

A Family Affair: The Avenue Gardens and Picturesque Shrubbery, Regent's Park, London

Dr Shirley Evans describes the work of the Nesfield family, inspired by the cover of our last issue

In 1861 the landscape designer William Andrews Nesfield, 1794–1881, received one of his most important public commissions; not only because the scheme is still *in situ*, impressively restored in 1996, but also because it is one in which all three Nesfields were involved and it was adjacent to the family home at 3 York Terrace. Apart from Nesfield Snr's contribution, his eldest son the architect William Eden Nesfield (1835–88), designed a Lodge House to accompany the gardens and his second son Arthur Markham Nesfield (1842–72) was, after the first year, to provide the planting plans for the Avenue Gardens and also design an adjacent Picturesque Shrubbery.

Originally Regent's Park had been planned as a 'fashionable residential estate set in extensive private parkland and occupied by wealthy merchants and professional people' (J. Summerson *The Royal Parks Survey*, 1981). As part of the scheme a small palace or 'guignette' was proposed for the use of the Prince Regent, the future George IV, although this was never built, the avenue intended to lead to the palace was constructed. The Park was partially opened to the public in 1835 and in 1851 was transferred by means of the Crown Land Act from the management of the Commissioners of Woods, Forests & Land Revenues, Works and Buildings, to the newly formed Ministry of Works.

In January 1861 Nesfield Snr's professional advice was sought with regard to the removal of existing trees from the southerly end of the lower section of the Broad Walk. He recommended that some of the horse-chestnuts, which were stunted to such an extent they could not be saved, should be removed. In December of that year he put forward a plan for 'dress ground in a geometric arrangement.' In January 1863 his plans were approved by the Office of Works and became known as the Avenue Gardens. His design consisted of strictly formal planting within a strong structure of straight vistas and axes, a promenade along which many people were to pass daily. Long relatively narrow beds with brightly coloured flowers were his solution, into these beds he introduced coloured gravels, box and topiarized evergreens. This design was a departure from the sophisticated *parterres-de-broderie* he provided for his private clients, and many of them could be classed as simple

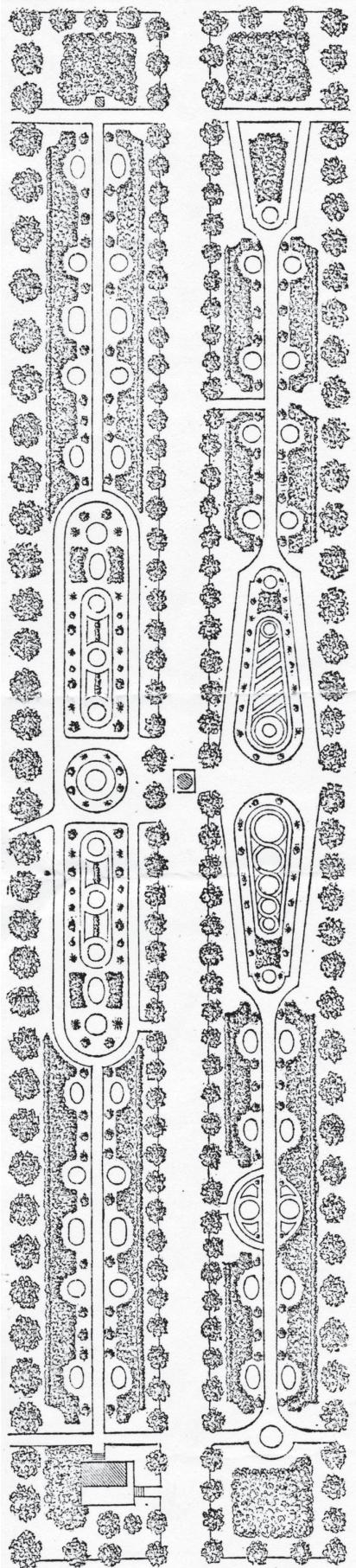
flowerbeds. The pattern rhythms were linear in their conception, being intended to lend variety and interest to the public as they walked up and down the central avenue. Whilst the beds were strictly formal they were not designed to reflect one another symmetrically across the avenue. When the design was put in place it must have had a strong appeal to the large numbers of people who passed along it daily, especially those who came from the poorer areas of London.

An important component in the gardens was a large cable frieze consisting of six circles containing one type of bedding, each circle surrounded by a ribbon of Verbena Purple King and edged with Cerastium.

The gardens were laid out within four existing rows of trees, a row of wych elms formed the outer edge, the inner a row of horse-chestnuts. Nesfield added an inner avenue of poplars in the north and south compartments, on both the west and east sides. Gravelled paths were bounded by turf panels in which were planted formal beds for the display of spring bulbs and summer bedding, set off by individual specimen shrubs. The plants were provided by James Vietch of Chelsea. In all there were twenty-four curved flower beds, with eight large Tazzas, five feet in diameter; eight upright vases with pedestals to stand about seven feet high, both to contain flowers. There were also four ornamental kerbs to the circular beds and a large Lion Tazza to act as the centrepiece to the gardens, bought from the artificial stone works of Austin and Seeley & Company of 371–75 Euston Road, London. They were edged with ornamental iron railings supplied by Hill & Smith.

