

Adam Banks

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### GCA/RHS Final Report

Before recounting the events of this past year, I would like to express my appreciation to a number of parties who made this year, a magical one to say the least, possible. I would like to deeply thank both the Garden Club of America and Royal Horticultural Society for providing the funds, network, and encouragement to embark on this journey. It goes without saying that I am ever in the debt of these two organizations and I cannot say enough good things about the work they do. I am beyond proud to have represented them both. From the GCA, Mary Frediani was a constant positive force and I am so grateful to her for being a part of this process from selection to the very end of the program. Mary, I am extremely grateful for all your help and support. And words cannot describe my appreciation for Rowena Wilson of the RHS, who guided me through the program and constantly connected me with individuals and organizations related to my focuses. Beyond being organized and amazingly efficient in all her affairs, Rowena is the loveliest person and made me feel exceptionally welcome in the United Kingdom. I would also like to express my gratitude to my family, Mom, Dad, and Danny, who always had my back throughout.

To now look back at my time in the UK is something like gazing into the rippling deep end of a pool. Leaning forward, the bottom of the pool simultaneously appears to be a league, and yet just an arm's length, away. In this way, my travels feel like they could have lasted years, and yet it flew by in the blink of an eye in my intent enjoyment. I must wrestle these amazing, cherished memories into a capsule of the ten months. Ten months is the span of time I must trust

I was there, just as I trust the white tile on the side of the pool which, in blue letters, states the depth is ten feet.

This year was a plunge for me. I pushed myself in many ways I had not even anticipated, and then pushed some more. Just as with stepping into the icy-cold February waves on Tresco, there were challenges on my journey this year in living in a foreign country. But walking thigh-high, then waist-high, then chest-high, I tried to not cease until my head sank below the surface. Through pressing forward, through opening myself to a plethora of completely new experiences, I feel that I have advanced my knowledge of what kindness means, what taking initiative entails, and what a bit of determination can achieve.

I have concluded this experience as a different gardener and person than when I commenced. I have learned so much about plants - their ancient origins, taxonomic organization, growing needs, roles in ecosystems, ability to connect people, strangeness, and certainly their beauty. However much my life was affected by flora before this year cannot compare to what it has come to mean to me on a daily basis. Even as I rotated through my placements, sometimes at what felt like a cyclonic pace, it was often plants, native and introduced, that gave me a sense of continuity and gravity. I am beyond grateful for the knowledge I have gained in the horticultural field and on the topic of plants and, just as importantly, I am inspired and invigorated to push on with my learning in the future.

I must interrupt once more before embarking on a description of the program itself and its twists and turns. I would first like to describe a brief but important story of ancestry. My

great-grandfather Lucius Banks was born in 1885 in Harmony Village, Virginia and moved up to Arlington, Massachusetts with his family as a child. After graduating from high school, he enlisted as a private in the United States Army and was assigned to the 9th Cavalry Regiment as a Cavalryman (then known as a buffalo soldier, as part of the black military regiment). As recorded by N. Johnson, our family historian, “In 1911, a former member of The Hunslet Rugby League Club’s management committee spotted Banks at West Point while he was playing quarterback in a football game and invited him to play for the Hunslet club. Banks did not agree to move to Yorkshire, England until he had the agreement of his commanding officer from the cavalry.” Lucius Banks then became the first black athlete recruited to play in professional rugby league, and the first American to play in professional rugby league in the history of the sport. Lucius Banks scored four tries in his first four games for the club.



*Figure left: Lucius Banks; Figure Right: Banks and his Hunslet Teammates*

I cannot state his true motivations in embarking on this journey but I can only believe that they entailed willingness to accept a challenge and a sense of adventure. He spent a year in the UK before coming back to the States to resume his time in the United States Army. The next

time he came to Europe was when he was deployed to France as part of perhaps the first almost-entirely black artillery regiments in US History, the 349th Field Artillery Regiment 92nd Division.

My great-grandfather was an incredible man. I cannot express what it means to have the opportunity to travel to the UK, also for about a year, 112 years after he did. He had struck out for foreign land, in which he certainly faced racism and xenophobia, to play a sport he had never played before. I drew my strength every day on this program in knowing that I was able to walk in just a section of his footprints.

The first portion of my time in the United Kingdom on the GCA/RHS Interchange Fellowship was a remarkable experience, filled with learning, friendships, and adventures. It was so good, in fact, I almost believed it could get no better. How blissfully wrong I was. My travels since my last entry in January have been nothing short of amazing, with surreal opportunities to peer into the windows of horticulture and everyday life across the UK.

After concluding at the Eden Project, I packed my bags and boarded the smooth, green Great Western Railways train headed south. I was off to my next placement in the nether-most region of the United Kingdom, the Scilly Isles. In this cluster of small, rocky islands lies one of particular beauty, a gem whose luster stands out from others surrounding it. The island of Tresco measures roughly 3.5 kilometers by 1.5 kilometers, making it the second largest of the Scillies. As ships do not ferry people from Penzance and back in the middle of winter (when the seas are choppiest), I decided on arriving via plane. I arrived at Lands End airport on Saturday after getting into Penzance the previous night, full of excitement. The place was tiny, probably

equipped to comfortably seat twenty people. Upon checking in at the front desk, the receptionist (not quite with the tense formality and distrust of a TSA agent) told me to wait for my plane to be called upon. An hour ticked by. Then another. And yet another. Finally, we were informed that our plane had been canceled due to cloud cover. I asked the receptionist if I would be able to fly tomorrow. She politely informed me that Lands End was closed on Sundays and I would have to wait until Monday. I do not claim to have been to an endless number of airports. I am no expert on flying. But I had never before been to an aeration establishment that simply took Sundays off. All I could do was shrug, book a tiny room in somebody's backyard converted shed, walk around the summer city which was in deep hibernation, and sample the local fish and chips for the next two days (some of the best I've had in the UK).

