

**Thursday October 18th 19.30**

**Talk by DAVID STANDING BA MSc, Head Gardener at Gilbert White's House, Selborne 1979 - 2017.**

This was a well attended talk, fully-illustrated with slides of engravings, maps, diagrams, plans and photographs. David opened with an engraving of a painting by Samuel Grimm showing the view of Selborne from The Hanger, overlooking Gilbert White's House. This was the frontispiece of White's famous book, *The Natural History of Selborne*, published in 1789 and still in print today. White eventually incorporated the hanger into his 'domain', adding a fake hermitage and making a zig-zag walk up to it. He appropriated many of the surrounding farm areas in this way, adding gates, cut-out statues and 'urns' made from olive jars - aiming to create the types of 'ideal landscapes' popularised by landscape gardeners such as Lancelot 'Capability' Brown. This made David's task of restoring the garden into one of archaeology and complex detective work.

Fortunately Gilbert White kept extensive diaries, with revealing notes in a journal from January 1751 until 1771. At this point the diary became a more formal affair laid out like a spreadsheet with headed columns showing in detail all the events of the gardeners' year including the weather, when trees came into leaf or flower, when seedlings were planted and so on. He also kept wine and beer recipes. In one January he recorded the planting of 600 cabbages, it is not recorded who ate all these!

David also introduced us to all the different stages of the house and the eventual museum. The task of restoration is still ongoing even after 39 years. This is not only because of the complex nature of the task but because the funding is entirely by grants and the museum and garden admission charges and sales. Two ha-has have been restored and gardeners have begun reconstructing some of the formally planted beds. Puzzling ridges across the fields have been identified as old field boundaries separated by hedges and so it is now possible to picture the layout of the landscape as it developed during the time that Gilbert White lived there.

References to plants in the notebooks have been checked against entries in the Sixth Edition of Miller's *Gardeners Dictionary*. Philip Miller FRS (1691-1771) was the chief gardener at Chelsea Physic Garden. There are up to 400 of these and David introduced us to some of them with photographs of these often unusual plants.

## **Flowers**

- 'dwarf morning glory' or *Convolvulus tricolor* - Attractive to hover flies
- 'curled mallow', *Malva crispa*,
- 'marvel of Peru', *Mirabilis jalapa*, The French named this tuberous plant 'Belle de Nuit'; the English called it the rather more prosaic '4 o'clock Plant' owing to its habit of opening from late afternoon and closing the following morning.
- The colourful self-seeding 'hollyhocks'
- The 'chimney bell flower' or 'Pyramidal Bellflower' - depending whether you grow it outdoors or indoors in a pot in front of the summer fireplace. This is now called *Campanula pyramidalis*.

- 'French honeysuckle' looks more like a member of the pea family and is a perennial Mediterranean herb, *Sulla coronaria* with other local names.
- 'rusty' and 'white' foxgloves, *Digitalis ferruginea* and *Digitalis purpurea* f. *alba*
- 'sweet rocket', now naturalised in shady places, it was used as a border plant in May and early June
- 'crown imperial' the bright yellow *Fritillaria imperialis*, native to the plains and foothills of the Middle East.
- 'dragon arum' *Dracunculus vulgaris*, a type of arum lily or cuckoo pint. Deep purple leaves, dramatic and foul-smelling!
- 'hyacinths' - much more open varieties than we see today but still highly scented.
- 'martagon lily' or Turks cap lily, *Lilium martagon*

## Roses

- *Rosa foetida* known by several common names including Austrian briar or Persian yellow rose, has the most terrible thorns.
- *Rosa gallica* - about 2000 year old
- 'Rosa Celeste' is a *Rosa x Alba* cultivar
- 'Damask rose' is derived from *Rosa Gallica* and *Rosa moschata*\*
- 'Rambling Rector' is another strong growing thorny rose with large sprays of fragrant semi-double smallish white flowers

## Vegetables

- 'Purslane', which GW described as 'a mischievous weed', was supposedly used in salads or like spinach.
- 'Skirret', *Sium sisarum* - a rather disgusting sounding root crop like a weedy white carrot
- 'Celeriac', *Apium graveolens rapaceum*
- 'Cardoon', *Cynara Cardunculus*, 'artichoke thistle' or 'Poor Man's Artichoke' is the naturally occurring form of the cultivated Artichoke. The blanched stems could apparently be eaten.

## Fruit

- 'NonPareil' was one of 30 different types of apple grown
- Medlars
- Quinces, now used to flavour Gilbert White Gin - available in the Museum shop apparently
- Pears, particularly 'Cadillac' - nothing to do with American Cars but a commune in France; 'The Canonball Pear'. *I can find no reference to these online - CS*
- \*DNA analysis has also shown there is also *Rosa fedtschenkoana* from East Asia (Wikipedia). DNA analysis is having a big impact on identifying plant species and hybrids.

There were lots of other fascinating snippets of information including photographs comparing an original oak from White's time, with contemporary engravings of the scene. (The artist took liberties with the position of the church to make the scene more artistically balanced). David finished with a picture of a tortoise. Little was

known in the 18th century about migration and hibernation. Apparently Gilbert White loved tortoises and thought it might like to hibernate upside down at the bottom of a tub of water. He did fish it out when the tortoise clearly didn't like it! This is a personal account compiled from notes made during the meeting, memory and help from Naomi Pattinson with getting the plant names right.

**Chris Shaw 22/10/18**

For a more detailed analysis of Gilbert White's garden David Standing is running a day course on Tuesday 27th November 2018 10.30 - 16.00, cost £40. Visit the website **[gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk](http://gilbertwhiteshouse.org.uk)**