

The Flora of Hillsborough

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Hillsborough in County Down is well known for its pretty Georgian houses, church, fort and mansion, but it can also boast a number of horticultural accomplishments, mostly from Oglesgrove Nursery just north of the village. The opportunity is taken here to detail some of these plants associated with the village. Some of the demesne trees, past and present, are also discussed



'New Varieties of Pernettya mucronata' The Floral Magazine (1881) Plate 339

The Oglesgrove Nursery

On a dull autumn day in October 1882 Mr. Lennox Thompson Davis of Oglesgrove nurseries, Hillsborough, caused a sensation with his exhibition of seedling pernettyas at the Royal Horticultural Society's meeting in the old gardens at South Kensington. He was awarded seven first-class certificates by the society and all the garden journals of the era wrote extensively on the new varieties. Oglesgrove was propelled into a fame that until that time was a novel experience for an Irish nursery.

Oglesgrove nursery was established in the early decades of the 19th century by Henry Davis about whom we know relatively little. He had had a significant

horticultural triumph in the 1830s when the Rev. Moore, who later built Rowallane and created its famous gardens, found a variegated various-leaved ash in the grounds of Eglantine House, a short distance east of the nursery. This form, *Fraxinus excelsior* var. *heterophylla* 'Variegata', was successfully marketed by Davis, who sold it at 'one guinea each'.

Henry Davis's success as a nurserymen can no doubt be attributed to his astute decision to locate his business on the Culcavy Road just to the north of the village, where it lay within only a few hundred yards of the Lagan Canal and its quay at Newport Bridge. Later when the railway arrived (The Banbridge and Castlewellan Branch Line), the business was fortunate in that the new line ran alongside the nursery with Hillsborough Station lying only a few hundred yards to the south. Both canal and railway provided Davis with excellent opportunities to expand his business and by the mid-19th century had become the largest nursery in Ulster. Indeed, by 1850 Henry Davis was advertising his 'extensive nursery stock', as 'unequaled by any in Ireland, which enables him to sell at more moderate prices'.

In 1852 Henry Davis handed the nursery over to his talented son, Lennox Thompson Davis, who was to continue to successfully develop the business as a nurseryman, seedsman and florist. From a very early stage in his control of the firm Lennox Thompson had developed a particular interest in forms of *Gaultheria mucronata*, formerly *Pernettya mucronata*, and this interest was to eventually propel him to considerable success in both Britain and across the Empire.

Pernettya mucronata, an evergreen ericaceous low growing shrub noted for its pea-like berries in autumn and winter, had been introduced to Britain in 1828 from Cape Horn at the very southern tip of South America. For a number of decades it was mainly planted as cover for birds; gardeners did not particularly like it as its crimson berries were eaten by the birds. Davis however saw the possibilities of the shrub and experimented by crossing it with *Pernettya augustifolia*, a dense narrow-leaved shrub, about three feet high with a light pink fruit, that had been introduced from China in 1810. It preferred the shade of other trees or shrubs, rather than direct sunlight. Over a thirty year period Davis patiently experimented with what one writer termed 'persevering care and skilful selection', until he had produced a range of shrubs (often dioecious) with shiny green foliage and small bell-shaped white or pink flowers in May and June, followed in autumn by long lasting fleshy fruits in about a dozen distinct shades of colour ranging from white through to pink, soft scarlet and dark blood red. Like other ericaceous plants it is essentially peat loving, but also succeeded in many kinds of soil, while young plants could be obtained by division or layers. Also in common with many other Ericaceous plants they could be lifted in almost any season without danger, owing to the dense mass of their hair-like roots

One critical advantage the new forms of *Pernettya mucronata* enjoyed was that the berries were allowed by the birds to remain through the winter. The low shrubs with their wealth of fruits could be planted on mass in flower beds or dotted about the margins of shrub beds, providing much needed colour to gardens in autumn and winter. They also proved popular in glasshouses and for interior decoration in homes and churches, the latter especially during harvest festivals. So when Lennox T. Davis finally distributed the new forms in 1881 and exhibited them in South Kensington the following year, it was perhaps hardly surprising they caused a considerable amount of attention. They suited the needs of the age perfectly.

Another introduction by Davis was *Chamaecyparis Lawsoniana* 'Gracilis Aurea' (the Yellow Lawson Cypress) which he produced in the early 1890s. It had a broad habit, with branches widely spreading, and bending over, leaves light yellow in

summer, becoming greenish-yellow in autumn. Thomas Ryan, the famed head gardener at Castlewellan, described it as being 'quite distinct from *C. Lawsoni lutea* being much more graceful habit'.

By the 1890s the Oglesgrove nursery was employing over a hundred men with extra 'hands' taken on during the height of the season. It has not been established when Lennox Thompson Davis retired, but his nursery was still operating in the 1930s when the business was being managed by Arthur Walker. The site of the nursery today is covered with suburban housing.



