell and the engineer James Grier produced a landscape of singular elegance and distinction with fine neo-classical water related structures and lovely parkland features including the famous Paxton's Tower.

The park was a measured, not full blooded, example of the Picturesque and the artificially engineered lakes, falls and cascades were in the vanguard of contemporary water

management. However, by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the estate and parkland had entered a slow decline which culminated in the destruction, by fire, of the hall in 1931 and, in 1934, the draining of the necklace of ornamental lakes.

The derelict site was rediscovered in the mid 1980s. The designation of the estate as the site of the National Botanic Garden of Wales enabled restoration work to start on some elements including the unique double walled garden, the extensive stable block and the former servants' quarters which were detached from the main house. These are today augmented by Lord Norman Foster's award winning Great Glasshouse beautifully set on the hill once dominated by Cockerell's hall.



## The Inspiration

Sir William Paxton created a designed landscape that has barely survived. But, almost miraculously, what has completely survived is a wonderful record of that landscape in its early maturity. The Hornor album of watercolours was commissioned by Sir William in 1815 and shows us not only the outstanding beauty of 'this Elysian retreat,' as Hornor called it, but, aided by the words accompanying the paintings, the way it was intended to be enjoyed, the sequence in which that beauty was to unfold and the varying effect it was calculated to have on those walking or riding through the park. No better guide and inspiration could be given to the contemporary restorer. The Garden now intends that a photographic record will replicate the Hornor watercolours and future visitors will see the views painted by Hornor and experience the sensations he described, pleasures imagined and commissioned by one man, Sir William Paxton, some two hundred years ago.



## The Project

Now, more than half way through its second decade, the Garden is maturing well and, in setting out its strategic objectives for the next ten years, the Trustees have enshrined the restoration of the 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape and water features as key objectives. The restoration will have wide appeal to visitors with its recreation of the features and vistas so much admired 200 years ago and with the opening up of many more areas for leisure and learning. It will also create an opportunity for better and more detailed interpretation of the Garden's history and its important geographical and cultural position in Wales' heritage. Both Paxton and the Elizabethan Middleton family before him, which first created the estate still known as Middleton Hall, were involved in the East India Company and it is the proceeds of such adventuring and profit from trade (not least in plants for health) that gave rise to the magnificent park. The estate is an embodiment of the aspirations and achievements of early empire and this underpinning of the Garden's origins will provide a wealth of historical narrative to share with the visiting public.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2017 the London Committee of the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) approved a Round 2 pass to the Garden's £7.2 million project to restore the estate's Regency landscape, plantings and water park. This £3.55 million grant enables the Garden to embark upon the Delivery Phase of the project (costing £6.3 million) that will achieve a complete landscape restoration. This will build upon the surveying, civil engineering consultancy, archaeology, ecology studies and business-planning that have been carried out over the past two years. The reconstruction of the dams, cascades, weirs and falls, the landscaping and replanting are set to be complete by March 2020.

Other funding in place includes a major donation from heritage philanthropist, Richard Broyd OBE, £300,000 from the Garfield Weston Foundation, £110,000 from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, £100,000 from the Monument Trust, £50,000 from Carmarthenshire County Council and £20,000 from the Country Houses Foundation. Previous support has come from the Pilgrim Trust, The Mercer's Company, the Patsy Wood Trust and Welsh Government.



## The Outcome

The Garden is acutely aware of the cultural and historic value of its inheritance and, as it has begun to cement and enhance its national and international credentials from the horticultural, conservation and scientific perspectives, it is turning its attention to honouring its history. It is little remembered that Carmarthen and its broader environs had a fundamental role to play in the development of Wales, both commercially and socially. As its largest “cittie” from Roman times to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was the nation’s de facto capital. It is now planned that, in three years’ time, the visitor to the National Botanic Garden of Wales will be able to experience the panoramic splendour that was once such a pronounced feature of the Tywi Valley, to appreciate the subtlety and beauty of the 18<sup>th</sup> century enterprise and to see why the Llanarthne site was the most natural part of Wales in which to site its National Botanic Garden. In order to fulfil that hope, however, the work starts now.



*The National Botanic Garden of Wales is a registered charity no. 1036354.*

*Images: Thomas Hornor Monograph – Illustrations of the Scenery of Middleton Hall, the Seat of Sir William Paxton (1815)*