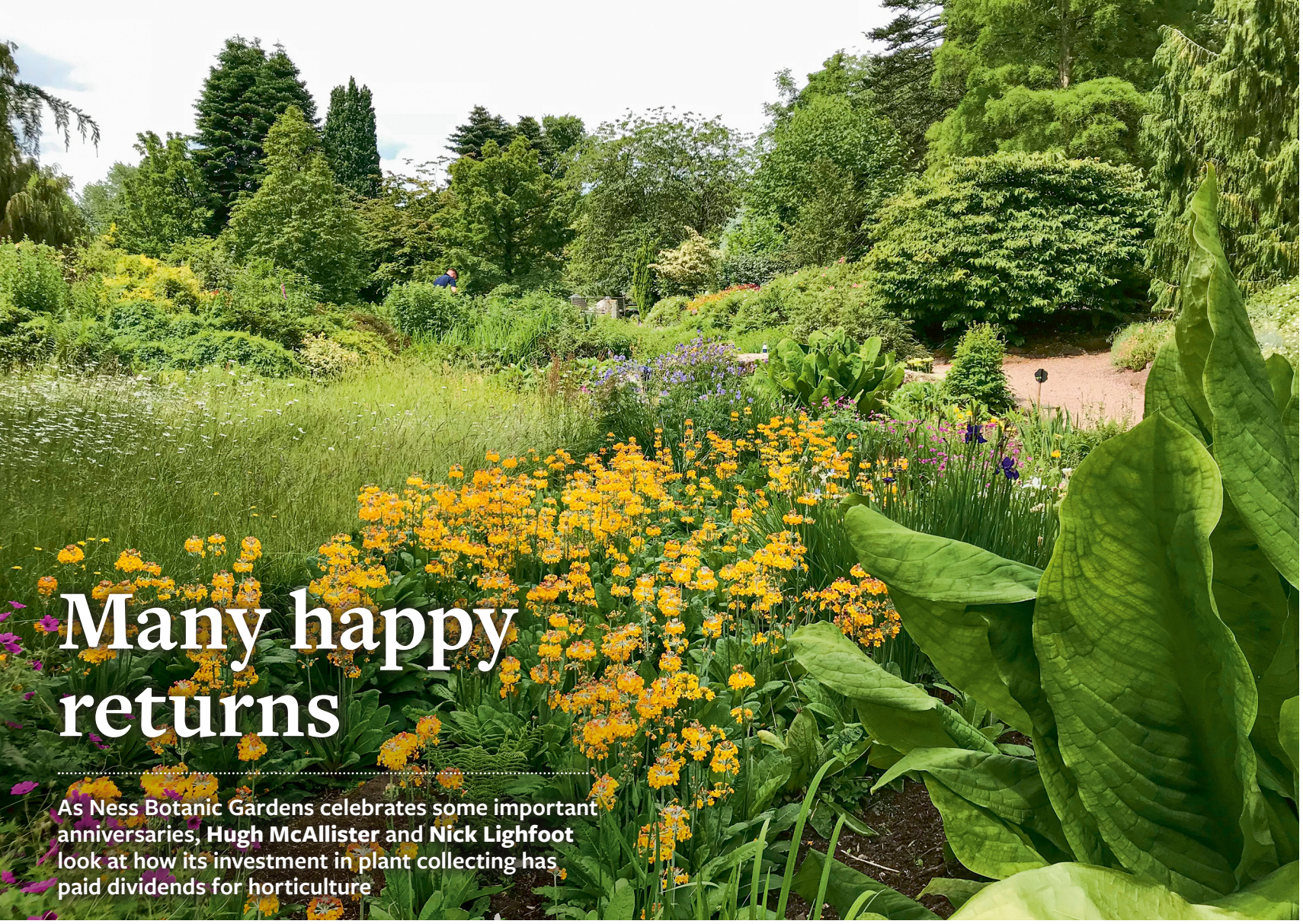


Many happy returns

As Ness Botanic Gardens celebrates some important anniversaries, Hugh McAllister and Nick Lighfoot look at how its investment in plant collecting has paid dividends for horticulture

NICK LIGHTFOOT

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

Arthur Bulley (above) at Mickwell Brow, the house he built at Ness; the Bulley's governess, "Nenni", in the garden in about 1910.

