

The Newsletter

Worcestershire Group



Issue 62
Autumn/Winter 2025



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HPS Worcestershire Group

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Photos in this edition:

Cover photo The Picton Garden, Malvern (Mike Bentley)

Other photos by Mike Bentley, Rob Swallow, Jan Vaughan

Speakers' photos taken from their respective websites.



From the Editor

Welcome to issue 62 (the fourth digital version) of the Worcestershire HPS Group's newsletter.

Thank you for your contributions to this newsletter and please keep them coming in. I am aiming to produce the next edition in April 2026. It's been an interesting year for gardeners, with some plants doing well and others having really struggled. I thought I'd lost at least one shrub (a winter-flowering *Viburnum Bodnantense*) but during our long, mild autumn its leaves have reappeared and it is now flowering well. In a sandy, South-facing garden that I look after the Asters were the worst I have ever seen them and barely flowered at all. At the moment the meteorologists are predicting another dry summer next year and I am having to rethink what I am going to grow in that garden. Later in this edition Wendy Richards has reflected on what's done well and what hasn't for her this year.

On the positive side I've discovered the usefulness of green manures (seeds planted to grow into plants that are cut back and dug in to improve the soil). I can write more about that in the next edition if people are interested.

Please keep your contributions coming in! Some tips:

- Please don't embed your photographs in the text, as I will only have to take them out again to get the formatting to work properly in the Microsoft Publisher software that I use. If you leave the photos as separate files I will be able to handle them much more easily.
- The format of the text doesn't matter too much as I can alter this, but if you submit it in Arial (font size 12) that saves me a few minutes.
- A picture paints a thousand words, so please let me have photos to accompany the text if you can.
- I am happy to accept handwritten submissions.
- If you end up with a file that is too big for your email provider (providers vary but the limit is often between 10 and 20 megabytes) you can use a file transfer service e.g. WeTransfer (wetransfer.com.... ask me if you need more information about this).

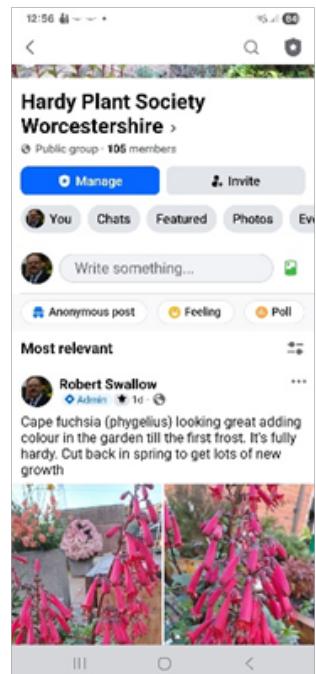
Mike Bentley, Editor

From the Chair



It's hard to believe that six months have already passed since I took over as Chair; and what a busy and rewarding half-year it's been! When I stepped into the role, my main aims were to grow our membership and raise our local profile. Looking back now, I'm pleased to say that it's been a reasonably successful start, with plenty of positive developments and encouraging momentum for the months ahead.

One of the first things we tackled was reviving our Facebook page, which had been sitting rather quietly with just nine followers back in March. Thanks to some fresh energy and regular posting, we now have over 100 followers, and that number continues to increase. We've been encouraging both members and visitors to share photos, comments and updates, which helps keep our page lively and engaging. Over the next six months, we plan to build on that progress by making more creative use of social media — including adding short video clips, linking more closely with our website, and connecting with the national HPS pages and other local media outlets.



Speaking of technology, I'm delighted to say that our new website is now live and fully up and running. This has been a real team effort, but special thanks must go to Phil Simpson, who we co-opted onto the committee earlier this year to help with technology and social media. Phil has given us a tremendous amount of time and expertise, all free of charge, and we're extremely grateful for his help. The site looks fantastic and is easy to use — if you haven't already explored it, please do visit <https://hpsworcs.co.uk/>.

