

## David Pannett's history of Bicton part 28

### Up the Garden Path

The different native trees and shrubs in our local countryside provide clues to the history of the landscape (July 09). Likewise, those in the village gardens reveal something of our garden history. In addition, gardens now contain many 'exotics' introduced from other 'temperate' parts of the world at different times.



Giant  
Sequoia  
popular with  
Victorians

During the nineteenth century botanical explorers were bringing back a selection of seeds and specimens from North America, China and Japan. The owners of large parks and gardens eagerly incorporated them into their existing native planting schemes. A very popular tree was the giant Sequoia from California, which earned the popular name Wellingtonia as a tribute to the 'Iron Duke'. After first arriving in 1853 they gradually appeared in many parts of the country including locally at Preston Montford and in Bicton's new churchyard. Our landowners cherished their specimens while the Americans were busy chopping theirs down. As a result, a later visitor from California once remarked "Gee, you have better ones than we have!"

The Leighton estate near Welshpool was particularly enthusiastic in acquiring North American trees, perhaps to upstage the neighbours at Powys Castle.

As a result, between 1880 and 1911 a Nootka Cypress from British Columbia was able to exchange pollen with a Monterey Cypress from California. This produced a hybrid named the Leyland Cypress, which, like 'a mule', was vigorous but sterile, but being a plant it could be

propagated by cuttings.

Amongst other introductions from this region was the Lawson Cypress, now seen in Bicton old churchyard.... more about these later.

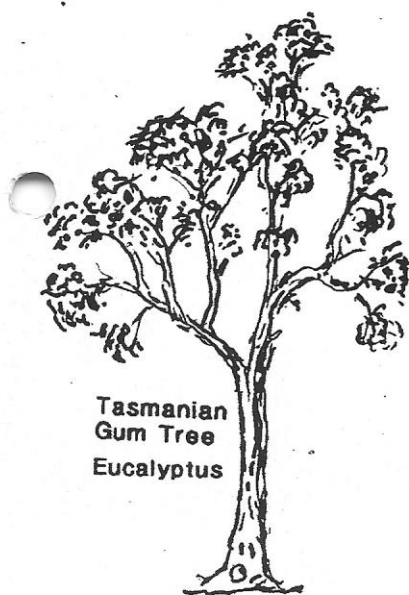
While all this was going on, the Scots Pine was also being reintroduced to lowland Britain, as can be seen at Udlington for example.

Meanwhile, cottage gardens retained the traditional mixed hedges similar to those in the surrounding farmland, but added useful plants such as damson and plum. As modern cottages and 'suburban' type houses were developed from the 1920s onwards, hedges of privet became almost universal. It is a native evergreen tolerant of clipping. Garden shrubs within were often only roses and lilac. By the 1960s, however, new ideas



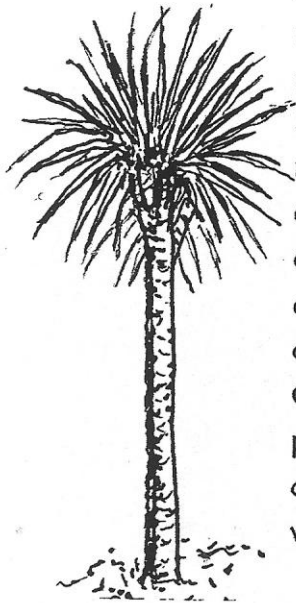
Lawson  
Cypress

and materials reached the village. Now developers wanted 'open plan' fronts devoid of hedges, while nurseries were offering a wide range of alternatives to privet for the other boundaries: Beech, box, laurel and that Leyland Cypress mass produced by cuttings.



Tasmanian  
Gum Tree  
Eucalyptus

In the century before, Charles Darwin had developed his ideas of 'natural selection' by noting all the 'unnatural selection' going on all around in the breeding of food crops, farm animals and ornamental pigeons. Today, gardens are packed full of 'cultivars',



**Cordyline  
Palm**

selected by nurserymen and plant breeders from naturally occurring variations. In the wild, any tree sprouting 'non-standard' growth could actually be handicapped and not thrive, but a nursery man would seize upon such mutations for their decorative effect – dwarf or upright habits, yellow or blue foliage etc. Even a single 'odd' branch could be multiplied by cuttings or by grafting on normal rootstock. Junipers and the Lawson Cypress have proved particularly useful in all this production, including varieties more suited to confined gardens than gentleman's parks or the vicarage.

Nationally many of those were promoted by Alan Bloom of Bressingham, while locally they were available from Merton nurseries, where Herbert Lewis planted his own collection. They still thrive, but suffer from congestion since even 'slow growing' dwarf varieties eventually grow!

By now the planting had become even more 'international' and our local specimens include Monkey Puzzle (*araucaria*) from Chile, Gum (*Eucalyptus*) from Tasmania, Cordyline Palm from New Zealand, Chus Palm from China, Acers and cherries from Japan.

Some of the northern hemisphere 'exotics' actually once grew here before being wiped out by a series of ice ages and are therefore quite at home in our current 'Interglacial' climate.

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