

NATURE

Jane Braham – reflecting on 25 years in the Park

by Piers Eley

Jane Braham retired as Assistant Park Superintendent in September after working in the Park for 25 years. During my involvement with the Richmond Park Wildlife Group over the past 10 or 12 years, Jane has been at the heart of the Park's management team and has been an influential figure in its steadily increasing sensitivity to ecological issues.

Her contributions to our discussions in the Wildlife Group have always been valuable and to the point and, often, in her quiet way, she has corrected some misconception or headed me away from one of my wilder ideas, by pointing out some possible consequence that I might otherwise have overlooked. I shall miss her wise counsel and, rather than write my usual "Nature Notes" for this issue, in what is always a quiet period in the Park's wildlife year, I thought I would invite Jane to tell me a little about herself and her experiences in the Park, which she was kind enough to do.

PE: When you came here 25 years ago, what was your first job in the Park?

JB: I was an unskilled gardener in a team reporting to Wally Miller, who was Head Gardener in the Isabella Plantation at that time. It was really Wally Miller, and George Thomson, the Park Superintendent who appointed him, who were responsible for creating the Isabella as we know it today.

PE: Did you have any previous gardening experience or qualification?

JB: No! I had a degree in fine arts and had been teaching art in a technical college for 13 years. I needed a change. I wanted to train as an ecologist and thought that, if I had a day job as a



Jane in front of the bog garden she created with her team

manual labourer, my brain would be able to concentrate on my academic studies in the evening. Of course it didn't work out like that. I was hoping to learn about tigers and trees and found myself

having to study topics like thermodynamics and

bacteriology, in which I had little interest.

Meanwhile, I became increasingly fascinated by horticulture – I learnt a lot from Wally Miller, who was self-taught, hugely enthusiastic and a mine of information, particularly on Rhododendrons, Azaleas and Camellias – and it became impossible for me to continue my ecological studies as well. Nevertheless, I have always retained my interest in ecology.

PE: When did you take over responsibility for the Isabella Plantation?

JB: In 1990 the vacancy as "Horticultural Foreman" came up for the third time since Wally Miller's retirement. I applied for the job and was lucky enough to be appointed. Unfortunately, the job now had wider responsibilities

throughout the Park and I was rarely able to get in there and work alongside the people for whom I was now responsible. I always enjoyed the camaraderie of working as part of a team of gardeners in the Isabella. I think those were some of the happiest years of my life. Then, of course, in 1992 the workforce was privatised and the whole thing changed.



Gunnera manicata in the bog garden

PE: How did it change?

JB: Well, the workforce were no longer employed by the Royal Parks Agency, but by independent contractors. Instead of managing my team, I was now Supervisor of the ground maintenance contract for the whole of the Park, a mammoth task, working under Mike Fitt as Park Superintendent and Bill Cathcart as his deputy.

PE: But you were still in charge of what happened in the Isabella?

JB: Oh yes! I planned the work, designed new planting schemes and, with the help of my colleagues, chose what shrubs and trees to plant. But I didn't get in there to dig any longer!

PE: What are the things you are most proud of achieving during your time at Isabella?

JB: Everything I have been able to achieve at Isabella has resulted from the collaboration and support of the very good team of gardeners working there. In the early 1990s, with the assistance of John Bond of the Savill Garden, we set up a National Collection of the "Wilson Fifty" Kurume Azaleas, all of them shrubs introduced to this country by E H ("Chinese") Wilson, the famous plant hunter. At the same time we started exhibiting Isabella's plants at the RHS Shows in Westminster, winning three silver cups, one twice, and a great many first prizes for our Rhododendrons, Azaleas and other shrubs, which was a source of great encouragement to the whole team. An

added bonus was that this put us in contact with gardeners from other great Rhododendron Gardens.

During my time as head gardener I also planned and saw through to completion three new garden areas.

The first of these was "Wilson's Glade", a rather secret glade that we created near the Broomfield Hill entrance. In this we planted a selection of unusual shrubs and trees that Wilson had introduced from China and Japan. These include a selection of Japanese Maples, Chinese Magnolias, Tibetan Cherries, a Chinese Tulip Tree, a Birch-leaved Viburnum, and a host of others. They make a most attractive and varied display.

Then, in 2000 we created a really splendid Bog Garden with five pools fed by Thomson's Stream. This gave me the opportunity to introduce many varied and architecturally striking plants that thrive in that environment, like Bamboos, Gunnera, Hostas and Giant Grasses.

Next, in 2003, to celebrate the Garden's Golden Jubilee, we created a white garden, known as the Birthday Glade, on the mounds of soil that had been dug out to make the ponds in the Bog Garden. This is along the fence to the East of Peg's Pond and is well worth a visit. Here you will find many shrubs whose "blossoms" consist of white

papery bracts, including the Handkerchief Tree, Cornus “Eddie’s White Wonder” and Hydrangeas, such as *H. quercifolia*, the so-called Oak-leaved Hydrangea, which is one of my favourites.

