

Visit to Colesbourne Gardens, February 2022

The u3a Garden Group's first visit of the year was to Colesbourne Gardens. It is renowned for its snowdrops and we were astonished by the number and variety.

We had private a tour led by Sir Henry Elwes who had us spellbound with his stories not only about the snowdrops but some of his rare trees.

The present Sir Henry Elwes' ancestor, the plantsman Henry John Elwes was born and died at Colesbourne, but from the age of 17 he spent at least part of every year abroad. During his visit to Turkey in 1874 he came across the fine large snowdrop which was subsequently named after him *Glanthus elwesii*. Before he left Turkey, he arranged for a large number of bulbs to be sent back to England, the first of many millions exported ever since. The present day collection has been built up over the years through purchases, gifts and exchanges with other collectors.

Sir Henry led our tour of the garden. We learnt to distinguish between the different snowdrop varieties as we were guided through the wood, George's garden, the Arnotts (named for magnificent drift of scented *Galanthus* 'S. Arnott'); passing the extraordinarily coloured lake, through ice house hollow, the formal garden and the courtyard. Everywhere we looked, drifts of snowdrops spread into the distance.

We discovered that some snowdrops start flowering around Christmas day and others will flower until April. We saw singles, doubles, yellow varieties and so many more. I think we all came away with a favourite in mind and a fair few have found their way into our gardens. .

The majority of snowdrops do not seed and need to be divided when they get to a suitable size clump. An essential tip we learnt was NOT to plant in the green as to do so damages the roots. We should mark where the clumps are and divide in July when suitably robust.

Carolyn and Henry Elwes, and more recently gardeners Shane Ball and Will Fletcher plant out thousands of snowdrops each year and new varieties are added when possible. The collection now totals some 350 cultivars.

If you ever get the chance to visit, especially with a guided tour, don't hesitate.