After waiting out the two rainy days in Penzance, I managed to board my flight, arrive safely on St. Mary's, and catch a speed boat over frothy waves to Tresco. I was greeted on the stone, barnacle-covered pier by Jon Taylor, who would prove to be a knowledgeable, generous, and fun-loving leader over my time there. After I was shepherded to my housing and shown which room was mine, I wasted no time in heading straight for the garden to join up with the team there. It was a Monday, after all, and there was work to be done and no time to waste. The crew was small, especially so with their head gardener and vegetable gardener on holiday. I met the crew in the break room (a wonderfully comfortable stone garage) including their head propagator, Emma Lainchbury, full-time gardener Brett, and three students, Phoebe, Harrison, and Hannah.

I was simply blown away when Jon gave me a brief tour of the garden. Though it was early February, the garden was ablaze with color, color worn by flowers of which I had never before seen a semblance in my life. Standing in the United Kingdom, I could hardly believe my own eyes when waves of plants from subtropical Asia, South Africa, South America, California, Madeira, and Morocco crashed over the path edges. Perhaps the most impactful plant of that first walk was Protea ‘Pink Ice.’ A hybrid between Protea susannae and P. compacta, ‘Pink Ice’ has a goblet-like inflorescence with involucral bracts that move from a light red at the base to a candy pink tipped with white at the top. Peering inside the floral structure one can see the dense mass of fine florets, darkening at heads. Droplets from Tresco’s constant winter rains still clung to the plant, each bead reflecting the pink even more brightly.



*Figure Left: Clanthus puniceus, a curious member of Fabaceae*

*Figure Right: Tresco’s history as a Narcissus farm is still visible today through the multitude of such bulbs naturalized to the island.*

One of my favorite parts of Tresco was finding unfamiliar members of familiar genera. One such example was seeing *Myrica faya*, native to Macaronesia and Portugal, which towered high into the garden canopy, easily reaching 30 feet if not more. I was well acquainted with the much shrubbier *Myrica pennsylvanica*, also known as Northern Bayberry, which I regularly worked with at Brooklyn Bridge Park and rarely reached a dozen feet in those conditions. Another favorite was *Clethra arborea*, which also stood at around 25 to 30 feet. I was most familiar with *C. alnifolia*, an aromatic and beautiful but common garden plant, and *Clethra barbinervis*, a serrate asian contingent of the genus. This tree species, *C. arborea*, is also a native of Macaronesia and Portugal. One final favorite was actually a species I had seen before on mainland England, *Erica arborea*. However, in the mild climate of Tresco Abbey Gardens, *Erica arborea* cleared twenty-five to thirty feet with ease, boasting a mass of white bell-like flowers high off the ground.



*Figure Left: Protea 'Pink Ice' following an afternoon rain*

*Figure Right: Erica arborea with some wonderful gardeners for scale*

Something that really set Tresco apart was the culture that they held in regards to plant identification. On especially rainy days, Jon Taylor would give us all twenty minutes to hustle about the garden to grab specimens of plants we wanted to learn (or maybe needed a refresher on, in the case of the students and staff). We would then all go through the plants one-at-a-time talking about their identifying characteristics and each of us would take turns guessing family, genus, and species. It was a wonderful way to learn plant families with which I had no previous experience and to share identification tips with others.



*Figure Left: An afternoon spent planting *Cupressus macrocarpa* in the gardens shelter belt, a feature without which the garden would not be possible*

*Figure Right: Anemone, but of the animal type!*

Beyond the surreal garden itself, the other experiences on the island of Tresco were incredibly special. I walked around the island as pelagic winds raged, coasted on my bike down hill paths at sunset as the turquoise ocean swayed back and forth below, and cooked myself a



delicious meal foraged from aquatic flora and fauna in rock pools on the island. I must stress as well how kind the other students were in inviting me to take part in all their reindeer games. We went for a series of cold-water plunges (one nocturnal) and spent one weekend day wading through ice-cold tidal zones to investigate rock pools. It was truly one of the most welcoming teams I had worked with, or would work with, in the UK.

After leaving Tresco<sup>1</sup>, I headed north (there is really no other direction to go if one wishes to stay within the bounds of the UK) for RHS Rosemoor. After a boat, a plane, a train, and a bus, I arrived at my accommodation in Devon, far after the sun had set. Set at the end of a sheep field in the valley below Great Torrington, my cottage was a cozy respite from the February chill. Before the sun had risen in the morning, I set off for RHS Rosemoor on foot, a route that took me up a hill, down the other side, up another hill and down again. The RHS Rosemoor team was a lovely bunch, almost each member an example of the classic Devon kindness. I began my work with the team who looks after the Bicentennial Arboretum, a section of the garden connected to the original 8-acre site owned and donated by Lady Anne Palmer. This half of the garden, east of the road which bisects the whole RHS property, was a great space for representing forest ecosystems from around the world. On the south side of the Bicentennial Arboretum was a looping path which was divided into different continental forest plant pallets. Asia, Europe, and North America, were the main representations that were on display. As cool as it was to see an organization undertake this educational project, I could witness the challenges in adequately representing a whole continent, or even country, through flora. For instance, in the United States or North American area there were east coast *Acer rubrum* planted immediately

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<sup>1</sup> This departure, too, was actually delayed by another stint of cloudy weather. I was not unhappy in the least to be stranded on a paradisiacal island, substantially warmer than the mainland.

next to west coast *Pseudotsuga menziesii*. I found it a useful opportunity to think about how I might be able to most accurately represent a country's flora through planting in the future. The steep slope of the eastern part of the property was filled with Australian, South American, and Oceanic patches of forest plants, carved into the native UK forest. While some of these plants struggled, others like *Leucospermums* and *Podocarpus* grew with vigor under the Devon rains.