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

Ness today (left) is rich in rarities thanks to a long-standing commitment to collecting plants.

THE YEAR 2023 marks two anniversaries for Ness Botanic Gardens. It is 125 years since the gardens were founded by Arthur Bulley in 1898 and 75 years since they were gifted to the University of Liverpool. A good opportunity to look back and forward.

The Gardens' founder, Arthur K Bulley, was a cotton broker who made good business decisions and became very rich. He appears to have been a man who did things his own way (McLean 1997), and his wife, Harriett, was similarly strong-minded. During the 1926 General Strike, Harriett Bulley organized payments to local miners' wives, saying of the cost that it was about what a woman of her position might have spent on a Rolls Royce.

It was Bulley's daughter, Lois, who donated the gardens to the University of Liverpool in 1948, having bought out her brother's share of the estate. It came with the condition that it had to be kept open to the public free of charge, as it had been by her father. The University asked for a £75,000 legacy to clinch the deal – a lot of money in 1948.

The area open to the public was about seven acres and comprised a rock garden, herbaceous area and shrubbery. The first director, Jimmy Duncan, cleared Bulley's orchard and vegetable garden, increasing the size to about 20 acres. The second director (1957–1989), JK (Ken) Hulme, gradually expanded the gardens to the full 65 acres which had been owned by Bulley, the outer areas having previously been rented out to farmers.

In 1980 university funding cuts meant charging for entry was introduced. Lois Bulley was initially reluctant to change her deed of gift to allow this, but was persuaded to do so by Nancy Kershaw, her lady companion. There was much complaint from local people used to free entry, though it was pointed out that in Bulley's day only seven acres were open and it was by then 45 acres.

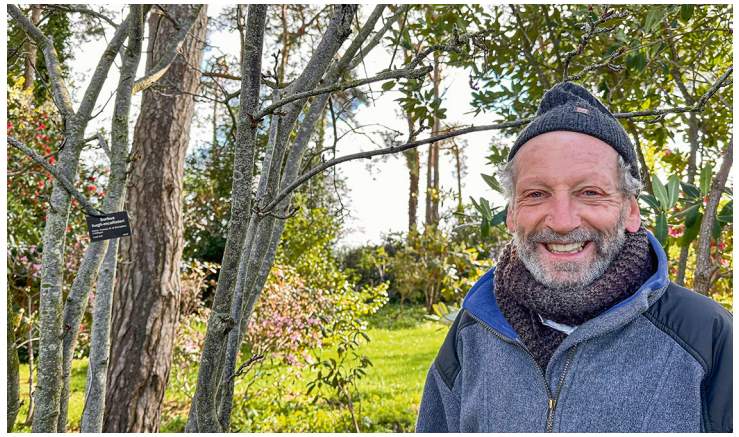
Plant collections

Bulley was the sole sponsor of the first plant collecting expeditions of George Forrest and Frank Kingdon Ward. That is, he was the entrepreneur who risked his money on unknowns, and is rarely given credit for this. Hulme always felt this was because he was a Fabian Socialist and not one of the inner circle of aristocratic estate owners, with whom Bulley jointly funded further expeditions.

Bulley seems to have been primarily interested in alpines and herbaceous species which could be sold through his seed and nursery firm Bees' Ltd (Bees' instituted the penny packet of seeds which enabled garden plants to be grown by all). However, this focus meant he had little interest in the collectors' trees and shrubs which took many years to mature, and it has been passed down to us verbally that he told Jo Hope, his head gardener, to throw them out!

