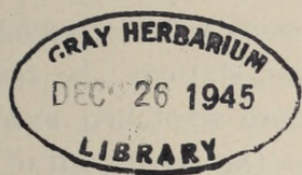


# ARNOLDIA



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BRITISH GARDENS IN WAR TIME AS SEEN  
BY AN AMERICAN SOLDIER

**D**URING the past few years, in connection with my duties in the Armed Forces of the United States, I made several trips to Europe and Africa. Some of the trips were very brief and of these my memories consist of little more than a constantly changing horizon viewed from the deck of a ship. On six of these trips made to the British Isles, I accumulated a wealth of memories, some of them very pleasant, others very discouraging. However, since time mellows most things, already one can view with humor the unpleasant situations and dwell more enthusiastically upon happier moments.

While in Britain my outfit was seldom stationed long in any one place, hence considerable moving about occurred. Although, at the time, this moving seemed irksome because of the total blackout (and it seemed we always moved at night), unfamiliar railway stations, crowded trains, new billets, etc., this very moving provided the means for our greater knowledge of the country, its terrain, people and customs. Now, in retrospect, we are thankful for these many changes.

While in any one place, ample opportunities were afforded each individual to visit localities within a reasonable distance from his base. Many men, naturally, preferred the larger cities and there spent most of their free time. To me, however, the English countryside held more allure and after an occasional visit to the cities to discover that a definite sameness seemed to exist in all the larger commercial centers, I was content to browse around and carry on a feeble bit of botanizing, almost entirely along observational lines.

Several long train trips were made, some from Glasgow or Edinburgh, south through the entire length of England including Wales and vice versa. Of course, one cannot judge the country from a train window but certain observations and conclusions were reached based on this method of travel. We never tired of look-



ing at the countryside and we all felt that even though Britain at that time was being torn apart by war—on the whole, the English countryside was probably one of the loveliest and most peaceful spots in the world. The gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) often brightened the landscape with its yellow flowers either growing wild upon the hillsides or planted along the railways or near stations. In northern England and southern Scotland, walls made of flat stones stretched away over the hills as far as the eye could see, appearing almost as the great wall of China in miniature. These rock-fences enclosed the various fields and pastures. While conversing about these walls, the observation was made, that unlike our American fields and pastures, not a single loose or stray stone could be seen. Thereafter, almost as though it were a game, the men watched the fields carefully and concluded finally that the clean fields and pastures were not mere chance but that the fields throughout all of England had been made clear through effort.

Farther south, hedge-rows replace the stone walls and are used almost exclusively to separate the fields and retain the cattle and sheep. Occasionally, one can see fields edged by hedge-rows which have become worthless for fencing because of neglect in trimming. When such a condition does occur, the hedge can be transformed into a serviceable fence by “plashing.” This is done by slashing the main stems half off with a knife and then bending them down and anchoring the branches so as to interlock with the adjoining plants. We saw some of these hedges in southern England a day or so after they had been “plashed.” Although they presented a formidable barrier through which no animal would attempt to break, I must confess, at that stage, the rows appeared very unsightly.

When traveling in Wales our train often moved close along the coast. On one side the ocean was sometimes within ten feet. Just a short distance on the other side of the tracks, the terrain arose abruptly, not so very high, but enough to present that strange, somewhat barren and lonely, almost indescribable atmosphere that is so typically Wales, which one must see to appreciate fully. Here on the hillsides one could see gullies filled with snow, yet growing close by would be clumps of bright-colored gorse—or so it appeared from the train.

Our first stay in Wales was brief, consisting only of five bleak days in March. We were billeted at Colwyn Bay which is situated on the north coast by the Irish Sea. The many small hotels, the promenade along the shore and the long metal pier with its pavilion led one to conclude that Colwyn Bay probably was a favorite peace-time summer resort for many people. The city also boasted a public garden which was none too attractive at this time of year. Photographs taken during the summer presented the garden in much better condition.

The Welsh people seemed much interested in us since we were among the first American soldiers to pass their way. They did much to make our stay pleasant. One acquaintance suggested several trips to noteworthy spots nearby and went so far as to check our trains to these various destinations. He even gave us de-



tailed information on how to reach other points of interest and mentioned places where he thought we might enjoy eating.

