

# History of Wakehurst Place

An estate dating back to Norman times, an Elizabethan mansion and a garden from the beginning of the twentieth century combine to give Wakehurst Place a sense of history that few other gardens can match. Add to that the Millennium Seed Bank, with its store of seeds for the next 500 years or even longer, and there can be no doubt that the significance of Wakehurst Place for both horticulture and conservation is assured for the foreseeable future.

## Early history of the Wakehurst estate

The name Wakehurst first became associated with this area in the High Weald of Sussex in 1205 when William de Wakehurst bought some 40 acres of land from Phillip de Crauele (Crawley). There is evidence, though, that the site was occupied much earlier. Situated as it is on the warm south-western slope of a sandstone ridge with freshwater springs nearby, it was ideal for settlement and evidence of Iron Age activity has been found in the locality. Later a Roman road from present day Aldrington to Croydon passed nearby - part of the road lies beneath the present-day car park.



## Kew information sheet W4

In 1454 the estate became linked with the Culpeper family when two Culpeper brothers forcibly abducted the sisters Margaret and Elizabeth, the last of the Wakehurst line, from their guardian. Despite this apparently inauspicious beginning, the two marriages were happy and both families lived at Wakehurst from 1464 for many years. The herbalist Nicholas Culpeper, who wrote the famous herbal, belonged to another branch of the family.



Above: **Wakehurst Place Mansion**

Below left: **Giant redwood**

## The Mansion

When Thomas Culpeper died in 1571, his will described his dwelling at Wakehurst as 'nowe verie ruinous and altogether decaide' and directed that the house should be rebuilt and that new outbuildings should be completed and linked to the house. His son, Edward, carried out his wishes and eventually the rebuilding was finished in 1590. The door now at the Chapel entrance commemorates this date and Edward Culpeper's initials are still visible above the old south entrance.

The Mansion is built of the local Ardingly sandstone. Originally it was square, consisting of four wings, each 35 m in length, around a central courtyard which was entered through the southern wing. By 1697, however, there was no trace of the southern wing and today only the north side and portions of the east and west wings remain. The building to the north, originally a stable block, was built between 1697 and 1727, and added to in the 1950s.

In 1694, Dennis Lydell, Commissioner of the Navy and a friend of Samuel Pepys, purchased the estate from the last surviving member of the Culpeper family. Over the next 175 years, the house had various owners and tenants. Some changes were made with the approach being moved from the south-east to the east. In 1848, the wings of the house were truncated when the Horsham stone roof proved too heavy for the rafters and the soft sandstone walls. The fronts were retained and replaced on the shortened wings.

Lady Downshire, who purchased the house in 1869, carried out extensive alterations. She built the Chapel and various rooms in the wing which forms the west side of the house, and moved the staircase and the ornate fireplace that can now be seen in the Lady Price room. The door inscribed 1590 was moved from the west wing to its current position by the Chapel in the east wing. Her contribution to the grounds was to plant some of the larger exotic trees, including specimens of giant redwood (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*). Subsequently the estate was owned by Thomas Boord MP who renovated and restored much of the house.



Sir Henry Price Garden

Sir Henry Price purchased the estate in 1938 and, over the next 25 years, restored the roof and decaying stonework as well as developing the gardens further. His contribution to the gardens is commemorated by the Sir Henry Price Garden, one of the walled gardens adjacent to the Mansion. On his death in 1963, the estate was bequeathed to the National Trust who leased it to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) in 1965. It is now entirely managed and funded by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

### The Loder Valley Reserve

This Reserve, developed around the Ardingly Reservoir, provides a safe haven for plants and animals of the Sussex Weald. It encompasses three diverse habitats – woodland, meadowland and wetland around the margins of the Reservoir and within the steep-sided valleys. Smaller areas of these habitats, located within the Gardens, are accessible for school groups using the Seaboard Study Centre, who study the plants, insects and other wildlife found there at close quarters.

### The Mansion today

Today, the Mansion houses exhibitions, a shop, offices and laboratories used by visiting school children. The main exhibition on the history and natural history of the Wakehurst estate is complemented by displays of current activities and occasional small craft exhibits in the Chapel. The restaurant is located in the stable block to the north of the Mansion.



*Iris ensata*

### The Gardens

When Gerald Loder (later Lord Wakehurst of Ardingly) acquired Wakehurst Place in 1903, the development of the gardens really began. Loder was a passionate plantsman, with a keen interest in the plants of eastern Asia and of the southern hemisphere, particularly New Zealand. He supported many plant collecting expeditions to these areas and received regular consignments of plants from Frank Kingdon-Ward, George Forrest and other famous plant hunters. The Pinetum, the rhododendron collection in Westwood Valley and the Southern Hemisphere beds still contain many specimens that they introduced. Working with his head gardener Alfred Coates, Loder transformed large areas of the gardens open to the public today. Coates' Wood was named after the man who encouraged Loder to concentrate his attention on trees and shrubs.



The Wellcome Trust Millennium Building

### The Millennium Seed Bank

Situated on land to the north of the Mansion is the newest addition to Wakehurst Place – the Wellcome Trust Millennium Building. Opened by HRH the Prince of Wales in November 2000, this building houses the Millennium Seed Bank (MSB), together with an exhibition of its work and state-of-the-art laboratories for research into seed biology. The MSB already holds seeds from virtually all the species of flowering plants in the UK and its goal is to collect and conserve seeds from 10% of the world's flora by 2010.