

# Plant hunting for Borde Hill

The Azalea Ring at Borde Hill is surrounded by several of the garden's notable trees

## HELEN HARRISON finds a rich collection of letters from 20th century plant collectors at Borde Hill in Sussex

**A** CHANCE INVITATION to Borde Hill in Spring 2011 not only familiarized me with these well-known gardens, I also discovered their relatively unknown archive. It details how specific plants were introduced and includes fascinating, original

correspondence from many of the early 20th century plant hunters. This was a prime time for plant exploration and garden creation and the archive provides additional information and insights into expeditions and the relationships between plant hunters and their sponsors.

When Col. Stephenson Robert Clarke (he signed himself 'SRC') was developing his new garden at Borde Hill in West Sussex his close neighbours and friends were the Messels at Nymans and the three Loder brothers at Wakehurst, High Beeches and Leonardslee. Roy Lancaster commented in his foreword to Brown (2009) that

nowhere else in the temperate regions (other than, perhaps, Cornwall) were there so many notable gardens in an area of comparable size. Borde Hill's archive is especially valuable since most of the early archives from these other gardens no longer exist.

The archive is complete from 1925–1949 (some of the pre-1925 material is presumed lost following damage in the 1987 storm). Yet to be thoroughly catalogued, it includes letters from plant hunters such as Ernest Wilson, George Forrest, Reginald Farrer and Frank Kingdon Ward on expedition or back home. There are numerous other items of correspondence from people and

organisations. These reveal Clarke's approach and character and the thrills and trials of introducing into an English country garden expensive, 'new' plants from faraway, recently explored, regions. Furthermore, his publication of the *Catalogue* (Jackson 1932) of the trees and shrubs at Borde Hill (one copy has Clarke's and others' personal annotations), ensures this garden a particularly detailed history.

### Clarke at Borde Hill

At the end of the 19th century opportunities to travel and acquire 'new' plants were almost unlimited for those wealthy enough. For an affluent gentleman these were exciting and propitious times to establish a new family estate – that was Clarke's intention when he acquired Borde Hill in 1893.

Clarke (1862–1948) was brought up in Sussex. First Chairman of the long-established Stephenson Clarke Shipping Company when it became a limited company, he had wide-ranging interests in flora and fauna, making his first collection of birds in New Zealand during a round-the-world trip after leaving Winchester School. As a young man he raised *Calycanthus occidentalis* from Californian seed brought back in 1886.

Clarke had great knowledge of his soil and terrain, providing details on these and his practical approach in the *Catalogue*. The needs of individual plants were as perfectly matched as possible regarding soil, aspect and situation. New specimens were placed where the setting and microclimate were deemed most appropriate. Undoubtedly, this attention contributed to their survival and healthiness. Borde Hill today has the largest collection of 'champion' (tallest or largest girth) trees of any UK, privately owned garden.

Clarke is also credited with the creation of the still popular *Camellia* 'Donation' and *C.* 'Salutation'. His citation for the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour (1936) describes 'an expert cultivator of trees and shrubs, greenhouse plants and bulbs'. Harold Hillier (1976) described him as the foremost, amateur plantsman he had known.

The records show his collection benefited from his family's enthusiasm as well as his own. His brother, Strachan, sent seeds from

*insularis*. Some dozen specimens are still growing. He also sent other seedlings back from the US and Canada.

### The archive: plant hunters' correspondence

The archive does not just catalogue the ways and means by which Clarke created his garden. It also sheds more light on the expeditions of the intrepid collectors of the first half of the 20th century.

