

JOHN HARVEY AND GARDEN HISTORY

By Richard Gorer

It can, I think, be argued without excessive over-simplification that there are two ways of writing history. There is the broad fresco-like approach, which was the only sort of history taught when I went to school and which was so brilliantly parodied in *1066 and All That* and the approach which concentrates on essential details over a comparatively short period. It must be fairly clear that the work of the first-named must depend upon the work of the second if it is to be tolerably accurate. The broad treatment may prove the more readable, but it is on the amassing of details that history depends.

Until comparatively recently writers on garden history seem to have ignored this truism and the reader could be fairly sure of reading of a progress from the Italian gardens of the Renaissance through Le Notre to Brown and Repton and finally to Gertrude Jekyll. It appeared to be assumed that to be worthy of note a garden had to be extensive and in any case it was taken as axiomatic that garden history and the history of garden design were synonymous. The first garden historian to query this assumption was Miles Hadfield with his invaluable *History of British Gardening*, but the writer who has done most to illuminate earlier details in the development of gardening must surely be John Harvey.

Starting from what now appears an obvious premise, but one which previous writers had tended to ignore, he pointed out that people grew plants in gardens. Obvious enough, you will say. Yes, but how did they obtain their plants? This was a question which no one seems to have asked. Economists talk glibly of the law of demand and supply, but in the period between the 14th and early 16th century we knew remarkably little about who were demanding plants and who could be supplying them. Indeed many historians might have asked whether anyone was growing plants on any large scale before the 16th century. The general picture was of cultivators growing vegetables for food and other plants for their medicinal virtues. Even if we assume that this is true . . . and here we may be in for some surprises . . . it is clear that some people must have supplied the necessary seeds and fruit trees. These early suppliers did not print catalogues and to establish their identity it was necessary to consult old records that are not easily available to the uninstructed. The garden historian is not likely, unless prompted, to consult the *Register of the Freeman of the City of York*. Even if he wants to he is unlikely to find a modern reprint and in point of fact he has to search for the 1896 and 1897 volumes of the Surtees Society. I suspect that few garden historians would even know what the Surtees Society existed to encourage. This ignorance certainly applies to the

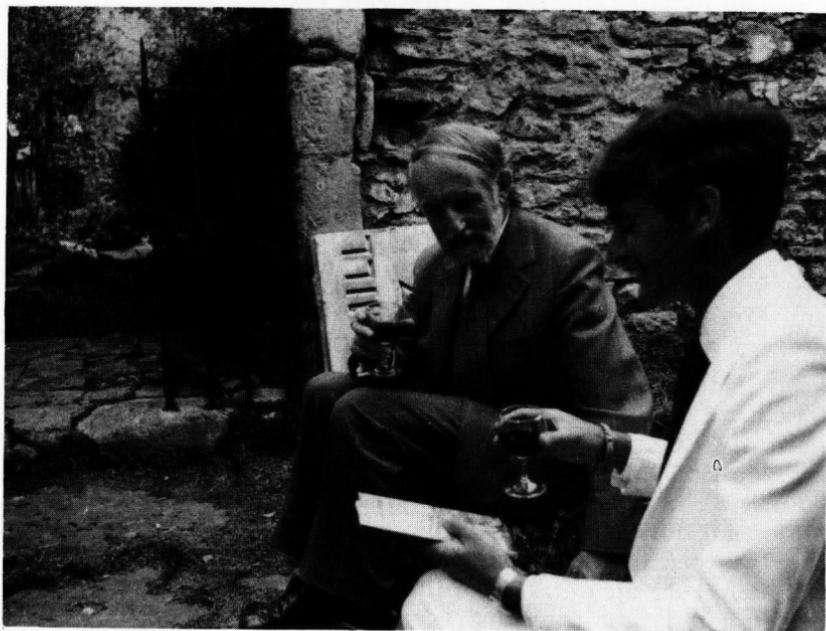
present writer, but not to John Harvey, who was able to establish the presence of fruit growers at York as early as 1322. One aspect of Harvey's work which it seems to me to be of outstanding importance is this practice of consulting official registers and of refusing to accept received ideas unless they can be shown to have some documentary backing. It must be admitted that with few exceptions garden historians have been gardeners or aesthetes primarily and have little practice in historical methodology.