In addition to our online presence, the committee decided we would once again hold our annual plant sale, and I'm delighted to report that it was a great success. Not only did a couple of local nurseries join us to sell their plants — both of whom have said they'd like to return next year — but we've also had interest from two new nurseries who've asked if they can take part in 2026. It's wonderful to see the event becoming so popular among local growers.

(Continued)

From the Chair (Continued)

Events like this simply wouldn't be possible without the support of our wonderful volunteers, so I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all who contributed. That includes those who donated or sold plants, those who baked for the refreshments, and those who helped set up and clear away. I'd also like to thank everyone who helps to make our monthly meetings so enjoyable and welcoming. A special mention must go to Leslie, who continues to do a fantastic job running the prize draw and our plant sales volunteers — a real highlight for many of our members each month.

Looking ahead, I'm very pleased to say that thanks to Jo's hard work and persistence, we now have a full program of speakers lined up for next year. There's a wonderful variety of topics, and I'm confident there'll be something to interest everyone. Alongside this, we've also arranged several coffee mornings and two garden visits, which will give members the chance to socialize, exchange ideas, and enjoy some beautiful gardens together.

Of course, not everything is without its challenges. Like many groups, we're feeling the pressure of rising costs. The hire fee for the hall has increased, and speaker fees are going up too. On top of that, the national HPS membership fees have recently risen. The committee have decided our own membership will remain the same at £35 for an individual, but reduce for a spouse or partner as we introduce joint memberships for spouses or civil partners at £50, making a significant saving. I do want to reassure you that our society still represents excellent value for money. To put it into perspective — if you went to the cinema 11 times a year for a couple of hours each time, it would cost you around £100 at the Vue with no refreshments or social interaction. By comparison, our membership offers a whole year of talks, events, and community for a fraction of that, not to mention the friendships and gardening inspiration that come with it.

All in all, it's been an encouraging first six months, full of energy, enthusiasm, and shared achievement. We've strengthened our communications, attracted new members, and held successful events that have brought our community together. None of this would have been possible without your continued support, and I'm deeply grateful to everyone who gives their time, effort, and ideas so generously.

Thank you for helping to make our society such a welcoming and thriving group. I'm very much looking forward to the next six months — and to seeing how we can continue to grow, learn, and enjoy our gardening together.

Robert Swallow

Speakers and events, 2026

10th January: Tamsin Westhorpe. Stockton Bury Gardens through the seasons

14th Feb: February: Carol Smith. Using Views and Vistas in designing your garden.

14th March: : Andrew Mills, head gardener at Blenheim Palace. An armchair walk through the gardens at Blenheim, with one eye on the past and one on the future

11th April: Garden Organic (speaker tbc) the Principles of Organic Gardening

9th May: Val Bourne First-rate Perennials: 46 personal favourites for your garden

13th June: Plant Sale

27th June: Visit to Benjamin Matthews' National Collection of Hostas

11th July: Diane Clement: The Narrow Road to the Deep North (travels in Japan)

20th July: Visit to our member Claire Constantine's garden

12th September: Julia Mitchell: The care and cultivation of Penstemons

10th October: Timothy Walker: "Bordering on Insanity", creating a border for year-round interest

14th Nov: Aaron Pleciak: Planting trees and bare-root hedging

5th Dec: John and Carole Matthews: The Vintage Garden



Timothy Walker



Carol Smith



Val Bourne



**Ben Matthews with part of his
National Collection of Hostas**

Growing plants for the group

Part of the attraction of our local HPS group is to be able to purchase plants grown by other members. There are two opportunities to do this: from the sales table run at our regular Saturday meetings (December excepted) by Wendy, Selwyn and Sarah, and at the annual plant sale which takes place in June of each year.



Wendy, Selwyn and Sarah running the monthly plant sales table

The plant sales table and the annual sale make a huge contribution to meeting the costs of running the Worcestershire group (as Rob said in the Chair's article, the annual sale last year raised around £1,000). Whilst we do have a small number of nurseries attending the annual sale, most of the plants there— and all of the plants on the sales table— are donated by group members.