'New varieties of *Pernettya mucronata*' The Garden illustrated Weekly, May 1882

Rosa 'Marchioness of Downshire'

Around the time of the Oglesgrove Nursery's rise to fame, the Newtownards firm of Alex Dickson was beginning to make a major impact on rose breeding in Britain. During the 1894-5 season they produced a hybrid perpetual rose that won a gold medal at the RHS called 'Marchioness of Downshire', being named after Georgina Elizabeth Balfour, the Dowager Marchioness of Downshire and wife of the seventh Marquis. It was a 'most distinct and beautiful satin pink with a soft rose shading' and won numerous prizes at both national and local level for the Dickson firm. No doubt it was widely grown at Hillsborough Castle.

The Grape 'Marchioness of Downshire'

Although the eighth Marquess of Downshire and his wife spent much more of their time at their English seat of Easthampstead, and only rarely came to Ulster, their head gardener at Hillsborough, Thomas Bradshaw, was very well known in his time, not only as a regular contributor to garden journals such as *The Garden Illustrated Weekly Journal*, but also as a very successful competitor at local and national shows. Bradshaw specialised in fruit growing and the walled garden at Hillsborough Castle was noted during his time for the variety and quality of its fruit, notably its 'apples, pears, cherries, plums, peaches, nectarines, apricots, currants, damsons, melons, raspberries and strawberries'. Bradshaw had a special interest in grapes and in 1895 submitted to the Royal Horticultural Society in London his own seedling grape, which he called the 'Marchioness of Downshire'. It was described as being a large white oval berry, 'not unlike Muscat of Alexandria when forced, but when grown in a cool house the berries and bunch are much larger and of a duller white; skin thick, flesh sweet and refreshing' a cross 'between Muscat of Alexandria and White Gros Colman'. It won an Award of Merit from the RHS, but not everyone was happy with this decision; indeed, some were very hostile. In 1887 one correspondent complained:

'Were there a distinct paucity of white grapes in commerce, we might, perhaps, have some tangible reason for welcoming a new one, but on what grounds a majority of the fruit committee did at a recent meeting grant an award of merit to the new grape Marchioness of Downshire it would be difficult to determine, especially when such an award was made in opposition to the judgment of the best authority on grapes in the kingdom. The new variety may claim the merit of being a spoilt Muscat of Alexandria. The raiser crossed that variety with white Gros Colman, doubtless in the hope of throwing some Muscat flavour into the latter, which seems to have been so poor a grape that no one has cared to grow it...why cannot we have a trial of [the] new grape at Chiswick before granting any award? Really this granting of such recommendations to fruits of this description is a very serious matter and if another failure should ultimately be corded, what becomes of the reputation of the fruit committee? Here is a grape getting an award without any knowledge by the committee of its habit or its cropping. It is indeed a veritable leap in the dark...'

It is not clear how commercially successful the grape became. Bradshaw himself remained as head gardener at Hillsborough Castle well into the 20th century, whilst also serving for a time as manager of the nearby Oglesgrove nursery.

Peach 'Marquis of Downshire'

Named after Katherine Mary Hare, the first wife of the sixth Marquess of Downshire, this noted peach was not actually raised at Hillsborough but at Easthampstead in Berkshire. It was however grown at Hillsborough. It was hailed in the 1890s and early 1900s as one of the best late varieties of peach and regarded as being similar, if not identical, to Royal Ascot.

Hillsborough Castle Gardens - Some Historic Records

The Kennedy Map of County Down dated 1755 shows that by that time trees had been planted in both the 'Great Park' and the 'Small Park' of Hillsborough. The Small Park, which was created by Wills Hill, first Marquess of Downshire (1718-93), probably assumed its present appearance in the 1760s, save for the addition of that section to the south of the old Moira Road added in the 1830s. The belts and screens of this original parkscape evidently comprised much sessile and holm oak. For J.C. Loudon writing in 1844 specifically mentions both. In one instance he mentions a sessile oak '70 feet high with a trunk 22 feet in circumference' and talks of 'some shrubs of some age in the grounds, particularly some fine evergreen oaks'. He also mentions a tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) 'in Lady Downshire's garden' which had a girth of 4ft 6ins and a *Magnolia acuminata* (cumbertree), 25 ft high and 4ft 4ins in girth. Another tree mentioned at that time was a cedar 8ft 8ins in circumference at 3½ ft from the ground, all of which indicates ornamental planting was in place in the Small Park by at least the 1770s if not earlier.