No one nowadays would be likely to write a history of painting that confined itself entirely to large frescoes and altar pieces or a history of architecture that confined itself to cathedrals and palaces, yet the garden historian has tended to do just that; to concentrate on the large and spectacular creations and neglect the equivalent of genre paintings and domestic architecture. If they continue to do so nowadays after Harvey's publications it will be through wilfulness, not through lack of easily available information.

Harvey's first significant publication in this field was the *Early Gardening Catalogues* of 1972. One might have thought that the contents of catalogues would have been a prime source for garden history, but they were after all issued to be consulted and later replaced by later editions, so that very few of the 17th and 18th century catalogues have survived and they are scattered over a number of libraries and private collections, so that it was a laborious business to find and consult them. It is true that some of the London nurserymen had previously been known. The great Brompton nursery turns up in the writings of Evelyn and of Addison. Fairchild was known, not so much as a nurseryman but as the creator of the first deliberate hybrid. James Gordon was known to have preserved the Camellia, which had perished, it was thought, in Lord Petre's hothouse and to have made ample money from the Gardenia (although this may be a legend), while Lee had a romantic story attached to him for introducing the fuchsia. The story is probably untrue, but it at least served to keep James Lee's name in memory. All these nurserymen were based in London and it was not before Harvey's publication that most of us became aware of a large number of important nurseries outside London, particularly at York and at Gateshead. Of course in the 19th century when much of London was built over, almost all nurserymen had to move into the country, but during the 18th century the tendency was for nurserymen to establish themselves on the outskirts of the capital. At this time it must be remembered that transport was slow. Plants either had to be transported by horse-drawn vehicles or by ship and so it would obviously take a considerable time for plants to get from London to the more remote parts of the country. Assuming that the provincial folk were interested in gardening it was clearly comm-

ercially attractive to have local nurseries. Put like this it seems blindingly obvious, but it had not been put so clearly before Dr. Harvey's work and the information must have caused many would-be historians to readjust their views.

Important as the *Early Gardening Catalogues* is, it is somewhat eclipsed by Dr. Harvey's 1974 *Early Nurserymen*. This book is so packed with information that it is always possible to find something new on a re-reading and it has already become one of the principal sources of contemporary garden history. The information is gathered from many different sources such as wills, bankruptcy proceedings, private correspondences, old accounts, parish registers, rating accounts, all of which had hitherto tended to be neglected as sources of information. Such are the essential bases for historical truth and the consulting and appraisal of such sources are the essential groundwork of any historian. One might have thought that such an observation would smack of the obvious, were it not difficult to think of any other gardener who has even started in such research, let alone pursued it so vigorously and effectively. I think it is safe to say that few people



Dr. John Harvey (left) with the Hon. Editor at a party given by the Frome Society for Local Study to mark the publication of *The Black Prince and his Age* in 1976. (Photograph by *The Somerset Standard*).

had realised what vast numbers of nurseries, mainly concerned with ornamental and forest trees existed in the 18th century. A number of nurseries around London might have been expected, although even here the numbers may cause surprise, but the rapid spread of nurseries throughout the provinces, which started in the 17th century, is unexpected. Readers of *Mansfield Park* might have concluded that provincial nurseries were scarce even in the early 19th century, but this is now proved to be far from the case and Mansfield Park must have been very unfortunately situated. It is of particular interest that many of these provincial nurserymen were also trained surveyors, so that they could be called in to design the garden as well as to plant it. Still even when the owner could afford a Kent or a Brown or a Repton, the necessary trees had to be purchased from someone and it is clear that the nearer the source of supply the more chance there would be of a successful transplant. Buying plants in London, having them shipped to the nearest port and then transported by land to the site was slow and expensive. With the improvement of river transport and the building of a network of canals in the latter part of the 18th century, the time elapsing between lifting the plants at the nursery and their being delivered to the gardener was greatly diminished and the increase in nurseries situated well inland increased dramatically. The nurseryman may well have depended to a large extent on the great landowner "improving" his park or planting forests, but he may well have depended on his bread and butter on people with a limited acreage. Mr. Harvey has shown that the great purchasers were often remarkably dilatory in settling their accounts, while the more modest landowner was liable to pay on the nail. The fact also that the number of hardy ornamentals available steadily increased is surely a clear indication that flowers played a greater part in 18th century gardening, than might be imagined from the old-fashioned garden histories. Obviously with a large acreage grass, trees and water must play the largest part in the design, but it may well be that these great 18th century parks had more flowers than one would have suspected. Indeed a perusal of Miller's *Dictionary* under the heading WILDERNESS and of Hill's *Eden* would seem to bear out this theory.

