

Amersham Gardening Association

www.amersham-gardening.org.uk

November 2023 Newsletter

From the Secretary

It has been a strange gardening year, sometimes too hot and sometimes too wet; I hope the winter will be better than last year, when many members lost plants. Talks and visits have gone ahead this year and a full programme is planned for next year.

Elsewhere in this Newsletter are details of the 2024 holiday. These holidays are always very enjoyable and everyone is welcome. Several members come on their own so don't hesitate if you have no one to come with, we all mix.

The committee hope to see many of you at the Christmas social on Friday 15th December; details below.

We wish everyone a healthy New Year and gardening success.

Jean Bowling

Would you like a lift home after the meeting?

We know that some members do not come to our monthly meetings because they prefer not to walk home in the dark afterwards – a problem especially in the winter months.

If you would like a lift after a meeting, please contact Frances Billington (☎ 01494 433857, email francesb643@gmail.com) and she will try to put you in touch with someone who lives near you.

Three booking forms with this newsletter:

Afternoon visit to Sarah Nicholson's garden in Wendover for snowdrops, Wednesday 21st February

Morning visit to Stubbings Garden and plant centre, Wednesday 20th March

See page 3 for details of these two outings

The 2024 holiday in Cheshire, June 9th – 13th – see pages 6 – 8.

Membership renewal is due at the end of December

The renewal form is with this newsletter; new membership cards and the programme card will be available in January.

Xmas social, Friday 15th December (note change of date)

This is a pot-luck meal, with wine and soft drinks provided from Association funds. If your surname begins A – F please bring something sweet, if it is G – Z, please bring something savoury. As usual, "finger food" is preferable. Please bring your contributions at

7:30pm, and please label your plate, etc, so it can be returned afterwards.

There will be a raffle, quiz and other entertainment.

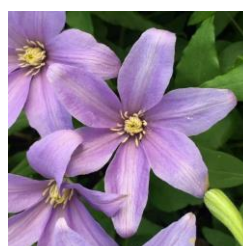
Forthcoming meetings in the Drake Hall starting at 8:00 pm

January 25th Peter Skaggs-Gooch: Thorncroft Clematis.



Peter has lived or worked with clematis almost all his life, growing up surrounded by them in his family's nursery and its gardens and progressing through the nursery from production assistant to production manager then finally to owner.

More information at <https://www.thorncroftclematis.co.uk/>



February 22nd Colin Roberts. A year in the gardens at Adwell House.



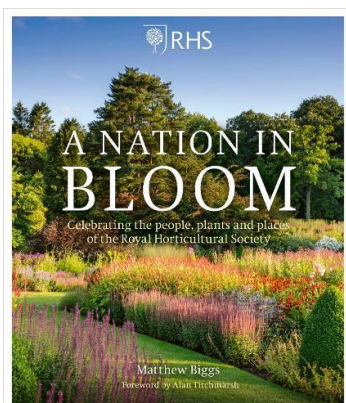
Colin has been head gardener at [Adwell House](#) near Thame for the past 15 years, having moved down from Lincolnshire from his previous head gardener post.

The garden at Adwell extends to about 4 acres where several events and open days are held.

Colin is a member of the Professional Gardeners Guild and was their vice-chairman for the south of England.

March 28th Annual General Meeting and Matthew Biggs: RHS - A Nation in Bloom

[Matthew](#) is a gardener, writer and broadcaster, best known for his appearances in BBC Radio 4's *Gardeners' Question Time*. He has been a TV researcher, presenter and director, has written or contributed to over ten books; his most recent book is [A Nation in Bloom](#): celebrating the people, plants and places of the RHS.



“*A Nation in Bloom* explores the new direction of the RHS, how it aims to inspire us all through plants and gardens, to improve our lives, and to encourage gardeners for generations to come. Illustrated with beautiful photography throughout, this book is the rich, varied and compelling story of how plants and gardens can transform people's lives and help to define the culture of an entire nation, both now and for the future.”

Note that the **AGM will start at 7:45**, followed by the talk by Matthew Biggs at 8:00pm.

Documents for the AGM, including reports from honorary officers and the accounts, will be in the February newsletter.

Two garden visits to book now

Sarah Nicholson's snowdrops on February 21st

We have arranged a visit to our friend Sarah Nicholson's garden in Wendover to see the snowdrops.