*Figure: Muscari azureum emerging with absolute beauty*



*Figure: Pruning *Potentilla fruticosa* was an enjoyable winter job, especially when the rain stopped.*

On the topic of Devon rains, that was likely the largest challenge of my entire program. It rained every day, sometimes three times a day, for my first two weeks in Devon without fail. On some days, the heavens exchanged rain for sleet or hail. The sky was almost perpetually filled with a mass of low-hanging gray clouds which descended on the valley. There was a span of five days when I did not see the sun once. In the States, I have braved low temperatures where your nose hairs freeze and where your hands can barely move with cold. This was a new kind of environmental discomfort, where waterproof boots can only remain waterproof so long when half-submerged in a muddy puddle. A rain jacket can only hold out rain so long before it starts holding it in. Gloves can become soaked with rain so that your hands are just as cold with them as without. One may arrive home and make haste to dry all these items, all to step into the chilly

rain the following morning and do it all again. As difficult as it was, I honestly did enjoy the challenge quite a bit and I certainly gained an even greater respect for UK gardeners.



*Figure Left: Before pruning Sambucus nigra*

*Figure Right: After pruning in a pollarding-like fashion*

The rest of my time at Rosemoor was spent working with the formal and landscape teams. During my stint with the lovely formal team, I felt most impacted by the time I was able to spend in the Hot and Cool Gardens. The Hot Garden, designed around twenty years ago, is exactly what it sounds like. Full of hot-colored plants, it is made to energize the viewer through exciting, and sometimes clashing, color combinations. I can only pass this information along as it was told to me, as I arrived after the winter had long-past robbed the garden of color, but the concept had grasped my attention. I was very happy to perform winter pruning of woody shrubs and herbaceous division. One of my favorite tasks was cutting back the *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyphylla* 'Eva' from a large, branching plant to a neat set of leaders. This specific plant

had been pollarded for years and had the knobby stubs to show it. I had never attempted this with *Sambucus canadensis* back in the United States but it is something I would be very eager to try.

The Cool Garden was the counterpart to the Hot Garden, filled with soothing blues and purples. Designed more recently than the Hot Garden, this section focused more on mental health and physical accessibility. A stream of running water lulled visitors into a state of calm and Devon breezes blew grasses like *Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind' (one of my new favorites) back and forth. Another grass which stole my heart in the formal area was *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Edith Dudzus,' the straight tan shoots of which spiked from the crown like rays, maintaining its delicate form far into the wet British winter. Working in this garden, we continued pruning and dividing, and carried on mulching where possible.

While Devon is certainly north of the Scillies, it was alarming to see what they could grow, as well as when plants were beginning to bloom. Frosts were a relatively rare phenomenon in this part of the country, allowing for the cultivation of a considerable variety of Gondwanan plants. Still fixated on conifers, I was particularly impressed with their ability to rear a selection of *Araucaria* and *Podocarpus*. The bloom times of plants which I would not usually see for another month in the United States began to spring from the ground with ease in Devon. Crocus, Narcissus, Trillium, Iris, Muscari, and Heleborus were in full bloom in February, covering the muddy meadows and woodlands with bright pops of color. A personal favorite of mine was *Muscari azurea*, which shone a radiant blue even in gray weather.

Perhaps the most impactful aspect of my time at RHS Rosemoor was learning the traditional practice of hedge-laying. I trained the basics of the skill with David Perry, an experienced member of the estates team. A far cry from anything I had seen in the United States, hedge laying is a process which uses woody plants as a long-lived barrier, a barrier which also lends itself to local wildlife as good habitat. After a line of woody plants (any mixed or homogenous selection of *Corylus*, *Ilex*, *Crataegus*, *Prunus*, *Acer*, and *Euonymus*) is planted and allowed to grow for a series of years, the hedge-layer can begin their work of rejuvenation. By cutting into established stems at an angle, 80-90% of the way through, the hedgelayer creates a cambial hinge which allows the plant to be “laid” down at an angle. These “pleachers,” the laid stem, is then pinned to the ground with a crook in the Devon hedgelaying style. The stem, still connected by that piece of cambium, will then send up shoots straight from the pleacher in response to its recent disturbance. This effectively thickens the wall of plants and creates more spaces which serve as habitat for fauna.



*Figure: laying a Corylus stem with David Perry*

During my last week, I had the privilege of attending a class on grafting taught by the legendary Jim Arbury. Perhaps the most knowledgeable apple expert in the UK, certainly the most knowledgeable I have had the chance to meet, Mr. Arbury is an exceptional talent. While often soft-spoken in casual conversation, his eyes light up with excitement when discussing the genus *Malus* and he is quite happy to share his decades of wisdom. Mr. Arbury allowed the Rosemoor students to select apple scions of their choice and practice attaching it to an intrageneric rootstock with a classic “tongue and groove” joint. I greatly enjoy grafting, which I had previously had the chance to learn the basics of, and I was appreciative to have this opportunity to learn more from one of the best experts in the field. Sadly, I could not take my grafted apple trees home with me (such is the nature of the program) so I was able to put them into the trustworthy hands of another student, Lawrence, who said he could make use of them.



*Figure: Preparing the wedge-shape necessary for joining the scion to rootstock.*

On my last day at RHS Rosemoor, I had the opportunity to sit in my favorite section of the garden, the foliage garden. An open lawn space surrounded by undulating walls of foliage

ranging from blue, to dark green, to red, to chartreuse, it was a space that instantly begs for the close attention of visitors. After saying my last goodbyes, I waited there amongst the swaying leaves for a couple hours until the next bus came (yes, that is the frequency of country buses in Devon) to begin my journey back to Wisley.

After taking a brief holiday exploring the gardens of Marrakech, a journey sparked by working with citrus at the Eden Project and reading *The Moors in Spain* by Stanley Lane Poole, I was lucky enough to spend a short time working with Ashley Edwards in Horatio's Garden in North London. Ashley had been the Interchange Fellow who worked at Longwood in 2014. Though my time with him was short, his garden and approach toward horticulture was one of the most important that I had a chance to witness in the United Kingdom. Horatio's Garden is an organization which seeks to nurture "the wellbeing of people after spinal injury in beautiful, vibrant sanctuaries within the heart of NHS spinal injury centres<sup>2</sup>." I think that gardens are often spoken of as spaces with properties to calm, heal, and inspire reflection. I have encountered no space in the garden world in which this is more present than Horatio's Garden. The people who make use of these gardens are folks who have sustained serious nerve injury which can turn their life upside down in a multitude of ways. I can only imagine that the stress associated with this must be an enormous burden to carry. To have a space which allows these folks to feel sunshine, travel smoothly in an outdoor space, and interact with plants is hugely beneficial, for both mental and physical health (which we know lean on each other). Per square foot, I see Horatio's as making the largest impact on those who use it of any garden in which I have worked.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.horatiogarden.org.uk/what-we-do/>