One of the difficulties that arise before the general acceptance of the Linnaean system is the identification of plants in the older lists. My acquaintance with Dr. Harvey began when I wrote to him, after reading his *Early Gardening Catalogues* about the identity of the White Wallflower (which turned out to be a ten-weeks Stock). Since then Dr. Harvey has done me the honour to consult me on doubtful plants and when writing *Early Nurserymen* asked me what the mysterious *Pardus Theophrasti* was in the 1688 list of George Rickets as printed in John

Woolridge's *The Art of Gardening*. At the time I was unable to make any suggestion, but later it occurred to me that possibly Woolridge had misheard Ricketts and that the plant should be called *Padus Theophrasti* and in Gerard is a plant which he calls *Chamaecerasus*, which has the alternative name of *Padus Theophrasti*. However, according to Parkinson, *Padus Theophrasti* is a large tree with fragrant small flowers and this would seem to equate *Padus Theophrasti* with *Prunus mahaleb*, the St. Lucie Cherry, while Gerard's plant would be *P. fruticosus*. According to Parkinson the identification of Theophrastus's plant with the St. Lucie Cherry is due to Dalechamps. If this was what Ricketts was growing in 1688, it puts back the introduction of the tree to cultivation from the previously received date of 1714. It is not quite clear whether Parkinson actually grew the plant or was only speaking from hearsay, but maybe the plant was already being grown in the orchard in 1629.

Both *Early Gardening Catalogues* and *Early Nurserymen* start their survey at an early period. In the first book we hear of Nicholas the Fruiterer who supplied fruit trees to Edward I and in the early 14th century two fruit growers are recorded from York and other 13th century records and mentioned in his second book of garden history. It seems increasingly likely that the pleasure garden existed long before the great Renaissance gardens, whose remains are still with us. Now there was a tradition of pleasure gardens which seems to have antedated the Roman Empire and which persisted with what would appear to have been remarkably little variation well into the Middle Ages. This tradition seems to have started in the Persian Empire long before even Theophrastus was writing. This tradition must have been brought to Europe in the 8th century A.D. when the Moors occupied much of Spain and Sicily and it was in the elucidation of this influence that Dr. Harvey's next foray into garden history concerned. This appeared in *Garden History* in 1975, which included lists of the garden plants named in 1080 by Ibn Bassal and a century later by Ibn el-Awwam. Both texts have been translated: Ibn Bassal into Spanish and el-Awwam into French, but neither texts are easily available to enquirers. From my personal point of view I think that this *Garden History* paper is the greatest single contribution to garden history that Dr. Harvey has made. It shows clearly that the Moors were keen gardeners, prepared to take into cultivation not only the plants from their original homeland, but also plants that they found growing locally. A later paper by Dr. Harvey in *Garden History* in 1978 examines the early history of the carnation, which strongly suggests that it was first bred in western Asia, probably by those keen gardeners, the Turks. No one knows for certain where the wild *Dianthus caryophyllus* is native, but the most likely locality

seems to be Sicily, which we have seen was also occupied by the Arabs in the early Middle Ages. They would quite likely have taken this attractively perfumed wilding into their gardens, whence it could have got to Islam's homeland and there been developed into the flower we know nowadays as the Border Carnation. The fact that there is a tradition associating the Normans, who occupied Sicily after the Arabs, with the wild plants, may be a contributory factor to this theory.

As with all early lists there are problems of identification and it is now fairly certain that the Kidney Bean, the *Faseolus* or *Phaseolus* of the classical writers was the plant known confusingly as *Vigna sinensis*, a plant of African origin which seems to have got into general cultivation at least a thousand years before the Christian Era. The seeds are still available today as Cow Peas or as Black-eyed Beans.