Mr Hope planted some of these in the boundary hedges and it's possible that two *Malus yunnanensis*, a *Sorbus coronata*, a *Paulownia tomentosa* and a *Berberis* in such hedges were grown from Forrest's seed. However, Bulley did develop and maintain an area of woody planting, of which more later. »

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS



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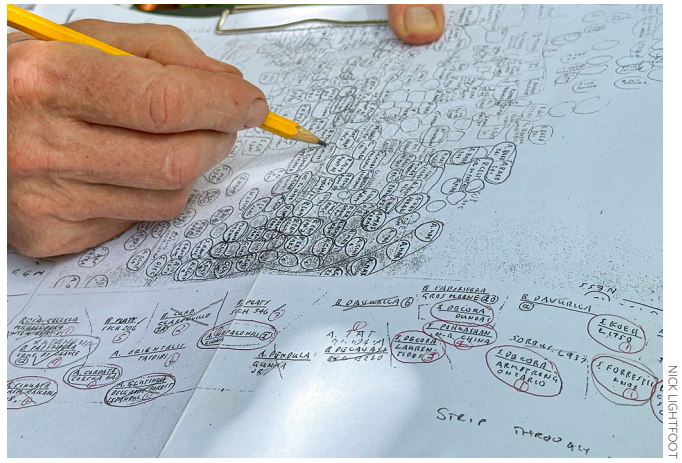

NICK LIGHTFOOT

Ness Gardens shortly before the First World War (left), with one of the gardeners under a rose pergola and Mickwell Brow in the background; Hugh McAllister (top) has amassed a vast knowledge of Ness's plants; one of Hugh's plant maps (above).

After Arthur Bulley died in 1942, Harriett Bulley lived on in the house (Mickwell Brow) until 1956, and little was done during this time except basic maintenance. Upon his appointment as director, Ken Hulme set about sorting things out, including telling staff to clear the loft of the garage, which contained mainly boxes of papers; most were apparently burnt. Who knows what was among them? Bulley's notes on what was planted where – the lost collection notes from Forrest's last expedition?

NESS BOTANIC GARDENS

Ken Hulme was a fine plantsman who did much to develop Ness.

The only plant still at Ness known to have been grown from seed sent by Forrest is a *Pieris formosa* var. *forrestii* planted in the area of Bulley's shrubbery in 1919. Nearby are two old, suckering, Chinese rowans growing on their own roots which may be from the same source. Within a few metres of these plants were some old rhododendrons which Hulme found when he arrived in 1957 and described as being in nursery rows with lead labels giving Forrest numbers. Some had 6m-long bare stems with a single rosette of leaves at the end. He transplanted those which could be moved to the Pine Wood where a few still remain, though by 1972, when Hugh McAllister started, none of the labels were present. However, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that these might also have been from Forrest's seed.

One other notable old tree in the gardens is a *Davidia*, probably derived from Wilson's original large batch of seed received in 1901. Lois Bulley remembered the excitement when it first flowered.

A penchant for primulas

Hulme was a very good plantsman and keen to grow a wide range of species, partly to satisfy demands for material of unusual plants from university staff. New plants for Ness were bought from Hillier Nurseries or raised from seed obtained through the botanic gardens seed exchange. Through the 1960s much seed was grown for taxonomic research, as the *Flora Europaea* project was being run from Liverpool by Prof. Vernon Heywood.

As well as rhododendrons and azaleas, a major interest through the 1970s and 1980s was candelabra primulas, *Primula sikkimensis* agg. and other primulas. By the number of requests received each year, Ness seems to have been a major world source of these – other gardens were presumably not able to keep them alive until they produced seed!

Only the large, vigorous *P. bulleyana*, *P. beesiana* (really just the purple-flowered form of *P. bulleyana*), *P. pulverulenta* and *P. japonica* are grown at Ness today. They are in wet areas where they self-seed and so are little work to maintain. Hulme said that when Kingdon Ward's collections were being grown at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh »

he was told to have a very good look at certain primulas that might not survive long. One was *Primula cawdoriana*, and it was 50 years or more before it was seen again in cultivation. Such species are often better looked after by individuals than institutions. As far as we know, seed of this species was not brought back by western collectors again until Keith Rushforth's 1997 trip to Tibet. Seed was then collected and grown at Ness, and by Kevock Garden Plants nursery.

