

Larachmhor from 1960 onwards

Reflections on Life & Times at the Garden 1960s – early 1990s

Ian C Hedge – original lease-holder from 1962
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How did it all begin ?

On 19 June 1960, Andrew Lauener & ICH [herbarium staff at RBGE] climbed the hill above Glenfinnan to see the rare and fairly recently discovered *Diapensia lapponica*. Afterwards, we made a very brief first visit to Larachmhor, feeling slightly guilty about entering a private estate. The following year on 26 May, with Alf Evans [assistant curator at RBGE], Jock Wilson [senior propagator at RBGE] & Margaret Hedge, after again paying homage at the *Diapensia* site, we visited Larachmhor to be amazed at the garden: a beautiful jungle wilderness, with extensive flowering rhododendrons, the hemlock glades, the tall *Embothrium*, the burn, the old hut, the half-built house, and the many shrubs that were new or unknown to us. Some time after that we learned through the horticultural grapevine, that the owner of the Arisaig Estates, Miss J. Becher, was looking for a new tenant for Larachmhor Garden. The factor for the estate was approached indicating our interest. Some time after that, a meeting was arranged to discuss this. It took place in the main garden area and was between Miss Becher, her factor and Messrs. Evans, Hedge (& Mrs H.) and Wilson. We met across the bridge and walked around different parts of the garden and had amicable discussions about what realistically we could do to clean up and re-vivify the garden. We, as a small team, had on offer our knowledge, enthusiasm and resources. We must have put up a good case plus the fact that ICH had known the factor Jock Hunter (of West Highland Estates Office) from school days in Edinburgh might also have helped in our being offered the lease! As the youngest member of the group, the formal lease was to be made out in the name of ICH. The annual rent was £10.

A Growing Team

Although delighted to have been offered the lease, we were fully aware of all the likely difficulties of looking after a 28 acre woodland garden c. 170 miles from Edinburgh and our times there being restricted to long-week-ends and holiday times. Shortly after the formal lease for 14 years was signed, with a break at half-way, Andrew Grierson [herbarium staff], Les Bisset [assistant curator at RBGE, later curator of Dundee Univ. Bot. Gard.] and Andrew [Lucien] Lauener [also herbarium], joined the syndicate – a blend of horticulturists and taxonomic botanists. As the years passed, the personnel changed. Bob Mitchell [horticulturist and latterly curator at St Andrew's Botanic Garden] joined in 1976, George Anderson [head of horticultural training at RBGE – and now in 'retirement' a regular presenter of *The Beechgrove Garden* on BBC tv in Scotland] joined in 1980, David Rae [latterly director of horticulture at RBGE] in 1981, Ron McBeath [renowned alpine specialist] in 1986, Alan Bennell [formerly laboratory botanist & mycologist, but by then Head of Public Services] joined in 1988 and Ian Sinclair [garden supervisor at Benmore Botanic Garden] joined in 1991.

Although the original 6 members were all on the staff at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, there was never a formal connection with it, either then or subsequently.

Jock Wilson and Roger McCluskey (then on RBGE staff) were the first to sleep in the garden – in a dry spot in the old garage. Then, Brennan's Hut was cleaned out, much rubbish dumped in holes beyond the hemlocks and much *Lyso*l used. Jock was the first resident of that famous and picturesque bothy since the death of John Brennan. Our toilet facilities were located in a small cubicle at the back of the dilapidated garage, beside the burn, with a hessian curtain decorated with a large pink elephant.

Getting down to work

The initial years were almost totally spent clearing fallen trees, including some massive beeches, cutting the numerous invasive birch, sycamore trees, and generally

making paths or ways through the hugely overgrown garden. In the flat garden area especially, we tried to thin out and rescue some large plants, mainly rhododendrons that had been planted in the 1920s or 30s in nursery-like rows. Today's magnificent line of katsuras (*Cercidiphyllum japonica*) is a fine example of this.

Relatively few new plantings were made until we had created a new nursery and had the erected a new bothy base, the Cedar Hut, built in 1963 beside the katsura wall.