Next time you are propagating plants in your garden please pot up some for our sales, they will be very welcome!

Helpers at the plant sale,
June 2025



Thrived, Survived (just) or Died?

Wendy Richards reflects on a challenging growing season

In the forty years that we have lived here I think that 2025 has been the worst hot, dry year for my garden. It's South-West facing, around a third of an acre, with a light sandy soil that gets very dry. Evesham has had little rainfall; it seems to come from the West over the Malvern Hills, gets as far as Pershore, and what little is left falls as a few light showers that just dampen the top layers of soil.

I water my pots but use the hosepipe very little in the garden; it only reaches about a quarter of the way anyway. So much has died this summer, including plants that have been with me for many years in large clumps, as well as ones I would class as completely hardy but just not drought tolerant.

Plants that survived well included all the *Hemerocallis* (most sent up fifteen to twenty stems), *Sedum*, *Nepeta*, *Dierama*, although the flowers dried out quickly. *Echinops*, *Eringium* and all the shrubby *Salvia* are still putting on a good show in October. The autumn tall pink *Anenomes* are fine, as are the *Achillea*. *Geraniums* just survived, having been cut back hard.

Big clumps of *Phlox* hated the heat and all my *Epimediums*, under various shrubs and trees, look dessicated with no leaves left to cut back before the flowers come, if they come at all. The *Astrantias* are gone... *Sanguisorbias* are very short, with few flowers. Most of the *Asters* and autumn *Chrysanthemum* are flowering but with a lot of mildew on the leaves.

So many plants have completely died; the ones most affected seem to be all my *Geums*. I had quite a collection, including six new ones bought this year from the Malvern spring show. All of those died! Some *Primulas*, *Heucheras* and little *Vio-las* are OK, some not. All the *Brunneras* are brown and I hope that my *Pulmonaria* will come back in the spring. Even in pots *Hostas* did not cope well. All in all, the autumn garden does not look good: a few clumps of *Chryanth*s, some *asters* and some *Penstemon* still in flower. This surprise this week was to find all the *Colchicum* planted under trees and shrubs suddenly appearing and all flowering well despite no watering: on one clump I counted forty-two stems.

So I put out a plea to members to remember the plant sales table as they carry out their autumn garden tidy-ups. If you can spare a bit from the edge of a clump please pot it up and bring it along to a meeting. I shan't be able to supply as much as I usually do and all the proceeds to go the Worcs. group's funds so help everyone. WR

Product review: garden snips

I have owned Felco secateurs for many years. My favourites are the Model 7 with a rotating handle; this is designed to reduce strain on your wrist and I've found that, once you've got used to the feel compared to that of traditional secateurs, they work really well. Another bonus of Felcos are that all parts are replaceable and you can even send them off to get professionally restored , a service which I recently took advantage of after leaving a pair in a customer's border for several months; they came back literally looking like new including re-dipped handles.

There are some jobs for which secateurs can be a bit big and clumsy for; these include cutting flowers for display, dead-heading and some fine pruning jobs. For those jobs a lighter pair of snips with longer, thinner blades is useful. I've had a couple of pairs of Felco snips (Model 310) but found the spring rather flimsy; on my second pair it snapped and I was unable to source a replacement; they had also gone up in price a fair bit over the last three years so I decided to try another make.

Browsing on a well-known internet site I couldn't make my mind up. In the end I bought two pairs: one to keep at home and one to go in my toolbox to go out to work with me. The models I chose were Darlac's "Straight Snips" (at the time of writing on a 'Black Friday' online offer at £13.99, reduced from a RRP of £19.99) and Spear & Jackson's Razorsharp Snips (currently £12.33). The model of Felco snips that I had been using are currently £27.99 but there are other Felco models available at a lower price.



After six months of use I am happy to say that these are both very good snips. I did wonder about the slightly offset blades of the S&Js but in practice they work well. The handles of both sit nicely in my big hands; the catches are similar and easier to use than the loop types that you find on some snips. Both come guaranteed.

On balance I prefer the Darlac snips. I like the long spring (spares are available) and the blades are great for fine work.