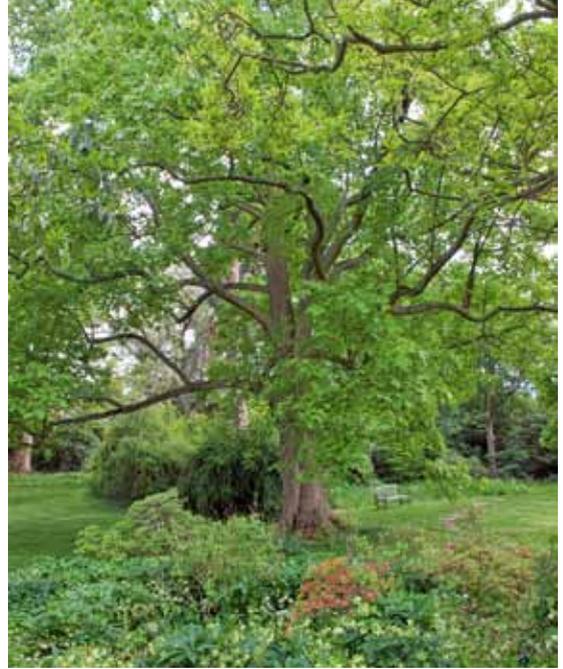
Some of the correspondents are well known for their lively, descriptive writing. For example, Reginald Farrer (1919): 'I have sent 6 magnolia species, all of them first-rate ... I do long to hear of their germination. I have sent them in statu quo (husked, of course) so perhaps a good long soaking might soften the hardened fatty shell, & enable the Sleeping Beauties within to find easier release? ... I am sure you will spare no pains or methods known to science & could you also from time to time keep me advised as to your results with them, & with other things, as nothing so revives a collector's heart ... do you realise that [*Gentiana farreri*] can be propagated from layers ... like any Carnation or Verbena ... in a year or two one may have beds & borders of it!'

Also in 1919, during his fourth expedition (1917–1920), George Forrest writes about despatch costs: 'As to expenditure, I have used considerably more than the sum you have given me, £85 and I shall at an early date give you a complete statement ... kindly let me know if you wish me to continue collecting & if so, let me have the necessary funds for the year ... meantime I am continuing the work pending your instructions. I have had to pay a small sum, a matter of £2 or £3 export duty here which I hope you will allow for as it is quite an



Colonel Stephenson Robert Clarke obtained plants from many famous collectors for Borde Hill

Japan in 1890–1891. His wife brought a small *Picea abies* from Switzerland in 1913 'in a luncheon basket', and a seedling of *Quercus pedunculata* (now *Q. robur*) from Fontainebleau Forest, France, in 1923. Clarke's eldest son, Col. Sir Ralph Stephenson Clarke (1892–1970), was perhaps the most enthusiastic. He found time to obtain acorns of *Quercus suber* on honeymoon in Algeria: two trees still survive. While at Mudros, on the Greek island of Lemnos, during the First World War in 1916, he sent back seeds of *Platanus orientalis* var.



Borde Hill house seen from the Rose Garden (left). The specimen of *Liriodendron chinense* (right) dating from 1910 is one of the largest in the UK

unexpected charge' (£85 in 1919 is equivalent to £3,800 in 2012).

Forrest also exposes in this letter the casual, even careless, handling some earlier shipments had received. 'For you there are four cases marked with your address ... All the cases are addressed directly to you at Borde Hill ... because ... I do not wish the cases to be opened by Chittenden or others at Wisley and the collection mauled as happened to Mr Williams' rhododendrons of 1917. Some persons connected with the Syndicate seem possessed of an insatiable curiosity to see what others are getting. No-one had any right to open the cases addressed to Mr Williams yet it was so and the contents, after having been thoroughly investigated sent on to Cornwall in paper packages!'

In 1930, Clarke was approached to support Frank Kingdon Ward's forthcoming expedition. '[He] is now making arrangements for a new Expedition to the headwaters of the Irrawaddy, and intends to sail in October next ... We propose to form a syndicate of 30 shares of £50 each for the seed collected ...' (Stern 1930) (£50 in 1930 is equivalent to £2,496 in 2012).

