

BEHIND THE SCENES AT MORETON MORRELL

A profile of Matt Handy: Work Based Learning Manager – Horticulture - Pershore College

A desire to learn more about apprentices entering the fields of horticulture and landscaping led us to request an interview with Matt, who divides his time between Moreton Morell and Pershore campuses, both constituent parts of Warwickshire College. Our meeting proved to be far more relevant to issues which concern WGT than we could have imagined.



We met on site at Moreton Hall and were able to see some of the projects that Matt continues to develop for his students. He has responsibility for two groups – apprentices undertaking level 2 and 3 apprenticeships. The first group tend to be young, and just starting out. They may be referred for training by their employers or might begin by approaching the college who then try to match them with

employers. Students may be sponsored by many unusual types of organizations - the National Trust, the RHS, local businesses or housing groups, for example. Their qualification makes them ‘operatives’ in one of the two pathways, horticulture or landscaping. Core units are studied and delivery is in seven block weeks. They typically spend six Wednesdays at Moreton Morrell and there is liaison with the employers to ensure the course key skills have been proved. Apprentices can begin this process twice a year and currently some 30 are in training. Level 3 is both more demanding and a qualification sought currently by fewer numbers as the apprentices are already at work with their employers. This level demands previous experience in the workplace, more depth and complexity and demonstration of supervisory skills.

How does this actually play out? Under Matt’s enthusiastic and pragmatic leadership, he is using the many opportunities of the site of the Hall so that the students can not only carry out processes and projects that they need to display competences, but also so that they contribute their abilities to a vast and seemingly unaffordable project. Level 3 students also demonstrate their supervisory skills by monitoring the work of the level 2 apprentices!

We saw how small changes are improving the site. Many hundreds of box plants previously saved from the front of the house were being transplanted to edge the huge lawn behind the

Hall; how the hedges needed to restore the perimeters of the Italianate Garden were being grown and installed; how plants were being grown at Pershore and brought across to ensure symmetry and colour in the planting in the flower beds; how a multi-disciplinary approach was benefiting the water quality in the pond and the hard landscaping was going to be made completely safe. What came across very strongly was a commitment to ensure progress on this complicated and costly project by achieving what is possible, in definable and affordable segments. Matt believes that if the area immediately around the Hall can be transformed, visitors and funds can begin to reinvigorate the project. He said 'I can only effectively share my wider vision if others see some evidence with their own eyes'.

One reason for exploring the ways in which people enter this field was to try to understand how we are going to ensure that skills and experiences are being passed on. Unsurprisingly, we asked how Matt himself came to be doing his job.

He had grown up locally, but his parents moved to Cornwall when he was doing his A-levels. He wasn't happy about the move but managed during his last years at school to get a weekend and holiday job at the Lost Gardens of Heligan, and almost straightaway knew the direction in which he wished to go. After a degree in Sustainable Agriculture, he returned to work full time at Heligan, where he created the Survivors Plant Collection and contributed to the national collections of rhododendrons and camelias. He left in 2012 to work at Cannington College where there was a RHS partnership walled garden and the national collection of santolinas and monardas.

Although this did introduce him to working with apprentices for the first time, sadly the pay was very poor, so he next chose to take a job at Moreton Morrell which had no responsibilities yet was better paid!

Fortunately for the students who have subsequently come under his care, this opening led to his current appointment which he has held with varying job titles since 2016.

We hope that the members of WGT may be interested to follow the progress of the restoration of the grounds, and might even like to contribute in some way.



The Italian Garden, April 2024

The acers in the Italianate Garden look wonderful but there are two gaps where mature trees have unaccountably been removed since the fire. We'd like to think that these might be replaced with the help of donors!

Matt's final story when we met concerned a benefactor – a lady called Gertude Looi. The widow of the first ever foreign student at Moreton Morrell college, who died in 2021, had not only donated a Horticultural Library and maintained a long and supportive relationship with the college in her lifetime, but also left funds to endow a scholarship and bursary in her will.

We hope to arrange a visit to Moreton Morrell next year and to be able to see the original cascade, crystal grotto and other features which have not been given any attention for many decades. We hope too that the work of Matt and his apprentices will continue to improve the more accessible areas and that a wider public will be able to enjoy this place.

Rosemary Jewel-Clark

Moreton Hall, Moreton Morrell, Warwickshire

Moreton Hall was built in 1907-08 before the beginning of the First World War. This period is generally described as the 'Golden Afternoon', when the British Empire was at its peak and a rich elite enjoyed sporting events, parties and galas.



Moreton Hall in 2006 before the 2008 fire.