In terms of physical accessibility, the garden certainly excels for clear reasons. In order to support patients who are operating at different levels of physical ability, the garden allows for general ease of movement. Horatio's has wide, soft, porous paths which allow for comfortable movement and gently curve through the garden. This allows patients to tour the garden with visitors or family members, as well as provides a space for patients who are new to wheelchairs or other support equipment to practice in a forgiving space. Horatio's provides a space that is accommodating for those who may have less severe spinal damage (or are on their way to recovery) and can actually walk around a small space, as well as others who are bound to wheelchairs or even rolling beds. This range necessitates not only the ability for different people to move through the garden, but for people positioned at different heights to view and interact with plants. The garden features comfortable "pods" which are small wooden buildings with large glass doors and small windows that give a glimpse of the rest of the garden while allowing for some privacy.

On top of the beautiful physical space, Ashley spearheads an amazing programming initiative which gives patients organized ways to interact with plants. This can be through art (when I arrived, I witnessed flower pressings that the horticulture staff had done with the patients), as well as horticultural practice. This latter option ranges from potting up a plant to sewing seeds. These activities are relaxing on a mental level, but are important resources in terms of recovery. Ashley shared with me that exercising your fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination for gardening activities that require some finesse can be great practice as one works to recover from their injury.



*Figure: After working the week with Ashley Edwards (right middle), I was able to meet up with past fellow Sam Fry and future fellow Liz Ciskanik at the London Gardens Network Conference at Kew.*



*Figure: Horatio's Garden in early spring*

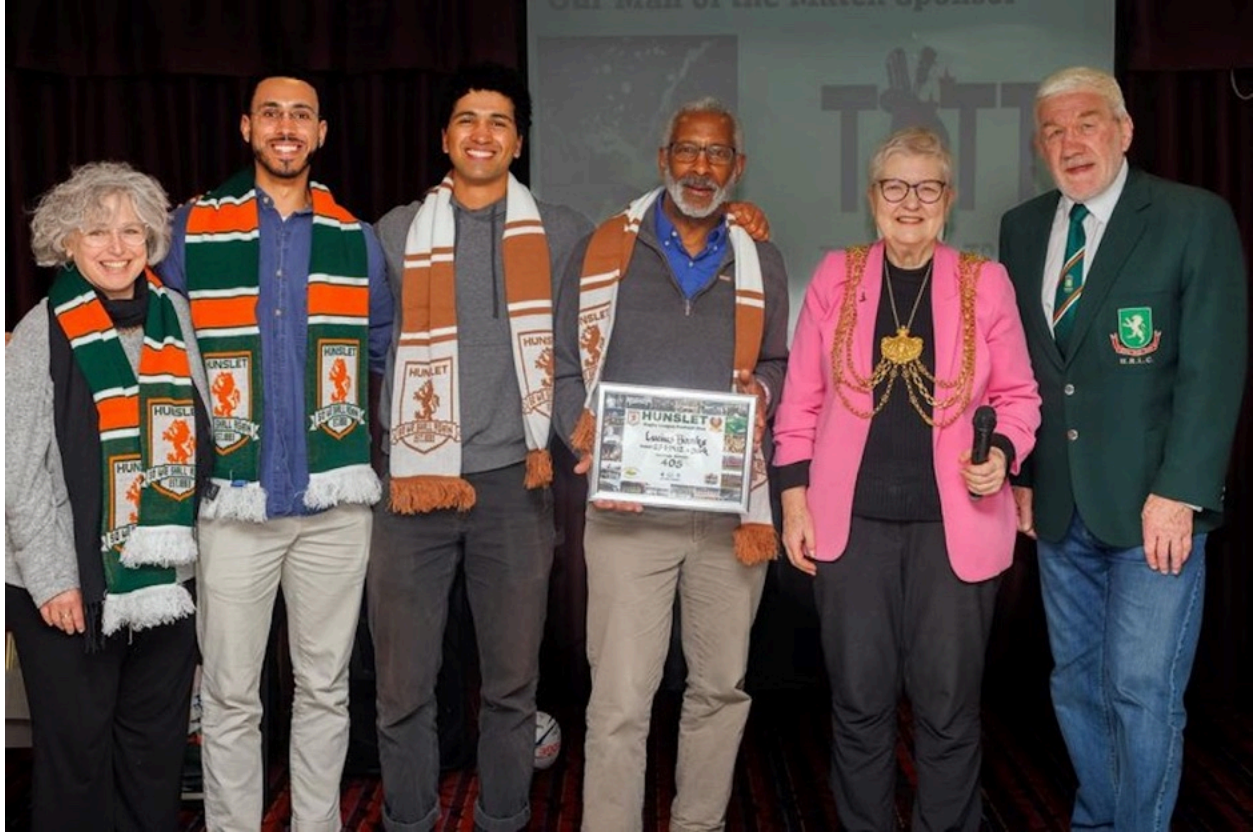
Ashley is a fantastic gardener and wonderful person. I am especially appreciative of the opportunity to get to work with him and learn about his horticultural and programming approaches, both of which I would be excited to carry forward in my career.

After finishing my brief time at Horatio's Garden, I was fortunate enough to spend some time with my family, who were nice enough to visit me in the UK. As this was the first time that most of them had been to the United Kingdom, we spent a fair amount of time seeing sites, and I managed to steer us toward the Barbican Conservatory, a striking space where brutalism meets thriving greenery. After London, we traveled north in order to make our most important visit of the trip in Leeds. As mentioned at the beginning of this document, my great grandfather played for Hunslet Rugby League Club in Leeds in the 1910s. We had been in contact with a sports historian, Professor Tony Collins of De Montfort University and the Institute of Sports Humanities, regarding my grandfather's story. He let us know that while the club has never quite reclaimed the glory it had in the early 1900s, it certainly still exists and retains a staunch base of supporters. Upon hearing that we were visiting the UK, he invited us to explore the area where my grandfather would have lived and to see a Hunslet match. Of course, we jumped at the chance. We met up with Professor Collins in Leeds and drove out to Hunslet with him to meet up with Pam, the club historian and a lifelong fan. They were exceptionally generous in sharing their knowledge, and perhaps one of the greatest highlights was having a pint in a pub which my grandfather would almost certainly have attended in his day.



