

The woodland garden at Higham

CAROL GURNEY and James Greenfield, the then Chairman and Secretary of the IDS, chose me as the new Editor to take over from Alison Rix in 2005. I have at last persuaded Carol to give us the story of his garden in Suffolk.

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A group of us enjoyed a cup of tea at our campsite just above the tree line at about 3,200 m (10,500 ft) in Nepal in the spring of 1988. We had climbed up during the day through the most magnificent natural garden of magnolias, rhododendrons and other glorious flora through the forest. We had just, days before, left behind at home chaos and destruction with our woods seemingly totally destroyed in the great gale of October 1987.

My father had bought the property here with some 70 acres of parkland and woods, just after he came back from the war in 1946. He was keen on the woods and improved them with some new planting up to 1970 when Elizabeth and I moved here. There was no garden then really, just parkland and bulbs, and I became interested in the woods and forestry. But the gale and our treks in the Himalayas changed everything. On the flight home we made the very rash decision to try to create here up the narrow acid valley below the house a sort of Himalayan woodland garden.

The gale blew swathes and holes in the existing woods and we started planting rare and ornamental trees in the gaps and clearings. This has proved helpful to the new planting providing good shelter and some frost protection. So now some 30 years later most are well established and sturdy trees, many beginning to flower and seed.

After two years of clearing fallen trees, we started planting in 1990. By then I had met, by chance, the late Peter Chappell who ran the lovely small nursery, Spinners, near Lymington in the New Forest. He was to prove a



Opposite, the view across the lake at Higham where rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias thrive in Suffolk. The woodland was started after the gale in 1987 destroyed much of the existing trees, above, with Carol's daughter, Sara Eley. Below, the spring foliage of one of the many Himalayan oaks that grow at Higham.

wonderful friend and gardening mentor to me, and most of my new trees and shrubs came on his advice and from his nursery.

In early 1995, I joined the IDS and Elizabeth and I have since been on many wonderful IDS tours, of which perhaps the most memorable were to Canada (2001), Iran (2002), China (2005), the Amazon (2006), Chile (2007), New Zealand (2009), Sikkim (2010), Tibet (2013), Vancouver (2015), Assam (2016), during which I celebrated my 80th birthday and Kyrgyzstan (2016). From every one of the tours we have learnt so much and made so many wonderful friends all round the world.

Rabbits and grey squirrels were



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Carol Gurney with *Magnolia maudiae* (*Michelia maudiae*), in flower.

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Above, left, *Magnolia* 'Elizabeth' and right, *Rhododendron falconeri*.

initially a serious problem; and now deer and badgers even more so, and protection for anything new is essential for the first few years. In particular in about 2000 we put up a rabbit and deer fence around an area of about two acres in the narrow acid valley below the house where many of the more interesting shrubs are planted.

So what are my most precious trees, those I would be heartbroken to find dead or blown over? First the wonderful old English oak trees, nothing beats them in grandeur, elegance and style. Then, of course, a clutch of trees grown from seed from the Himalayas: *Quercus lamellosa*, *Abies spectabilis*, *Magnolia campbellii*, *Cedrus deodara*, *Daphne bholua*, *Magnolia doltsopa* (*Michelia doltsopa*), *Rhododendron wardii* and *R. barbatum* and the beautiful blue poppy, *Meconopsis baileyi* (found in Tibet exactly 100 years after Bailey found it). Beyond these special old friends it is invidious to have to choose, although to keep myself cheerful during the Covid lockdowns I did produce a list of my top 100 trees which I sent to a number of IDS friends. It included a wonderful 75 year-old *Juglans nigra* of three metres in girth, planted as a boy with my father in the winter holidays in 1950. He had ordered two from Notcutts locally for nuts and



Ostrya carpinifolia

was very cross to discover when they came into leaf in the spring that there were not *Juglans regia*!

So what have we created here now after 50 years? Others will of course be better judges of that, but I am proud of our collections of magnolias, mostly species including several evergreen michelias and mangletias; a good collection of *Quercus*; smaller collections of *Tilia*, *Carpinus*, *Malus*, *Sorbus*, *Acer* and *Juglans*, all scattered around in a rather haphazard way in old parkland and in the clearings created in the woods by the 1987 gale. I am not proud of the design, there is none! If I find a hole, I plant something in it...

And my regrets? I tried to keep good records when we started of the source of everything and planting dates and other details, but not well enough and now sadly they are in a bit of a muddle. And secondly, I wish I had from the start had a plan of where I would plant what have become mini collections of genera I particularly like. My only excuse: I was busy working and involved with other interests.

It has all been a lot of fun and through the IDS we have made so many lovely life-long friends. We are grateful to so many for advice and encouragement, but very especially to the late Peter Chappell and Colonel Mike Allen, our ex-Ghurkha friend who took us to so many parts of the Himalayas. Sadly in 2022, with the long summer drought and then a very cold spell in December, hit us very hard killing a number of special trees and most of our large-leaved rhododendrons, although all of the camellias seem to have come through unharmed.



The IDS Yearbook Editor, Caroline Boisset with one of Carol's fine oaks.