In two of the cities visited, Conway and Caernarvon, were ruined castles. Conway castle, the first viewed, was old, exceedingly old, and easily the most primitive among "our" castles. We spent considerable time there reconstructing it mentally and in the process withstood many imaginary attacks and prolonged sieges. We rebuilt it and staged gala affairs in the large halls. Unfortunately, in spite of our mental efforts, the castle was still in ruins when we departed! The city itself, in reality a walled city within the castle grounds, is still unspoiled and charming. It was by the merest chance that I found myself standing over the "grave in the Conway churchyard" which inspired Wordsworth's famous poem, "We are Seven."

On a longer trip to Caernarvon, we were fortunate in having a train companion who pointed out numerous places of interest along the way. At this castle we were treated to a "special" tour by one of the guards. Later, in the guard-room we were shown the pictures of the latest investiture of the Prince of Wales, a truly noble piece of pageantry. The destruction of this castle was most unfortunate. It seems that in the middle of the nineteenth century, the castle was abandoned. The townspeople were permitted to remove the castle stones for building their own homes. Later,—but too late—this practice was discontinued and an attempt made to restore the castle to a semblance of its former state. Several other castles were visited at various other times, but these two, because they were our first, will probably always hold a special niche in our hearts.

All things botanical were brought to me, since I was the only botanist in the outfit! Another outfit, which usually moved with us, boasted a zoologist so between the two of us we could answer a majority of the questions "biological."

Recently I was asked what impressed me most in England. There are many things to impress an American, away from home and tired by war. The fortitude and gallantry of every British citizen, after years of privation and war was enough alone to make a lasting impression and to give a moral lift to anyone. Among other things, the endless number of chimney-pots, rows upon rows of them atop all the city houses, the beautiful English countryside and the thatched cottages—all were impressive. However, what impressed me more than anything else was the English people's love for their flower-gardens. It seems, wherever possible, every house has its garden—the larger estates, gardens often of renown—the smaller homes, gardens to fit the space, no matter how small it may be.

Some of the larger estates, like Warwick Castle, have centuries of history and tradition behind them. Their gardens are just as old and historic. In fact, the grounds of the entire estate appear as one huge garden. Like the castle itself, the plans of the grounds were made many years ago. Perhaps a new wing may be added to the castle—perhaps a small change may be made in the plantings—



the over-all picture will scarcely change. I use Warwick Castle as an example because today, despite the war, the castle is alive—the grounds in beautiful condition. A pitiful sight is a similar, perhaps less renowned, estate sinking into the abyss of decay. Taken over by the Armed Forces, the halls resound with alien footsteps of war. Initials appear on the woodwork and balustrades. Windows are broken in. These are nothing—and can easily be repaired! A walk down the garden path shows real destruction. Vandalism—no, they know no better! Trucks have made shorter roads through shrub plantings. Lying on the ground, gasping its last may be a precious gift from the Orient! Nearby construction destroys another group planting. C'est la guerre! C'est l'american! Wherever possible, however, the British themselves have maintained an excellent standard in their parks. They will deplore the rundown condition, as they term it. Last spring, I visited the public park at Leamington. An extended walk through the grounds proved the place to be in excellent condition. The trees were well-labeled, the grounds well-kept, and the border plots filled with regular rows of tulips and other spring flowers, making a truly brilliant display. The trees were in full flower and the red-flowered varieties of the English hawthorn (*Crataegus Oxyacantha* var.) were at their best. The hawthorn is perhaps England's finest flowering tree. It starts flowering in May and continues into June. At this season of the year one can see the bright spots of pink and rose dotting the landscape.

Another brilliant and colorful display was afforded by the flowers of the many species, varieties, forms and hybrids of rhododendron. Near Warrington in Lancashire is an estate that has the most casual planting of rhododendron that I have had the pleasure to see. Always I had thought of rhododendrons growing only in sheltered places but here they were planted in the open as well as among the trees. I am afraid that I failed my companions miserably when I told them that I could not begin to name all the different kinds. They could not understand why such simple looking plants should be difficult to name—so thereupon I gave them a not too profound “lecture” on species and hybridization. With such ample material at hand—perhaps I was convincing.