The terraces flanking the house were created in the early 1840s, but generally speaking not much was recorded about the planting in the grounds during the 19th century. Trees observed there during visits in the 20th century would suggest that Arthur Wills Blundell Sandys Hill, the 5th Marquess of Downshire (1844-1872) was responsible for starting the pinetum at the upper end of the lake. This included a *Pinus radiata* (formerly called *Pinus insignis*) or Monterey Pine, which was planted by the marquess himself in 1872; by 1926 it was 100 feet high and by 2005 it was measured by Aubrey Fennell at 43.5m high with girth of 4.39m, which was claimed then to be second tallest of its kind in Ireland. Other large conifer trees noted in this area during a visit in 1905 included *Abies pinsapo*; *Abies Douglasii* (*Pseudotsuga macrocarpa*); *Abies Albertiana* (*Tsuga heterophylla*); *Abies Deodara alba* (*Cedrus deodara*); *Cupressus erecta viridis* (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana erecta viridis*); *Thuja gigantea* (*Thuja plicata*); *Libocedrus decurrens* (incense cedar) and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (Wellingtonia).

In 1926 the trees in the grounds were described by Angus Duncan Webster, one-time Chief Forester to the Duke of Bedford and Park Superintendent of Regent's Park. He noted that in the pinetum and elsewhere there were 'trees of unusual proportions', making special mention of 'varieties of *Tsuga*, *Cupressus*, *Thuja*, *Juniperus*, *Libocedrus* and others', whilst also noting that the grounds contained 'fine old beeches, giant specimens of the Turkish and evergreen oaks and a varied collection of underwood'. He noted that 'many of the sequoias are well over 100 feet high' and observed that one of the largest had a girth of just over 16 feet at a yard. He thought that the 'rare and beautiful' *Cupressus funebris* (the Chinese weeping cypress) was 'represented by several of the largest trees of their kind that I have seen'. Other trees noted were a large *Cryptomeria Japonica* (syn. *Cupressus Japonica*), *Cephalotaxus* (a plum-fruited yew); several tall *Thujopsis dolabrata* and a large grand fir 'one of the largest in the British Isles' with '160 feet of wood'. There was, he said 'an

exceptionally large evergreen oak' by the kitchen garden, and elsewhere a far-spreading *Quercus Cerris* (Turkey Oak) on the lawn, lost of 'good English maples with tulip trees well represented' and 'common silver firs in abundance'.

Judging by the size of many of the ornamental trees present in the early 20th century, it is likely that much of this exotic planting was done by either the 4th Marquess (1812-1868) or his son the 5th Marquess (1844-1872). The enormous *Rhododendron Arboreum* on the house lawn must have been planted during their time also. The 6th Marquess of Downshire (1871-1918) however rarely visited Ireland, but his uncle Col. Lord Arthur William Hill (1846-1931) did spent time in Hillsborough and was undoubtedly responsible for its most memorable horticultural feature of the property, the Irish Yew Walk, planted around 1880. This is a classic late Victorian garden 'set-piece' comprising a ramped allee of yews flanking a wide path, terminating at the pond with a specially designed balustrade and urns and aligned upon the contemporary Lady Alice Temple at one end and the south portico of the house at the other.

Hillsborough Castle Gardens - The Trees Today

The dominant tree in the Small Park today is the oak, as has been the case since the 18th century. According to a recent tree report, there are at least 100 specimens over 80 feet tall and a number of particularly large specimens over 100 feet with large girths. These include a mixture of *Quercus petraea* (the majority) and *Q. robur*, a few *Q. rubra*, but there are also eight or nine very large specimens of Turkey or Austrian oak (*Q. cerris*), the latter popular for parklands in the 18th and early 19th century, possibly because it was quite fast growing and served as a good wind-break in addition to being ornamental. Considering the historic references to evergreen oaks at Hillsborough, there are relatively few holm oaks (*Q. ilex*) in the grounds today and none more than a 100 years of age.

Over 50 limes can be found in the park, many of these (*Tilia x europaea*) along the lime avenue, aligned upon the Lady Alice Temple and delimiting what is now the 'moss walk'. These trees vary in height from 80 to 95 feet with girths of around 20 to 25 feet, supporting the supposition they were planted in the 1860s.

Among the conifers, the largest are the redwoods with nearly 30 mature *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (Giant Sequoia or Wellingtonia) the largest with a height of 132 feet (40m). The tallest of the half dozen or so *Sequoia sempervirens* (California Redwood) is 104 feet. Out of around thirty large *Pseudotsuga menziesii* (Douglas fir), there are two over 130 feet high and out of a similar number of large *Tsuga heterophylla* (Western Hemlock) there are three over 110 feet high. Other conifers of note are a small collection of *Thuja plicata* (Western Red Cedar), the tallest being 111 ft (34m), a half dozen *Cedrus atlantica* (Atlas Cedar), one in the Glauca group and one Cedar of Lebanon

The only 'champion' in the grounds is the enormous spreading *Rhododendron arboreum* on the West Lawn (subsp unknown). This has a multi-stemmed bole with height of about 32 feet high (10m) and appears in the *Guinness Books of Records* as the largest in Europe.

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