

Dream £300,000 garden signed, sealed and delivered in two years

IN a little over two years the first physic garden to be created in Wales for several decades has been brought to fruition in the market town of Cowbridge.

Designed, constructed and delivered at a cost of just over £300,000, the project is a landmark scheme for Wales, and is expected to draw up to 20,000 visitors annually, reports MIKE MEREDITH.

Created on derelict land that was formerly the kitchen garden of the old Cowbridge Grammar School, the garden occupies a half-acre plot right in the heart of the town, close to shops, restaurants, wine and tapas bars, boutiques and other attraction that make up the attractive matrix of Cowbridge, whose population is a mere 4,500.

Dan Clayton-Jones, chairman of the Cowbridge physic garden trust and a prime mover behind the scheme said: "We've been extremely lucky to find a site so conveniently placed for the enjoyment of local people and visitors.

"I remember it as the former kitchen garden of the old grammar school which I attended as a pupil. Those of us who were part of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust who were keen to develop a garden in Cowbridge couldn't believe our luck when we discovered that the old garden, though derelict, still existed.

"It had been taken over several years ago as a tree nursery and had fallen into decay, but the site itself was perfect, tailor-made for the new creation we had in mind.

"Cowbridge, the people of the Vale, local authorities and the town council have united behind our cause.



Their help has been truly fundamental in bringing the garden into being."

He continued: "Through the Creative Communities programme, we were granted £130,000 from the European Commission, backed up by a further £45,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. The remaining cash we have raised in 24 months through support from people and sponsorships.

"It has been an object lesson in good PR in galvanising the whole community. We could not have asked for better co-operation.

"We have been extremely fortunate in having on our side visionary designers and contractors who have worked together impeccably to bring this scheme about.

"While we have an invaluable part-time volunteer co-ordinator at present, the garden in future will be administered, run and organised by a dedicated team of volunteers, who have worked tirelessly in preparing the planting beds, removing rubble and stone, and placing more than 5,500 plants in the garden, ranging from mature trees to delicate plants, all with a medical provenance.

"As a result of all this effort, we now have an elegant Georgian walled garden, which complements the town in an exquisite way. It's a haven of peace, tranquillity and beauty, which has drawn approval from everyone concerned."

In its half-acre space the garden contains:

- A central fountain;
 - Two summer houses;
 - An oak pergola;
 - A Pope's urn;
 - A pleached hedge with Ogee arches;
 - A sundial;
 - Twelve planting beds – each one containing plants associated with a specific part of the human anatomy i.e stomach, heart, lungs, liver etc
 - More than 230 varieties of plants including trees, shrubs and roses;
 - Well over 5,500 plants;
 - A lawn;
 - 12 benches;
 - A stone-built lectern topped by a stainless steel engraved description of the garden;
 - A potting shed and a mess-room for volunteers
- Dan Clayton-Jones added: "By way of illustration of the local support we've had, in one promotional afternoon we received pledges for sundry artefacts and furnishings to the tune of more than £50,000 and that subsequently grew to almost £100,000. It was a magnificent fillip for our cause, backed up by a growing membership which now exceeds 300.

"It's been one of the most rewarding projects I have ever known and reflects great credit on those who have supported us. I can only hope they will derive years of pleasure from Cowbridge Physic Garden. I'm absolutely confident they will," he added.



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIKE WILCOCK

How the garden grew

THE story of Cowbridge Physic Garden:

April 2004: Welsh Historic Gardens Trust establish a group in Cowbridge to examine the possibility of creating a physic garden in the town.

July 2004: The group meets the Vale Council to outline ideas and move forward; a public meeting follows in Cowbridge attended by more than 100 people.

July – August 2004: Visits to Oxford Colleges and Chelsea Physic Gardens to glean ideas and map out forward programme. A similar sortie follows later



Sue Duffield, Val Bertorelli and John Sherwood.

