

The Highbury Rhododendron Collection

Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) the prominent Birmingham and national politician is invariably associated with exotic orchids of which he had a large collection at Highbury, his Birmingham home from 1880. The orchids were sold soon after his death and most of the glasshouses demolished by 1922. However what does remain at Highbury is another plant group of equally striking flowers, that of hardy Rhododendrons which also held appeal for him. *The Gardeners' Magazine* of April 18 1903 commented 'Rhododendrons are extensively planted, the common forms in shrubberies and by the lakeside and the finest named forms filling large irregular beds. Many of these beds are grouped on and around a sharp dip on the eastward side of the grounds, the grassy slope leading down to a small pond planted with aquatics.'

Regrettably the article did not expand on the names of 'the finest named forms' nor did any other of the numerous articles on Highbury that appeared from 1885 to 1904. Although very extensive the Chamberlain archive at the University of Birmingham, does not include planting lists or plans. The contemporary black and white photographs of the grounds often include beds of rhododendrons though these are not aids to identification. None of the collection is labelled, and probably never was.

The Chamberlain Highbury Trust which currently administers Highbury is seeking funding to restore and interpret the mansion (listed Grade II*) and the still intact 30 acres of grounds (listed Grade II). The grounds, half of which have been a public park since 1922, have had little informed management for decades. To catalogue and manage the rhododendrons in the future it was decided to commission experts and a survey was carried out in May-June 2018 by Michael & Beverley Lear of Lear Associates from Oxford. They have identified and mapped over a 100 rhododendrons dispersed in six areas of the garden. Identification requires highly specialist knowledge and observation of growth habit, flowers and foliage, of which Lear Associates have thirty year's experience. Michael Lear writes that there is 'no comprehensive labelled collection of Victorian hybrids.' The RHS is the registration authority for Rhododendron cultivars and hybrids. Details of all named Rhododendrons are put in the International Rhododendron Register but not all named varieties have been adequately described.

It is not known from which nurseries Joseph Chamberlain purchased his rhododendrons although Waterers would be the obvious candidate. An interesting fact has emerged from the survey that Chamberlain received two consignments of Rhododendrons from Kew during the period when he was Colonial Secretary. That of November 15 1899 included *R. decorum*, two specimens of which are by the entrance drive, but of the consignment of 1904 consisting of eleven Kew raised hybrids, none have survived. These were probably planted in the area which is now known as 'the rhododendron garden.' Several shrubs of *R. ponticum* may be the rootstock of these lost hybrids. This area was the focus of much attention from 1901 because the shallow soil over gravel was not a suitable medium and 'the whole of the rhododendrons are to be transplanted, the work extending over several years, the soil and subsoil to the depth of thirty inches, is taken out, good loam and peat substituted. Costly

work certainly but it pays.' The hybrids here include 'Stella', 'John Waterer', and 'Lord Palmerston' also known as 'Cynthia'.

A feature of Edward Milner's landscape plan of 1879 is two heart-shaped beds in view of the mansion. These were planted exclusively with Rhododendrons which have had no additions to the original planting of hybrid varieties, including 'Sir Isaac Newton', 'Sappho', 'Lucidum', 'Madam Carvalho', and 'Amphion' which is no longer available commercially. There are also three specimens of a crimson rhododendron similar to 'Prince Albert' and another specimen unknown to Lear Associates with flowers of mauve pink with two rows of crimson spots. These beds are a dense mat of roots and it is recommended that the plants are propagated and the bed replanted. Propagation could also supply plants for the re-instatement of circular beds of rhododendrons evident in historic photographs but which are no longer extant.

The lake has intact original planting in good condition of *R. ponticum* and early hybrids of *ponticum* such as 'Cunningham's White' which was introduced before 1830 and *R. catawbiense* 'Boursault' and *R. 'Fastuosum Flore Pleno'*, both introduced in 1849. These conceal the dam banking along the length of the lake.

On the western side of the grounds the flowering tree and shrub garden added in 1902, and now in the public park, has a few rhododendrons planted post Chamberlain. These include 'Lady Bessborough' introduced in 1933, *R. macabeum* introduced into cultivation in 1927 and a specimen of the still popular 'Pink Pearl' introduced in 1897 but which is judged to have been planted at Highbury in the 1950s.

In the early years of the Highbury rhododendron beds the young shrubs were 'mingled with lilies and foxgloves'. Perhaps this could be emulated when replanting takes place at Highbury in the future.

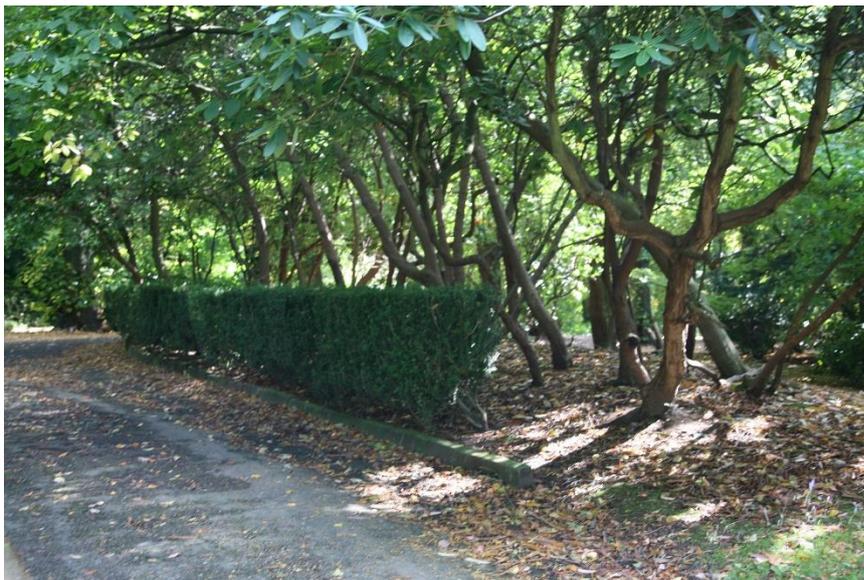
Phillada Ballard



Bed on the lawn at Highbury with Rhododendron 'Sappho' in the foreground. ©Michael Lear



Rhododendron 'Lucidum' (tag 4634) bred before 1857 at Waterer, photographed at in the western heart shaped bed in front of Highbury ©Michael Lear



Overgrown Rhododendrons on the drive at Highbury, planted in 1899 ©Phillada Ballard