

Recovering Danesbury's Victorian Fernery

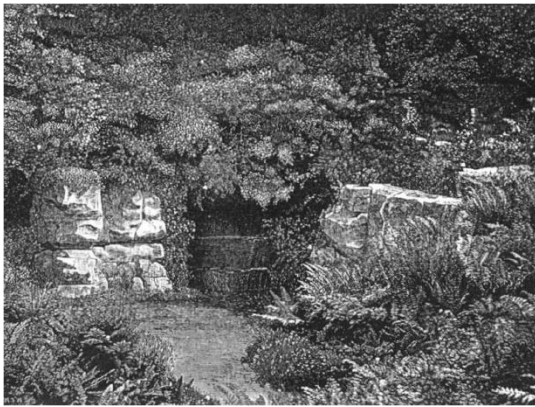
Danesbury House was built in 1776 and owned by successive families until the early 1900's. It was requisitioned during both World wars, ultimately becoming a hospital for long stay patients.

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 William John Blake, who then owned Danesbury House, asked his gardener Anthony Parsons to design and construct a Fernery in an old chalk pit about 500 metres to the East of the House, in what is now one of the pastures forming the Local Nature Reserve. Anthony Parsons was a fern cultivator of some renown, and with the Pulham family of Broxbourne, who were at that time the leading artificial rock builders in the country. The Fernery was completed one year later in 1860.

William John Blake died in 1875, and Anthony Parsons the gardener died in 1880. The leading national gardening journal of the time, '*Garden Memoranda*' referred to the Danesbury Fernery in 1881 as '*the best fernery to be found in the Home Counties*'. But it must be doubted that the Fernery was much managed in the early years of 20th Century: it was 'remote' from the House; the Victorian Ferning 'fad' was over; there had been changes in family ownership; and after wartime requisitioning the House had become a Hospital. We have new evidence showing that in 1924 principal local gardens gained from Danesbury's abandoned specimen ferns.

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. 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 owners, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, a small group of local volunteers (the Friends of Danesbury Fernery), with support from the Sherrardspark Wood Wardens and the Friends of Mardley Heath, first ventured onto the derelict Fernery site in September 2015. They found an impenetrable and hazardous old chalk pit full of nettles, elder, thistles, litter and rubble. The Pulhamite rock work was there, but hard to see behind a tangle of ivy and tree roots. No ferns were to be found.

Ann MacDonald, Landscape and Ecology Manager, Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council, 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.



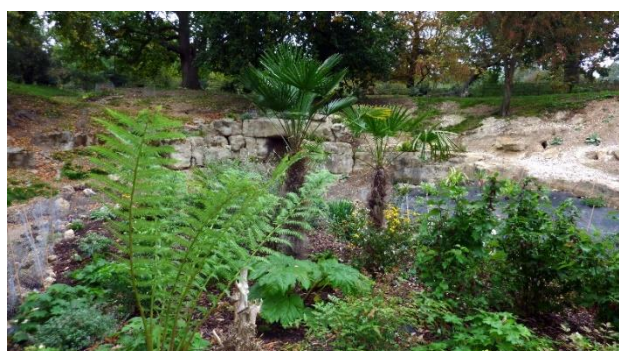
So, the work started and by June 2016 the scrub had been cleared, and invasive and damaging tree roots in the rockwork were poisoned. In November 2016, Borough Council contractors moved tons of spoil that was found to be covering the site, to allow excavation work to begin in earnest in April 2017.



This revealed the original gravel pathways and rockwork that had been hidden for 100 years or so. Two large Pulhamite stones which had fallen, were skilfully reset by professionals into their original position above the grotto.



In February 2018 young tree 'whips' were planted around the perimeter to provide long term shelter and shade, and the volunteers started digging to find the location of Anthony Parsons' original planting beds. Our first 'Big-Plant Up' of the Central Bed took place in May 2018 in time for the Welwyn Festival Open Day in June 2018..





Apart from the planting of specimen trees, shrubs, and flowers in the principal beds, under the guidance of our garden adviser Sarah Marsh, we have also now planted a substantial collection of wildflowers on the slopes, mostly cultivated by Jenny Hawkins. These are all wildflowers native to Hertfordshire although not necessarily to be found in the original Fernery site.



We hope you notice the decorated posts at the Entrance which the Victorians termed 'Grotesque'. This described the way in which the two iron posts were dressed in bark, with ivy encouraged to grow and bind it together. The repair and straightening of the two Entrance posts was made possible by a generous benefactor, and the fir cones which add an artistic touch, have been set by Harry Ward, one of the Friends' Committee members.



Since 2016 we have been gradually planting ferns. Initially this was made possible by awards from the Welwyn Wailers and the Welwyn Festival Committee, and donations from many local garden and horticultural societies. We are now group members of the British Fern Society (BPS) and we are benefitting from their advice and generosity, which is freely given.



2019 Welwyn Festival Open Garden

The Fernery is 'Open' Thursday 20th June 6 pm to 8.30 pm.

An Entrance charge of £2 for adults is made towards the Festival's named local Charities, and light refreshments will be available, the proceeds of which will go to the Friends of Danesbury Fernery funds. Volunteer guides will be available, and visitors will be asked to keep to the paths.

You can help as a volunteer or as a benefactor

Volunteers meet on the 3rd Thursday each month throughout the year, and all news of our activities can be found on www.danesburyfernery.org.uk and at: @danesburyfernery #danesburyferns

If you would like to be a benefactor and help us complete the restoration of the Danesbury Fernery, we have been given Charities Status by HMRC and at the time of print are awaiting the allocation of the Charity Commission's Registered Number.

if you have old records that would help fill the many gaps in our knowledge about the Blake Family at Danesbury and the history of the Fernery, please contact us at info@danesburyfernery.org.uk



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