Many of you have visited her garden before in the summer. Sarah has now collected a great many different snowdrops and the hellebores should be out too. Do come and see the snowdrops and enjoy her garden in a different light.

Date: Wednesday 21st February
Time: 1.30 pm
Cost: £10.00 per person to include tea and cakes – own transport

As HS2 work may be involved, directions and parking details will be sent with the tickets.



[Stubbings House Garden](#) and [Stubbings Nursery](#) March 20th

Stubbings Lane, Henley Road, Maidenhead, SL6 6QL

Wednesday 20th March
Time 11am
£6 per person – own transport

Please apply for a place by the end of January as we have to pay in mid-February

Numbers are limited to 25



Stubbings is a parkland garden and March brings an abundance of daffodils. Notable trees include historic cedars and araucaria. There is a large lawn with a ha-ha, an 18th Century icehouse and access to an adjacent NT woodland. The garden is accessed via the adjacent retail plant centre and café.

A new member, Mo Zaki, has sent this photo of his garden

If any other members would like to share photos of their gardens, please email them (as jpg images) to newsletter@amersham-gardening.org.uk



Visit to Little Heath Farm Nursery on 15th August

Little Heath Farm Nursery is hidden in the peaceful countryside not far from Berkhamsted

Little Heath Lane, Potten End, Herts, HP4 2RY.

Many of us had visited before but a new member described as “a gem”. It is being renovated by Vanessa Garstin and her husband after the previous owners John and Jan Stokes retired and the brambles etc. tried to overrun it.

We admired how much they had achieved in a short time and enjoyed pottering along the raised beds, looking at the plants they had for sale and choosing some for our gardens.

Then it was time for tea. What nicer way is there to spend a sunny afternoon in a garden with friends.

Photographs from the Little Heath Farm Nursery [website](#)

Frances Billington



***Iris foetidissima*, the stinking iris**, is also known as the roast-beef plant, because the aroma of the crushed leaves resembles, to some, that of roasting beef, while others regard it as a foul stink.

It is also called gladdon, gladwyn or gladwin, due to the sword-like shape of the leaves (from the Latin *gladius* for sword). The seeds are poisonous, but not to birds, although they only consume them late in the season, when they have softened, so they provide a late-season source of food.



The flowers (above) are unexciting; it is the seed pods in autumn (right) that make this a garden-worthy plant.

(In our garden the birds seem not to bother with the seeds at all – perhaps we are too generous with the nut, fat ball and seed feeders.) It is evergreen, moderately invasive and thrives in dry conditions.

The pollination rag

Two, four, six, eight
Time for you to pollinate
Come on all you honeybees
Find the flowers' nectaries
And pollinate, pollinate, pollinate

With apologies to [Tom Lehrer](#)



Outing to Kew Gardens, September 6th

After what seemed like more or less continuous rain though most of the summer, a somewhat depleted group of us made the trip to Kew Gardens on one of the hottest days of the year. Meteorological autumn may have begun, but this was true summer weather – not a cloud in the sky; fortunately, Kew being Kew, there were plenty of benches under trees for us to rest in the shade.



The entry gate for coach parties is the Elizabeth Gate on Kew Green (the other entry gates are all on the main Kew Road; fine if you are travelling by bus or train, but not otherwise). The advantage of this gate is that unlike the Victoria Gate, where you are greeted by the shop, restaurant, etc, here the first thing you see is an avenue of Indian horse chestnut trees, then colourful borders en route to the orangery for a welcome coffee.

The various glasshouses – Palm House, Temperate House, Princess of Wales Conservatory, were all much warmer than when I have been there before, mainly in spring and early summer. Indeed, we could have renamed the Temperate House as intemperate, and in the Palm House there was a notice at the foot of the spiral staircase up to the viewing walkway warning us that the temperature at the top would be well over 30° and to make sure that we would be prepared for this. Discretion being the better part of valour, I did not attempt the climb.



Although I walked through most of the gardens, I did not get as far as the pagoda. I have known Kew since I was a child, and the entry fee was 3d (old money), and had never known the pagoda to be open to walk up. It underwent a major restoration in 2018, and is indeed now open for hardy visitors to climb the 253 steps to the viewing gallery for what are said to be splendid views across London, which is why it was built as a gift for Princess Augusta in 1761 in the first place, apparently modelled on the Porcelain Pagoda in Nanjing.



