

Horticulture



The Beckett Horticultural and Cottage Garden Society came about after a meeting held at the Barrington Arms on Thursday, February 15, 1877. Their first show took place later that year when the Swindon Advertiser dated August 18, reported, *'The members of the Beckett Horticultural and Cottage Garden Society had their first show on Wednesday last in Beckett Park, which had been placed at their disposal by Viscount Barrington. The arrangements for the show were excellent. At the back of the lodge leading from the village street three tents were erected, one for the open class, one for the cottagers and amateurs, and a third for refreshments. The weather turned out beautifully fine, although at mid-day the heavy peals of thunder which could be heard in the distance caused considerable apprehension in this respect. The entries were not near so numerous as might have been expected, it being explained that the villagers were rather shy this, the first, year, but that greater things may be expected in future. The unusually late sharp frosts at the beginning of the year, and the absence of sun and a succession of cold nights at the latter part of it, had a damaging effect on wall fruit and some other varieties, and the specimens of various descriptions were scant. There were, however, some capital apples, gooseberries and currants, whilst the display of garden vegetables was profuse and excellent. The collections of mixed vegetables which competed for the prizes in the first class were*

deservedly admired. Of course, there were none of those splendid stove and greenhouse plants which impart grace to the exhibition of the higher classes of growers, but there were nevertheless a goodly number of gay coloured blooms, which gave a cheerful and holiday appearance to the tents. At the end of the cottager's tent there was displayed a collection of needlework, the work of the children of the National Schools, for which special prizes were awarded. Several of the young maidens tried their skill in the manufacture of dolls dresses, and the first prize in this class fell to Nellie Holyoake, aged 10 years. Alice Webb, 8, Mary Ann Dennis, 8, and Alice Chivers, 9, also competed. For the best Ladies' work basket Elizabeth Fulham, 11, was first, a second prize, for a bag, being given to Ellen Carter. The other competitors were Mary Jane Monk, 12, Ellen Thorne, 12, Selina Cox, Sarah Ann Honeybone and Annie Webb. The judges were Mr Atkins, gardener to Col Lloyd Lindsay, Mr Eckford, of the North Wilts Nurseries, Swindon, and Mr Darby, of Cirencester, and their awards appeared to give general satisfaction. All the afternoon and evening the visitors - among whom were the Countess of Craven, Lord and Lady Barrington, The Hon Miss Florence Barrington, and many of the clergy and gentry of the neighbourhood - strolled about the noble demesne, every portion of which appeared to be thrown open, the pleasure of promenading in the shade of the beautiful trees or on the cool lake side being considerably enhanced by the strains of the 11th Wilts (New Swindon) Rifle band (under Bandmaster Hawkins) which occupied an enclosed space in short distance from the tents. A word of praise is due to the Rev J.W. Murray, to whose exertions, and those put forth by the secretaries, Messrs Wentworth and W.J. Baker, and others, the undoubted success of the show is due.'

The next show seemed more popular as the Swindon Advertiser dated Monday, Sept 2, 1878, reported, 'This was the second annual show held on Weds last in the beautiful grounds of Beckett House, again most kindly placed at the disposal of the committee by Viscount Barrington MP. The show was much larger than last year, and as a proof of the interest taken in it locally a much larger number of the prizes fell to local exhibitors. The contributions from patrons and others were also doubled, and the committee having a balance of about £7 to bring forward from the previous year, the prize list was much more liberal one. The weather in the morning was anything but favourable, and some fears were expressed as to the success of the show, but the sun breaking through again after mid-day we had a gloriously fine afternoon, and the consequence was that everyone who could by any means spare the time wended their way to the park. The noble owner not only threw open that part where the show was held but invited the visitors to ramble at leisure through the magnificent gardens, and this was a treat most thoroughly enjoyed by all. The splendid foliage of the stately trees, the shady walks, the beautiful lake, and the magnificent flower beds, are such that can be rarely seen by the general public. One of the chief features of attraction was the 'carpet garden;' the beds are simple perfection. Their design, their colours, their regularity are marvellous. Not a leaf is wanting, not a spray is out of place, and the utmost credit is due to the gardener, Mr Meades.'

The same as last year, the exhibits were arranged in two large marquees - one for the open and the other for the cottager's classes. The flowers in pots were truly beautiful, particularly

those sent for exhibition by Colonel Loyd-Lindsay and Viscount Barrington. The exhibits in all the cottagers' classes for fruit and vegetables were very creditable.'

There was a good show of cut flowers and a number of flowers in pots, exhibited by amateurs. The cottagers did not show many pots of flowers, but the entries from cottagers for cut flowers were numerous and of good quality.

