

Exclusive / Downton Abbey Part 1

Gardening the Downton way

If the ITV Edwardian drama has you hooked, then the abbey's gardens will captivate you too, writes Greg Loades

HAVE the exploits of the Crawley family and their servants at Downton Abbey got you glued to the TV on a Sunday night? If so, you may fancy a visit to the real Downton Abbey - Highclere Castle in Berkshire - where the series is filmed.

Make the trip and you won't just get a Downton fix but a gardening one too. The gardens at Highclere are an attraction in their own right and getting better by the day.

The current Lady Carnarvon is in the process of creating a garden that is a spectacle to match the grandeur of Highclere Castle, which was designed by Charles Barry, who also designed the Houses of Parliament at the same time. Notice the resemblance?

With records of fruit tree planting in the gardens as early as the 13th century, the gardens at Highclere are steeped in history but they are no museum piece. Lady Carnarvon has always loved gardening and when she and the 8th Earl of Carnarvon took over Highclere 10 years ago, the chance to share her passion for gardening on a grand scale was taken on with relish. No stone is being left

turned in making Highclere a destination for keen gardeners, regardless of the Downton Abbey connection. A whopping 15,000 bulbs have been planted by Lord Carnarvon, countless trees added to the new arboretum and opening times extended so that more people can enjoy a day of inspiration and tranquility at Highclere.

Space is no object, with 1,000 acres of parkland, originally designed by Capability Brown at the end of the 18th century, but new pockets of border perfection have been recently added that will leave visitors jotting down ideas to take back to their own patches. Remember your notepad and camera when you go!

Jim Carter, who plays the butler Carson in Downton needs to remember his too! "The garden is out of bounds when Downton is being filmed," said Lady Carnarvon. "I keep meaning to take the cast round the garden for a tour," she said. "Jim Carter is a very keen gardener and is coming to the Heroes at Highclere Day so I can give him the tour then!" she added.

All parts of the garden will be open to view on the special Heroes at Highclere day on October 16 and the real

Climbing roses



Highclere uses climbing roses to good effect to get as much old-fashioned charm out of their walls as possible! And once you've had climbing roses in the ground for a couple of years, they are far more tolerant of drought than they are given credit for and will flower gamely against a warm wall, where trickier large-flowered clematis will flounder in the dry conditions. Use horizontal wires to train the stems and they will flower more prolifically.



PHOTOS: HIGHCLERE CASTLE 2011

DID YOU KNOW?
The holly *Ilex altaclerensis* was bred in the garden. The name 'altaclerensis' comes from 'alta' meaning 'high' and 'clerensis' being 'clere'.

In The Secret Garden



Plants in The Secret Garden have been chosen with July and August flowering in mind because this is the peak time for visitor numbers. So the penstemon collection is ever-growing and you'll see blue and white agapanthus liberally planted as you explore

your way through the bendy borders. Blue is a popular colour in the garden with a blue and yellow bed planted in front of the peach house two years ago, a favourite of Lady Carnarvon. "When a new bed is planted it looks sparse to begin with but it's looking good now," she said.

Colour themed border



Lady Carnarvon is keen to colour theme the borders and it certainly makes them more dramatic. Keeping plants of the same colour in one place allows you to have a lot of a plant you like without it overshadowing the rest. So in the secret garden, enormous white-flowered mophead

hydrangeas are a prominent feature. Because their flowerheads last for a long time, they are a good 'main' plant to rely on in a border. Grow them in part shade for flowers that are 'whiter than white'. In full sun they will have a red or blue tinge in the centre of each bract.

How to get there

By car
Highclere Castle is situated six miles south of Newbury, Berkshire, off the A34 between Whitway and Litchfield. Leave the M4 at junction 13 and follow the brown tourist signs.
By rail
The nearest train station is Newbury, a 20 minute taxi ride away from Highclere Castle.



Heroes at Highclere

Heroes at Highclere is an Armed Forces Charity Day taking place on Sunday October 16 at Highclere Castle, Highclere Park, Newbury RG20 9RN, 10am-4.30pm. Meet the Downton Abbey cast and enjoy the air and ground displays, the Kings Troop and the Royal Horse Artillery as well as looking at the fabulous castle and gardens. Tickets are £15 for adults, £5 concessions. It is recommended that you book tickets in advance so tel: 01635 253210 or visit www.highclerecastle.co.uk

Highclere Castle Garden in numbers

15,000
Bulbs planted by the current Lord Carnarvon
1218
The earliest record of a garden existing at Highclere
1,000
Acres of parkland
3
Gardeners



Meet the Downton cast at Highclere gardens on October 16

gardens of Downton will also contain the real cast! "I've asked for as many members of the cast to turn up as possible," said Lady Carnarvon.

Aside from the parkland and arboretum, the garden is split into two parts, The Monk's Garden and The Secret Garden, which is being constantly updated. "I looked at some of the National Trust gardens and their herbaceous borders and how they attract masses of people. Then I looked at our borders and thought they were skinny in comparison so they were redesigned," she said.

Tradition is a big part of what is planted in the garden. A beech avenue originally planted in the early 1700s has been replicated and plants in The Monk's Garden are chosen with what was originally planted in mind.

"Jim Carter who plays Carson (right) is a very keen gardener"
Lady Carnarvon



Although no veg is grown in the garden, the magnificent glasshouse contains peaches and nectarines and the walls are put to good use, home to trained peach, nectarine, medlar and quince trees.

Another development is the 'Wood of Goodwill', where acres of conifers have been removed. They're being replanted with an avenue of British native trees to make it look like it would have done in the 18th century. And why the name? Well, here's another idea to take home with you. The avenue is being

underplanted with plants given to the Earl and Countess as gifts, so they are grouped together, hence the name 'Wood of Goodwill'. "This project gives my husband one of the greatest joys," said Lady Carnarvon.

"I've gone back to what we think was planted here in the past but we do have to do battle with the dreadful soil," she said. "It dries out very quickly and is not ideal at all." Roses have been added to The Secret Garden - made up of packed, bendy borders - for their crowd-pulling

potential despite their battle with the poor soil. "Roses and penstemons work very well because most of our visitors tend to come to the garden in July and August when they are in flower," she said.

Pink roses have been a must and are some of the garden's star attractions in summer. Pink climbers 'Penny Lane', 'Alberic Barbier' and 'Gertrude Jekyll' are some of Lady Carnarvon's favourites. And one of the garden's newest additions is a rose arbour, which is being planted up this autumn.