The lists present some problems. Both contain a plant translated as Cauliflower, but it seems generally agreed that this vegetable did not get into general European cultivation until at least the 14th century, when it was brought, allegedly, from Cyprus to Genoa. It is not as if the Moors were protected by a sort of iron curtain. Dr. Harvey has pointed out the connection between the Moors and the French town of Montpellier from the 13th century, so there was a perfectly possible route for introductions. The same applies to Spinach and to the Aubergine, both of which were being grown in the 11th century. In the case of the aubergine one can understand some customer resistance. It is not only the English who are mistrustful of "foreign fal-lals", but why the cauliflower should have been rejected in the 11th century and welcomed two or three hundred years later is harder to explain. Even odder is the case of spinach. According to de Candolle it did not reach Europe before the 15th century; it was referred to as a new plant by Brassavola writing in 1537. Yet Spynage was described by Dr. Bray before 1381 as having an indigo blue flower, which according to Dr. Harvey proves to be Self-Heal, *Prunella vulgaris*. We know that in medieval times when some plant was not available it was not unusual to take a native plant as a suitable substitute and give it the same name and that is what, presumably, happened in this case. Since, however, the true vegetable would have been available from Montpellier via Spain it seems extremely odd that the vegetable had to wait so long for introduction. There is also one rather odd omission. When Gerard wrote his Herbal he mentioned Okra, under its Arabic name of Bhamia, and mentioned it as being eaten in Egypt. It may, of course, appear in the Bassal and al-Awwam lists as one of the many varieties of mallow they mention, but otherwise there seems no mention of this vegetable.

Although the gardeners of Moorish Spain were so ahead of

their Christian contemporaries, they seem to have had little influence on gardening in the rest of Europe. It would seem that it was far otherwise with Turkey, to which Dr. Harvey next turned his attention. His paper *Turkey as a source of garden plants* appeared in *Garden History* in late 1976. We have seen already how it is possible that *Dianthus caryophyllus* came to Turkey from Sicily and it is fairly certain that the various *Tazetta narcissi* and the Jonquils, which were so developed by the Turks must have come from Spain and North Africa. *N. tazetta* itself gets into the eastern Mediterranean, but the other forms do not get beyond Sicily, while the jonquils are entirely confined to Spain and Portugal. The traffic was not entirely one way. Near Gibraltar is the only colony of *Anemone coronaria* known in Spain. It has developed a curious stoloniferous habit unique in the species and probably deserves varietal status. This, one feels, must have originally been an escape from cultivation. The case of the Spanish colony of *Rhododendron ponticum* is more controversial. Most botanists would claim that, since at one time the shrub was widely distributed over most of Europe, the colony in southern Spain is simply a relict of this more general distribution. Against this any gardener would point out that more rhododendrons are killed by drought than by any other cause and that the hot dry climate of Andalusia is, on the face of it, highly unsuitable for the plant. Against this must be set the fact that we seem to have no written record of either the Arabs or the Turks cultivating rhododendrons. This problem may be simply linguistic. Among the plants in the el-Awwam list is the Oleander. This is fairly widespread in the Mediterranean and seems to have been a popular garden plant with its late pink fragrant flowers. It is mentioned as a garden plant by the elder Pliny, whose name for it is *rhododendron*, so it is not inconceivable that the two plants have become confused. It seems to me to be odd that the Turks who brought so many of their local plants into cultivation should have neglected one of their most floriferous shrubs.

Be that as it may it was to Turkey that Dr. Harvey next turned his attention. It is a commonplace that innumerable garden flowers came to Europe from Turkey at the end of the 16th century and, since many of these, such as anemones, ranunculus and hyacinths were already highly developed, it is safe to assume that the gardening tradition may have started at least in the 15th century and possibly earlier. Our view of Tamerlane, who died in 1405, is coloured by Marlowe's play, but he also laid out public parks in Samarkand, so that the tradition of laying out ornamental gardens can be brought back to the 14th century. What these gardens were like is not altogether clear. Babur, to whom we are indebted for their mention speaks of avenues of planes and

of poplars. There seems, unfortunately, to be a paucity of written material before the late 16th and early 17th centuries and thus a vital link in the chain is still missing. We still do not know when the cult of flowers entirely for their beauty and fragrance, which seems to be the great innovation of Turkish gardening started, nor, indeed, why. It was, after all, a revolutionary change. Flowers had certainly played their part in the older Persian and Arabian gardens, but they seem to have been wild plants brought into the garden, yet suddenly by the mid 16th century, we find tulips of unknown provenance, hyacinths of various colours, florists' forms of anemone and ranunculus and even the comparatively scarce *Iris susiana* available in such numbers, that by the early 17th century we find Parkinson complaining about the unreliability of Turkish nurserymen, clearly indicating a fairly substantial trade with western Europe.