GEORGIAN THEME DRIVES GARDEN'S PLANTING SCHEME

BY JEAN READER, CHAIRPERSON OF THE PLANTING GROUP

PERHAPS the most unusual feature of the garden is that all the plants in it would have been available to the Edmondson family, the former owners, in Georgian times.

No plant has been allowed into the garden if it hadn't arrived in Britain by 1800 so, for example, a Passion Flower (*Passiflora incarnata*) is included because it arrived from tropical America around 1580, but not a Wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda*) because it didn't arrive from Japan until 1830.

The effect upon the eye is that most of the plants are of a muted colour: there are few of the harsh and zingy shades produced by

modern hybrids.

This doesn't mean that there is no 'wow factor' – as anyone who witnessed the swathe of French lavender (*Lavendula stoechas*) this month will have witnessed.

The 12 beds surrounding the fountain in the centre of the garden contain medicinal plants and have been divided so that each contains plants that are believed to treat or cure either a part of the body (e.g. the eyes) or a condition (e.g. childbirth).

The contents of these beds sometimes cause visitors to raise their eyebrows: Dandelions, for example, are allowed to flourish because of their diuretic properties.

The garden contains a number of trees: apart from their beauty, all have useful properties and interesting stories. We shall hope to be able to use the fruit trees like the

Quince (*Cydonia oblonga*) and the Medlar (*Mespilus germanica*) to make preserves in the next few years.

Other trees in the garden have remarkable qualities: the Maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) is revered in Japan because it was the only living thing to survive the bombing of Hiroshima.

A number of trees are being trained on to the walls; some are being grown as specimens and some of the apples are being encouraged to form a pleached hedge – sometimes called a 'hedge on legs' or a 'hedge in the sky'.

These trees should not only prove to be visually striking but be good to eat, as some of their names suggest: Blenheim Orange; Devonshire Quarrenden; King of the Pippins and Ashmead Kernel.

So many plants have gone into

the garden since the first were planted on September 21, 2006, that it has been a challenge to keep up with the labelling. However, our aim is to label all plants in English, Welsh and Latin, so you will see labels which read like this: 'Meadowsweet-Filipendula ulmaria-Erwin.'

We have not felt able to include all the plants we would have liked: this is a garden unsupervised and open to the public, so we have felt it important to preclude any particularly poisonous plants.

One casualty of this policy has been the Henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*); despite its interesting-looking flowers, fascinating history and its association with Dr Crippen (he used it to kill his wife), we have deemed it unwise to include it in the garden.

Associates made principal design consultants... Limited company is formed.

January-April 2005: Charitable status is agreed and a grant of £130,000 from Europe under Article 33 funding, via the Vale Council's Creative Communities programme is delivered.

Site work begins with the removal of trees and roots, an archeological survey is completed and work on restoring surrounding walls begins. A topographical survey, the erection of a security fence and power supply connections begin.

May 2005: The project design is agreed and project tender selection is completed, with Anthony Jellard

Associates made principal design consultants... Phase one site clearance and repairs programme is completed and Landcraft Ltd are appointed as main contractors.

March 2006: Phase Two of the development programme begins and a 25-year lease is signed with the Vale Council.

August 2006: Phase Two is completed, together with the new West Wall which completely encloses the garden. Work by volunteers, under the supervision of volunteer organiser, Jacky Thorne, begins to prepare the soil, remove stone and rubble.

September 2006: Planting programme

begins December 2006 – January 2007: Planting programme and lawn preparation starts.

Main features follow, including central fountain, ogee arches, two summer houses, a Pope's Urn, pergola, the completion of potting shed and rest room for volunteers and installation of benches.

March 2007: Garden opens informally to the public.

May 2007: Volunteers under the management of planting group leader Jean Reader, complete further works on the 12 medicinal beds. Elsewhere they see the culmination of planting 14 semi-mature trees, together with 5,500 plants in 250 varieties.



David Pierce, Cecil England; the eldest volunteer, and Graham Duffield.



Gillian Williams and Jacky Thorne.