There were no swans on the lake in front of the Palm House, although there were plenty of ducks and Canada geese. I was somewhat sad not to see any swans, if only because some years ago I took a colleague from South Australia to Kew and at the lakeside she exclaimed with delight “Gee, albino swans” – in Australia she had only ever seen black swans.

Thanks to Margaret Hillier for organising a very successful and enjoyable day to end the year's outings.

AGA holiday Cheshire gardens and RHS Bridgewater

9th to 13th June 2024

This year we travel north to see some exciting gardens, large and small, old and new, famous and private. Many of the gardens have plants for sale. This year there is not a free day as we want to make maximum use of the coach, but there will be some free time after the visit to Bridgewater.

The booking form is included with this newsletter.

We have not made group bookings for lunch as most of the venues have a café or tea room which we can visit at our own pace.

On the first day many people like to bring a picnic, which the driver might let us eat on the coach, provided we don't drop too many crumbs!

The hotel can provide packed lunches, but we don't know the price yet. There is a Tesco Express ten minutes walk from the hotel.

The cost includes all garden entrances except for NT properties. Current prices for non-members are: Little Moreton Hall £13; Lyme Park £6 for the garden and £13 for the house and garden.

Tatton Park, cost to be confirmed; Tatton is not a straightforward NT property, the administration is shared with East Cheshire council. This may mean that the privileges and concessions members enjoy at most NT and RHS gardens could be curtailed. We are working on it!

Remember that RHS and NT membership cards are only for the use of the named member on the card (and sometimes a guest as well).

All photos here are from the hotel's and gardens' websites.

We will be staying at the [Best Western Pinewood Hotel in Wilmslow](#)

180 Wilmslow Rd, Handforth, Wilmslow SK9 3LF
☎ 01625 529211

The hotel is set in attractive gardens, close to the M6, M56 and M60. It has a lift and free wireless internet in public areas and guest rooms, there is also a cocktail bar. The rooms have coffee/tea maker, hairdryer, AM/FM alarm clock, iron, ironing board, desk, telephone and a trouser press. Wake up calls are available.

The garden has a large lawn, trees for shade on a sunny day and carefully curated flower beds. Some of the rooms overlook the gardens



Day 1, Sunday morning: [Castle Bromwich Hall Gardens](#)

A remarkable survival, this Grade II listed, 10-acre walled garden is a rare example of a formal Baroque style English garden. It fell into decline and has been restored as near as possible to the period 1680–1740, which was when it was at its best. It contains over 600 species of plants from the time, and a holly maze (ouch!) which is a mirror image of the one at Hampton Court Palace. The kitchen and fruit gardens are based on designs by Batty Langley from his book "New Principles of Gardening", published in 1728, but still available today. It is now maintained by volunteers.

Tea coffee and cake are included here.

Frances Billington



Day 1, Sunday afternoon: [Little Morton Hall \(National Trust\)](#)

Little Morton Hall is an iconic wood framed moated Tudor Manor House with wonky angles and quirky character. It is possible to explore the house, learn about its history, and see the wall paintings which stayed hidden for centuries until 1976 when discovered by an electrician.

There is a knot garden and borders and traditional viewing mounds. Across the moat there is a small orchard with young trees. The moat dates back to the Middle Ages and nowadays is alive with wildlife.

There are two tea rooms, offering hot and cold food and drinks.

Felicity Vickery



Day 2, Monday morning: [Tatton Park \(National Trust and East Cheshire Council\)](#)

A grand country estate over 1,000 acres featuring a deer park, sweeping landscapes with lakes, formal gardens and a famous Japanese garden. This old established Japanese garden is very fragile and can only be visited by small groups with a guide. We have booked several guided tours in the morning so that everyone has the chance to enjoy it.

In the last part of our visit it may be possible to look inside the impressive neo-classical mansion. Not far from the mansion are several glasshouses, housing amongst other plants, ferns, orchids and pot plants, together with a pinery for pineapples.

The Stables café serves coffee and light meals.

Jane Jenkins



Day 2, Monday afternoon: [Lyme Park \(National Trust\)](#)

An essentially eighteenth century house with a nineteenth century 15 acre garden and a 1,359 acre deer park.

