

# Isabella today and tomorrow

*Michael Davison*

When the diggers and tree-fellers moved into the Isabella Plantation to start work on the current Access Project there were, let's face it, many Friends ready to weep at what seemed the devastation of parts of their much-loved woodland garden. Huge swathes of shrubs were rooted out, leaving a landscape suggestive of battlefields; bulldozers churned through mud at the bottom of the drained ponds. Even a year into the project, large no-go areas remained, and the wet winter left a sea of puddles to negotiate on the paths that remained open.

Gradually, however, the Isabella of the future has begun to emerge – and for visitors during the coming months and years, there is a new and revitalised Plantation to look forward to. It will be a Plantation stripped, eventually, of all its familiar *Rhododendron ponticum*. Beloved of Victorian garden designers for its luxuriant green foliage and handsome purple blossom, *R. ponticum* became too successful for its own good. It invaded huge areas beyond its original plantings and robbed lower-growing shrubs of light and air, creating ideal conditions for the spread of pests and diseases. The death knell for *R. ponticum* in Isabella came when it was found to be particularly susceptible to a pathogen known as *Phytophthora kernoviae*, which, if unchecked, could devastate the Plantation's nationally important collection of other rhododendrons, azaleas, magnolias and camellias, and even spread into the wider Park and endanger its precious oak trees.

In clearing out the *R. ponticum*, a large party of Friends volunteers have played a major role, awarding themselves the proud nickname of "rhoddy bashers" as they hacked and sawed at the undergrowth, making a clear path for the machine diggers to move in.

The loss of *R. ponticum* will inevitably mean a permanent change in the appearance of the Plantation, but already new plantings are beginning to dot the cleared areas. It may be ten years before these provide a similar degree of cover to the banished *R. ponticum*, but this is, after all, a short time in the life of the Park. As the new plantings are mainly of deciduous trees, there will remain a clear passage of light and air to the soil, encouraging a wider variety of plant species.

Muddy paths will be a thing of the past, as new, all-weather accessible paths of Coxwell gravel on a bed of flint pebbles lead the visitor on a winding course among the long-established stands of trees and shrubs and the new plantings. Along these paths there will be additional benches, higher than the traditional seats and incorporating armrests; they are made in the Park's sawmill, using green oak from the Park.

Plaques beside the paths and markers at ground level will highlight special "character areas" – the ponds, the Bog Garden, the Acer Glade, the Camellia Walk, and so on. Appropriate symbols will pinpoint remarkable trees and other individual features of interest, which will be described in a printed leaflet or downloadable app. Such signage may seem superfluous to Friends long acquainted with the Plantation, but every volunteer at the Visitor Centre knows how many newcomers call in on their way to discover the Plantation for the first time.



At the northern end, beside the entrance from the newly surfaced Peg's Pond car park for disabled badge holders, there will be a new toilet block, shelter area and interpretation board. The pond has been cleared of 2,500 cubic metres of silt and enhanced with reed beds to encourage a greater variety of wildfowl, with broad

observation platforms to watch them from. Thomson's Pond has also been cleared of its long accumulation of dead leaves and bird droppings to create healthier water conditions; the adjacent stepping stones, favourites with young visitors, survive in a more accessible form for wheelchairs and buggies.

The Still Pond, famous for its azalea backcloth in spring, has an added border of deer fern and arum lily, as well as a widened all-weather observation area.

In the 1830s the Park's Deputy Ranger Viscount Sidmouth, a former Prime Minister and a man of vision, established Isabella as one of several enclosed plantations with which he enhanced the Park. In the 1940s, work began on developing the woodland garden we know today, opened to the public in 1953. Last year's 60th anniversary saw the beginning of the latest reconstruction, to harmonise the Plantation with the recreational and conservation requirements of the 21st century. Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and Big Lottery Fund, work proceeds in the hands of a large and dedicated team of planners, designers and contractors led by Assistant Park Manager Jo Scrivener, maintaining the visionary tradition of Lord Sidmouth.