If you'd like to recommend any tools please email me:

editor.hpsworcester@gmail.com

Unfashionable, forgotten, lost!

New garden plants are bred for the nursery trade every year, and the choice seems endless, but what about a plant that you used to grow? Maybe it was in the garden for years and slowly faded away, or you moved house and didn't propagate it in time. Now, when you search for it there are no nurseries offering that particular variety.

Over the years many good garden plants are lost to cultivation. Perhaps because that particular cultivar takes longer to bulk up for propagation, or a newer cultivar has a bigger flower but possibly isn't as hardy. Whatever the reason some plants become lost from cultivation.

The HPS Conservation Scheme tries to identify good garden plants that are hard to find, even in specialist nurseries. Plants are recommended by members and, if meeting certain criteria, are taken on for assessment. This means that plants are grown in gardens across the country to see what situations suit best and if they are generally garden worthy.



Two of my favourite conservation plants.
Penstemon Pensham St James' (left)
and *Erigeron 'Sincerity'* (above)

Sally Adams, the national coordinator for the Conservation Scheme, wrote about three plants that she would like to find and this met with a good response from HPS members which has resulted in finding two of them.

One was *Hemerocallis 'Helle Berlinerin'* which I have grown for quite a few years and seen here growing with *Hemerocallis 'Cherry Ripe'* another conservation plant.



(continued)

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Worcestershire Group has had a long association with the Conservation Scheme, although at the moment there is no coordinator to represent the Group. If you would like to find out more about how the Scheme works or the list of plants that are currently the subject of our conservation efforts then visit the HPS website, www.hardy-plant.org.uk/activities/conservation

I am a member of Worcestershire Group, but also coordinator for Western Counties conservation growers and would like to see this Group getting involved again.

Jan Vaughan

If you enjoyed the articles about Claire Constantine's newly created meadow garden, as featured in recent editions of the Newsletter, you can now enjoy a video of the garden on Youtube.

Just copy and paste this link into your browser:

https://youtu.be/-e_ENzyuJ4

***Echium pininana* — From Seed to Spire and Back Again**

There are few plants that command attention in quite the same way as *Echium pininana*, writes **Tracy Swallow**. Towering, architectural, and humming with pollinators, it brings a touch of the subtropical to even the most temperate garden. Originating from the laurel forests of La Palma in the Canary Islands, *E. pininana* has found a happy niche in many mild parts of the UK, especially along the southwest coast — yet with a little care, it can be cultivated successfully much further inland.

Every year, Rob sets himself the challenge of growing something a little unusual from seed, and last year's choice was *Echium pininana*. The decision came about after he read — or rather misread — an article that claimed they were “prehistoric plants.” Another joy of living with a dyslexic husband is these small moments of misunderstanding that keep us both laughing. Nevertheless, once Rob had done his research and sown the seeds, the task fell, as it often does, to me — to find room in the garden for his latest horticultural experiment.

Establishing the Rosette

Echium pininana is a monocarpic biennial or short-lived perennial, completing its life cycle in two to three years. The first year is devoted to forming a substantial rosette of narrow, silver-hairy leaves — a vital photosynthetic engine that fuels the following year's spectacular flowering spike.

When Rob sowed his first batch, he started with a packet of ten seeds — but only one actually germinated! That single seedling has since flourished into a magnificent plant, and the plan now is to succession sow each year so that we always have *Echium pininana* at different stages in the garden. We're also keen to see whether it will self-seed naturally, in which case we'll lift and replant the young seedlings to establish a continuing display. We may even have some left for our plant sale next year.

Site and Cultivation

In its native habitat, *E. pininana* grows on volcanic slopes with perfect drainage and abundant sunlight — conditions well worth emulating in cultivation. A south- or west-facing slope or raised bed is ideal. The soil should be well drained but moisture-retentive enough to sustain growth through summer. A mix of loam, grit, and coarse compost suits it well.

