

BOOK REVIEWS

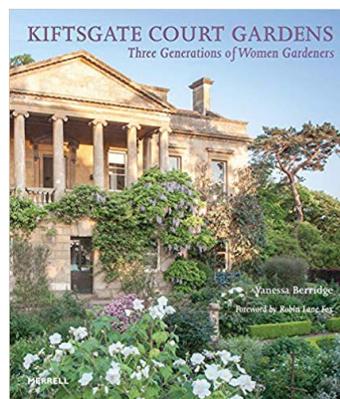
Kiftsgate Court Gardens: three generations of women gardeners

Vanessa Berridge, (London: Merrell Publishers, 2019). 192 pp., many col. ill. Hardback, £40.00 [ISBN: 9781858946696]. Reviewed 01.2020

This lavishly illustrated celebration of the centenary of Kiftsgate Court Gardens combines the aesthetic of a coffee table book with a family history, a lesson in garden design, a plant encyclopaedia and a comprehensive garden guide. The first section begins with an account of Kiftsgate's early history and its link to the eighteenth-century garden designer William Shenstone. This is followed by a chapter on each of the three plantswomen who have created the garden as it is today: Heather Muir, her daughter Diany Binney and Diany's daughter Anne Chambers. This biographical approach explains how this garden on the edge of the Cotswold scarp came to exhibit Italianate features, and traces its development over the three generations from a private garden into a business, open to the public for several months of the year. This section also draws the links between Kiftsgate's owners and other influential twentieth-century gardeners: Lawrence Johnston, Vita Sackville-West, Norah Lindsay, Graham Stuart-Thomas and Hilda Morrell. The author has been fortunate both in being able to interview Anne Chambers and in the survival of notebooks belonging to Diany Binney. This allows the evolution of Kiftsgate to be explored in far greater depth than the neighbouring Hidcote, for which the archival remains are limited.

The second section of the book takes each section of the garden in turn, describing how its design, planting and maintenance has evolved. I know Kiftsgate quite well, but at times I became slightly lost amidst the detail and had to refer to the garden key at the front of the book or the aerial photograph at the start of this section to orient myself. The detail on the plants is slightly overwhelming, but will provide a useful reference for the future. The book ends with a useful short section on the Kiftsgate rose and other signature plants found in the garden.

The beautiful photographs in this book fill me with a strong desire to revisit Kiftsgate as soon as it re-opens in the spring. I will now view the garden with a more discerning eye, being far more knowledgeable about its design and planting. If



you have any interest in twentieth-century garden history, I recommend this book.

Jan Broadway

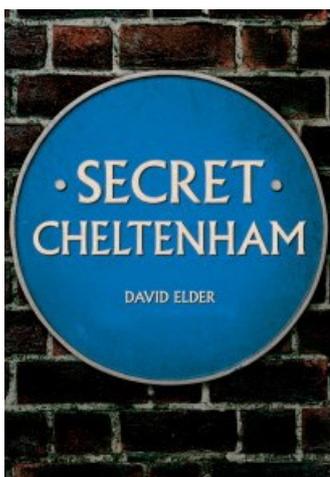
Secret Cheltenham

David Elder, (Amberley Publishing, 2019). 96 pp., many col. ill. Paperback, £14.99 [ISBN: 9781445673325]. Reviewed 09.2019

Cheltenham punches above its weight in local history circles. Perhaps the biggest 'secrets' of the town are those being revealed by the VCH volume currently in process, heralded by the publication last year of *Cheltenham before the Spa*, which summarises the town's forgotten history from before the medieval period up to its emergence as a resort for the wealthy who arrived in the wake of King George III's visit in 1788.

Cheltenham has been well served by histories since Gwen Hart's *A History of Cheltenham (1965)*, as well as by numerous more recent investigative books and articles by Cheltenham historians such as Sue Jones, Neela Mann, Eric Miller, and others. The resources provided by the Gloucestershire Archives, and particularly by the indexing work of the volunteer researchers (and doesn't the term 'volunteers' undervalue their work?) of the Cheltenham Local History Society, is making the historical infrastructure of the place more publicly available. As the work of the 'volunteers' feeds through into Ancestry and other

genealogical and social history platforms, and as databases such as the British Newspaper Archive expand, we can nowadays examine the lives of Cheltenham's people, its architecture, its interaction with the wider world, in ways that could only be dreamt of previously.



David Elder is another well-known doyen of Gloucestershire local histories, with contributions including *Cheltenham in 50 Buildings* and *Literary Cheltenham*. *Secret Cheltenham* falls into the popular genre of books which explicitly search out hidden and forgotten facts. Cheltenham, as the author points out, is paradoxically a town known for its secrets, being the home of GCHQ, but are there other curious stories which deserve telling (or retelling)?

The book is divided into seven thematic chapters, such as 'Crime and Punishment' and 'War and Peace', each concentrating on particular aspects of the town's history. The structure is well thought out, the narrative excellently written, and the stories flow easily: the diminutive Cheltenham muffin-man, 'Little John' Milbank, is followed by his successor, Henry Clarke, fined for smashing the window of a druggist's store. Henry Clarke gives way to Mr Fry, the Dandy Candy Man, with his 104-year-old mother, who in turn introduces the celebrated Cheltenham Dandy, Jan Mackay. Although the characters are known to historians of Cheltenham, the author has made excellent use of new resources to provide additional colour to their lives.