Subsequently, Kingdon Ward writes to Clarke while on expedition, 'I went through a variety of country – sub-tropical, Pine woods rather dry, temperate broad-leaved forest, moist alpine and dry alpine. At Shugden Gompa, where I spent three months, there is no forest at all but plenty of flowers; and in the arid Salween gorge which I reached in August, hardly any vegetation .....by October I was back in a moister climate and spent two good months collecting seeds of alpiners in the snow from plants not seen in flower but none the worse for all that!' (Kingdon Ward 1934a).

In October 1934 particulars of Kingdon Ward's forthcoming expedition to the Patkoi mountains (between Assam and Burma) must have excited both explorer and sponsors: 'Nothing', he writes, 'is known of the flora of this region!'. Then, 'In order to enable keen gardeners [sic] to come in, without feeling that they are saddled with seeds they do not want, it is proposed to divide the collection'. Headings range from expensive 'Rhododendrons' and 'Dwarf Alpine Shrubs' (5–7 guineas each) and

'Trees. Evergreen and deciduous', 'Shrubs' and 'Orchids' (3–5 guineas each), to the least expensive 'Climbing Plants', 'Hardy Herbaceous Perennials' and 'Non-hardy Herbaceous perennials' (2–3 guineas each; two guineas in 1934 is equivalent to £118 in 2012) (Kingdon Ward 1934b).

Kingdon Ward assumed he would contend with political disturbances. In 1933, he had written to his agent: 'I have had to alter my plans a bit – plans made in London about an unknown country can hardly be expected to work out perfectly' (Kingdon Ward 1933). The following year he comments to Clarke on politics in Tibet. 'The death of the Dalai Lama will probably upset things ... There may even be a revolution, or perhaps another filibustering expedition on the part of the Chinese. Tibet does not seem to have any stable future but is likely to be saved from any permanent occupation by the hungry landgrabbers who surround her, by her uncompromisingly harsh climate and poor soil. I don't think there is much "mystery" left in the country since the late Dalai Lama installed a



Rhododendrons at Borde Hill were excluded from the 1935 *Catalogue* because of identification difficulties

telephone in the Potala and lit it with electric light. The only mystery which remains is why anybody – except of course a botanist – should want to go there!’ (Kingdon Ward 1934c).

Edward K Balls displays a similarly resigned acceptance of the vagaries of political regimes. ‘I have been obliged to abandon my plant-collecting expedition to the Caucasus ... our permits had been reduced to normal Tourist visas, quite useless for our purposes. I have strained every effort to have this matter rectified ... at the Soviet Embassy in London was told that my only hope was to go over to Leningrad and Moscow and attempt, in personal interviews, to arrange things there ... from information obtained from our Foreign Office I think that there was very little likelihood of success ... [consequently we] are going to collect in Thessaly and the Pindus ranges of northern Greece’ (Balls 1937).

### Sourcing and naming plants

Confusion often arose initially over the identity of new seeds and plants when they first arrived in the UK. In the *Catalogue*, Clarke explained that rhododendrons had been omitted

despite having ‘a more or less representative collection of these beautiful plants including most of the fine species introduced by Wilson, Forrest, Rock, and Kingdon Ward’ (Jackson 1935). This was because the time lapse before flowering had delayed verification of some plants. He continued: ‘For example, the tiny *Rhododendron lepidanthum* [now *R. primuliflorum*] of the *Cephalanthum* group, which came to Borde Hill in 1915, did not produce a full crop of flowers until 1933’. Subsequently, Clarke’s grandson (Robert Nunn Stephenson Clarke, 1925–1987), an authority on rhododendrons, carried out detailed labelling and checking of the Borde Hill collection.

Identification difficulties were a universal problem. Clarke describes (Jackson 1935) *Abies delavayi* as: ‘A tree raised from Wilson’s seed No 4052 and distributed under the name of *Abies Faxoniana*’. And regarding *Betula japonica*: ‘These birches raised from Forrest’s seed were at first identified as *B. Delavayi* var. *Forrestii*, a very different species’. Sometimes he details the authorities applied to for corroboration, and his

continuing doubts about a tree which, ‘hitherto called *B. Caerulea*, has been identified at the Arnold Arboretum as *B. Papyrifera*’, he warns, ‘I think an error may have been made’.

