

## **A Visit to Biddulph Grange Gardens, Staffordshire ..... and a surprise discovery**

Biddulph is one of the best surviving gardens of the great age of Victorian gardens, where plants, which can be traced from all around the world, are brought together, to form spectacular and picturesque areas, ranging from Chinese willow gardens to the damp of a Scottish glen. In 1883 Nathaniel Ward had invented the “Wardian Case”, the first miniature portable greenhouse, enabling live plants to be shipped from all around the world, by the many plant enthusiasts.

Biddulph Grange Gardens were principally the work of three people, its owners James and Maria Bateman, and their friend Edward Cooke. James Bateman was born in 1811 and, from the age of eight, was fascinated by orchids which became the passion of his life. He created an important collection at his home, Knypersley Hall, and became an orchid expert. In 1838, he married Maria Egerton-Warburton, who came from a leading Cheshire family. Maria was interested in herbaceous plants, fuchsias and lilies. In 1840, the Batemans moved from Knypersley to Biddulph Grange where, with their friend Edward Cooke’s help, they created the famous Biddulph Grange Gardens. James was responsible for many of the trees and shrubs from around the world.

By the late 1860s, the cost of maintaining Biddulph was proving too much for James’ resources and they passed Biddulph to their son and retired to Worthing where, although in their late 70s, they created another garden. Maria died there in 1895 and James two years later. In 1871, Biddulph was sold to Robert Heath, a leading industrialist. The Grange was largely destroyed by fire in 1896 but was rebuilt and became a hospital for many years until it closed and it laid derelict until the National Trust acquired it in 1988 and then restored it to its original glory.

James and Maria had two sons, Roland and John. Roland became a well-known missionary in India for many years. John Bateman, born in 1839, was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and became a Deputy Lieutenant for Staffordshire and a Justice of the Peace and the Chairman of the Biddulph Bench. In 1865, John married the Hon Jessie Caroline Bootle Wilbraham, sister of the Earl of Latham. They had one daughter, Agnes. In 1871 John Bateman sold his **grandfather’s estate**, Knypersley Hall and Biddulph Grange and bought Brightlingsea Hall and its estate.

On his arrival in Brightlingsea, John Bateman set about introducing new ideas in agriculture. He grew maize, made silage and grew tobacco; and, with his love of plants and forestry, he introduced the Eucalyptus Gunnii (or the “Blue Gum”) from New Zealand around his estate. He also brought an exotic bird from the River Plate, the Tinaniu, which was not very popular as it had a very healthy appetite for young pheasants!

On the revival of the Cinque Port Liberty, he became Brightlingsea’s first Deputy and held the office for seven years, from 1887 to 1891, and again in 1899 and 1903. In 1893, John presented Brightlingsea with the Deputy’s badge and chain of office, a large opal carved with a seascape on a solid silver chain with alternate links of oysters and crossed sprats, which is still worn by the Deputy today.

When the National School was planned (St James), he gave all the bricks for the building and also provided the land for the two almshouses, built by Mr Bayard Brown, and he stocked them with wood, coal and sides of bacon for the new tenants. He supplied the land for the new sewage works and, when All Saints’ Churchyard became full, he gave several acres of his fields to enlarge it.

John Bateman became a Deputy Lieutenant for Essex and a Justice of the Peace. He was also a member of the Essex County Council when it was formed in 1889 and also Brightlingsea Urban District Council from its formation.

One of Brightlingsea’s most loved benefactors, or the “Old Squire” as he became known, died at Brightlingsea Hall on 12 October 1910 and his wife, Mrs Jessie Bateman, died in October 1925 at the age of 89.

One has to wonder what the future of Brightlingsea Hall will be, with its links to Biddulph and the Bateman family.

*Tom Moulton, November 2008*