The most prevalent gardens in England and, perhaps, the most traditional are the front-yard or door-yard gardens. Each house along the city streets, at least in the smaller cities, has its own little garden. In the country they are termed cottage gardens. This same custom of door-yard garden was brought to the United States by the early settlers and flourished during Colonial times. At that time, the front yard was not for pleasure and children never played there. It was a part more formal than the side or back of the house. I understand that these door-yard gardens originated back in the middle of the 18th century in England when the fore-court was planted to give privacy to the home. Later, it became the custom of the yeomen to have door-yard gardens and this idea, in modified form, has been carried into modern times without general realization of its origin.



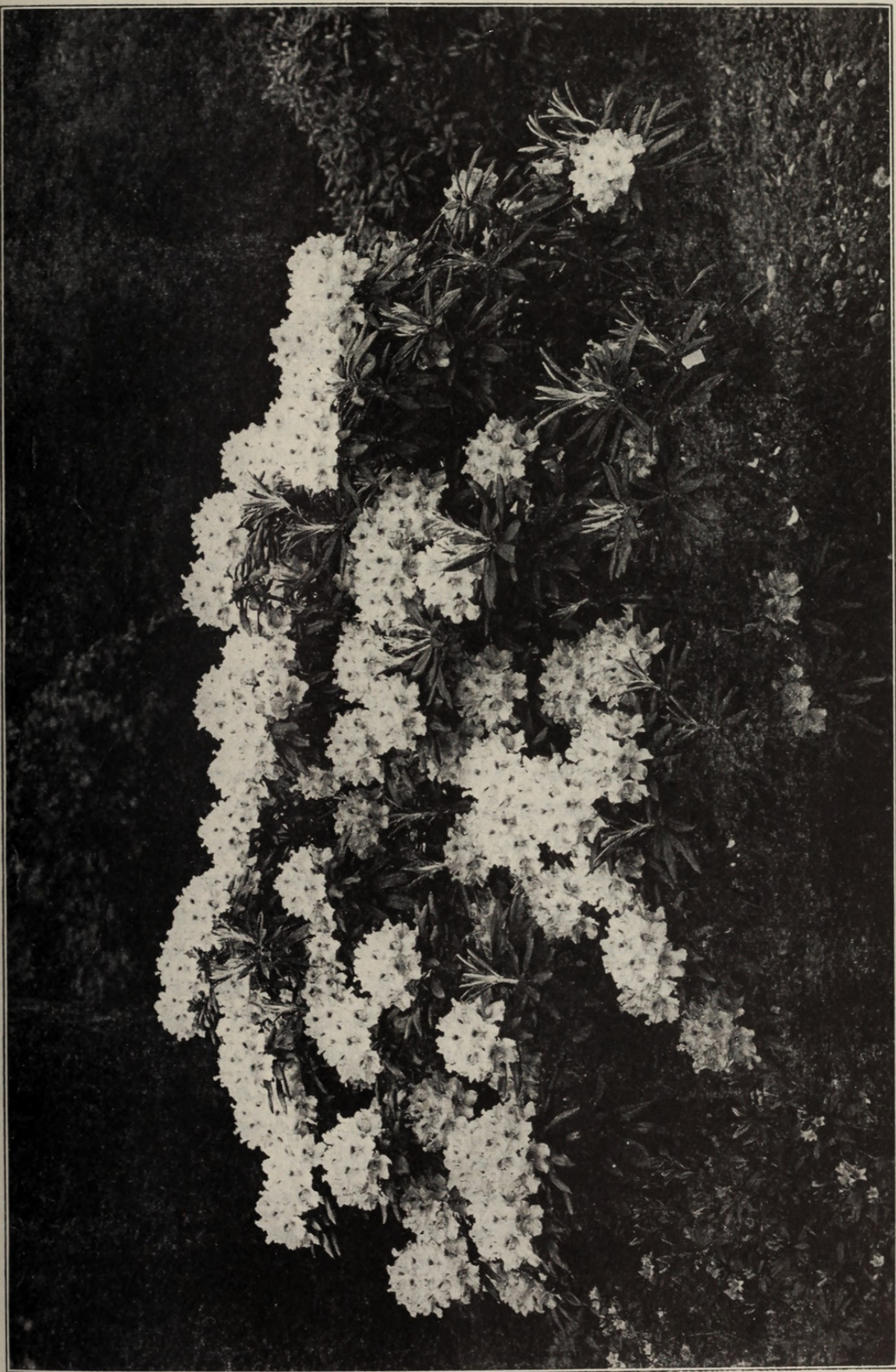


PLATE XV

One of the many species of rhododendron for which the climate of England is excellent for growth.



Often the door-yard plot was used as an herb garden. In the United States, this type of garden has long fallen into disuse and been replaced by grass plots with shrub plantings near the house. In England and also in Wales, perhaps unwittingly, this custom has become part of their very life.

Some of the most beautiful front-yard gardens were observed in Wales. These gardens are not merely the whims of individuals, lasting a few years until the novelty wears off and then allowed to run to weeds. The individual gardener takes great pride in the care of his plants even though they may be few and very common. However, one usually finds that over a period of time each garden has acquired one or several unusual species or varieties which have become pampered pets. Even during the trying war years—and I probably saw them at their poorest—these gardens were kept up.

In the rear of the houses where vegetables were planted, perhaps less care had been given to the flower borders that usually surrounded these gardens and greater attention given to the vegetables themselves. It appeared to me that war-time emergency demanded that the people concentrate on cabbage, brussel-sprouts and other variations of *Brassica oleracea* because of the quantity produced rather than the quality. This same was true in the “public” gardens devoted to the growth of vegetables. These latter resembled very much some of our Victory Gardens but appeared more permanent. Over a rather extensive plot of ground, one might see many very small sheds, which I presume housed the tools of the various gardeners. The sheds, in most instances, appeared rather old. All this was merely assumption, since these plots were observed always, it seemed, from the train window. I have recently learned that these are permanent and are termed “allotment gardens” which rent at a very nominal fee of about ten shillings a year. At the same time, I was told that cabbage has always been the dominant vegetable grown in these gardens. Often over a period of time it was the only fresh green that appeared in our mess halls. It was much more coarse in texture and taste than the cabbage to which we are accustomed in the States.