Something that pleased us all very much was that Robin Lane Fox selected the Isabella as one of his 10 best gardens in the country, in his article for the Financial Times in April. On the same day, the Independent also included the Isabella in its supplement “The 100 Best Gardens in the Country”, as one of the top 10 woodland gardens. We felt this gave the Isabella some of the recognition that it truly deserved.

PE: Can you remind me how the Isabella got its name?

JB: Almost certainly not. On old maps, before its enclosure by Lord Sidmouth in the mid-nineteenth century, it was already known as the “Isabel Slade”. It is thought that this reflected the dingy yellow colour of the garden’s topsoil. The use of “Isabel” to mean “dingy yellow” was coined after Queen Isabel of Austria swore never to change her linen until the siege of Ostend was successful. No-one knows quite why she chose to do this, but it appears that the siege lasted three years and the impact on her clothing did not pass unnoticed.

PE: What changes have you noticed since you first came to the Park?

JB: Well, of course the emphasis is quite different. We are all much more aware of the ecological priorities than

we were. This is most noticeable in the management of the trees, which are allowed, even encouraged, to retain dead wood, provided this is not considered dangerous, because of the wildlife which thrives on it, and when branches do fall, we leave them to rot on the ground. In the old days this would have been considered very sloppy management!

Generally the management of the Park has become more sustainable. For example, I was given the task of developing a Park-wide recycling and composting system. This, together with cutting and composting bracken, has allowed us to become completely peat free.



Enjoying a quiet moment in her white garden

I am afraid wildlife has inevitably become under greater pressure with the ever increasing numbers of people, dogs and cars that use the Park. Against that, some of the Wildlife Group’s initiatives have born fruit. The re-enclosure of the Reed Beds at the South end of Pen Ponds has been very successful and the Bird Group’s designation of Lawn Field, the grass area above lower Pen

Pond, as a dogs-on-leads area, appears to have been very beneficial. Certainly the numbers of breeding Skylarks recorded in the area has risen year on year since we did this.

I regret the increase of signage in the Park, particularly that associated with the Tamsin Trail: it interferes with the natural feeling of the Park, but I can see that it is necessary. By contrast, the new illustrated notice boards, celebrating the Park’s status as a National Nature

Reserve, have been a wholly positive and successful development, much appreciated by the public.

PE: Tell me about the Bird Group, which I know you helped to organise.

JB: As you know, this was really an initiative of Jacqueline Shane, your predecessor as Chairman of the Wildlife Group. I was merely the facilitator who organised the meetings and made things happen. Nigel Reeve (the Royal Parks' ecologist) and I designed the circular "Transect Walk", which samples the varying habitats of the Park. This survey, now in its seventh year, has been a great success and has taught us a lot about the bird population in the Park.

Now we are trying to map the resident bird population and their nesting areas, so that this information can be taken into account in planning the environmental management of the Park.

We have a really excellent and committed team of bird recorders who also lead bird-spotting walks several times a year, which are very popular.

This reminds me that we also have gardeners' walks in the Isabella, which we started in 2003, as part of the Birthday Celebrations, and which were so successful that they have continued on a regular basis ever since. PE: Now that you have retired, how do you plan to spend your time?

JB: At the moment I want to have a long rest with no commitments. Then I plan to explore the art and architecture of London in depth, learn Italian and visit the gardens of Italy and go travelling with my daughter, who is a choreographer and movement director in opera, when she goes on tour.

I also want to go to India, to see tigers. I have always been fascinated by tigers. They are the most beautiful of all creatures. I used to imagine them appearing through the grasses in the Isabella Plantation. Now I would like to go and see them in the wild. And when Mike, my partner and long-serving member of the "Isabella gang", retires in two years, I expect we shall do a lot of walking and birding, particularly on the North Norfolk coast.

PE: What about gardening? Is there a garden attached to your new house?

JB: Certainly not! One of our top criteria in choosing a house was that it should have no lawn for Mike to mow. There is a small back yard in which I may grow some herbs, but nothing that requires any serious work.

PE: Tell me what has been your overriding impression and memory of your time in the Park?

JB: Hard work, but with many rewards and a great deal of pleasure. I must say that I could not have had a nicer collection of colleagues with whom to work throughout my time here. I hope and expect that they will always remain our close friends.

P Jane, thank you!

Piers D C Eley

Piers Eley is Chairman of the Richmond Park Wildlife Group. He originally studied law, and worked as a corporate financier for 30 years, but his great love is wildlife and the Park.

Photos of Jane Braham by Piers Eley