The nursery at the time of John Brennan was beside the burn and under the beeches to the north-west of the flat garden. In those early days, our new plantings were just dug in and left to grow – but we soon learned that they all needed protection from weeds, sheep and roe deer. Many small Chusan palms (*Cordyline australis*) were planted on either side of the drive down to the burn, but none survived. As our experience widened, wire cages - secured in place with bamboo canes - were used around new plantings; nutrients (Enmag) were applied and trimmed black polythene sheets were placed on the soil. Once a year, the soil around the young plantings were given a dose of Paraquat to keep the vigorous weeds in check. Asulux was sprayed to control bracken, which could form up to 6 ft high thickets in summer. Throughout the garden, across the year, nests of leaves were made for future leaf mould, used later in all new plantings.

Gradually, as the clearing progressed, our emphasis turned towards planting for the future of the garden and, with Margaret Hedge acting as “Records Officer”, great numbers of small to medium sized plants were brought up from Edinburgh. Jock Wilson, then a very experienced propagator at RBGE, was a source of many of them. Jock was also an important influence and a source of much horticultural, and other often surprising, information for the team, always imparted with humour. He taught us, among other matters, the skills needed to layer rhododendrons. Large numbers of rhodos were layered, and, after a few years, were moved to the nursery till strong enough to plant out.

Most of our newly imported shrubs and trees were first put in the “flat garden” nursery and left there for some years before planting out. Keeping the nursery in good order and weed-free was an important and regular small job. Andrew Grierson later developed another nursery in an area of the garden beyond the *Cunninghamia* towards the southern end.

By the later 1960s, with Alf Evan's guidance, we had crudely sectorised the garden into 20 numbered areas: the flat garden, the burn, the bamboos, the west-facing hill, the slopes near the (former) village rubbish dump (at the high eastern roadside corner of the site) etc. Concomitantly, we compiled lists of all the plants in these areas – new and old. The active co-operation and interest of H.H. Davidian [David], with his immense knowledge of cultivated rhododendrons, was of fundamental importance in getting accurate names and ear-marking species of interest or rarity for special attention and/or layering. Walking round the garden, armed with labels with Davidian, was always memorable - sometimes when a particular rhododendron took his fancy, he would eulogise about it in a theatrical celebration!

Hard Labour – digging drains and clearing fallen trees

There was a huge amount of manual work done, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. Work parties, very often including our herbarium colleagues Jennifer Lamond and Gill Meadows, used to go for long-week-ends. Friends and other colleagues from RBGE and elsewhere were welcome to come along and contribute. Over that time, we (ICH/MCH) would, on average, be at Larachmhor more or less once a month throughout the year – usually long week-ends but sometimes, in spring and summer, for up to 10 days – especially when, in July, we (ICH/MCH) took a week's fishing on Loch Eilt. It was a combination of general maintenance and planting for the future (and occasional breaks for recreation).

One area that was given special attention from early on was the “bamboos” (Bambuselem)], so-called because of the thick ring of bamboos encircling the knoll. It was

a very sheltered zone and some very fine large Rhododendrons – such as a huge *Rh. macabeanum* - thrived there. In the late 1980s the bamboos, after umpteen years, flowered (maybe for the first time since they were planted), and all the shoots died back and went brown. But, in common with their life-style, they eventually, after several years of dormant quiescence, revived and re-grew...with renewed and blanketing vigour.

With persistent rainfall at times the garden could get very soggy and much time was spent on drains, old and new – especially the one in front of the incomplete house that followed down towards the burn above the bridge. In 1973 Andrew Grierson, his son Jeremy and I had a long hard deep dig at it. Often, all our time had to be spent clearing or burning a fallen tree or fallen limb; this meant that our plantings ploys had to be delayed till another time. The weather was always unpredictable, changing rapidly from good to bad or *vice versa* – it could be clear and beautiful; it could be heavy rain with strong to gale force winds. On top of this challenging climate, sheep ticks were abundant and their bites for some (especially the author) could be troublesome for weeks afterwards.

