

Recovering a Victorian Fernery

Danesbury House was built in 1776 and owned by successive families until the early 1900's. It was requisitioned during both World wars, ultimately becoming a hospital for long stay patients.

In the 1990's, like many old country mansions, the House was developed into private apartments with mews houses at the rear. Large areas of the estate came into the possession of the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council in 1985 and in 1998 the estate was designated a Local Nature Reserve (LNR) covering an area of some 25 hectares (65 acres).

Access to the site, which is permanently open, is via North Ride, Welwyn, Hertfordshire, AL6 9RD



The Danesbury Fernery – “the best to be found in the Home Counties”

In 1859 the then owner of Danesbury House, William John Blake, asked his gardener Anthony Parsons to construct a Fernery in an old chalk pit about 500 yards to the East of the House, in what is now one of the pastures forming the LNR. Anthony Parsons was a fern cultivator of some renown.



Completed in 1860, the Danesbury Fernery was very successful and in 1881 the RHS journal “Garden Memoranda” referred to it as ‘*the best fernery to be found in the Home Counties*’.

William John Blake died in 1875, and Anthony Parsons the gardener died in 1880, and it has to be doubted that the fernery was much managed after that date. It was ‘remote’ from the House; the Victorian ‘fad’ was over; there had been changes in ownership; and it was a turbulent time in history

Pulhamite Rock Work

Apart from the famed collection of rare ferns it once contained, of principal interest was the artificial rockwork, constructed in situ by James Pulham the Second, of Broxbourne, and known as Pulhamite. The Pulham design at Danesbury included ‘a **dropping well, a grotto, a pass, and a rustic bridge over a gorge**’, but unfortunately no original plans exist, and we do not yet know what is meant by ‘a pass’ in this context. The Pulhams were nationally famed for building natural looking stone for many Country Houses and Estates, including Buckingham Palace and Sandringham.

The Danesbury Volunteers

Under the direction of the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, a small group of volunteers (the Friends) had been clearing paths and scrub on the Nature Reserve from the 1990s. In September 2015, the Friends first ventured onto the derelict site of the Fernery, which had been written off by Pulhamite experts as ‘beyond redemption’, and they found an impenetrable and hazardous old chalk pit full of nettles, elder, thistles, litter and rubble. The Pulhamite rock work was there, but behind a tangle of ivy and tree roots.



Ann MacDonald, Manager of the Council's Landscape & Ecology Department, agreed with the Friends that if they could commit to clear the site and subsequently maintain it, then her Department would give them all the encouragement and support needed to make it a success.



By June 2016 all the invasive nettles, elder and scrub had been cleared, invasive tree roots poisoned, and grass seeded to make the site look slightly less derelict.



By November 2016 the 'scrub-bashing' phase was over, and the Borough Council provided specialist help from contractors who started the careful task of excavating the original pathways.



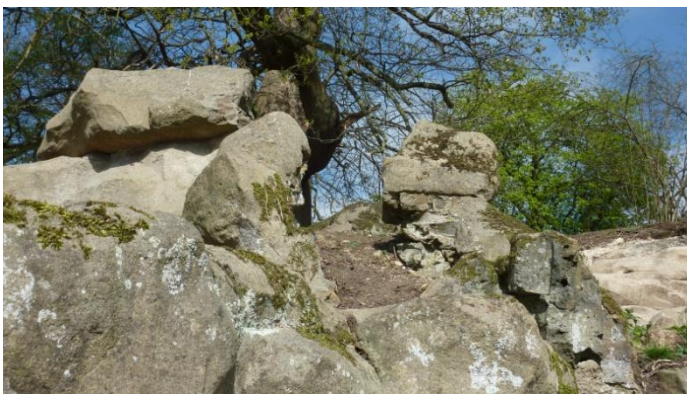
In March 2017, it was recognised that with many tons of spoil to move it would take the Friends a few years to make further serious inroads. The contractors came on site for another short period of intense and skilled activity. Some massive discoveries were made: we 'found' the basin at the foot of the Dropping Well, and we uncovered the gorge which the 'rustic bridge' would originally have spanned, and we found the remains of a very large Pulhamite vase or urn, with a diameter of at least 1 metre.



In early May 2017, guided by a 1st Edition Ordnance Survey map showing the Fernery and its paths, we uncovered a 'lost' path above the grotto, still with its original gravel surface. It ends with a sudden stop before the 'gorge' which might have been the point where the Victorians crossed to the other side over a 'rustic bridge'.



To our amazement, a water pipe was uncovered in mid-May 2017 adjacent to the Dropping Well, with a built in key/tap to control the water flow, and the Council has agreed to replace a couple of large Pulhamite stones that fell many years ago from the top of the grotto.



Newsflash

The 2017 Welwyn Festival - The Fernery is 'Open' Sunday 18th June 2-5 pm.

As part of the 2017 Welwyn Festival Open Gardens Programme, the Fernery will be 'Open' on 18th June and visitors will enjoy Victorian drinks and cake as they learn how the Danesbury Fernery might have looked some 158 years ago when under construction.



Gardening Friends Needed

Specimen ferns have been purchased and planted thanks to a generous gift from the Welwyn Wailers, plus donations of plants from members of the local Gardening Club. We now need a group of Saturday Fernery Friends to help maintain these beds. The Fernery Friends will plant up and maintain all parts of the Fernery as excavations proceed. Their central aim will be to restore the Danesbury Fernery to be '*the best fernery to be found in the Home Counties*' once again.

Work in Progress

We estimate that it will be three years before restoration is completed. There are tons more soil to excavate before we will completely uncover all the rockwork and restore the original topography of the Fernery. We have to work out how the Victorians got water to the site and pumped it around. We need to cost the repair/replacement of the perimeter 'estate' iron fencing, and the ironwork which originally formed a 'grotesque' entrance. At some stage we might need a technical survey of the Pulhamite rockwork.

Your Help is needed

The third Thursday every month - The Friends of Danesbury meet to continue the task of excavation and restoration

Saturday mornings – Fernery Gardening Friends meet to maintain and improve the formal gardens as we progress.

For more details please contact:

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