We have planted ours against a fence in a westerly position that receives plenty of sun, in our free-draining border — and it seems to be thriving there. The shelter from the fence offers just enough protection from cold winds without shading the plant, which appears to appreciate both the warmth and the airflow.

The species is borderline hardy, tolerating brief frosts down to about -3°C once mature, but rosettes are easily damaged by prolonged cold or wet. In milder counties it can be overwintered in situ with a dry mulch of bracken, straw, or horticultural fleece, particularly around the crown. In colder areas, overwintering in a cool, frost-free greenhouse is a safer option; replanting in the following spring once growth resumes.

During the rosette phase, avoid high-nitrogen fertilisers. Excessive feeding encourages soft, sappy growth susceptible to rot. Instead, ensure the plant has ample root room and excellent drainage — the two key factors for success.

The Flowering Phase

The transition from rosette to inflorescence is unmistakable. As days lengthen in late spring, the central stem begins to elongate dramatically, often growing 15–20 cm per week. Within weeks, the plant transforms into a magnificent spire reaching 3–4 metres tall, clothed in a dense panicle of small, funnel-shaped blue to violet flowers with crimson stamens.

A mature spike can carry up to 200,000 individual blooms, producing a rich nectar source that is irresistible to bees, hoverflies, and butterflies. Once flowering begins, the plant devotes all its stored reserves to reproduction; foliage withers progressively from the base upwards, and the plant dies after seed ripening.

In many gardens, *Echium pininana* quickly becomes a talking point. Its size and presence make it almost impossible to ignore, and watching the flowering spike rise by the day is one of those small garden dramas that never loses its fascination.

Seed Ripening and Collection

After flowering, allow the stems to dry naturally on the plant if weather permits. Each flower produces several nutlets containing a single viable seed. When the spike turns a uniform pale brown, cut and place it over a large tray or paper sheet — thousands of seeds will fall away readily.

Spread the seed in a single layer to dry fully before storing. Avoid plastic containers; paper envelopes or breathable seed bags are best. Properly dried and kept cool, seed remains viable for at least three years.

In most gardens, the plant will self-seed prolifically, often germinating in gravel paths or the bases of walls — places that mimic its native terrain. These self-sown seedlings are generally stronger and hardier than pampered ones, so it is well worth letting nature take its course and thinning where necessary.

Maintaining a Colony

Once established, *Echium pininana* often becomes self-sustaining, with successive generations appearing each year at different stages of growth. A garden with a mixture of rosettes, spikes in bud, and plants in full flower offers a continual display of vertical drama. For a more controlled effect, you can collect and sow fresh seed annually, selecting for desirable traits such as richer flower colour or compact habit.

Final Thoughts

Cultivating *Echium pininana* is a masterclass in patience and payoff. For two years, it grows almost anonymously, and then, for one glorious summer, it becomes the undisputed focal point of the garden. Its stately form, tactile foliage, and magnetic pull on pollinators make it a plant worth the effort.

And, in our case, what began with a misread article about “prehistoric plants” has grown into one of the most promising and intriguing additions to our garden. Though our Echium has yet to flower, our hope is that it will, in time, rise into a truly magnificent display — a fitting reward for patience, curiosity, and a little shared laughter along the way.

Tracey Swallow

For more info from the RHS about growing *E. pininana* copy this link to your browser:

<https://www.rhs.org.uk/plants/6295/echium-pininana/details>

A day out in Wales: Mike and Kathryn visit The Veddw, Anne Wareham and Charles Hawes' quirky garden near Monmouth

I'd become aware of the garden through Anne's posts on a horticultural Facebook page, so when she posted that the last Saturday in September would be the final open afternoon of the year we decided to have a drive across to have a look.

We didn't get off to a good start: I'd lost the adaptor for my SatNav, and without it we got lost several times on route, taking in Raglan castle and an unwanted tour of Monmouth town before finding the Veddw, which is set in the hills between Monmouth and the Severn.