In the very old villages and towns, the houses often were flush with the walk and one could step immediately from the street into the dwelling. One expected no gardens here. However, the windows were usually gay with flowering plants. In the smaller cities, the homes were set back from the street anywhere from ten to twenty feet or even more. Along the street-walk and side of the house customarily had been erected a low concrete wall about eighteen inches high. Immediately behind this low wall might be a hedge. Up to this point there seemed to be a definite sameness. The gardens themselves, however, varied considerably. In some instances, the whole yard became the garden with beds or plots formed by connecting paths. In other places, grass plots served as bases for plantings with flowers in the center and along the sides. Still other patterns were produced by planting the flowers along the main path to the house and a border



along the outside with the hedge as a background. In these instances the entire yard with these exceptions was devoted to lawn.

When one is accustomed to the abundance of floral display found in our American gardens, these small British gardens may at first appear lowly. On further observation one realizes that the British have merely used restraint and individuality in their selections. There may be gardens there as riotous with color and abundance as any found in America only I never have happened to see them. This restraint may be illustrated in the use of the rose. Roses, because of the favorable climatic conditions, flower long and luxuriantly. One might imagine an English street just a shower of rambler roses. Just the opposite situation occurs. As far as I can recollect, the rambler rose, used so extensively in this country, appears more rarely in Britain. The small British garden may boast of one or two fine rose bushes—but what roses! There is an individuality exhibited by each plant. The owner obtained it, perhaps, from some obscure source—or may have produced it himself. It is his very own and he is very proud of it. Some gardens, on the contrary, are almost wholly devoted to roses since it is a very popular plant. I can recall passing daily a garden in Llandudno, Wales, and stopping each time to peer over the hedge in order to admire a particularly gorgeous double yellow rose. At that time, it appeared to be about the only plant flowering in the garden. The owner had observed my interest, I knew, and one day as he stood in his garden, I commented on the beauty of his rose. He was very proud of the plant, and told me that he had produced that particular rose himself. Whether or not he gave all the information to his neighbors also I don't know, but it was the only rose of its kind that I saw in Llandudno. And such is probably the story of many other varieties of roses in the same city block, which incidentally happened to offer especially beautiful roses to view.

