

## Report on visit to The Oxford University Botanic Garden

Sixteen members of the Society left the Beeches Car Park at 10am precisely on Thursday, 11<sup>th</sup> June, in an Alex Cars Coach driven by David Hogg. and arrived at the Oxford University Botanic Garden at 11.30 am. The sun was shining.

In Reception each member was presented with a map of the Garden and sticker which allowed re-entry at any time during the day.

We then had a magnificent talk from Timothy Walker, the Horti Praefectus. He explained that the garden was founded in 1621 as a Physic Garden with a donation of £5,000 from Sir Henry Danvers (c. £3.5 million in today's money) 'whereby learning might be improved and for the greater glory of God'. The site was chosen as being the first open space outside the city walls. The soil is excellent because it was the site of a former Jewish Cemetery and also because of silt deposited by numerous floodings of the River Cherwell. The Garden has not been seriously flooded since 1967. Timothy then went on to discuss why and how the naming and classification of plants became necessary, from Genesis to Theophrastus and Dioscorides through the middle ages when plants were important for their medicinal properties to botanists like John Ray and Linnaeus who were interested in them scientifically, and noticing that some groups of plants were very similar to each other and different from other groups. Linnaeus simplified the identification of plants and animals by giving them two names, a Generic name and a unique Specific name. – a Binomial. This classification was mainly based on the morphology of the flower. After Darwin published his 'Origin of Species' botanists began to consider how plants had evolved and were related to each other.

Since the 1990's, as DNA techniques have improved and become much easier, some plants have been found not to fit the conventional classification and have led to a re-thinking of evolutionary pathways. Evolutionary trees are three-dimensional. We just see the tips of the branches and have to try to construct the pathways from **all** the information that we have as John Ray had proposed in the 1600's "that all characteristics of a plant, floral, morphological and anatomical should be involved in the description, naming and classification of plants".

The Oxford University Botanic Garden is being re-organised based on these new findings in order to aid the teaching of systematics and taxonomy at the University. It is the first Botanic Garden to do this.

Timothy Walker is a real raconteur. He gave us all this information, and more, in a very informal and fascinating way, with lots of amusing anecdotes and asides as well as showing examples from the plants around us. He held the attention of everyone for whole 90 minutes.

We then had time for lunch in nearby cafes, restaurants or pubs, which had been shown on a small map given to members on the bus, and a return to the garden if we wished.

The coach left at 4.10pm and arrived back at the Beeches Car Park at 5.30 exactly. Sincere thanks to Alex Coaches and excellent driving by David Hogg.

Jo Newbould 15/06/09