Perhaps the most successful chapters are 'Reform and Revolution', features for which

Cheltenham has been less noted in the past, and 'Hidden Histories', a title which itself rather coyly hides a significant area of modern research into Cheltenham wealth derived from the slave trade. James Robert Scott, of Thirlestaine House, and 'Handsome Sam' Barrett find themselves in the spotlight, alongside numerous former slaves who came to live (and be buried) in Cheltenham. House names can elucidate history, and the author notes that 'Zeelugt House' and 'Rioho Lodge' commemorate estates which were formerly the property of plantocrats who retired to Cheltenham.

The focus of the book is naturally Cheltenham and the curious details which can be extracted by sympathetic research, but the book benefits from a wider perspective, as a national context is suggested for clashes involving rights of way, women's rights, animal rights, and religious freedom. Cheltenham, especially since the development of its spa society, emerges both as a caricature of what we always suspected, or thought, or feared, but also as a focus of the humane concern of its citizens, for innovation, and for protest. Perhaps that is really the 'secret' of the title.

John Simpson

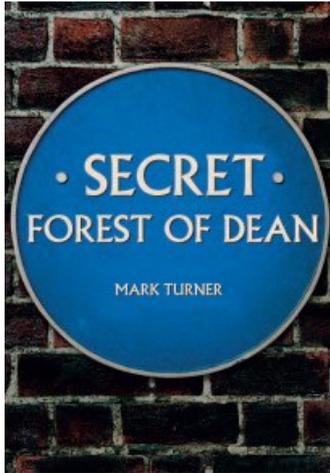
Secret Forest of Dean

Mark Turner, (Stroud, Amberley Publishing 2019). 96 pp., many col. ill. Paperback, £14.99 [ISBN: 9781445684956]. Reviewed 08.2019

The first thing that you notice when starting to read this book is the amount of background research Mark has put in. He has certainly consulted several Forest of Dean books to help with this research and has then built on the information he has uncovered. The book moves from prehistory through the Roman and medieval eras pointing out important and lesser known sites connected with each period. He tells us about the remains of earthworks, castles, and standing stones that can still be found today and of the impact of the Civil War in the Dean describing battles in Coleford, Highnam, Redmarley and Westbury. Mark has obviously

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visited many of the sites he writes about as some are quite hard to locate and could only be described after a personal visit.



The book continues through the industrial era of the Forest of Dean and into the twentieth century, again with detailed descriptions of significant buildings and structures. Several interesting church artefacts are included in this chapter and a note about Rock castle in Coleford is quite unusual. The narrative throughout the book is cleverly interspersed with highlighted blue boxes entitled 'Did you know?' which give snippets of interesting information concerning individual sites.

Mark finishes his book with some well observed chapters on the canals, tramroads and railways of the Forest of Dean, a chapter on crime and punishment mentioning the first murders of any Gloucestershire policemen being carried out in 1861 and of course the infamous story of 'Who killed the bears?'. Finally a chapter on notable residents of the Forest bring us right up to date with details about the lives of, among others, Edna Healey, Denis Potter and Joe Meek.

The collections of superb photographs throughout the book help the reader to understand the description of each building and site. The book covers locations lying in the wider area of the Forest of Dean District Council's administrative area and for anyone visiting the Forest this is a book to keep in your car to help you understand the rich history of this unique area.

Averil Kear

The Surgeons and the Bristol School of Artists

Michael Whitfield, (ALHA Books 28, 2019), iv, 22pp. col and b/w ills. Paperback, £3.50 [ISBN: 9781911592280]. Reviewed 12.2019

This is the sixth book written by Dr Whitfield in the ALHA series of pamphlets. It describes three Bristol surgeons who as amateur artists sold art works and contributed to the Bristol School of Artists.

Francis Gold, a surgeon, in 1813 set up a course of medical lectures in Bristol but then tried to become a commercial artist in 1819 but had to return to medicine before dying in the service of the East India Company in 1832. His paintings are said to have influenced Francis Danby towards a more imaginative and poetical style.

John King worked with Beddoes and developed links with Robert Southey, S T Coleridge and Humphrey Davy as well as the local artist scene. He developed friendships with Washington Allston, an American painter, who painted his family. King's paintings, however, are not described or illustrated in this pamphlet. He died in 1848 aged 80.

John Harrison, an Infirmary surgeon, used to go sketching with the artist William Muller. He painted many views of Bristol, a selection of which are illustrated. He was crippled by rheumatism in his one remaining hand but still painted. He died in 1892 at the age of 91.

The pamphlet briefly describes the antecedents of the Royal West of England Arts Academy and how doctors generally were important in its committees. In addition it touches on the Bristol School of Artists. It is a good opening to this rarely described group of artists who have little known about them. It is however rather bitty in content and leaves questions unanswered such as which other doctors contributed paintings? Harrison is described as having only one rheumatic hand at age 80 but we are not told how he lost the other. I would presume this may have affected his painting!

Peter Carpenter