



Friends News

November 2020

Keeping in Touch during Covid-19

In our October issue we had some comments from the great gardening broadcaster, Monty Don.

In the local village of Fawkham, the Old Rectory has a fascinating garden which Monty Don once visited, for reasons which you will read about in what follows. The house is owned by Christopher Proudfoot and his wife Karin; he is a retired auctioneer from Christie's, with a special interest in musical boxes, gramophones and other mechanical antiques. He has kindly agreed to pen the following on his garden and on Monty Don's visit.

The Old Rectory at Fawkham is, as Old Rectories go, a very modest late Georgian building which nestles in the Fawkham Valley about a third of a mile south of the Norman parish church. The last Rector, Canon Alfred Ford, retired in 1982 (his daughter incidentally, had been an early pupil at Cobham Hall). We moved in a year later, inheriting a garden that contained some overgrown grass, a few shrubs, some rather tired rose bushes and, in early spring, a magnificent display of snowdrops and aconites. The latter was nothing new to me, having lived in the parish for all my early life; the churchyard

had a similar display, as did the house (also late Georgian) which my parents bought in 1958, and the late 16th-century house almost opposite the Rectory.

Sadly, these three snowdrop crops have been decimated by a combination of excessive mowing, landscaping (the JCB has much to answer for) and the leaf-blower. Leaf-blower? – yes, in autumn these days, people don't sweep up the leaves and cart them away, they just blow them into enormous heaps at the boundary, smothering the snowdrops which tend to flourish there. So the Rectory, now the Old Rectory, alone retains its 19th-century February glory. The moral is: don't mow the snowdrops until late May or early June.

Karin is a great gardener, with a love of perennials (none of yer municipal bedding, or even hybrid tea roses), and is an active member of the Kent Group of the Hardy Plant Society. Through this group she met a snowdrop enthusiast (or 'galanthophile') who sparked an interest in these inherited flowers, and now we have not only the swathes of common-or-garden snowdrops, but carefully selected specimens of rarer types, often much bigger, and recog-

nisable to fellow galanthophiles by such subtle features as the degree of green flecks in the white petals.

Another friend among the Hardy Planters is also a local assistant organiser for the National Gardens Scheme. They organise, in case you didn't already know, the opening of gardens all over the country in aid of Charity. And it was suggested that our snowdrops might be suitable for such opening, not least because there is precious little else to see in gardens in February. Amazingly, although Kent is replete with Old Rectories, we are the only one in the county in the NGS scheme. We have a limited season, inevitably, and for practical reasons visits are by appointment only (even without Covid), and we have no space for coaches. Visits are normally accompanied by tea and cake (cake is as much a vital element of garden visits as the plants), though quite how that will be managed in February 2021, assuming we are able to have visitors at all, remains to be seen. (See the NGS website or the 'Yellow Book' for details nearer the time.)

I was invited to write this piece by a friend who is also a Friend and remembered,

Dear Friends

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Monty Mows the Lawn

when he saw the picture of Monty Don on the October newsletter, that Monty had visited the Old Rectory a few years back (2014, to be precise). He wasn't looking for snowdrops though; he was working on a BBC series called *The Secret History of the Garden*. (Why do BBC histories have to be 'secret'? Anything less secret than a broadcast is hard to imagine. Ah well...)

While Karin collects plants, I collect ancient lawn mowers, and it was to demonstrate an early motor mower that Monty Don and his team of cameramen and sound engineers had come to visit. Many gardeners have little interest in mowing lawns or the machines to do it with, but not so Monty Don. We opened the doors of a shed full of mowers, and his eyes lit up. "Can we have them all out?" he demanded; "No" was the firm answer from the producer, but there was a compromise. In addition to the early post-WWI motor mower which was the object of the visit, he was allowed to try its predecessor, a large two-man mower, which was operated by a gardener pushing from behind and an assistant (often a gardener's boy in the old days) pulling on a rope in front. Monty stood in for the boy on the rope.

The motor mower was a 1922 Shanks; Shanks of Arbroath were one of the three main British mower

manufacturers in the 19th and early 20th century, and specialised in large, horse-drawn machines which they had introduced in the 1840s. This motor mower had inherited from the horse machines a device for emptying the grass box without the gardener having to leave his safe position behind the handle bars. A conventional grass box has to be lifted off from the front of the machine, not a nice place to be with your back to a possibly impatient horse. This transitional mower is powered not by a horse but by a Villiers two-stroke engine, a hangover from WWI motorbikes, ideally demonstrating the change from animal to motor power. It takes much churning (with a starting handle) to get going, but Monty was keen to have a go and eventually off we spluttered to the front lawn, where the cameramen filmed Monty and a mower from every conceivable angle, including birds-eye shots from the top of a long pole. *The Secret History* was eventually broadcast a year or so later. I have been able ever since to tell of the day I got Monty Don in to mow the lawn.

As an ancillary to lawn mowers, I also collect garden rollers, and whereas the mowers live in sheds, the rollers can remain in the open, as they normally do in gardens. Often, they become a permanent fixture and are inherited with a house when it changes hands. (There were no roll-

ers in our garden when we came, although we have unearthed parts of a small lawn mower of around 1900.) Most of these rollers are left as they are found, gently rusting and growing algae. Journalists who come to write about the snowdrops seem to like the rusty rollers, but one thought that sounded a bit rude and changed it to 'rustic'.

Visitors often ask how old the house is. "Depends which bit you are looking at", I reply archly. Most old houses have been added to over the centuries, but on this one the Rector who came in 1829 and extended the house went out of his way to disguise the fact that the existing part was of two different builds. He raised the roof level of the oldest part to that of the front, which had been added about 1800, and added a single story extension at the rear, containing a kitchen and scullery. The entire building is stuccoed in the manner of that period, so any changes in the brickwork are hidden, and the house looks at first sight like a four-square block with the single-storey bit at the back – except that, in 2005, we finished the 1829 job by removing the roof of that extension with a crane, adding a first floor and then replacing the original roof on top.

Thank you Christopher Proudfoot for this article.

Fingers crossed that the NGS scheme will be able to run in 2021 and that your display of snowdrops will be open to the public.