

AUTUMN BEAUTY



Sheffield Park in East Sussex is considered to be one of the very best woodland gardens in Britain. *Lorraine Harrison* took an autumn stroll through the grounds to learn its history and secrets.

SHEFFIELD PARK GARDEN is undoubtedly among the finest gardens in Sussex and is well worth a visit in any season. However, it is in the autumn that the colours at Sheffield Park transform it into something even more special. On a still early autumn morning, a cloudless blue sky is the perfect counterpoint to the rich russets, golds and reds evident at every turn. Taking a leisurely stroll through the grounds, a balanced composition of colour and form, light and shade and most especially of water and land meets your eyes wherever you look.

The history of the site dates back to the Domesday Book, when the name 'Sheffield' signified a 'sheep clearing'. The same tome records that there was

once a watermill on the site and that local rents were paid in eels rather than money! In the past, the River Ouse frequently flooded the lower area of the valley. Today the garden covers an impressive 120 acres (49 hectares), of which almost a third is water. Famous historical characters associated with the estate include Robert, Count of Mortain, who was half-brother to William the Conqueror, and Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk, who in 1538 was host to Henry VIII here. From 1769 to 1909 the estate was home to the Earls of Sheffield, with each subsequent generation implementing changes and improvements. John Baker Holyroyd, the 1st Earl, commissioned the rebuilding of the house by James Wyatt

Above left **The elegant 'Gothick' façade of Sheffield Park House, remodelled in the latter part of the 18th century, reflected in the waters of the Ten-Foot Pond.**

Above right **The fiery glow of an *Enkianthus campanulatus*.**

Right **The colours of autumn are rivalled at other times of the year by the striking spring blooms of rhododendrons and azaleas, while colourful water-lilies cover the ponds in summer.**

Far right **Leaves of *Acer palmatum atropurpureum* silhouetted against the tranquil waters of the Middle Lake.**



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Top left **Vast expanses of water are as much a feature of the gardens as the trees and shrubs, providing beautiful mirror images of the scenes above.**

Bottom left **A visitor pauses to admire the view from the Top Bridge, built for the 3rd Earl between 1882 and 1885.**

Bottom right **The fallen leaves of this group of Acers create a stunning carpet of colour.**

Right **An evocative view of the house across the water, in the fading light of an October day.**

in the then fashionable 'Gothick' style and called in the famous landscape designers Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, and later Humphry Repton, to improve the grounds.

Speculation surrounds exactly what improvements Brown made, as little documentation survives. The National Trust's guide book to the garden suggests that his work primarily involved the felling and clearing of overgrown woodland, an opening out the landscape, rather than the planting of new specimens. This was doubtless necessary as the site, just south of Ashdown Forest, is particularly propitious for growing trees. Repton was later to comment 'Such is the power of vegetation at Sheffield Place, that every berry soon becomes a bush, and every bush a tree.' Repton's work seems to have been confined to the areas closest to the house, including the creation of small lakes. The main structure of what we see in the garden today was laid out by the 3rd Earl in the 19th century. He created an arboretum of exotic and native conifers and introduced many rhododendrons, azaleas and acers, the latter being at their breathtaking best in autumn.

Some of this extravagant spending on the grounds at Sheffield Park undoubtedly contributed to the dire state of the 3rd Earl's financial affairs on his death in 1909. The gods of horticultural largesse continued to shine on Sheffield Park, however; this time in the shape of Arthur Gilstrap Soames (1854–1934).

Soames first became enchanted with the house and grounds in 1889, while staying nearby, and asked for the first option to purchase the estate should it ever be sold. Soames was also one of the late Earl's chief creditors, thus placing him in a strong negotiating



position, and the sale was completed in 1910. As a successful Lincolnshire brewer Soames, fortunately for the garden, had deep pockets and for the next 40 years he lavished time, money and attention on Sheffield Park. Initially thousands of cartloads of loam were imported onto the site to improve the growing conditions. A massive quantity of trees of bewildering variety was planted. Many were of North American origin, such as the Tupelo Gum and Scarlet American Oak, and these now account for the spectacular range of colours in autumn. This palette was further added to by Soames's mass planting of autumn gentians. Conifers, cypresses and Japanese maples were also planted in abundance. But Soames's love of roses and rhododendrons rivalled even his love of trees. He planted rhododendrons in carefully orchestrated clumps around the lakes, while Banksian roses were encouraged to scramble over the walls of the house. Throughout his years at Sheffield Park, Soames frequently opened the garden to local people and it understandably proved a popular attraction.

Somewhat unexpectedly, at the age of 65, Soames married for the first time. His bride was Agnes Helen Peel, granddaughter of the 19th-century

prime minister, and they had two sons. He was in his 80th year when he died. Agnes remained at Sheffield Park for the rest of her life. The Second World War was a turbulent time for the Park as it became the headquarters of a Canadian Armoured Division and then a Prisoner of War camp, with Nissen huts on the once-immaculate lawns. In 1949 Arthur's nephew, Captain Granville Soames, took over the running of the garden and set right much of the chaos after the war.

Changing economic conditions forced the sale of Sheffield Park in 1953. The estate was split into lots, with the house and garden sold separately. Although converted into apartments and discreetly fenced from the Park, the house still forms an elegant backdrop to the garden, its reflection mirrored in the First Lake. Thankfully, the National Trust acquired the garden and continues to develop and tend it with its usual expertise and sensitivity, and its ownership ensures that the garden is still open to the public today. **BB**

For more information on visiting Sheffield Park Garden, telephone 01825 790231 or visit the National Trust website www.nationaltrust.org.uk



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