Nurture and disperse

After Chinese botanist Te-tsun Yu remade contact with the West in the late 1970s, joint Western and Chinese plant collecting expeditions were subsequently organized. Western botanists then had access to China for the first time since before 1949. Through links with botanic gardens, Ness obtained plants and seed from these expeditions as well as through the botanic gardens seed exchange.

Ness, like other botanic gardens, has so many documented collections that many are not grown in ideal situations (usually too shaded) and their horticultural value is therefore not evident. This happened with *Sorbus forrestii*, which had survived as a poor specimen at Edinburgh since 1921 until a whip was given to Ness in 1956 and grew to be the most striking rowan in the garden (Hulme, pers. comm.). Twelve other of Forrest's *Sorbus* collections didn't survive. The lesson to learn from such losses is that unique collections should be propagated and distributed as soon as possible to other gardens in a range of climates (Dosmann & Del Tredici 2003).

At present, Ness has a large number of plants of recent introductions from the wild, some of which are unique to the gardens. Ness has had the space available for planting out such trees and shrubs,

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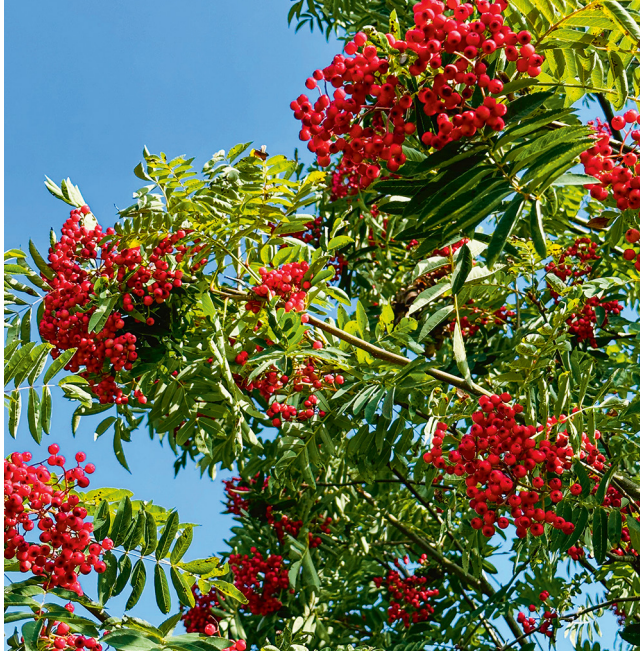
Forrest collections of *Pieris formosa* var. *forrestii*.



NICK LIGHTFOOT

***Sorbus* 'Pink-Ness' is one of Ness's best introductions.**

though the staff have often been short of time to look after them. Where possible, especially with self-incompatible rarities, we have maintained several clones to ensure a breeding population – very different from the old practice of having one of as many species as possible!

Because of Bulley's legacy, we've been very conscious of the significance of introducing new plants to cultivation, both from the wild and through breeding. Interestingly, the most commercially successful have not been new tree species, though some of these are very attractive, but individual clones selected from seedling batches or seedlings self-sown in the garden. Very distinct selections made at Ness and now widely available include *Sorbus* 'Pink-Ness', *Santolina chamaecyparissus* 'Small-Ness', and the dwarf, mildew-resistant Michaelmas daisy *Symphyotrichum* 'Small-Ness', and there are several more currently under trial. A century and a quarter after he began it all, we hope Arthur Bulley would be pleased with our ongoing efforts! ○

Hugh McAllister is a taxonomist and botanist who spent his career at the University of Liverpool and Ness Botanic Gardens.

Nick Lightfoot is Garden and Collections Manager at Ness Botanic Gardens.

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