*Figure: My family had a chance to pose with today's Hunslet team, club president, and mayor.*

We made it to the stadium and felt warmly welcomed by the club's representatives and players. They had pulled out all the stops for our family, and during pre-game dinner they honored Lucius Banks' short career with Hunslet. Before the game commenced we had the opportunity to take a picture with the team and meet the local mayor. It was a magnificent spectacle to watch the team play one of its local rivals, a heated competition. While Hunslet did not come out victorious, it was still a remarkably special evening for our family, one which I will not soon forget. I must emphasize once more the hospitality and kindness that was shown to us some 112 years after the first Banks stepped into a Hunslet stadium.



From Leeds, my family accompanied me to Scotland in advance of my placement at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. After spending a couple days with them, I said goodbye and they returned to the wonderful city of Boston.

As soon as I arrived at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, I knew it was going to be a special placement. I was welcomed by Gunnar Ovstebo, who was soon to leave the organization after around a decade there, and his colleague Duncan Young, who was to replace Gunnar in his coordination role. Both were incredibly kind and did a great job getting me settled. In fact, Duncan also served as the head of the Herbaceous Team, with whom I would work for the first week. On Duncan's crew was a gentleman named John who had participated in a work interchange with the Arnold Arboretum over twenty years ago. His counterpart on the interchange, John Delrosso (a John for a John seems only fair), still works at the Arnold and had

regaled me of his travels in Scotland. It was a tremendously fun occurrence to meet this other John, with whom I shared many connections, on the other side of the Atlantic.

From the first time I saw the collection, I knew that it was an immensely special one. Though the garden is not overwhelmingly large, the reaches of the collection are beyond formidable. Plants collected from around the world, whether wild collected or received from other botanic gardens, come together to create one of the most varied and beautiful collections of plants I have encountered. In addition, the climate in southern Scotland is very forgiving for all sorts of plants, from *Embothrium coccineum*, a South American member of Proteaceae, whose blazing red tubular flowers were just beginning to emerge at the end of my time, to a wide range of west-Asian *Meconopsis*, distant relatives of the Welsh Poppy (*Meconopsis cambrica*), who have been bred to bloom a stunning sapphire blue above a full pubescent basal rosette. Hailing from the United States the white-tinged, pink-centered flowers of *Darmera peltata*, the sole member of its genus, rose from the ground in April, right as *Richea scoparia* of Tasmania, an unsuspecting Ericaceae member, begins to come into bud. I could walk nowhere in the garden without stopping to inspect a plant and begin circling around a plant, as a shark might its own curiosity, in search of a small metal label, a dance which most gardeners know only too well.



*Figure Left: RBG Edinburgh's montane rhododendron (and other Ericaceae members) glasshouse, bursting with color*

*Figure Right: Richea scoparia*

Following my time with the Herbaceous team, I was able to work with the Arboretum crew. I was able to act as ground support for an arboriculture operation, pruning out dead from a *Quercus garryana*, a Northwestern US oak with furrowed bark whose glossy green leaves possess softly rounded lobes. This department also oversaw the Himalayan Glade and Conifer Hillside. The Himalayan Glade, especially, is certainly something I found of great interest. There is a long plantsman from the United Kingdom, certainly including Scotland, traveling the world in search of new plants that could be used for industry or ornamentation. Some of the most famous Scottish plant explorers include David Douglas (after whom *Pseudotsuga menziesii* receives its

common name), John Fraser (credited with bringing the Fraser Fir, *A. fraseri*, as well as *Magnolia fraseri* to cultivation), and the Hooker family. The last of these, an established family of plantmen that spanned generations was responsible for a series of expeditions to the Himalayas<sup>3</sup> in search of plants. The Himalayas are a global hotspot for biodiversity, with complex geology, topography, and climate which combined to create a huge spread of niches, niches which flora dependably evolved to fill. It just so happens that the climate of Scotland is not entirely distant from many areas in the Himalayas, with moderate winter chill and consistent rainfall and humidity. One of the most iconic of the plants to make it into this Himalayan Glade happened to be in bloom while I was there, the famous *Rhododendron arboreum*. Standing at 10 to 12 feet in most places where I saw it, it was simply dripping with white and red flowers.

After cycling through my lovely time with the Arboretum team, I began work with the Rock Garden and Woodland Team. I adored every part of the garden but I cannot deny that this was likely my favorite section. The plants they kept and their arrangement was nothing short of amazing. The rock garden is not a massive space but is composed of winding paths that pass through rolling hills and short rock outcrops. These changes in elevation, and the somewhat labyrinthian design, makes it so that the visitor is finding something new around every corner, or over the top of each little hill. Plants from around the world, found suitable for gravel gardens, grow beautifully arranged in beds to create a feeling that would almost suggest a natural landscape if the plants were not so clearly drawn from the corners of the globe. The landscape was littered with *Pulsatilla*, *Arctostaphylos*, *Rhododendron*, and dwarf conifers. Many of the

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<sup>3</sup> In fact, a member of the Hooker family was a part of the first group of foreigners to ascend Mt. Fuji. He sent back a series of Japanese plants and specimens to the UK and created some of the first sketches of Fuji's phyto-topographical systems. Sadly, he died early at the age of 31 from tuberculosis.



labels in this area were red, indicating their threatened or vulnerable status. It was a truly remarkable garden of botanic, as well as conservation, interest.

