

# Society Outings

## A TRIP TO WAKEHURST PLACE

Reported by Madeleine Mee and Jane Francis

WAKEHURST PLACE in the beautiful High Weald of Sussex is an outstanding botanic garden and conservation area managed by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

William de Wakehurst built the very first house in 1205. The family lived there until the family line came to an end with two girls Margaret and Elizabeth. After being abducted by the brothers Nicholas and Richard Culpepper in 1463 the sisters eventually married the two brothers and the two couples lived together at Wakehurst for nearly 50 years. Elizabeth ensured the line was continued with no less than eighteen children. The family line however finally ended in 1740 upon the death of bachelor wastrel Sir William Culpepper.

After this the estate had a chain of various tenants and gradually fell into a dilapidated state until Lady Downshire bought it in 1869. She gutted the house and repositioned many of the garden features. In 1890 it was bought by Thomas Boord MP; his wife restored the house considerably but neither of them took much interest in the gardens. The gardens were simply maintained, until Gerald Loder, later to become Lord Wakehurst, a passionate plantsman bought the property in 1903. Lord Wakehurst started the estate on the road to the horticultural eminence it has today. He died in 1936 and Sir Henry Price of the 50-shilling suit fame then bought the estate. He then spent a great deal restoring the

roof and stonework of the mansion before WW2 interrupted. Wakehurst then became the Advanced HQ of the Canadian Corps from January 1942 to October 1943.

Sir Henry and Lady Eve Price continued in the horticultural tradition and in 1963 it was bequeathed to the National Trust. Then on the 1st January 1965 it was leased for the use of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

On Saturday 13th May a small band of Dover Society members and friends set off in a coach at an early hour for Wakehurst Place.

We arrived at approximately 1020am and Joan headed off to the visitors' reception centre to get our tickets. She then came back and told us of a guided tour that was starting at 1130am from the sundial by the Mansion. In the meantime some of us partook of refreshments in the Visitors' area and others decided to indulge in retail therapy of both the gift and plant species.

As 1130 approached most of our group congregated to go on the guided tour. Our guide was a delightful lady called Valerie who commenced with a short history of the estate which my co-author Madeleine has written about. We were taken through beautiful natural woodlands ablaze with bluebells and snowdrops. She was very insistent that we touch the bark of the trees and gave us the feeling that not only were we seeing the wealth of colour but being able to feel the texture of Mother Nature as well. Gerald



Wakehurst Place

Loder, later Lord Wakehurst, created the Southern Hemisphere garden. He built up an outstanding collection from South America, Australia and New Zealand, which make a significant impact on the local landscape. Among these are Hebe, Costadenia and Drimys as well as the spectacular show of Waratah. There is also a Winter garden but this flourishes between November and February.



The Water Garden was a delight and in the nearby meadow in the slips it included two native orchids as well as the flamboyantly leafed Pieris which originated in these gardens. Close by are the Bog Gardens and Iris Dell with its unmissable display of Iris Ensata. The water ditch beds produce magnificent examples of Himalayan Blue Poppies and giant Himalayan Lilies.

While on the tour Valerie asked if the group would like to see something a little out of the ordinary (but which would lengthen the tour). Everyone agreed and we were taken down a woodland path where there were several tall oak trees. She explained that during WW2 the estate was taken over by the Canadian Army, whilst in situ they set up underground radio stations known as zero stations. In the event of the Germans invading they would be used for underground resistance. The Zero Station was discovered when one of the gardeners suddenly disappeared down a hole and upon investigation it was discovered that the radio equipment was still in place. They also found in the toilet there was a rotating switch and behind the toilet an escape tunnel up into the gardens. One of the radio aerials can still be seen hanging from the big oak tree. Inside the

tree there is a handle to open the entrance to the Zero station. The tour guides used to show visitors how this handle opened the entrance until one unfortunate guide discovered a hornet's nest in the tree. From then on guides were advised to leave well alone. The station is in too dilapidated a state of repair to open to the public, but underneath a lot of foliage next to the path one can just see the

entrance to the escape tunnel.

We then started our way back to where we commenced our tour, with a brief look into the ground floor of the mansion. There was very little to see except that in the hall there are two portraits of Sir John Price (founder member of Burton's Tailoring) and Lady Price. The actual architecture is mainly Tudor with very ornate ceilings. One room displayed heavy Jacobean furniture and some of the other rooms are used as lecture rooms. The mansion did not exude the feeling of what one would class a real family home. We then went into the nearby café and restaurant for lunch. Afterwards we were able to wander around the grounds and go in to the walled garden but this was somewhat stark as a lot of plants had not yet really come out yet although a display of tulips was exquisite.

Time began to be pressing and we made our way back to the Visitors Reception Centre to finish off our retail therapy and also to purchase some plants and shrubs. We then made our way back to the coach having enjoyed a superb day in the fresh air with our feet telling us they were waiting for a rest.

I would like to offer thanks to Joan for yet a successful and very well organized trip.