

## Our American Trees

Many years ago, the Shell Guide to Shropshire, written by Michael Moulder, dismissed Bicton as a 'decayed village off the Holyhead Road... A white stuccoed manor house, a ruined and overgrown eighteenth century church, a red-brick Georgian farmhouse with a monkey-puzzle tree make up what there is. The new church (1866) has a very ugly tower...'

We hope that these essays have shown that there is more of interest here than is obvious at such first sight. Now the old churchyard is slightly less overgrown, while that monkey-puzzle tree has long since disappeared. However, new ones have been reappearing around the village gardens showing their very distinctive foliage and geometric profile, which wits thought would be a puzzle to any monkey climbing one.

The correct common name is Chile Pine, while the botanical name is Araucia araucana, based on its name in the native language. It belongs to an ancient family, whose members survive in scattered locations around the Pacific Ocean and include the newly rediscovered Australian Wollemi Pine and the once popular pot plant Norfolk Island Pine. The family evolved at a time 250 million years ago when all continents were joined together and thus now provide evidence for later continental drift, which has scattered them.

The sharp needles may have evolved as a defence against browsing dinosaurs, which were particularly large in South America. Significantly, araucaria forests provided a 'real' backdrop to the computer animated film 'Walking with Dinosaurs', as they still grow on rough mountain terrain shunned by 'modern' flowering plants and grasses.

Their odd characteristics appealed to some Victorian gardeners, who were eager to plant exotic forms collected by intrepid plant hunters. By coincidence, Bicton in Devon can boast the finest avenue of 80' monkey puzzles planted in 1844. Significantly the garden here is not far from the site of the Veitch family nursery, which was then promoting the collection of new plants from the Far East and the Americas. Earlier naval expeditions had already been introduced to the tree through its edible seeds, but now William Lobb was sent out to collect those seeds in bulk for planting.

In the 1840s, he was busy with this task in Chile before moving on to California, almost in the wake of the 'Gold rush'. Here he was shown the giant sequoias of the Sierra Nevada, which some 'yankees' were already interested in chopping down, before they realised their value as a tourist attraction.

In this way, their seeds reached British nurseries and the first trees were planted in 1853. As this was so soon after the death of the Duke of Wellington, many thought such a great tree should be named after him. Locally our specimens, including those in the churchyard, were mainly planted in the 1880s at the same time as the church was built.

Lobb and similar collectors were bringing back much more besides, so that the horticultural writer, John Loudon, could remark that 'the grounds of every country seat, from the cottage to the mansion, will become an arboretum'.

While all this was going on, other writers illustrated the contrasting romantic and scientific approaches to all this material. For instance, over in Ireland in 1848 (170 years ago) Mrs Alexander, a prolific hymn writer, was composing her famous verse 'All things Bright and Beautiful', while in Kent, Charles Darwin was working to make sense of natural life, including what he had observed on the Beagle. He was hesitant to publish ideas at a time when those expressed by the hymn were more popular. Meanwhile, out amongst the islands around Borneo, Alfred Wallace, hunting animals for zoos rather than plants for nurseries, was coming to the same conclusions as Darwin and wrote to him in 1858 (another anniversary). This prompted the publication of 'The Origin of Species' at long last.

One might wonder what could have been the result of these dates being the other way round, allowing time for Mrs Alexander to digest the ideas of Wallace and Darwin. Her hymn might have been different...

*Refrain:*

All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
By selecting variation,  
Evolution made them all.

The purple headed mountains,  
The rivers running by,  
are home to various life forms  
which must adapt or die.

*(refrain)*

The cold winds in the winter,  
The burning summer sun,  
Are forces of selection  
Evolving every one.

*(refrain)*

Each little flower that opens,  
Each little bird that sings,  
Were products of selection  
That evolution brings

*(refrain)*

All good things around us,  
Evolved through ages long,  
Now human care is needed,  
To stop things going wrong.

*(refrain)*



Victorian Villa with exotics

OSBERT  
LANCASTER