Adjacent to this section set the woodland garden. It was equally incredible, with a grove of *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, fantastic specimen *Acers*, and a long list of spring ephemerals I had certainly never before laid my eyes upon. *Primula pseudodenticulata* (as well as *P. denticulata* of course), *Corydalis felxuosa*, *Fritillaria imperialis*, *Trillium tripetalum*, and many, many others covered the forest floor. Even my native *Uvularia grandifolia* shone golden with its downward-facing corkscrewed tepals, a treat to see so far from home.



*Figure: Meconopsis 'Slieve Donard' coming into bloom in late April*

As much as I fell in love with the city of Edinburgh, I was also quite happy to take some trips while there. I first took myself to Glasgow to see the botanic garden. Though clearly not as well funded as RBG Edinburgh, it was still a great landscape with a number of trees which interested me. One of my favorite finds from the day was an x *Cupressocyparis notabilis*, a cross between *Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* and *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*. It retained the more triangular stature of *C. arizonica* while also holding onto the pendulous branches of *C. (or Xanthocyparis) nootkatensis*. What a fun mix!

Another I was fortunate enough to take was out to RBG Benmore, one of the satellite gardens associated with RBG Edinburgh. I had heard great things about this garden from John Delrosso (mentioned above, an arborist from the Arnold Arboretum), and I was dying to go see it. Transportation, however, was quite an obstacle, as reaching Benmore by public transit would have taken roughly nine hours. However, I had the chance to meet Hannah Wilson, who was the new lead of the International Conifer Conservation Project (ICCP). Once it became clear to her that I was fascinated by conifers and had some great interest in learning more about them, she offered to take me out to Benmore on a work trip in order to plant out some specimens in a conifer “safe zone.” Essentially, the ICCP is working to develop a network of zones throughout the world which can host genetically significant conifers, essentially conservational stock beds. It is important to maintain these trees in different sites because disease, natural disaster, or even human damage could have a great impact on a species if it is confined to a specific, small area.



*Figure Left: Rhododendrons of all shades and sizes at Glenarn Gardens.*

*Figure Right: Pinus mugo planted on the rainy hillsides of western Scotland.*

It was a two day trip, as we planned to stay at a garden for the night which Hannah knew well on our way west. Glenarn Gardens in Rhu, Scotland is an extremely special garden, run by Michael and Sue Thornley. Having inherited the already-mature Rhododendron garden long after it had grown out of control, the couple spent the last four decades or so rehabbing the garden to keep plants in top shape. It looks absolutely stunning. Rhododendrons of colors I have never seen before were high and low and magnolias bloomed wherever they could be squeezed into the dense Ericaceae plantings. The couple was more than generous with their time, as well as giving us food and housing for the evening.

Leaving Glenarn the following morning, we made for Benmore and arrived there in western Scotland's most classic weather, gray skies and steady rain. We first offloaded our van of conifers for the Benmore team and then made for the conifer conservation site. After the jolly job of planting into heavy clay in the rain (I do mean that without sarcasm, I had a great time), we threw ourselves, soaked, back in the van and headed once again for Benmore. What a collection! They had some of the largest trees I had ever seen. Pseudotsuga rose like wooden silos into the

canopy, so tall that standing directly under them I could not see the crown. *Araucaria araucana*, having reached full maturity, stood proudly on the Scottish hillsides, massive domes of spiky leaves positioned on almost lizard-skin looking trunks. One of the shockers of the day was the largest *Picea orientalis* I had ever seen, easily clearing 80 feet, a thing of striking density and ominous size. It felt something like walking in the land of Brobdingnab, and I was the tiny Gulliver. In addition to conifers of colossal size, Benmore was also host to marvelous rhodies. The most impressive of those I encountered was *Rhododendron macabeum* x *sinogrande*. Standing about twenty feet tall, the inflorescences were literally larger than my head, each campanulate yellow flower the size of a small tea cup.



*Figure Left: Larix griffithii* sporting remarkably showy juvenile cones

*Figure Right: Sequoiadendron giganteum* allée, a powerful sight to behold.



*Figure: Rhododendron macabeianum x sinogrande*

I made one last expedition from Edinburgh, a day before my birthday, to the RHS Urban Show. The first of its kind, the show aimed to engage a different audience than the established RHS shows which cater to a specific demographic. Naturally, the Urban Show's goal was of great interest to me, dovetailing with my objective of grasping the social landscape within horticulture in the UK. I took an early morning train down to Manchester in order to have some time to explore the city before attending the event. Manchester itself was great, there is no question that it is a city with a pulse. With canals filled with houseboats, old roman ruins, and the Castlefield viaduct, it was clear that the city contained multitudes.

I was fortunate, upon reaching the venue, to connect with my old housemate from Wisley (and one of my best friends in the UK), Em Owen. One could make a strong argument that Em is one of the kindest humans in the UK. Therefore, it was lovely to meet up with her and explore

the event with a friend. It was exciting in its innovative display of horticulture, as it focused far more on indoor plants than outdoor ones. It was very effective in meeting gardeners wherever they were in terms of plant knowledge and without question attracted a crowd of relatively varied backgrounds. It was difficult for me to adjust to the selling of plants in a dark warehouse and the marketing of products which were ostensibly tangential to horticulture, but it was the first iteration of the flower show and I was thankful to be there.



*Figure: Toasting with our small potted plants at the first RHS Urban Show (Emma Owen on the right).*

At the very end of April, I headed south toward London for my placement at RBG Kew. My placement was with the Arboretum team, which oversees a verdant ocean of taxonomically significant trees. I was working under Andy Conor, a lifelong londoner who had been at Kew since his youth. He was incredibly welcoming and made me feel right at home with the rhythm of work. Kew itself, entering the full swing of spring, was a dream. When I arrived, *Anthriscus sylvestris* and the famous *Hyacinthoides non-scripta* (Bluebells) were still in bloom, creating a wonderfully cheerful combination in the ever-more-present sunlight. On the cooler mornings, Kew's landscapes were covered in a foggy haze, making the morning beams of light which penetrated the arboretum's canopy glow.