The design of the garden is in the High Victorian mixed style. It has an orangery and elaborate bedding displays. There is also a woodland garden in a ravine, a lake and a herbaceous border designed by Graham Stuart Thomas for the National Trust.

The visit will also include the opportunity to visit the house, the largest in Cheshire, and a Grade I listed building. Lyme Park has been used in several films and television programmes. The exterior of the hall was used as Pemberley, the seat of Mr Darcy, in the 1995 BBC adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

Lyme Park has a café, tearoom, coffee shop and plant shop.

Joan Clark



Day 3, Tuesday morning: [Arley Hall](#)

The extensive gardens, claimed to be amongst Europe's finest, have been created over the last 270 years by successive generations of the same family.

There are two distinct areas, 8 acres of formal gardens and 7 acres of woodlands. Major features are the double herbaceous border thought to be the first to be planted in England, two large walled gardens, one of which still functions as the kitchen garden, the vinery, the fish garden and the rootery (a rock garden).

Arley Hall is owned by the 11th Viscount Ashbrook and his family. It is approached through an avenue of pleached limes and is a popular film and TV location so may look familiar to viewers of *Peaky Blinders*, *Coronation Street* and *The Real Housewives of Cheshire*. The hall itself is not open to visitors at this time.



The Gardener's Kitchen café will be open for anyone wanting tea, coffee or lunch. It uses locally sourced ingredients and produce grown in the Arley Kitchen Garden.

The plant nursery has a large selection of hardy herbaceous perennials and unusual pelargoniums which are propagated on site.

Val Cannon



Day 3, Tuesday afternoon: [All Fours Farm and Nursery](#)

A traditional and well-established country garden with a wide range of roses, hardy shrubs, bulbs, perennials and annuals; it opens for the NGS.

You will also find a small vegetable garden, a pond and a greenhouse, as well as vintage machinery and original features from its days as a working farm. The garden is adjacent to the family's traditional rose nursery.

Tea, coffee and cake are included here.

Althea Godfrey



Day 4, Wednesday all day: [RHS Bridgewater](#)

Bridgewater is the latest addition to the RHS's own gardens and here they wanted to create a world class garden that would also benefit the local communities. Tom Stuart-Smith created the master plan. There is the Weston walled garden which contains the paradise garden and the kitchen garden with a community area. In the Chinese streamside garden there is the new music pavilion. Also to be found are orchard gardens, Ellesmere Lake, Victoria meadow and the Old Frameryard. New areas are being developed all the time. There is a restaurant, as well as coffee trucks around the grounds.

The site was once the home of Worsley New Hall, demolished in the 1940s. Some of the old buildings still remain on the site. It should be a great visit.

The coach will leave for the hotel in the afternoon allowing some free time. Alternatively, people may want to stay in Manchester and make their own way back.

Liz Moulton

Day 5, Thursday morning: [Wollerton Old Hall](#)

Set around a 16th century hall (not open to the public), Wollerton Old Hall is a formal, modern garden on an old site. Located in north Shropshire and covering 4 acres, its garden rooms are richly planted with perennials and bursting with design ideas. The garden is renowned for its salvias, clematis and roses, growing in controlled exuberance with clever use of colour, form and scale. When Lesley Jenkins moved back to her former childhood home of Wollerton Old Hall in 1983 with her husband John, she quickly discovered that the great age of the site demanded formality in the garden's design. She created three north-south and three east-west vistas. The resulting linearity of these vistas together with the hedges, walls and paths resulted in a collection of separate gardens, with each one having its own style and ethos. There is a popular plant centre and a tea room that serves teas, coffees, light lunches and cream teas.

Di Taylor



Our last stop will be a short break at the **Warwick service station** on the M40.

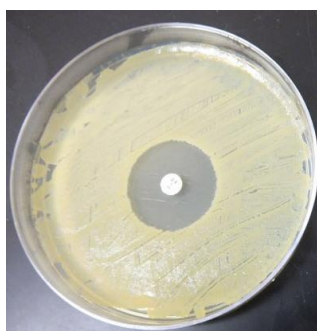
The magic of autumn



Clive Symes drew my attention to an article in the Telegraph Magazine of October 28th about [Merlin Sheldrake](#), a mycologist whose book about fungi, *Entangled Life* is a best seller and is now available in a fully illustrated edition as well as the original text version. Although I have a well-thumbed copy of the *Collins Guide to Mushrooms and Toadstools*, it is really a field guide to identify what you find on a fungus foray (mainly in autumn). Although it is well illustrated with colour drawings, on field outings with friends who had the same book we noticed how the colours differ from one printing to the next; the second edition was first

printed in 1965; mine is the 1978 fifth reprint, and there are new editions available now. The Telegraph article has persuaded me to order Sheldrake's book, which covers not just mushrooms and toadstools, but the whole fascinating world of fungi.

