

The Japanese Garden at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens

The original garden viewed from one of the entrances, and showing the way through to the bonsai collection.



It is not every day that the JGS is asked to help to redevelop a major public garden, so in June 2003, when the Curator of Birmingham Botanical Gardens, James Wheeler, approached us at our stand at the BBC Gardeners' World Live Show at the NEC, it was something of a surprise. Apparently a huge weeping beech tree in the existing garden was diseased and had to be removed, leading to a rethink on the overall design. James felt that by coming to the 'experts' he could ensure the best possible outcome for the Botanical Gardens.

After exploratory discussions and a site visit by Kira Dalton and myself, it was agreed that we would run a design workshop for members of

the Midlands Region to develop some ideas. The scope was the existing 'Japanese' courtyard and the adjoining area housing the National Bonsai Collection.

The workshop, attended by over 30 JGS members, the Chairman of the Bonsai group, and staff from the Botanical Gardens, including James Wheeler, produced many ideas for the design. A drawing incorporating many of the ideas was submitted early in 2004, and was enthusiastically received by James. We also offered assistance in the building of the garden, provided we could do it as a series of workshops for JGS members. This offer was also enthusiastically received, as James felt the advantage of having experienced and knowledgeable help



The original garden looking towards the moon window.

The original garden viewed from the moon window, and showing the weeping beech.



outweighed the disadvantage of the construction taking much longer if they built it themselves.

The *quid pro quo* for us providing this assistance was the opportunity to publicise the garden and the Society on permanently mounted display boards. With many thousands of visitors a year this is a golden opportunity in itself, let alone the value to us of having a prestigious garden to our credit as a reference for potential involvement in future projects.

The Japanese Garden at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens cont...

Work in progress. Midlands members manning the tripod.



The shape is complicated, with two entrances and exits, a gateway through to the enclosed Bonsai area and windows on two sides of the garden. One of these is a huge moon window in the wall of the tropical plant house, the other being a wall of windows from the corporate dining suite, (which incidentally was used by Tony Blair to host a dinner during the G8 conference in Birmingham a few years ago).

The primary aim of the design is to provide visual interest at all stages for people walking through the garden, as well as good 'vistas' from the two windows, bearing in mind that viewers through the moon window will be standing and those from the dining room will be seated. This is achieved by lots of detail including a dry stream, re-using the existing water feature and incorporating several lanterns, a water basin and various rock arrangements. Various structures are included, such as a roof on the long wall, a roof over the gateway between the two areas and a covered seat or *machiai*. Planting, of prime

importance to the Botanical Gardens, is aimed at providing continuity of style as well as giving a variety of interesting plant material.

Before we were involved in construction the Gardens' staff cleared the site, lifted the existing paving and re-laid it to the new design, incorporating a bridge over the planned dry stream. This was some job, as being a public space the paths have to be at least 4 feet wide to allow for wheelchair access. Then the walls were repainted at our suggestion, softening the harsh white of the old garden to a more mellow off-white. This alone made a tremendous difference to the feel of the space. They also started creating the dry stream, but finding it more difficult than was first thought, it was left for us to assist with at our construction workshops.

Then came the boulders.



Another boulder placement - head of the dry stream.

The pinus strobus and the new window panels.



After a visit to CED Ltd in Langley Mill, near Nottingham, where James and I selected suitable boulders, there came the tricky job of getting them into the garden. Being a courtyard with a considerable length of indoor corridors to get to it, the best way was to hoist the boulders over the 10 ft wall between garden and car park. This meant each boulder had to be held in a sling and lifted over the wall on the hiab. The biggest rock, about a tonne in weight, slipped its sling just as it was over the wall. Fortunately the only damage was a few broken paving stones and a bamboo plant having its style cramped a bit (well, quite a lot really).

It took us three separate day-long workshops to place the boulders and form the dry stream. Since then David Burgess has built and installed the covered seat, a roof on the long wall, a roof over the gateway between the two areas and some panels to hide the curved Georgian-style top section of the dining room windows.

Before rock placement, and showing the relaid paving and abandoned dry stream.



Each element in turn has added to the feel of the garden and has, as James has commented, made it 'feel like you were in Japan'.

We then submitted an outline planting plan for James to use as a basis for acquiring the plants. We had suggested a cloud pruned pine, but I hadn't imagined what James would come up with. It is a superb, large, elegant pruned *Pinus strobus*, which now occupies a central position in the garden, providing a very strong presence and adding tremendous character. We also offered to assist in placing the plants, lanterns, water basin, gravel and cobblestones to help finish the garden. At the time of writing, this is still work in progress, but hopefully before the end of December it will be completed.

Our involvement has been highly appreciated, and I think we can look forward to a close relationship with the Gardens in the future. They already house our book and photo archive in the library and have offered the Midlands Region a permanent home for winter meetings. They would also be delighted if we were to hold a National meeting there at some stage.

The garden will be officially opened in the spring of 2005 and the Japanese Ambassador

has been invited to perform the opening ceremony. Once a date is known for this, it will be publicised via the newsletter and in Shakkei.

In Part 2 of this article, which hopefully will be in the next issue of Shakkei, I will be able to show the finished garden, if possible get some comments from people at the Botanical Gardens and describe some of the very useful

Rock arrangement at the source of the dry stream.



lessons we have learned from our involvement in this project.

Graham Hardman

Images Graham Hardman and Terry Bonham



Before planting, showing some of the rocks and the roof on the wall.