*Figure Left: Catching the last bluebells in the southern UK*

*Figure Right: Larches at Kew! Larches became a true fixation for me this spring*



*Figure Left: Morning walk to work at RBG Kew*

*Figure Right: A wonderful chance to rake the gravel in Kew's Japanese garden.*

In addition to the maintenance activities I undertook with Andy Conor's team, I was able to pitch in on whole-department projects and help out in the Arboretum nursery. The latter of these was greatly interesting to me. Something which became abundantly clear to me in the UK is how much growing operations differ from organization to organization. The setup at Kew was state of the art, but I felt that Fran Culverhouse, who ran the department, was the one who truly set the operation apart from others. She worked tirelessly to sew, prick out, pot up, and distribute quality woody plants. I was able to help her pot up some significant *Tilia* crosses in an effort to test their vigor and candidacy for maintaining genetic information.



*Figure Left: Pterostyrax psilophylla blooming beautifully in May at RBG Kew*

*Figure Right: Flowers of Halesia diptera var. magniflora spilling from the branches above*

On another day, I had the chance to join the Arborist Team. It was one of the highlights of my time in the UK. Always a fan of woody plants, I was elated to be given the opportunity to ascend a tree in Kew's Arboretum. No less, it was a *Sequoiadendron giganteum* that towered over the pond, a plant which I had been admiring from my first day at Kew. The team were incredibly



good teachers and got me set up with a hand and foot ascender, neither of which I had used before (the first time I learned to climb in New York, I ascended using a prusik and the body thrust and footlocking methods). The *Sequoiadendron* was in fact a particularly good tree for beginners, as conifers usually grow in such a way that a climber is rarely far from a limb. Huffing and puffing in pursuit of the other climbers, I managed to reach the top of the tree's lofty crown, some hundred feet from the ground. What awaited me was a spectacular view through the green leaves and fresh cones over Kew's sprawling grounds toward the London skyline. Later that day I had the opportunity to scale a London Plane and try my hand at some swings from branch to branch. It was an amazing day.



*Figure: View of the London skyline from an amazing Sequoiadendron giganteum.*

Toward the end of my time at Kew, I had the chance to catch a ride out to Wakehurst, Kew's second campus. To my understanding, years ago Kew was facing a sizeable problem relating to the health of some of their collections, foremost of these, Rhododendrons. Kew is a wide expanse of flat land, the soil of which is at times overwhelmingly composed of clay. Clay does not lend itself well to many plants, and can oftentimes exacerbate dangers regarding disease. For this reason, Kew felt that it would be wisest to move their collection to a site which is more freely draining and climatically more suitable for plants which might otherwise flounder in London. The main way, in my eyes, that Wakehurst differs from Kew is topography. In contrast to the pancake that is Kew, Wakehurst is positioned on dipping hills and sometimes even shallow cliffs, creating more diversity of temperature and shade. This creates an ideal habitat for many mountain-dwelling species and is particularly helpful to the rhododendrons that had previously sat in the hot plains of Kew. From its national *Betula* collection, to its woodland garden area alight with many kinds of primulas, to its ancient *Taxus* perched upon boulders over the lower meadow, I thoroughly enjoyed my day there.



Figure: *Ligularia przewalskii*, seen here at RBG Wakehurst, has become my favorite member of the genus, with beautifully cut leaves on long dark stems.



*Figure: Taxus of incredible size and habit clinging to boulders at RBG Wakehurst.*

After finishing my time at Kew, it was time for the famous Chelsea Flower Show. After assembling an outfit by visiting a number of charity shops, I was ready to attend the event. I showed up on the first day for the purpose of helping to set up the plant of the year stand, and to attend the Woody Plant Committee Walk. I was extremely excited for the latter, as many of the names I saw would be in attendance were only alive in legend for me. To be able to meet Tony Kirkham and John Grimshaw was a great opportunity and I was very warmly welcomed as a guest by all those in attendance from institutions around the country. As we walked and talked,

we reviewed the trees in consideration for the best woody plant in show. Some of the candidates were *Crataegus crus-galli*, *Crataegus prunifolium*, *Tetradium danielii*, and *Chionanthus retusus*. In the end, the *Chionanthus*, a part of the children's garden, was the winner and we presented the designer with a woodcarved award.

The rest of Chelsea was a whirlwind, from seeing Monty Don and Adam Frost presenting in front of me, to meeting up with my old friends from Wisley (and even running into some folks from RHS Rosemoor and RBG Edinburgh), to meeting new horticulturists from the London area. On my final day at Chelsea, I was very fortunate to be able to attend the Young Persons Horticulture Breakfast. It is a remarkable event put together by the RHS to create a space in which young (or new) horticulturists can meet each other and trade stories, advice, and contacts. I loved meeting a whole array of young gardeners, but was most elated to see a number of members of the Bankside Open Spaces Trust's Future Gardeners program. In my midterm report, I recounted a chance to have lunch with students of this program in the autumn of 2023. At this breakfast, in May of 2024, I had the chance to meet a number of the same class again and hear how they had been doing<sup>4</sup>. I spent a good deal of time hearing about their respective years and I strongly encouraged them to look me up should they ever come to visit the States.

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<sup>4</sup> When working at RBG Kew, I was allowed to follow along on one of the identification walks for the first-year apprentices. Arriving at the walk, I recognized one of the faces in the group and after reintroducing myself, I realized that we had met at the Future Gardener's lunch in September, only a couple weeks into the fellowship. It was very special to see her, thriving and happy, at Kew after she had finished her time with Bankside Open Spaces Trust.



*Figure: Model gardens at Chelsea were mind-blowing. How a team could steer a project to completion of such size and production was baffling. Beautiful and thought-provoking, each garden offered something different. The garden above, for instance, spoke of water use in the modern day.*

I was very grateful to be able to meet up with Mary and David, Rowena Wilson, Sam Fry and Kristen Biddle of Andalusia Historic House, Gardens, and Arboretum. It was a wonderful thing to see Mary again, whom I had not seen since the fellowship interview (sadly illness had prevented an earlier meeting in November). I had not seen Sam Fry in some time, and I had never met David or Kristen so there was certainly much to talk about. We were all able, later, to meet up at Mary's apartment for the famous post-Chelsea drinks party. Here, I was also able to meet Sarah Carey, a Garden Club of America champion who had done much to build the

fellowship into what it is now, and to reconnect with Liz Dugan, whom I had not seen since the prior year. It was a lovely occasion and I was, and still am, grateful to Mary for having hosted us so graciously for the evening.

