

Volunteers investigate the mysterious 'work of fairies'

THIS summer visitors to the National Botanic Garden of Wales may have noticed mysterious goings on in the woods, but rather than scary witches and giants, it has been a team of hardworking volunteers and staff from Dyfed Archaeological Trust that you may have glimpsed through the trees!

The team has been investigating the remains of a whole host of early 19th Century landscape garden features in the Cwm Felin Gat woods on the northern edge of the Middelton Hall Estate in which the botanic gardens are situated.

The 'necklace' of lakes that ran through the open parkland landscape that surrounded the Big House culminated a dramatically landscaped gorge.

The landscaping was commissioned by Sir William Paxton as a breath-taking showpiece, designed to impress visitors to his estate. It was filled with a series of romantic features including dramatic cascades, waterfalls and fountains, linked by twisting footpaths and rustic bridges, leading to limpid pools, woodland glades, and a captivating view. There was even a 'Hermit's Cave', complete with its resident hermit!

The Harcourt family who visited in 1813 were suitably impressed as they explored the gorge and described their walk over a rustic bridge to a little spot, which seemed to be the work of fairies.

A wild sort of garden, two small buildings, and a trickling spring, were before them, on the right was a waterfall, the water of which passing under the bridge on which they stood, precipitated itself with much violence over masses of broken rocks... For some minutes they gazed in silence, unable to express the pleasure they felt at a scene so enchantingly romantic.

Although at first glance these spectacular displays appear to be natural, in fact many of them were carefully designed and constructed using a complex network of dams, hidden watercourses and channels to

A RESTORATION project worth over £6 million is hoping to catalogue the majesty of one of Britain's finest parks — and give a boost to Carmarthenshire tourism in the process.

Dyfed Archaeological Trust Project Manager DUNCAN SCHLEE gives an update on discoveries so far.

enhance the dramatic power of the cascading water. Some of these features, such as the 'Great Waterfall' can still be appreciated on a walk from the gardens along the modern woodland paths.

Many others have lain in ruins for over 100 years, and until now have been hidden deep in the undergrowth.

Armed with loppers and secateurs in addition to their trowels and shovels, the archaeological volunteers cleared the undergrowth to investigate how several of the expertly engineered dams and bridges were built, sometimes discovering previously unknown structures as they worked. But one mystery remains...

The view that so impressed the Harcourts was captured in a painting by Thomas Hornor in 1815, and in it you can also see a 'rustic building'.

This building was assumed to be a cold bath house, the 'must have' garden accessory of its day in the early 18th Century, the equivalent of a modern-day 'hot tub'!

Tasked with locating and excavating the remains of this building, for several weeks volunteers and archaeologists alike were perplexed by the lack of evidence for a bath house on the ground. Yes, there were the scant remains of a series of drains that had once lain under the floor of a demolished building, and yes they were definitely digging in the right place, but the remains did not look anything like a bath house should do! However, the archaeologist discovered something rather different.

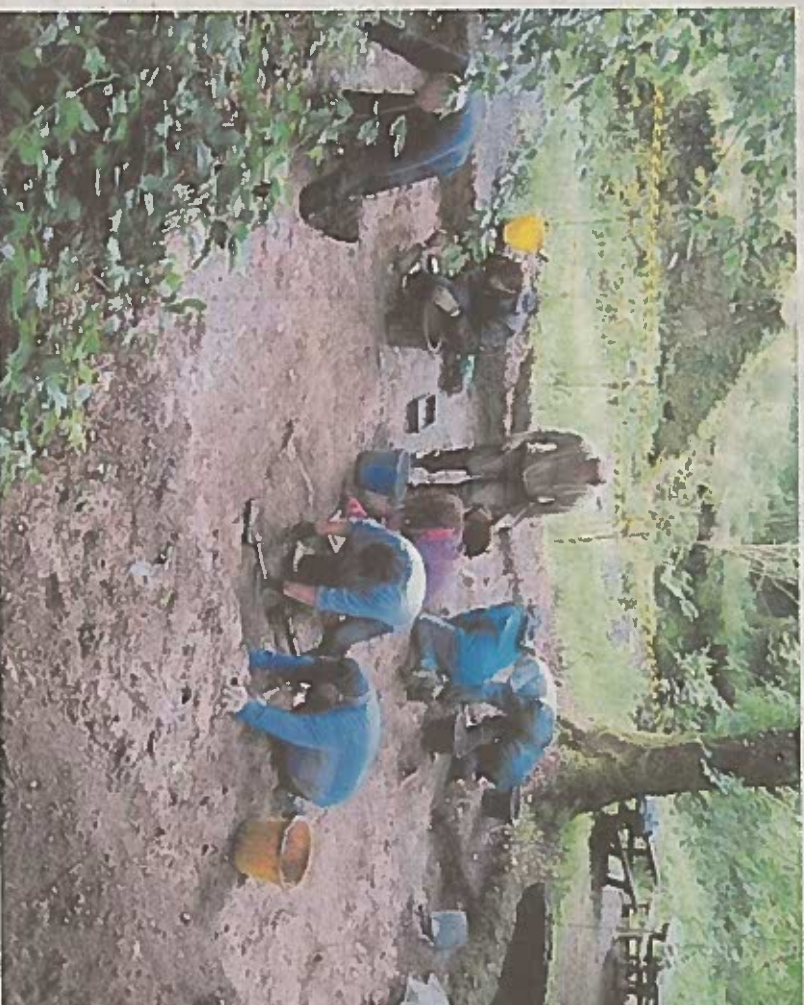
There was one other structure known to have stood in this location and referred to as 'the Grotto of Hygiea' (an ancient Greek Goddess of health).

Today only a Chalybeate well that supplied iron-rich spring water with medicinal properties can still be seen. The site of the bath house remains a mystery! Now this phase of the archaeological investigations has finished.

The information that has been discovered and recorded will help in the detailed design of the Regency Restoration Project which intends to restore the magical romantic garden landscape to its former glory. If successful the project will recreate the captivating and awe inspiring spectacles awaiting those that venture... into the woods.

The project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and has secured additional funding from Carmarthenshire County Council, Esme Fairbairn Foundation, Garfield Weston Foundation, The Mercers Company, The Monument Trust, Patsy Wood Trust, The Pilgrims Trust and Welsh Government.

Do you dare venture into the woods? If you do and fancy being part of our project, come and join in our Muddy Monday where we will be completing this phase of archaeology by protecting our revealed remains. Planned for the first Monday of half term (October 26), all you need are clothes that can get muddy, walking boots or wellies, and curiosity! Email holliswales@steaneprices@gardenofwales.org.uk or call 01558 687157.



REGENERATION: Volunteers at the National Botanic Garden of Wales excavate the Grotto of Hygiea — a monument to an ancient Greek Goddess of health — as part of the Regency Restoration Project.