As Sheldrake tells us, fungi are all around us; some cause human or plant diseases – think of thrush in human beings, blackspot and mildew on roses, mould of food kept too long in the fridge. Other fungi are responsible for the blue veining of cheeses.



<https://microchemlab.com/test/zone-inhibition-test-antimicrobial-activity/>

Some fungi are sources of antibiotics – penicillin was the first to be discovered, and there have been more since. In the late 1940s and into the 1950s, drug companies spent considerable sums of money screening soil samples for potential new antibiotics; indeed, in my biochemistry course at Birmingham University one practical class consisted of spreading a dilute extract of soil onto a plate of nutrient medium seeded with a harmless strain of the bacterium *Escherichia coli*. If a colony of fungal growth was surrounded by a region of clear medium where no bacteria grew (see left), you had an antibiotic-producing fungus. I was lucky; I found one. However, it was almost certainly not worth applying for a patent, or even alerting a pharmaceutical company.

The Upjohn pharmaceutical company spent millions of dollars on screening soil samples, and as far as I know, the only potential antibiotic they discovered was streptozotocin, produced by *Streptomyces achromogenes*. It was far too poisonous to be used in medical practice because it is extremely toxic to the insulin-producing β -cells of the pancreas. It has proven to be a very useful tool for the study of experimental type I diabetes in rats and mice.

There is no real difference between mushrooms and toadstools; they are the (mainly stalked) fruiting bodies of fungi, bearing spores for propagation of the fungus further afield. More generally, “mushroom” is used for those that are edible, while “toadstool” is reserved those

that are not edible and may be poisonous. However, using this division means that “magic mushrooms”, a group of psychedelic fungi that contain the hallucinatory compound psilocybin, should really be classified as toadstools.

Autumn is the time for fungus forays in gardens and woodland, because especially in a warm and damp autumn (as this one has been), the underground fungal growths (mycelia) come together and reproduce sexually to produce the fruiting body, the above-ground mushroom or toadstool contain millions of spores that are dispersed mainly by the wind. If you are lucky enough to find a ripe puff ball fungus and allow a few drops of water (ideally wait for rain rather than teasing it with a stick), you can see a cloud of the microscopic spores being released. It is the spores of fungi growing in damp houses that are responsible for lung and other diseases.

Foraging for wild mushrooms in the woods is a common activity in many countries of central and eastern Europe, and is increasingly popular in Britain. However, you need to be careful. First of all, if you are foraging anywhere other than land you own, you need permission to take anything away, and this includes mushrooms. It is permissible for genuine scientific purposes to take one or two specimens for identification. You usually do have to pick the mushroom or toadstool to confirm identification, because the colour and microscopic appearance of the spores is an important differentiation between similar looking species. You pick the cup of the mushroom and place it on a white or black paper, and look at the colour of the spores as the drop out. If you have a microscope, so much the better, you can look at their fascinating shapes as well. Even this is not always enough. I remember finding an interesting-looking mushroom in my garden many years ago. Armed with my trust Collins Guide, I followed through the steps in the key identification guide until had come to two possible identifications: one was “rather good to eat” and the other “rather poisonous”. The difference was the colour of the spores: one had cigar-coloured spores and the other rust-coloured. I took a (small) cigar out to a rust patch on the car – I could not tell the difference in colour.

This, of course, brings to mind the other problem of foraging. Unless you are really confident in your knowledge, it is all too easy to pick, cook and eat more or less poisonous mushroom – sometimes with fatal consequences. Watching other mammals is no help – I have seen squirrels happily nibbling away at the poisonous bright red fly agaric (*Amanita muscari*), apparently with no ill effects. It may be that squirrels are immune to the adverse effects of the toxins; more likely, they consume a very small amount for the psychedelic high, and unlike us, know when to stop.