Another moment from Chelsea I shall remember well was a meeting with my friend Emma. Emma and I grew up next door to each other in Jamaica Plain, Boston. A couple years older than me, I always looked up to Emma as something like an older cousin. Eventually she ended up going to university in Scotland for landscape architecture, and proceeded to remain in the UK to pursue the field. Ever diligent and skilled, Emma landed a job working for a very reputable landscape design studio in London and has continued to work there for some years now. After coming over to the UK I managed to see Emma a few times to explore the city and see gardens, and it was amazing to have a friendly face in a new country. It is a funny thing, to us both, that we independently ended up leaning toward garden profession which brought us to a city across the Atlantic. It was a no-brainer to give my courtesy ticket to Emma so that we could explore Chelsea together. Though it was a monstrously rainy day when she visited, we had a great time walking around the show gardens and through the seemingly never-ending lines of the stalls. It was valuable for me, especially, to be able to view the designs with a landscape designer to my right who had insights into the builds I would never have picked up on.

After packing bags and wishing my Wisley friends well, I was off to my final placement for my fellowship. I first had the opportunity to visit Great Dixter in October, 2023 for the autumn plant fair. They were kind enough to accept me for a month of volunteering for the month of June. Looking out of the wide windows as the train out of Saint Pancras pushed forth,

the city buildings slowly shrank to walled suburban houses, which in turn eventually dissipated into wide expanses of agricultural fields. After passing through fields filled with sheep and resilient grasses I made it to Rye station, where I met Catherine Haydock who brought me to Dixter. After putting down my bags, I was glad to be able to meet the team and pitch in that afternoon.

Dixter, pushing off from spring and heading toward summer, was heavenly. The beds were exceptionally full of color, more compact and eye-catching than any other garden I had visited in the United Kingdom. From the floriferous meadows, to the worn stone steps, to the hay bales in the gardener's shed, I was nothing short of enamored. Walking that garden the first night gave me the chance to see my first Dixter sunset, which bathes the garden in oranges where the light hits and quiets the colors where shadow stretches.



*Figure: During my first week, I was able to co-create this pot display with fellow American, Naciim Benkreira. He is a creative dynamo and he consistently gave me welcomed encouragement to explore my creative side in the garden sphere.*



*Figure Left: Dactyorchiza fuchsii was a beautiful UK orchid which performs in well-maintained meadow ecosystems.*

*Figure Right: The namesake, I believe, for the former plant's epithet, was Leonhart Fuchs. A little more than a month before seeing these flowers, I saw an original copy of Fuchs' "De Historia Stirpium Comentarii Insignes," published 1542, in the RBGE library archives.*

I think most would agree that there are many factors that set Dixter apart from other gardens. One of the most prominent in my eyes is the ability of the garden to simultaneously trigger relaxation and excitement. Flying around the old estate are swifts and sparrows who chirp and trill over the swaying grasses below. Turning corners in the high garden or sunken garden, you encounter scenes of quietude which evoke contemplation. At the same time, the same very time, you are faced with loud plant combinations which clash in the most lovely way. If you visited last year, you will certainly find bedding pockets changed to be almost unrecognizable. Walking through the exotic garden, one must duck and dodge the sprawling limbs of Cedrus, roses, and a multitude of subtropical plants. This combination, this brilliant contradiction, is one of the factors that makes Dixter one of my favorite gardens.





*Figure: Sunken Garden at dusk*



*Figure: Ladybird poppies in early June in the high garden stock beds*

Another facet that distinguishes Dixter is its culture of embracing many aspects of the traditional gardening process. There are not high-tech greenhouses or warehouses of expensive machinery at Dixter. Instead, many practices which were implemented in previous generations are still in use, from in-house propagation to meadow-maintenance. Additionally, each person partakes in all aspects of the horticultural operation; pot displays, plantings, propagation, greenhouse management and staking are all skills in which the whole team engages. Nobody on the team has a specific zone, but everybody pitches in. This means that there is not the siloing effect to which many larger public gardens fall victim, where people are often more interested in their own personal zone than the space as a whole.

Something that I wrote about in my mid-term report was the effect that working in the Wisley Seed department had on me. It was beautiful to see here, at Dixter, seed being sown which had been collected from plants in the garden the year before. Dixter propagates the vast majority of its annual material (which constitutes much of the garden) in house and, after pricking out seedling, controls the growth of the plants using cold frames. This aspect of the organization is one of the things which I find most impressive, and it was a beautiful feeling of efficiency when the whole team was working on pricking out or potting up an armada of plants in the nursery.

My time at Dixter mattered so much to me. I felt that is where I grew most as a gardener, sharpening fundamental skills that made me a better gardener. I layed out plants with greater patience, delved into a whole new world of staking plants (which I found remarkably enjoyable), and learned how to walk dexterously through a bed. This is all due to the remarkable team, each

and every member. I felt so welcomed, supported, and included and I could not be more thankful to the team at Dixter. I must extend a special thanks to Fergus Garrett, whose exuberance and generosity are unmatched in the horticulture field.



*Figure: East Sussex sunsets were the most beautiful of any I had seen throughout the year.*

After rushing to the 313 Rambler bus on my last day at Dixter, I returned to Wisley for a day before my next chapter. I was able to say goodbye to a few friends and walk the garden once more, beautiful in the summer heat. Most importantly, I was able to meet with Rowena and say goodbye. She had been an ever-present, reliable, and extremely kind figure over the course of the

fellowship and I attribute my successes to her guidance and assistance. Thank you Rowena!



*Figure: Departure from Wisley. I feel so lucky to have had Rowena throughout the program!*

I have made more memories than I could have imagined on this program and grown as a gardener in ways I could never have anticipated. I extend my greatest thanks to the Garden Club of America and Royal Horticultural society, as well as all who made these ten months possible, a span of time I shall hold dear for the rest of my life.