



SEAFORDE HOUSE IN 1833

Seaforde House stands, between two lakes, in a broad wooded demesne; the trees and parkland are in their prime; 60,000 trees are supposed to have been blown down here by the Great Wind of 1839. 'The village, which was anciently called Neaghen, is small but very handsomely built, consisting of one principal street, from the centre of which a smaller street branches off at right angles. At its northern extremity is a very handsome gateway of freestone, consisting of a centre and two side openings; and near it is a chaste Grecian lodge of freestone, forming an entrance into the extensive demesne of Seaforde, the handsome seat of Col. M. Forde; the mansion, which is situated in the centre of the parish, was destroyed by fire in 1816, and rebuilt in 1819 in a style of sumptuous elegance.' No record of the date, architect or appearance of the former house seems to survive; the new one is externally rather severe; but the interior is indeed the most sumptuous example of Grecian neo-classicism in the north

The house - five bays deep, and seven wide - has two principal storeys, a basement, and an attic above a modillion cornice. On the front overlooking the lake, the three central bays are generously bowed to take advantage of the marvellous view of water, woods, lawn and the Mourne Mountains. The three central bays of the entrance front project, but alas the original excellent semi-circular porch, with coupled Ionic columns, fanlight, and round-headed windows, was replaced in the late 19th century by a much larger rectangular porch with rather incorrect Doric pilasters and the family coat of arms in a recessed panel over the doorway. Apart from bows and porch, there is no external ornament save for the singling out of certain windows in each front for emphasis (of a modest kind) by very reticent consoled hoods. The stonework is throughout of very high quality.

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The fine landscaped park can be glimpsed *en route* to the vast walled garden half of which is a commercial nursery with the attraction of a Butterfly House displaying a collection of tropical plants. The other half is an ornamental garden bedecked in late summer with blooms of eucryphia that make up the National collection. The hornbeam maze has a rose-clad arbour at the centre, the vantage point for which is a 1992 'Moghlul Tower'. Beyond the walled garden is the 'Pheasantry', a verdant valley enclosed by mature trees, full of noteworthy plants collected over many years and still expanding.

GOOD GARDENS GUIDE

I have just had a very nice day out (out of my own garden that is). It was so good I should tell readers about it. My trip was to visit a walled garden in the well-wooded demesne of the Forde family at Seaforde in Co Down. While walled gardens in varying states of dilapidation, neglect and decay are a commonplace in the countryside, with beleaguered owner, making occasional forays into the brambles, scutch and ground elder in a vain attempt to exert a token of control, places where the tide has been turned and the garden adapted to late 20th-century use are rare enough.

The walled gardens - there are two ad joining - at Seaforde went like virtually all others into a decline a generation ago. One of the 6 great walled enclosures at Seaforde was the kitchen garden, while the second enclosure was a part of the pleasure grounds. It housed the great camellia house - an enormous iron conservatory with formal parterres and lawns in front. With the passage of time, escalating labour costs and a changing lifestyle, the walled gardens and the conservatory fell into decay and disuse. The gate was locked and the place was forgotten for a while.

Then some 20 years ago Patrick and Lady Anthea Forde embarked on the restoration of the gardens. Part of the spur to action was the disposal of the stock of the famous Slieve Donard Nursery at Newcastle. The Fordes purchased much of the stock with the intention of simply growing the plants and then selling them. To accommodate this venture the old kitchen garden was made ready and part of it became a nursery. Over a few years the business expanded and, instead of disposing of all the stock, the range of trees and shrubs was greatly enlarged as plants from the demesne and pleasure ground were propagated and added to the list. Today the nursery completely occupies the old kitchen garden, with lines of

public. The place is alive and abuzz with activity again, as every garden should be.

Those who have grown up with the world of garden centres where one expects to find a whole range of plants in one outlet, from alpines to roses to shrubs and trees, as well as garden sundries, will find a nursery rather different. At Seaforde all the plants have been propagated from stock on the premises - plants in the garden or pleasure ground - and all are container grown, so they can be purchased virtually any time of the year. For such an enterprise the range and variety on offer is surprisingly large. As the soil there is acid, it is not surprising to see lots of camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons and magnolias - the lovely *Magnolia wilsonii* which will be happy on limey soil is there in quantity. Eucryphias run to a total of 14 on the list including *Eucryphia nymansensis* 'Mount Usher', and *Eucryphia X intermedia* 'Rostrevor', two Irish cultivars which are usually very difficult to come by.

There are conifers in plenty, among them the lovely pencil-slim Italian cypress - *Cupressus sempervirens* 'Stricta', green Irish yews - a scarce plant in nurseries and garden centres around the country - and incense cedars, *Calocedrus decurrens* which will form great green architectural exclamation marks, making the perfect end to a vista in larger gardens. A small range of roses includes several species or wild roses and a selection of vigorous ramblers. Pauls Himalayan Musk Rambler caught my eye; it is a manageable Rambler which will go 20 feet into a tree and then cascade down with a great froth of pale pink flowers in June and July.

Not everything at Seaforde has potential for enormous growth. There are thymes, periwinkles, fuchsias, penstemons and agapanthus. The place has a steady discerning clientele, and deserves to be much better known. All keen gardeners should beat a path to Co Down.

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