Peace and prosperity reigned, and with economic stability, landed aristocracy and the *nouveaux-riches* entrepreneurs, dealing in commodities such as coal, steel and chemicals, quickly accumulated personal fortunes. Edwardian Britain became a hub for expanding global trade which included the reliable international movement of plants, with large commercial nurseries commissioning plant hunters to find new varieties for sale and propagation. The plentiful supply of labour also allowed these groups to 'indulge in the luxury of gardens on a scale never to be seen again'.ⁱ

Nevertheless, country-house owners experienced difficulties due to the restructuring of death duties in 1894, with some estates sold or leased to the steady flow of Americans who found the financial climate more conducive in Britain than America. Many of the Americans were of European ancestry who had gained their money within industry - steel, railroads or banking. These were self-made families, hoping to gain the respectability of British society. They were attracted to Warwickshire by American artists and writers who had previously visited England as part of their European tour, for instance the author Henry James who recommended the delights of the Midlands: 'There is no better way to plunge *in medias res*, for the stranger who wishes to know something of

England, than to spend a fortnight in Warwickshire. It is the core and centre of the English world; midmost England, unmitigated England.'ⁱⁱ

In middle England sporting activities, hunting, shooting, fishing, polo and horse racing, were woven into social calendars. Wealth was used to lease rented accommodation while decisions were made in buying property or land which were at a premium in South Warwickshire. British architects who could design on a lavish scale were especially in great demand.

William Henry Romaine-Walker, the architect of Moreton Hall, studied with George Edmund Street who had won a high reputation with Americans in Europe. Romaine-Walker, following in Street's footsteps, was considered to have a 'natural flair for stylish eclecticism and pastiche',ⁱⁱⁱ with the ability to draw on many periods and styles. This versatility endeared him to the rich millionaires. His early country houses, at Danesfield, Buckinghamshire, and Rhinefield, Hampshire, which first exhibited Romaine-Walker's signature designs of parterres, terraces, water systems and topiary, were echoed again in his later Warwickshire properties, Moreton Hall and Moreton Paddox.



Charles Tuller Garland

One of Romaine-Walker's clients was Charles Tuller Garland, the son of James Albert Garland, the co-founder of the First National Bank in New York who had Directorships in cotton, oil, railway and coal companies. Charles Garland first leased Ashorne Hill House near Moreton Morell in 1900, then appointed W. H.

Romaine-Walker & Besant Architects of Bond Street, London, to design an imposing house for entertaining guests to parties and sporting events. Moreton Hall, reputed to have cost half a million pounds and completed 1907-8, was built in Neo-Palladian style with a winged central block and Venetian windows on the garden façade.^{iv}

In designing the landscape Romaine-Walker mixed Arts and Crafts styles, Italian design, new plants and rock gardens into his plans for the Moreton Hall estate where everything was completed on a lavish scale regardless of the cost. Garland's passion for sport - tennis, hunting and racing – lead him to build many sports facilities at Moreton Hall, including a Real-Tennis court constructed to professional standards, and an indoor riding school.



The Terrace Garden

The gardens paid homage to Renaissance styling and to eighteenth-century English gardens with an avenue of Wellingtonias welcoming guests as they arrived at the house. Classical motifs, topiary, and statuary were used throughout the house interior and gardens. The 1938 sales catalogue describes an extensive 'pleasance with winding walks' leading to a Tea House, Rock Garden and Waterfall which tumbled into a pool with a fountain surrounded by shrubberies.^v

A broad terrace to the west of the house, enclosed by a balustrade and accessed by circular steps, contained a parterre, lawns, topiary, and pool with the statue *Diana and her Nymphs*, manufactured by the Bromsgrove Guild of Craftsmen in 1912. Having constructed the epitome of a fashionable English garden and house, Garland increased his status in society by giving up his American nationality in 1914, serving in the Second Lifeguards (a division of the Household Cavalry), in the First World War, later selling Moreton Hall to Colonel R. J. L. Ogilby in 1920 for £35,000 before dying of a heart attack on 10 June 1921 aged 46.

Colonel Ogilby lived in great style at Moreton Hall until 1936, when the house and land were unsuccessfully put on the market in 1938, and later used during the Second World War by the Czechoslovak army. It became the Warwickshire Institute of Agriculture in 1948 with sixty ex-servicemen arriving to form the first class of students in November 1949. The Hall is now part of Warwickshire College, specialising in equine studies, animal care and welfare, floristry, countryside management, agriculture and other land-based activities.

Unfortunately, the house suffered a major fire in March 2008 which resulted in the roof and interior being almost totally gutted. Restoration took place on the roof in 2009 and although Lottery funding appeared to be within the College's grasp to renovate the interior and gardens, the Covid outbreak in 2020 brought funding options to a halt.

It is hoped that in the future suitable funding can be found enabling Moreton Hall to be open again to the local community and Warwickshire residents, the house and gardens once more resounding with the sparkling chatter of lively parties and events.

Notes:

ⁱ David Ottewill, *The Edwardian Garden* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1989).

ⁱⁱ Henry James, *Portrait of Places*, XII – In Warwickshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (first published 1883)).

ⁱⁱⁱ George Plumtre, 'A Warming Winter's Tale', *Country Life UK*, 7 December 2016.

^{iv} Geoffrey Tyack, *Warwickshire Country Houses* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co Ltd, 1994)

^v 1938 Moreton Hall, Estate Sales Particulars, Historic England Archive, SC01179.

Photographs:

Diane James, 1, 4. Warwickshire College, 2, 3.

Diane James