Travelling to the Garden

Our [ICH/MCH] earliest, pre-car, trips to Arisaig were by rail. The train left Edinburgh about 4.30 am, via Crianlarich, where waiter-served breakfast was gratefully partaken on the train, and then, with many stops on the way, on to Arisaig. Necessary basic provisions for our time in the garden were delivered by the Co-Op to the gate at the entrance. Travel by car to and from Edinburgh was rather different in the 1960s from today; the road from Fort William to Mallaig was especially slow-going, twisty, narrow and with many passing-places. Sometimes, at worst, the journey from Edinburgh took almost 5 hours. Mallaig at that time was a major fishing port and the numerous large fishing lorries on that stretch of road were another hazard to contend with. There was also the ferry at Ballachulish to queue for and cross, before the road bridge was built and opened in December 1975. It was such a very

different world; petrol was around 5 shillings (20p) a gallon, a bottle of whisky under 2 pounds. Our annual rent for the Garden was £10 - and newspapers didn't run to 60+ pages plus. Mobile phone-free life moved at a much gentler and happier pace.....

Life in the Garden

Time out of the garden was considered as time wasted; just minimum shopping for food. Breakfast was cereal, coffee and toast; lunch was beans on toast – with at times an egg on top; dinner was tinned soup, curried rice with “Surprise” peas. A can of beer was a bit of a luxury. A very large curry pot, with its contents prepared beforehand in Edinburgh, was the source of our staple diet for many years. Trout and sea-trout in later summer – and the occasional Mallaig kipper - were special treats. While the (supposedly stronger) male workers were clearing trees and debris, chain-sawing, cutting bamboos, having bonfires, making leaf-mould nests, Margaret H. spent many contented hours pampering the young plants in their protective cosy nests. She also started, with Alf Evan's guidance - and for long maintained, - the 2 planting books: one for Larachmhor and one for Edinburgh; also two sets of cards listing the plants in all areas. In general, our experience was that each young plant or layer needed 4-6 years of care before independent and vigorous adulthood. Once a year, they were sprayed with Paraquat to eliminate the weeds.

Shortly after the Cedar Hut became our main residence in 1962 [guest “visitors” were usually housed in Brennan's Hut], we planted *Paeonia lutea* close to this new hut. Today, it looks about the same size as it was when planted (but has been joined, since 2000, by a twin, that has already attained matching stature). In contrast, the nearby *Trachycarpus fortunei*, planted about the same time [c. 1963] seemed scarcely to be growing at all before suddenly taking off in the 21st century and now soaring towards 4metres in height, giving this locality an almost sub-tropical look.

Although we never had any obvious physical vandalism in the garden, nor to our two

accommodation bothies, we did have a depressing number of plants stolen. Sometimes layers of rhododendrons which had taken years to establish would disappear. We had, for security, established the practice of giving numbers, not names, on our labels and yet the plants stolen, always rhododendrons, were of special interest. The thief well knew what was being taken.

In addition to the manifold attractions of a remarkable, perhaps unique, west coast Scottish garden, there was also the inherent attraction of the surrounding countryside:- the Rhu peninsula and its wildlife; the views to Rhum and Eigg; the rich bird life, the Ghaoideil and Morar beaches, and the scenic Traigh golf-course. In the earlier years, up until the late 1970s, there was very good fishing in the famous sea-trout Loch Eilt [then still part of the Arisaig estates]; there was also the nearby small Loch Dubh which in late summer had a goodly number of sizeable sea trout.

Importantly, there were also several friends and helpers in the village – especially Polly and Willy Pringle at the nearby Achnahully croft; also Barbara Mathieson and Josephine Forrest. Miss Becher always took an interest in our garden activities and there were not infrequent walks round Larachmhor with her.

Our [Hedge *et al.*] formal lease ended at Martinmas 1978, but our links with and work in the garden continued through the late 1980s [as *anno domini* became a factor].

By the time of Miss Becher's death in 1995, with the subsequent sale and splitting up of the Arisaig estate, younger team members were beginning to take the lead : notably Alan Bennell and Ian Sinclair. A new generation of enthusiasts could pick up the mantle and seek to keep Larachmhor alive.