Close by, in another yard, I found growing a tall, rather old tree, the monkey-puzzle (*Araucaria auracana*). This again was the only tree of its kind in the vicinity and attracted the attention of the Americans, many of whom had never seen it growing before. I knew immediately when one started to say, "I saw the strangest tree today—" just where he had been in town and to which tree he was referring.

During a period of a few weeks we were billeted in private homes in Llandudno. This city, erected on a point of land almost completely surrounded by water, is one of the finest vacation spots in North Wales. We learned to know the people quite well—and the surrounding country became the scenes of our hikes, some enforced and others for pleasure. One evening while strolling along the promenade we discovered a statue erected in memory of Lewis Carroll, renowned author of the widely read "Alice in Wonderland." The statue was fittingly placed at the far end of a wading pool for children, at that time used for an Emergency Water Supply. One could easily imagine on examining the caves on Great Orme



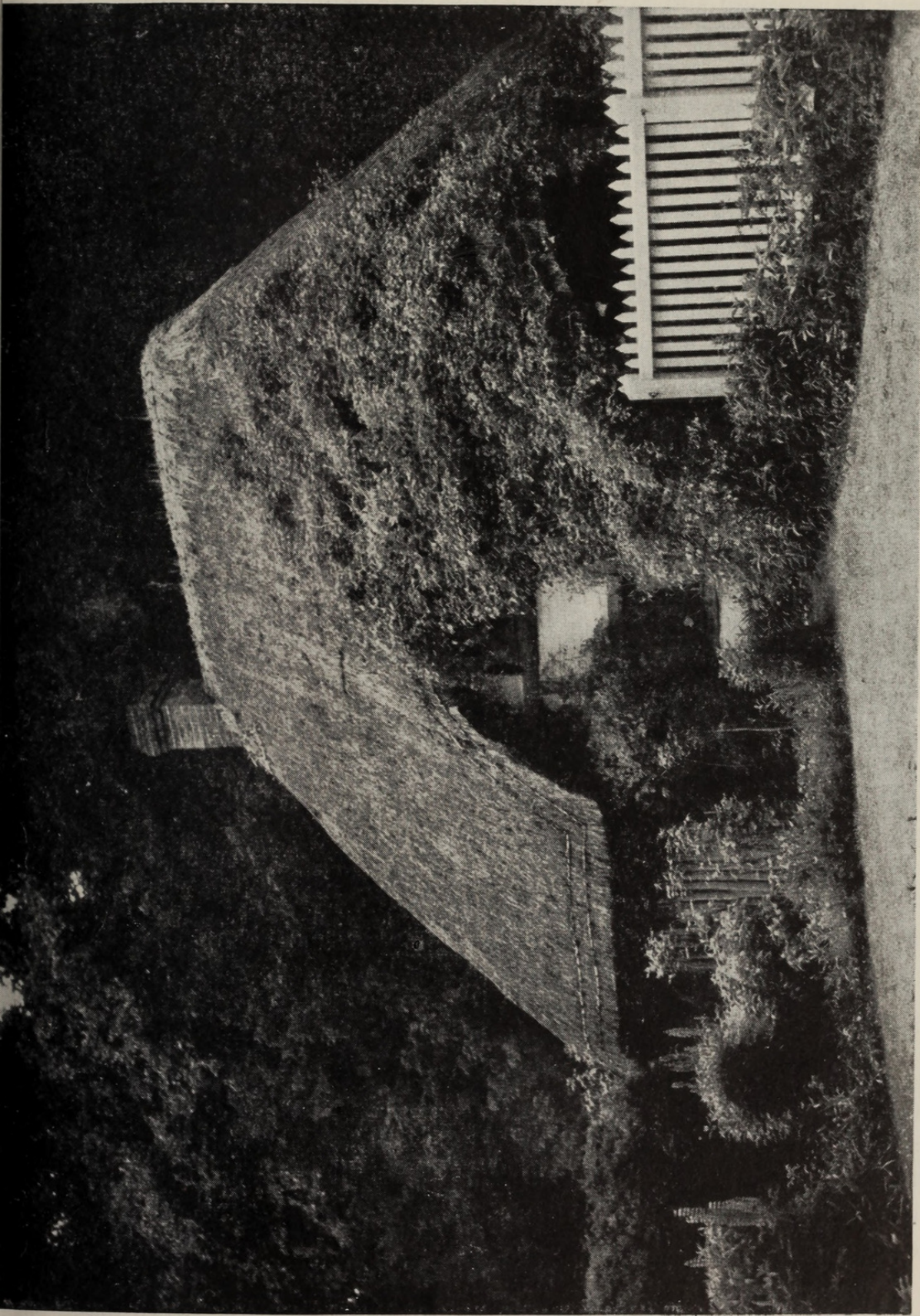
and the nature of the shore-line just how and where Carroll got his whimsical ideas for his ever-read books.