There was one Turkish flower of such importance that Dr. Harvey contributed a separate paper to Garden History, where it appeared in 1978. This paper, entitled *Gilliflower and Carnation* had first to demolish the long-held tradition that the carnation was one of the oldest of garden flowers, which he was able to do with a novel use of linguistics. His sentence deserves to be repeated here. "The serious investigation of language upon historical principles thus provides a new foundation for horticultural research". This he proves abundantly, but, alas, so few of us have the breadth of knowledge to make such investigations. Dr. Harvey showed that the name *clavell* first appears about 1460 in Spain; *oeillet* in France dates from 1493, whilst in England 1500 would seem the earliest date and this is not certain. This is the *gyloffr* gentyle of the Fromond list and could equally well refer to a double stock. In any case it seems fairly clear that the plant was not known in Europe before the mid-15th century. These dates are of some importance as, if we assume that the carnation and pink were originally developed in Turkey or thereabouts, it enables us to put back the Turkish flower cult, probably to the start of the 15th century if not earlier. Since a double carnation is mentioned in a book written at Herat in 1515 as being available in three colours, this suggests a fairly lengthy period of development. By the end of the 16th century the yellow *Dianthus knappii* had been hybridised into the plant, so that Nicholas Lete was able to import a yellow carnation from "Poland".

Dr. Harvey's progress in various aspects of garden history is generally logical, following step by step from one premise to the next, but occasionally his eagle eye sees something that other people have hitherto overlooked and in 1978 he observed that many of the plants described in early issues of the Botanical Magazine were described as being suitable for rockwork. It had

previously been thought that the earliest alpine gardens dated from the late 1820's and early 1830's, but Dr. Harvey has convincingly proved that plants for "rockwork" were grown even before the famous Forsyth rock garden at Chelsea of 1774. In any case the interest of this garden seems to have lain more in the rocks than in the plants, if any, that adorned them and, although we have several pointers as to what plants were considered suitable for rockwork in the late 18th century, we still have little idea as to how this part of the garden was arranged. This is of minor importance compared with the establishment of the existence of a rock garden far earlier than had previously been suspected. My name was associated with Dr. Harvey's in this paper, but this was mainly due to his generosity as he was responsible for at least eighty percent of the paper, which would have been equally valuable without my brief contribution.

I imagine that there must be many like me who when a new issue of *Garden History* arrives looks eagerly to see what new aspect may have caught Dr. Harvey's attention. In 1974 he rescued from oblivion the unknown Casimiro Gomez de Ortega, the creator of the Madrid Botanic Garden and a man who introduced a number of plants to Britain. It might be thought that the diversity of interests shown in the various disparate subjects discussed by Dr. Harvey might occasionally give rise to a somewhat superficial treatment, yet this never seems to happen. Whether he be discussing a provincial 18th century catalogue, the plants grown in 11th century Spain or the life of a Spanish botanist, the work is always thoroughly researched.

Garden historians now and in the future may count themselves fortunate that their subject attracted the attention of a man with so many skills and such encyclopaedic knowledge. Many of us must have been aware of the importance of Turkish gardening in the introduction of plants to the west in the 16th and 17th centuries, but only Dr. Harvey had enough knowledge of Turkish to be able to consult contemporary accounts. When this knowledge is combined with the disciplines of the more tedious types of historical research, such as the investigation of parish records and rate books, we obtain results that hitherto no other garden historian has accomplished, for the simple reason that no other garden historian has the necessary knowledge or experience. His work has already changed our way of thinking of the earlier English gardens and it is a safe prediction that there will be further surprises in store for us yet.