Charcoal sketch of Brennan's Hut c. 1970s



Ian and Margaret Hedge at the *Diapensia* site in 1961



Building Cedar Hut June 1963



Digging ditches April 1966



Margaret Hedge with Sitka spruce



Al fresco lunch at Cedar Hut



Early spring picnic at Rhu



Gill Meadows examines *Rh sinogrande* leaves



Ian Hedge sawing at Brennan's Hut Ian Hedge with Polly at Achnahully Ian Hedge inside Brennan's Hut 1963



The 30th Anniversary planting in 1992 of *Rh* 'John Holms', incl L>R Ian Hedge, H H Davidian, Alan Bennell, Pauline Grierson, Willie Pringle, Sally Rae, Ian Sinclair, Margaret Hedge, Moira Sinclair, David Rae, as well as Kate and David Mitchell (2019 chairman of Scotland's Gardens Scheme)



At the 50th Anniversary opening of the re-built Brennan's Hut, the ribbon is cut by Etta Mann, (John Brennan's niece) & Ian Hedge. June 2012

Selected extracts from ICH Diary & Larachmhor Accounts Book 1970s-80s

1962. Income - £126.

Expenses: Hut -- £76 10s.[c half cedar hut payment]. Hire of coal-man's lorry to transport hut --£1. Padlocks and keys --£2 0 3. Rent --£10. Insurance --£2. Lawyer's fee for preparing the lease --£2 19 9. Rates -- £5 7 6.

1964. Income - £258.

Expenses One hotplate --£6 12s. Foam mattresses --£9 5.

Travel expenses --£4 5. Fence repairs--£237. Polystyrene -- £20 3 6. Felt £3 15. Rates £6 3. Rent --£10. Insurance -- £2. Ditching tool -- £1 15. Varia -- £2 12. Total --£303 10 6.

Deficit: £45.10 6.

1968. Income: £156 14 7.

Expenses. Calor gas --£3 2. Gloves -- 9s 6. Calor gas --£9 6. Racosan -- 9s 6. Three gaz mantles & globes --£1. Stihl saw & 1 gallon oil --£80. Rent -- £10. Rates --£9 11 8. Insurance --£2. Cuprinol --15s. Petrol & oil --12s. Hillier's trees --£11 6 6. Balance in hand 1 Jan 1969 £31 4 5

26 Dec. 1971. "Just back from Larachmhor .Planted out 6 *Sorbus* -- some on Christmas day. Visit Josephine and Polly and consume large whiskies; otherwise, hardly out of garden; swarms of blue tits, coal and great tits in the flat garden."

24 May 1972. " Wed.- Sund. At L. Clear back of garage, fish (unsuccessfully), apply Grammoxone, plant potatoes (under black poly).Good weather".

1972. Income: £218.39

Expenses. Calor gas --- £7 40. Grills cooker, mats ---£3 14.

Garage -- £150. Asolux -- £4. Elsan £1 15. Paint, cuprinol, hardboard, etc £14 19. Rent ---10.

Insurance -- £5. Rates--- £7.70. Total: £203.84

Balance in hand 1 Jan. 1973 £14.55

30 May 1973. "After 5 days at L. with Gill. Plant potatoes in the nursery. Some drain digging where Gill finds 2 curled up unpleasant looking flat worms (? *Rhyncodesmus triangulata*). Climb Streap."

14 Sept. 1974. "After 3 pretty wet days at L. Plant out *Myrtus ugni*, *Rhodo. collettianum* [it did not survive] The Sept. holiday weekend."

30 Nov. 1975. "After 3 days at L. The 14 year lease terminated on 28th Nov. [Martinmas] .Very cold and lots of snow at higher levels - hundreds of red deer near Glencoe."

7 Feb. 1976." Last week end at L.with Jennifer, Bob Mitchell. Plant out *Griselinia*, dig drains, bonfire, walk at Rhu. 2 days of beautiful clear frosty weather." [Note: scores of seedlings grew each year from the large *Griselinia* shrubs -- many went from Larachmhor to Logan Botanic Garden]

2 May 1976. "Back today after 4 days at L. Probably the best flowering year for a long time. *Rh. aboreum* (s), *macabeanum*, *niveum*, *coriaceum*, exceptionally fine. The macabe in the bamboos really marvellous [prize-worthy]. All told a fine 4 days though it rained on 3 of 'em. Planting out most of the time and clearing fallen weeping ash at side of bridge. Sheep and lambs, as usual in spring, plus 2 resident roe deer. Herons on field in front making strange croaking noises."