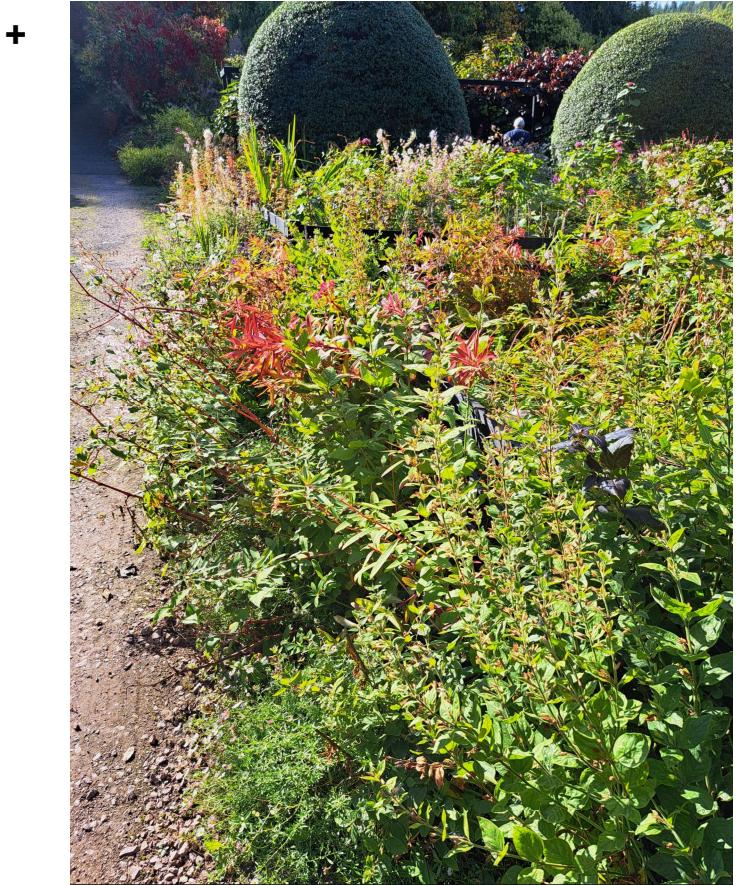
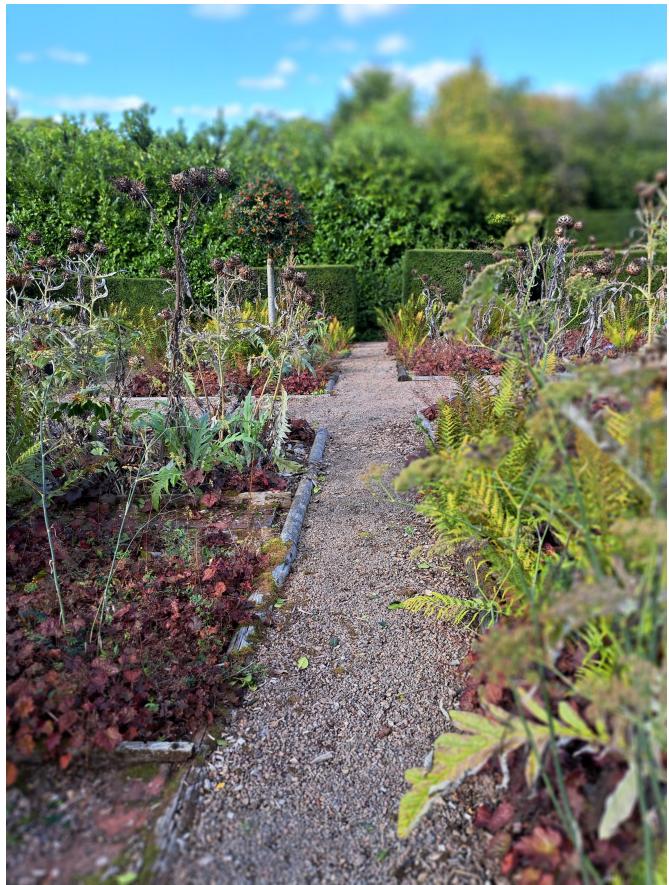
It certainly isn't a typical country garden. It's set on a fairly steep hillside, enclosed on three sides by woods and is divided up by hedges (some trimmed into curving, sculptural shapes). The borders are quite "scruffy", deliberately, with some weeds being positively encouraged, including a large drift of Rosebay Willowherb which was setting seed everywhere.