Part of the magic of fungi in autumn is that they are transient. The ink cap in the lower left of the photo above comes up, opens and then “melts” to a black ink-like mess within a day or so – as soon as its spores have been released. Similarly, the stinkhorn (*Phallus impudicus*) in the lower right of the photo lasts for only a few days. Others are longer-lasting, and indeed may appear in more or less the same place for several years.

I never did manage to identify the two fungi growing on decaying wood at the top left and right of the photo. The fungus on the centre right is actually two different fungi: *Mycorrhiza* growing on *Coprinus*. I took the photo using flash, and did not see the *Mycorrhiza* until the film was returned; I saw only the *Coprinus* by the limited daylight.

The other two fungi in the photo are both edible. Wood blewits (*Tricholoma nudum*, lower centre left) is said to be good to eat, and has a pleasant distinctive “aroma of autumn”. I was fairly confident in my identification, and took just a couple from a large clump to cook. However, when I cut open them in the kitchen, I was not the only one aiming to eat them; they were riddled with maggots. So much for my wood blewits omelette. The other edible fungus in the photo (top row centre) is *Auricularia auricula*, the wood ear fungus – the common name is from its resemblance to an ear. Although edible, it has a not very pleasant slippery, rubbery texture, and little flavour, so best to leave it to break down the decaying wood it is growing on.

Even if you are foraging with permission, you should not be greedy. You should leave some for others to enjoy (not to eat, just to enjoy). Also, remember that the purpose of forming the fruiting body is not to feed you, but to permit the fungus to exchange chromosomal material, ie, sexual reproduction to permit diversity of the species, as well as distribution of the spores further afield.

This brings us to the biological roles of woodland and garden fungi. We can divide them into three groups:

Parasitic fungi that kill plants. The best known is the [honey fungus](#) (*Armillaria* spp.) that have golden yellow fruiting bodies, but attack and kill the roots of woody plants. They spread by black, root-like structures called rhizomorphs (often known as ‘bootlaces’), which can spread from infected roots through soil.

Saprophytic fungi grow on dead wood and leaves, acting as agents of decay and recycling nutrients from the wood and leaves into the soil. These are highly desirable and increase soil fertility. If you make leaf mould, as opposed to compost, then the breaking down of the leaves into friable leaf mould is due to saprophytic fungi. Unfortunately, much of the damage to fences and gates is also due to the action of saprophytes.

Symbiotic fungi are free-living in the soil, but their mycelia have a symbiotic relationship with the roots of trees other plants. They extend the root system of the trees very considerably, providing water and minerals to the plant and in return receiving carbohydrates and other nutrients from the host plant. There is also growing evidence that they provide wood-wide communication between trees. Like other symbiotic relationships, most are specific to a single species of tree. More on this topic of how fungi and plant roots interact in a future newsletter.

David Bender

Some requests for help

We always need people to meet and greet members and visitors at our meetings.

If you can help, please contact Felicity Vickery Tel: 01494 726284, email felicityvickery@yahoo.co.uk

We need people to help with the tea and coffee at our meetings. There is a rota so you are not expected to help at every meeting. If you can help, please contact Liz Moulton Tel: 01494 784913, email libbym6740@gmail.com

As ever, it will be much appreciated if some members could arrive about 7 pm to help put out chairs and tables; they do not put themselves out!

Please remember the raffle at each meeting. The profit on the raffles makes a very useful contribution to our expenses; subscriptions alone do not cover the cost of meetings and speakers.

Publicity. If you know where you could put a publicity poster please contact david.bender@btinternet.com

At present we have posters in the following places:

White Hill Centre, Chesham; Van Hage garden centre; Little Chalfont Library; Amersham Library; Coleshill Village Hall

Committee and Contact Details

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Past newsletters

There is an archive of past newsletters from May 2014 to the current issue on our website at <http://www.amersham-gardening.org.uk/newsletter.html>

Local events

If you know of local garden events, open gardens, etc, please email newsletter@amersham-gardening.org.uk to let us know as early as possible, so that information can go out in the newsletter and on the website.

Photos from outings

You can see links to lots of photos from our outings at <http://www.amersham-gardening.org.uk/outings.html>

See the photos in this issue full size

[Click here](#) to go to the photos from this newsletter in full size.

[Click here](#) for more photos from the outing to Kew.

Click the button on the top right of the screen for a slide show; you can scroll through the pictures using the > and < arrows on the right and left of the screen