30 May 1976. "4 days at L. with Davidian (staying at Morar hotel), Mathew [RBGE librarian] & Salar Khan [Dakka, Bangladesh] (staying in Polly Pringle's caravan). *Rh. thomsonii*, *glischroides*, *basilicum*, *hodgsonii* --in good flower; midges bad. Roe deer, sheep as usual. An interesting, profitable - at times hilarious -- time."

11 Feb. 1977. "After 2 days at L. with Les Bissett; plant out 8 Rhodos (from a chum of Davidian's.) Sleety snow on way up; very cold at the garden with strong SE wind"

21 April 1978. " Snow and sleet all the way to Lochailort. Plant out c. 10 non-Rhodos: *Photinia*, *Gaultheria*, *Picea*, *Daphne*, *Camellia*, etc . Recent frosts had devastated what clearly would have been an above-average Rhodo flowering year; scarcely one good flowering truss left. 5 skeins of geese heading north - end of winter."

1 Oct. 1978. "After 6 nights at L.; malevolent weather; tremendous heavy rain and burn a dangerous torrent. Cows in the garden making a quagmire of our paths."

22 Dec. 1979. "Back after 4 hours clearing up the fallen *Cupressus macrocarpa* which fell – accurately - between the garage and the cedar hut; it would have destroyed either had it fallen on them. 4 other trees down in a ferocious gale the previous Sunday."

4th Oct. 1980. "After a week at L. while our house was re-wired. Plant out 14 items (incl. *Rh. argyrophyllum*, *morii*, *griersonianum*, hybrid Rhodos, *irroratum* series, *concatenans*, *strigillosum*, *Enkianthus*, monkey puzzle; dig a drain, move nursery plants around, trim some hemlocks. Mild weather but three times the burn was in full spate; also some violent wind."

22 Nov. 1981. "Frid-Sat. at L. Frid - Sund. Very mild but a near storm force wind, heavy continuous rain on Sat.; the burn as high as we've ever seen it. A splendid time. 10 plants to the nursery, drain-digging & hemlock trimming. 3 Rhodos planted in area 13. Heron in garden."

1981. Income. Brought forward --£76.32. Subscriptions £180. Bank interest – £15. Total £271.32
Expenses. Rent – £100. Calor gas ---£21. Insurance – £17.50. Rates – £10.20. Saw blades – £4.84. Racasan, Delipon – £3.50 Total £157.04.
Balance in hand 1 Jan 1982 £114.28.

24 April 1983. "After 4 days at L. Frost each morning and most Rhodo flowers – *macabeanum*, *niveum* - frosted. Bonfires, checking plant records, drains and planting out. Cuprinol the gate (the new one), the garage and the cedar hut."

6th May 1985. "Garden looking its best though not a great flowering year. Plant out 9 Rhodos & *Nothofagus*. Clean and spray young plants; tidy a fallen *Eucryphia* and beech. Socialise with John Hammond [researching J.H. Holms] and wife."

23 Oct. 1985. "A day trip to L. to see the devastation after the recent flood (c 7th Oct.) that floated the Cedar Hut off its piers."

11 May 1986. "Last weekend at L. - puncture at Glencoe. With George Anderson, son Stuart and hort. student Mark. Friday to Sunday, emptying, stripping, unpicking the Cedar Hut, laying new foundations and re-erecting it. All, with Willy Pringle (at 82) the Clerk of Works, timeously completed late on the Tuesday. The weather was kind to us.

1986. Income. Brought forward --£293.69. Subscriptions £300. Bank interest -- £20. Total £613.69
Expenses. Roofing, felt, tacks --£42.73. Guttering --£49.57. Bubble polythene --£15.52. Roof planks -- £6.00. Rent --£200. Rates --£12.70. Calor gas -- £28.95. Mattresses -- £27.00. Six railway sleepers --£19.00. Elsan-- £4.30. Varia ---£3.98. Total £409.75
Balance in hand 1 Jan. 1987 £203.94.

18 March 1989. "A day trip to. L. Breakfast at Onich hotel. Get stuck on the drive in the glaur. Gale damage the worst since we had the garden. - *Abies*, beech *et al.* but not much damage to our recent plantings; little in flower.

IAN C HEDGE 15 November 2011