

Going Ashore Experience:

A Visit To Exbury Gardens, England

By

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Exbury Gardens has been called the finest informal garden in England. In a country known for its lush and beautiful gardens, that is indeed high praise. Thus, when Cunard's Queen Mary 2 offered guests who were traveling onwards from Southampton on QM2 or transferring to another Cunard ship a shore excursion to Exbury, I immediately signed on.

Although I have planted a tree or two in my time, I am by no means an expert gardener. Thus, my interest in Exbury stemmed from a desire to experience a scenic place rather than from an interest in horticulture. As I discovered, Exbury caters not just to gardening experts but to the average person as well.

Exbury was the brainchild of Lionel Nathan de Rothschild. A member of the English branch of the famous banking family, Lionel was expected to make his career in banking. However, at an early age, he became fascinated by horticulture and gardening, reportedly planting his first garden when he was age five. Lionel did as his family expected and entered banking. However, he always said that banking was a hobby and that gardening was his true

profession.

In the early years of the 20th Century, Lionel began looking for a property that he could use to create his dream garden. He wanted it to be near his friend Lord Montagu's home at Beaulieu because the two shared a passion for fast automobiles and fast boats. Therefore, his search focused on the New Forest area.

Eventually in 1912, Lionel purchased Inchmerry House in Exbury but that property proved unsuitable for his planned garden. Consequently, when the neighboring Exbury House came on the market in 1919, he purchased that property, which had been the home of a branch of the Mitford family.

Lionel went to work on the 2,000 acre estate with a passion. He built a new neo-Georgian house around the existing house. However, his chief focus was the garden. He landscaped the area and even built a railway to transport stone for the rock garden. He sponsored expeditions to remote places such as the Himalayas to bring back rare species for the garden. He developed 1,204 hybrids of rhododendron and azalea. In all, he planted some

one million plants.

One fan of Exbury is reportedly Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Our guide confided that Her Majesty sometimes makes unofficial visits to the gardens just to explore and enjoy the scene. According to local legend, one day she came upon another visitor who told her: "Oh, you look just like her."

Her Majesty reportedly replied: "That is very reassuring" and dashed off.

During our visit, no royals were in evidence. However, even though the weather was threatening, there were a fair number of visitors in addition to our group.

After walking along a path surrounded by tall trees and flowering plants, we came upon a small railway station. Inspired by the railway station at Aviemore in Scotland, this was Exbury Central Station, the main station on the Exbury Steam Railway. The railway was the dream of Leopold de Rothschild, Nathan's son, who had a passion for trains. It opened in 2001 and has been a surprising success with over half a million riders including Her Majesty who officially named one of the locomotives.

The railway is 12 ¼ inch gauge and is one and a quarter miles long. Visitors ride on benches in open coaches that are pulled by coal-burning steam locomotives. (You can also learn to drive a locomotive for £495).

The train meanders through various sections of the gardens, over bridges and trestles and along grades. At various points, there are statues of wild animals that serve as a focal point. Inasmuch as this was the Diamond Jubilee weekend, several of the animals were equipped with Union Jacks.

All too soon, our train came to a halt near the American Garden and we disembarked. Other visitors not with our group then continued on with the train.

Our guide explained that this garden was so-named because of the collection of American rhododendron presented to Edmund de Rothschild (also Nathan's son) after the

damaging Great Storm of 1987. In addition, the majority of the plants in this area were from North America. Most of the group was from America and so quite a few photos were taken. It is a strange facet of human nature that when one is traveling, things from home take on heightened interest.

We were then guided along a path through a park-like section of the gardens. There on a gentle slope overlooking a pond, we found a little tree that our guide told us was our tree - - We were to do an official tree-planting to mark our visit on the occasion of Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee. This news came as something of a surprise but the group was obviously pleased.

All of the hard work had already been done. The tree was already in the ground. Thus, all each visitor had to do was transfer a spade full of earth from the pile next to the tree onto the area surrounding the trunk of the tree.

The Gardens had already placed a sign on the tree stating what type of tree it was and explaining that it had been planted by guests from the Queen Mary 2 during the Diamond Jubilee. It was nice to think that future visitors would read the sign and enjoy the tree as it grew.

This was the end of the organized part of our visit. We now had two hours to explore the remainder of the gardens on our own. The guide, however, made suggestions as to the most interesting route to take.

By now, the sky was no longer threatening - - it was actively raining. Some members of the group decided to continue on using umbrellas and raincoats. Others decided to head back and wait out the storm in the Gardens' tea shop.

But there was another alternative. The Gardens have several vehicles called "Buggies" that look like a stretched golf cart and for a few pounds they take people on guided tours of the gardens. They are open on the sides but have a roof and a windshield and so offer protection from the rain. Since it was uncertain whether the

rain would ever stop, I choose this alternative.

Although I like to walk, I think this would have been a good choice even if it had not been raining. The driver/guide was able to explain the different sections of the gardens and point out unusual plants. He was also quite accommodating. If one of the passengers expressed an interest in something he would take us to see it and pointed out related things along the way.

We traveled through glades, past stands of tall Sequoias, brooks and ponds with flowering plants and numerous rhododendron. It was enchanting.

One of the places we went was along the Beaulieu River. Here, the guide pointed out, landing craft and assorted ships for the D-Day invasion were marshaled before setting out for

France. Since the day of our visit was the fifth of June, this was an especially poignant moment.

Exbury House was also used during World War II. It was requisitioned by the Royal Navy and given the name HMS Mastodon. Amongst other things, the house was used in D-Day planning. Author Neville Shute was posted here and used Exbury as the setting for one of his novels.

The house is not open to the public. It is still used by members of the Rothschild family. However, you can look at the exterior of this stately home with its manicured lawns.

After about an hour, the buggy brought us back to the entrance to the Gardens. Even in the rain, they had been beautiful and one could well imagine that they must be magnificent in the sunshine.