By June 1863 the western side of the gardens was complete. The eastern side was finished in August, and the whole scheme was put in place by the Winter of 1863–64. In 1864 William Eden Nesfield designed a small Lodge House in the vernacular 'Old English' style as a terminus for the garden. It was said of this little building that 'with its handsome gables and verandahs nestling among the trees, it will form an elegant finish to the vista in the western garden looking southwards' (*Gardeners Chronicle* 1864, p890).

*William Nesfield's original plan for the Avenue Gardens [reproduced in *The Garden*, June 1873]*



Two years after the completion of the Avenue Gardens, William Nesfield's second son Arthur Markham Nesfield designed an additional area, known as the Coliseum Gardens, but described by Markham as a Picturesque Shrubbery. Here he introduced over 150 plants both evergreen and deciduous, together with a water garden. Markham travelled extensively on the continent, examining and recording gardens and nurseries, and could have become aware of the work of Jean-Pierre Barillet-Deschamps (1824–75), chief gardener to the city of Paris, who introduced exotic specimens into his designs. Nesfield's caption for the Sketch Plan for the Picturesque Shrubbery reads, 'Concentrated display of all the new foliage plants as they are brought out by Mr. Barillet.' Although Nesfield Snr. was responsible for drawing up the original plans and planting scheme after the first year it was Markham who provided the Avenue's planting plans and these exist for the years 1864, 1866, 1867 and 1869.

That these gardens are still admired today by the many thousands of people who pass along the Avenue is a testament to the original skills associated with the Nesfields.

9th Annual Essay Prize and 2nd Graduate Symposium 2013

The Society's Annual Essay Prize includes an award of £250, free membership of the Society for a year and consideration for publication in *Garden History*. Download an Entry Form & Submissions Guide from our website. Entries can be submitted up to and including 30 April, 2013. The Prize is supported by NFU Mutual.

The Society invites new scholars unpublished in the field to submit a 200-word abstract to: enquiries@gardenhistorysociety.org by **Monday 7 January 2013**. Intended Symposium papers must be no longer than 20 minutes long (approximately 2,000–2,500 words). The Symposium takes place in London during July; for more detail see our website.

Congratulations to Westonbirt Arboretum and **The Swiss Garden** in Old Warden Park, on receiving substantial HLF funding.

GHS Events 2013

for more details of our events please see **GHS news** or: www.gardenhistorysociety.org/events

GHS Winter Lectures, London

Wednesdays from 30 January to 20 March
Programme and Booking Form enclosed.

Passion, Plants and Patronage: Three Hundred years of the Bute Family Landscapes

Lecture by Kristina Taylor
at the Royal Botanical Garden of Edinburgh
7pm for 7.30pm, Thursday 14 March
Cost: £5, non-members: £7.50. Tickets on the door.

Study Tour to the Landscapes of California

Sunday 14 to Thursday 25 April
FULLY BOOKED

Gardens and Art

GHS/OUDCE Weekend School
at Rewley House, Oxford
Friday 7 to Sunday 9 June
See **news 90** for details. For further information contact Rewley House: ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk or: 01865 270 380

AGM & Graduate Symposium

July, London
More details in the next **news**.

Conference 2013

The theme for 2013 amongst the partners in Working Together; the GHS, Association of Gardens Trust (AGT) and the Garden Museum, is contemporary landscape design. Because there is no better place in the UK to see contemporary parks than in east London, we are promoting the AGT Conference, in September. It will be based

at Queen Mary's College, University of London, E1 4NS, on Friday 6 to Sunday 8 September. Scrutinising the changes to east London's landscapes since the 1940 Abercrombie plan, lectures and visits will focus on **Mile End Park, Canary Wharf and Thames Barrier Park**, and conclude with a guided tour of the **Olympic Park**. For further information please email: office@londongardenstrust.org or: 0207 839 3969

Study Tour to the parks and gardens of North Bohemia, Silesia & Saxony

Saturday 21 to Friday 27 September
The study trip to Eastern Bohemia, Silesia and Saxony, led by Harriet Landseer, will start and end in Prague, and cost £995 per person for those sharing a room, with a £225 single room supplement. The price includes all accommodation, transport within the country, all breakfasts, lunches and most dinners, and entry to all sites but does not include transport to and from Prague. Amongst those gardens visited within the Czech Republic will be **Krasny Dvur, Veltrusy, Nove Mesto and Kuks**: within Poland, **Bukowiec** and **Myslakowice**, and in Germany, **Bad Muskau, Seifersdorfer Tal, Pillnitz** and **Großsedlitz**. Although we already have a lot of interest in the trip, there are still places. Please contact Robert Peel: 0207 121 8938 before 15 December, or: rma.peel@btopenworld.com at any time.

Alicia Amherst

Autumn Study Day, with the AGT November

Alicia Amherst, the founding mother of garden history in England, was not only an

author with access to the great gardens of late 19th century Britain but was active in finding jobs for British women gardeners abroad. For further information please contact Gwenneth Raybould: garden@gbz.demon.co.uk

Study tour to Northern Ireland

May/June, 2014

We are planning a three-day residential programme to Northern Ireland, with the aim of visiting various exemplary gardens around the city of Belfast, in Counties Down and Antrim. Full details will be released in the Spring edition of the **news** but to express interest please contact Daniel Glass: 07449 984 211, or email: daniel.littlecoppice@hotmail.co.uk

THE GARDEN

HISTORY SOCIETY

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The Society offices will be closed from Thursday 20 December, reopening on Thursday 3 January 2013

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Correspondence and items to the GHS Head Office, or email the Editor: news@gardenhistorysociety.org
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