While roaming on Great Orme, a high rocky cliff, along the shore just outside of Llandudno, I was amazed to find growing in solitary grandeur, a species of cotoneaster. My first thought was that it was an escape, but frankly I couldn't understand whence the species could have escaped up there on that lonely spot. Since then, I have been told that it is *Cotoneaster integerrima* and happens to be an isolated station for the species. On the journey down the shore-drive back to the city we were amazed to find thousands of gulls nesting high on the cliffs over our heads. Such an inquisitive group of birds! They had elected to build their nests on the very edge of the cliff, so that they could observe passersby by merely craning their necks over the side of the nests with the least effort. Immediately, as we came into view, the birds set up a raucous din with their exchange of calls.

While at Llandudno we saw some of the Welsh gardens at their finest. Used extensively, but modestly, was the lupine (*Lupinus polyphyllus*). Here were beautiful blues, some shading from deep blue at the base to near-white at the top of the spikes, others deep blue the entire length of the inflorescence. Red variations were likewise found in abundance and some plants had a combination of red and blue. Another favorite was stocks (*Matthiola incana*). This species appeared as the most commonly used flower at that period of the year. The sweet-William (*Dianthus barbatus*) in white, pink, scarlet or deep red was grown along with the true carnation (*Dianthus Caryophyllus*). I was surprised to find the latter growing in the yards in such excellent condition. Also used was the wood-anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) and columbine (*Aquilegia vulgaris*). Occasionally, in the corner, perhaps near the house, could be seen a small tree of laburnum or golden-rain with its cascades of bright yellow flowers. When admiring this tree, one was always informed with a sort of solemn triumph that the tree was poisonous!

Another spring was spent in Wiltshire, Somerset, and Warwick Counties. In the very early spring we were stationed near Lavington and Devizes in Wiltshire. One February day while on a walk, a companion and I happened to stroll through a small village near Erlestoke Manor. This little place was composed almost entirely of homes with thatched roofs. I neglect to say cottages because some of the places were homes of more than a single story. Some houses, even though quite large and seemingly more modern were very old and one could see that the nails when used were hand-fashioned. The homes alone were intriguing. One little place interested us more than all the others because of the gem of a garden before it. We spent considerable time looking at the brilliant-colored crocuses, the snow drops (*Galanthus nivalis*), the grape-hyacinth (*Muscari racemosa*), a few daffodils, a small bush of jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*), a few perky primulas, and finally a small stiff-branched bush, about eighteen inches high, of *Daphne Mezereum*. The owner, who happened to appear, gave us a sprig of daphne be-





*Courtesy of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society*

## PLATE XVI

The Cottage garden. A thatch-roofed cottage, often seen on the English countryside, surrounded by its garden.



cause I wished my companion, who had never seen nor heard of it, to enjoy the fragrance. The owner remarked that most people considered it too stiff! It did appear a bit awkward and bristling when he drew attention to its growth. However, few plants produce such an exquisite odor outdoors at that time of year. And as my companion remarked, "I don't blame the poor plant. I am stiff with the cold myself." This little garden was one of the most beautiful I have ever seen—and in February!