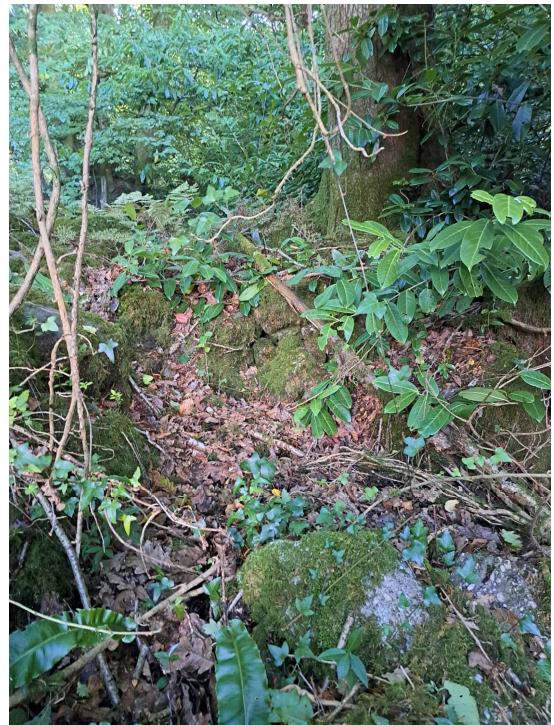
There's no café or gift shop but there is a loo! The steep slopes could be tricky to negotiate, but Anne and Charles are prepared to offer a lift from the carpark for anyone with mobility issues.

I liked the garden; Kathryn was not so keen (though she did like the reflecting pool). I'm told a Worcestershire HPS visit a few years ago also generated mixed opinions! I'll let the photos do the talking now.... If you'd like to read more about the Veddw you can find their Website at <https://veddw.com>



The classic view of the reflecting pool





That Population consists principally of small farmers, quarrymen, woodcutters and labourers many of whom have reared their cottages amidst the woods, or upon the commons. and by great toil and perseverance have cleared the ground from stones furze and heath. These men hold their cottages and small enclosures by which they are surrounded, of the Duke of Beaufort, as Lord of the Manor, at moderate rents, usually on life leases. Accustomed to scanty fare, inured to poverty, suffering occasionally from cold and hunger, and exposed to peculiar temptations, they have been accused of dishonest practices, and of those acts of petty fraud which often prevail amidst such a population.

from 'Life of James Davies, a village schoolmaster' by Sir Thomas Phillips, pub. 1850

'they subsist chiefly on potatoes and the coarsest kind of bread... it was amongst these people on this wild heath that the subject of my memoir took up his abode with the charitable purpose of humanizing them, of bringing them to some knowledge of the obligations of religion, and training up their children in the paths of duty.'

from a Brief Memoir of James Davies, master of the National school on Devaen Hill, Monmouthshire: by a clergyman 5th edition 1834

~ accounts of the Veddw in the early 19th century

Throughout The Veddw there are references to the history of the garden and of the area



We hope that you have enjoyed these photos. If you'd like to visit, the garden is open again from next June (details are on their website).

The Veddw is not a huge garden.... an hour and a half or so is plenty of time to have a good look round—and you could easily combine this with a visit to the nearby Tintern Abbey, Monmouth or Chepstow.

Mike & Kathryn



Notice of Annual General Meeting of Worcestershire Branch

The 2026 AGM will be held on Saturday 14th March 2026, following the speaker's presentation (i.e. at about 3.30 pm).

Committee Vacancy

We are looking for somebody to join the Committee and take on the currently vacant role of Publicity Officer. The role would involve contacting and arranging advertising in local booklets and newspapers. If you think that this is something you could help with, please speak to one of the Committee or email Rob or Jo (addresses are on page 2).