The grapes shown by Mr Atkins, gardener to Loyd-Lindsay, Mr Meads, head gardener to Lord Barrington, and Mr Lodge, attracted as much attention as anything in the show, from the fact of their unusual excellence. There were some very good samples of other fruit shown and in the vegetable classes were some remarkably well grown samples of garden produce. Outside the tents arrangements were made for all sorts of games, into the spirit of which the visitors entered with great glee. The band of the 11th W.R.V. (New Swindon) occupied a prominent place and played in their usual style. Altogether the show must have been a great success.'

The following year though, they were not so lucky with the weather. The Swindon Advertiser of Saturday, August 30, 1879, explained, *'The third annual exhibition of the Beckett Horticultural and Cottage Garden Society was held on Weds last in Beckett Park, the use of which was again kindly placed at the disposal of the committee by Viscount Barrington, the president of the society. A more unfortunate day, so far as the weather was concerned, could not possibly have been chosen. From early morn the rain descended in torrents and continued throughout the whole day. Anything more disheartening could not be conceived than the attempt under such circumstances to derive any enjoyment from a visit to the show. Those who did venture out in the cold, gusty, November wind and rain could not avoid getting a soaking, but there were very few who possessed sufficient ardour to risk the consequences. All this is much to be regretted, for the show was a really excellent one. There were four large tents on the ground - one for the open and amateur classes, another for the cottagers, and two for refreshments.'* After listing what was being exhibited it laments, *'Arrangements had been made for dancing and other out-door amusements the New Swindon Rifle Volunteers occupying a stand near the tents, but the weather prevented anything of the kind being attempted. Some of the very few visitors did brave the weather and stroll round the beautiful gardens near the house, but their reward must have been a regular soaking.'*

But the year after, all was well again as the newspaper of August 28, 1880, reported, *'On Wednesdays last the fourth annual exhibition of the Beckett Horticultural and Cottage Garden Society, was held in the usual place in the beautiful grounds attached to Beckett House, which had been again kindly placed at the disposal of the committee by Viscount Barrington, the president of the society. The arrangements for the exhibition were of the same excellent order as noticeable former shows, the cottagers', amateurs, and open classes each having separate tents. In contrast with the weather of the previous show day, on Wednesday it was delightful, and we expected to see a much larger gathering of visitors than there were assembled, but still, considering the number of other attractions in the neighbourhood this week, the committee cannot complain of the patronage they received,*

and we have no doubt when they cost up accounts will find a good balance on the right side. In addition to the attraction of the show, and the natural beauties of the park, the regimental band of the W.R.V. was in attendance, and provision was made for dancing and other amusements, in which the visitors entered with much spirit.'

The show held on Wednesday August 10, 1891, seems to be the last one put on by the Beckett Horticultural and Cottage Garden Society. As usual it took place in the grounds of Beckett Park, and although the weather on the day was reasonable, there had been quite heavy rain only the day previous. The article that appeared in the Swindon Advertiser on Saturday August 13, stated, 'In former years the prizes were offered in open classes, but the committee this year, only having a very small balance to bring forward, decided to confine the show to cottagers and amateurs only.' Although hailed a success, for some reason it seems to be the last show as no more articles appear in the newspaper.



The Gardens

Throughout the Barrington tenure of Beckett, much emphasis was placed on the presentation and up-keep of the formal gardens. We only know this from sources such as Wills, Mortgage Documents and latterly, Newspapers. But whilst we know that they were spectacularly pleasing to the eye, there is little evidence to suggest their layout in the form of drawings or sketches. However, some of the 19th century newspaper articles do refer to the many walkways and flowerbeds. In one of the surviving accounts books in the library of the DCMT, there is a book that deals exclusively with labour costs. It's a puzzling book in that it only covers the period 1860 to 1863. It's a weekly account and each week is sub-headed into sections thus:

Carpenters, Sawyers, Thatchers, etc, and one of the headings is, Nurserymen. Throughout the three years, the cost of labour under this heading is huge when compared with the others. During some weeks, £30 - £40 is being spent on labour, whilst some of the other headings such as Road Labourers or Farm Labour consume only £3 or £4.

Throughout the period it is also evident that many local people were being employed for numerous forms of labour. The name of a person paid for work in the gardens may also appear under one or maybe another, of the other headings, so the workforce was very flexible. The names Cook, Martin, Ogden and Merryfield were fairly consistent. Others tended to be occasional such as, Young, Tiffin, Potter, New, Holyoak, Hillier, Day, Hower and Cavey. Many women were also employed on a casual basis and were listed as exactly that, '10 women,' for example. Horses too, played a large part, with Manure, Lime and Sand etc, being carted in, and stones & leafs etc going out

Certainly, the impression given with regard to the gardens, is that each incumbent felt a strong sense of duty to maintain the traditional standards, and it was a sense of duty that came with a high running cost.