Another winter flowering plant which pleased me much but which I saw infrequently was the Christmas-rose (*Helleborus niger*). Oddly enough, the first time I saw the flower was Christmas day. We had arrived at our first base in Britain the afternoon of the previous day, Christmas eve, after a long train trip of nearly forty-eight hours. We were a very dismal looking, disgruntled group of soldiers when we finally arrived at our base in the Midlands. We had left the Queen Elizabeth in the Clyde early in the afternoon of December twenty-second and through a confusion of orders, were shipped to the very southwest tip of England, only to find we were unexpected and unwanted. After a long two-hour wait in the dark and cold, we again entrained and started back to our original destination, arriving there on Christmas eve. Much time was consumed in hurriedly getting established before dark. During the night, the feeble fire in our tiny stove went out and Christmas morning found us shivering, a trifle apprehensive and discouraged. A couple of us decided that it was warmer outside than within the hut and since we had not been assigned to duty yet, we would stroll about the grounds of a nearby estate. Here we found growing—and in full flower—the Christmas-rose. I had never seen it before but recognized from the descriptions the beautiful white flowers which were tinged with pink. I remembered enough about the plant to explain that the showy portion was the calyx and not the corolla. My companion thought it was very auspicious that we should find the flower on Christmas day.

There is considerable folk-lore associated with the Christmas-rose. It was used by the ancients to purify their houses and hallow their dwellings. They also believed that by strewing or perfuming their living quarters with the plant, they drove away evil spirits. In the same manner they blessed their cattle with the plant to keep them free from spells of the wicked. The people would first pray to Apollo and Asklepios (the Greek god of medicine) for leave to dig up the root. Later, the Christmas-rose, with its delicate white flowers was dedicated to St. Agnes—and most appropriately, since she was always regarded as a special patroness of purity.

The same day, while walking to a nearby village, we observed one of the finest pieces of camouflage it had been our privilege to see. Pausing at the top of a hill, we looked down at a tiny village sleeping in the valley. Not a person was in sight. The other side of the valley appeared as a green and brown plaid, pat-





*Courtesy of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society*

**PLATE XVII**

The Christmas-rose (*Helleborus niger*) flowering in English gardens during December and January and traditionally used at Christmas.



turned by many fields and hedges. The unploughed fields were all very green but one appeared a trifle more so than the others. We pondered on the sight and wondered what might be planted there. Later, on closer observation, we discovered that it was a huge building for some war use, artfully camouflaged to match the nearby green fields.

Later in March and April, on still another trip, we were stationed near Taunton in the southern part of England. The houses here were neither the thatched type noted previously nor the street type of the cities, but semi-modern so-called detached houses along the road. Here the same love of gardens was found, but more individual. Flagstone walks up to the house formed the basis for planting. Here also we saw some larger homes with walled-in gardens of corresponding proportions but carrying out the same general effect of the smaller gardens mentioned above. Fruit trees were in flower. The display seemed rather feeble compared to our own abundant fruit orchards.

The following month found us again in the Midlands near Birmingham. From this base we visited Kenilworth, Warwick and Stratford-on-Avon. The last named place is a pilgrimage for all Shakespeare lovers the world over and I became one of the millions who have paid tribute to the bard. The townspeople did everything to make our stay there pleasant, showing us all things relating to Shakespeare and his family. In the rear of one of the Shakespearian Museums is a garden devoted to the growing of the flowers mentioned by Shakespeare in his works. In late May, it was an excellent display but little time was permitted for a prolonged tour to examine the various plants. So many of them I did not know. This was in early May, 1944.

Everything eventually comes to an end—and so it was with the war in the European Theatre of Operations and my various stays in Britain and on the Continent. At the time, I felt very weary and worn and was glad to dash up my last gang-plank at Southampton and take one last look at the coast as our ship faded into the night and the English Channel. I had traveled enough—and would be glad to settle down in the States forever! As I mentioned earlier, time mellows everything and I already begin to feel the urge to go back to see how differently Great Britain will appear in time of peace and to check up on things I am doubtful about—as well as to meet again some of the friends I have made in a foreign land.

C. E. KOBUSKI





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