The *Catalogue* makes clear his plants came not only from professional sources, but also from his extensive network of family, friends and relations. The Azalea Ring, originally parkland, was planted early on with specimen trees and shrubs raised from seeds, including those sent from Japan by Strachan Clarke.

Specimens were also contributed by such well known contemporaries as Augustine Henry (*Callitris tasmanica* and *Larix occidentalis*, ‘planted in 1907... from native seed obtained in Montana’), Reginald Farrer (*Viburnum fragrans*), Collingwood Ingram (*Acer monspessulanum* from Corsica) and Canon Arthur Boscawen. Other friends from gardens such as Caerhays, Woburn, Westonbirt, Nymans and Leonardslee contributed seeds and plants, no doubt receiving others back in return.

Clarke purchased enthusiastically from nurseries at home and abroad (e.g. Hillier, Veitch, Waterer, New Zealand Native Seed Company, and Yokohama Nursery). At the Aldenham sale of Vicary Gibbs’s huge collection in 1932, the pride of his acquisitions was *Meliosma beaniana*. A magnificent tree, presumed to have been raised from seed collected by Wilson in western Hupeh (no. 258) in 1907, it was already 7.1m high (in 2012 it is 10.5m high). According to Lancaster (pers. comm. 15 Dec. 2011), who first saw this specimen in the 1960s, there are only three other examples in cultivation in the UK (at Kew, Edinburgh and Caerhays). It is ➤

described in some detail in the *Catalogue*: 'The ball of earth around its roots weighing considerably over a ton, [it] occupied a whole lorry. The risk of moving such a large specimen was considerable, but the tree stood the shock well ... In the spring of 1933 it showed signs of flowering and by May 16th its panicles of cream-coloured flowers were fully expanded. This is the first time this species (introduced into cultivation in 1901), has been known to flower in this country, and in this case the flowering may have been induced by the shock of moving. Unfortunately no seed ripened' (Jackson 1935).

Six years earlier Clarke had achieved another important 'first flowering', recorded in a letter from EH Wilson, recently appointed Keeper at the Arnold Arboretum: 'I am very, very interested to learn that you have flowered the Chinese Tulip Tree [*Liriodendron chinense*]. So far as my knowledge goes this is the first record under cultivation. Here ... it is not hardy, but I rejoice to learn that it is succeeding in ... the British Isles ... I congratulate you' (Wilson 1927). The tree had been raised from seed (collected by Wilson in central China), purchased in 1910.

First flowerings are still being notched up at Borde Hill. A specimen of *Emmenopterys henryi* flowered for the first time there in 2011. Planted in 1928, it was grown from seed collected by Forrest in Yunnan in 1924 (a specimen at Wakehurst Place was the first to flower in the UK in 1987).

The first Loderi *Rhododendron* hybrids (*R. fortunei* x *R. griffithianum*, with huge trusses and enormous, sweetly fragrant flowers) were raised by Clarke's friend and neighbour, Sir Edmund Loder, in 1907 at Leonardslee. At the Leonardslee Sale in 1920, following Sir Edmund's

Post Office. Myittha, Upper Burma  
29/XI. 19

Dear Colonel Stephenson Clarke  
I was delighted, today, to find your letter waiting for me, on my way down country, with two large hampers full of seeds, in addition to the big main sowing from Hpimaid. Altogether I am amazed & delighted with the complete success of my harvest: nothing has been completely missed, though of course the quantities are small, so I hope you will share my satisfaction, & enjoy my results: and that your kind goodwishes for next year may bear equally rich fruit! The Rhododendron harvest particularly gratifies me, & 1622 & 98 are alone worth anybody's subscription all to themselves. But I have sent 6 *Magnolia* species, all of them first-rate, & £. 2. 6 right away out at the top. So I do long to hear of their germination. I have sent them in statu quo (basket of course) & after a good long soaking might soften the hardened fatty shell, & make the sleeping beauties within find easier release? In any case I am sure you will spare no pains or methods known to science, could you also, from time to time, keep me advised as to your results with them & with other things, as nothing so revivifies a collector's heart. I already have a great deal off my mind, in learning that at least 2 gardens have raised *R. E. F. 891*, - of which the first is as rich a prize as even *Gentiana Jarrowii*. In the way, do you realize that this last can be propagated from layers & cuttings like any *Carnation* or *Verbena*? So that in a year or two one may bid a bumper of it!

