

Lavant Horticultural Society

'History of the Bishop's Palace Garden, Chichester'

Brian Hopkins

Wednesday 11th January 2023

Despite it being an afternoon with some of the worst weather for a while, we had a record attendance to learn about this local garden.

History of Chichester

Brian started with the history of Chichester itself. The Romans arrived here in CE 43 and during their stay laid out Chichester's roads in a grid pattern. Walls surrounded the town in an irregular polygon with a walk on the top. After the Romans left in 410 CE, Chichester was left to deteriorate and was a relatively insignificant place. This changed after the Norman Conquest and there was a permanent move of the see from Selsey to Chichester in 1075. Work on building the cathedral began the following year.

The earliest known map dates from 1595 and the city within the walls is much as it was then, apart from the north-west quadrant. The south-west quadrant was given to the church and the space at the end of Canon Lane, south of the cathedral, to the bishop.

The garden

This area of 5.5 acres given to the bishop comprises the South Garden and the West Garden. The **South Garden** was probably used for food production and is now used by Transition Chichester as a Community Garden.

Over time, there have been changes to the **West Garden** where a number of trees grow but the layout remained similar for over 100 years until 1966.

In 1875 the Ordnance Survey prepared a detailed map of Chichester (scale 1:500) and every tree in the West Garden was surveyed for that map. Recently the volunteers who work in the garden have labelled and numbered all the trees that are in the garden, including 7 county champions. The labels are as those used at Kew and show botanical and common names as well as the country of origin.

Brian told us about some of the **trees in the garden**:

- The tallest (although not a county champion) is the Giant Sequoia which is 27 metres high and was planted around 1900. At Cowdray there is one 29 metres tall!
- There are two Holm Oak which were planted (or self-seeded) between 1700 and 1740. There were 6 bishops of Chichester in that period!
- There had been a box hedge which was removed but one specimen that was left was allowed to grow into a tree. It now has 5 very large branches. Huw Crompton – an expert on box – estimates it was planted around 1700.

The role of the Bishops

Chichester was regarded as a 'starter diocese' and a quarter of the bishops served less than 5 years. Looking after the garden was a spare-time occupation and they had to pay for it from their personal funds. There is little record of what the bishops did in the garden.

Francis Hare (in post 1731-1740) spent £54 p.a. on the garden (equivalent to £94,500 in 2022, on one measure).

Robert Sherborne (in post 1508-1536) built the walls.

Henry King (in post 1642-1669) probably planted the box hedge.

Richard Durnford (in post 1870-1895) was the exception and had great enthusiasm for the garden. He planned and planted the Bishop's Garden.

More recent history

In 1974 a lease was signed so that the Church Commissioners leased the major part of the garden to Chichester District Council. This appears to have been to save the church the cost of the garden's upkeep and to allow public access to the garden, including through an additional entrance in the north-west corner. It is not clear why the Council also agreed to fund the cost of fencing, gates and notice boards.

Initially the Council did a lot of work there, tidying up and maintaining the garden, but that declined over time. Concerns were raised – in particular by Brian Hopkins and Geoff King – that this prestige site should be preserved and maintained. A new post of Parks and Green Spaces Officer was created and an appointment made in April 2005. Since then a number of changes were made, including a design by Sue Sutherland for the large eastern part of the garden. The garden was entered for various competitions and won a number of awards from 2007-2015.

Unfortunately around that time the funding of public parks began to suffer and budgets for parks have since fallen away sharply.

The garden is now being looked after by the volunteer Friends who have contributed a lot of work. Since March 2020 it is used much more by the public and there is more recognition nationally of the value of green spaces.

After the end of the talk there were a number of questions and comments from the audience and a lot of interest in supporting the work being done in the garden.

Brian has written a book on the history of the garden which is Number Twelve of the New Chichester Papers produced by the Chichester Local History Society. He sold copies after his talk and they are also available from Kim's Bookshop in South Street, Chichester.