I & E  
D. J. Jarrow  
I shall always find me!

Ans  
RECEIVED  
BARNBURY

3, THE AVENUE,  
Kew Gardens.

October 3rd 1932.

Dear Col. Clarke,  
The following are the lots I purchased for you at the Alderham Sale on Thursday, Friday and to-day (Monday).

Lot 894 <i>Quercus densiflora</i>	£1-10-0d.
" 898 <i>Aesculus Harbisonii</i> and 11 others	18-0d.
" 951 <i>Ilex cornuta</i>	£1-12 - 6d.
" 954 <i>I. macrocarpa</i>	£1- 5-0d.
" 1064 <i>Phellodendron chinense glabrieculatum</i>	£1- 5-0d.
" 1124 <i>Fagus japonica</i>	£2-10-0d.
" 1136 <i>Aesculus neglecta georgiana</i> and <i>Pyrus</i> (Forrest 22582)	£2- 7-6d.
" 1159 <i>Melicope cuneifolia</i>	£6- 0-0d.
" 1219 <i>Nyssa austriaca</i> , <i>Selix moupinensis</i> , <i>L. lanata</i>	£1-10-0d.
" 1443 <i>Alnus rhombifolia</i> & 15 others	15-0d.
" 1470 <i>Quercus oxycodon</i>	

July 11, 1927

Lieut.-Colonel Stephenson R. Clarke,  
Borde Hill,  
Haywards Heath,  
Sussex, England.

Dear Colonel Clarke:-

Thanks very much for your order of a copy of "Plant Hunting". I sincerely hope that you find its pages interesting and the book itself worthy of a place in your library. My effort has been to make it of wide and general interest to the amateur gardener at large. It is in the British Isles that the largest class of these is found and it is on their opinion that the success or failure of the book must be judged.

I am very, very interested to learn that you have flowered the Chinese Tulip Tree. So far as my knowledge goes this is the first record under cultivation. Here in the Arnold Arboretum it is not hardy, but I rejoice to learn that it is succeeding in many gardens of the British Isles. I have been looking forward patiently for the last five or six years to hear of its flowering. At last this has happened and I congratulate you.

With personal regards,

Very truly yours,

*E. H. Wilson*  
E. H. Wilson

EHW/KK



Letter from Reginald Farrer to Clarke (far left top)  
Letter detailing the Aldenham sale (far left bottom)  
Letter from Ernest Wilson to Clarke (left)  
*Emmenopteris henryi*, collected in 1924, flowering at Borde Hill in 2011 (above)

death, Clarke purchased six Loderi rhododendrons at £20 each (equivalent to £812 each at 2012 values).

The archive contains much other information: comparisons between plants raised from different seed stocks; plant-raising methods; observations on Victorian rural folklore and nature, from wild cats and moths to honey fungus, all interspersed with Clarke's observations.

## Conclusion

Borde Hill has much of interest for serious gardeners and casual visitors. Its reputation burgeoned from the beginning when Clarke set out to create suitable environs for his growing collection of plants. Eventually it contained species from all continents except Antarctica, but including *Nothofagus antarctica* grown from Harold Comber's seed from the tip of South America. Of equal interest today is its fascinating archive, documenting information on the plant explorers and plant introductions of the first half of the 20th century.

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- All the letters cited above are held in the archives of Borde Hill, Haywards Heath, West Sussex
- Currency conversions were performed on the Historic Inflation Calculator at [www.thisismoney.co.uk](http://www.thisismoney.co.uk)