

Mr Slade and the Edwardian Gardens at Poltimore House

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Introduction

The Poltimore Estate Research Society (PERS) exists to promote the study of the history of Poltimore House, a grade II* listed building on Exeter's north-eastern edge, and of the estate previously owned by the Poltimore family. One of the major areas of interest is the history of its gardens. What survives today, partly in the hands of the Poltimore House Trust and partly in those of neighbouring landowners, dates mainly from the Victorian era: an arboretum laid out by celebrated local nurseryman and garden designer, James Veitch, vestiges of formal gardens closer to the house, and the original walls of the kitchen garden.¹ The interpretation below of the Edwardian gardens at Poltimore is based on an article about the gardens which appeared in July 1907 in a short-lived magazine called *Garden Life*, intended for the amateur rather than the professional.²

The article was part of a series called 'Famous Gardeners at Home', in which the journalist Alfred Wilcox was conducted around a garden by its principal gardener, and provided a unique insight into the development of the Poltimore gardens under head gardener Thomas Slade, FRHS, who worked at Poltimore between 1895 and 1909. Slade had been at Poltimore for twelve years by the time of the visit. His career had included a start at Coleshill House, near his childhood home in Hertfordshire (now in Buckinghamshire); a period of apprenticeship at Cardiff Castle gardens under the well-known Mr Andrew Pettigrew, where, as he revealed on another occasion, he had helped to lay out the famous vineyard at Castell Coch, planted in 1875.³ He had subsequently worked in Kent, Sussex and Lancashire; then had posts as head gardener in relatively small gardens in



Figure 1. Mr Slade 1908

Oxfordshire and Bedfordshire; and a spell as horticultural lecturer for Somerset County Council.

Immediately before coming to Poltimore Slade had worked for Messrs Veitch, probably at the Chelsea Nurseries, and been head gardener at Lea Park in Surrey, the fantasy garden built by financial speculator and fraudster Whitaker Wright in the early 1890s. This garden, now Witley Park, was famous for having a ballroom, smoking room and conservatory built beneath the lake. Messrs Veitch are known to have worked on the gardens there and it may have been for this project that they had engaged Slade; or their knowledge of both him and Lord Poltimore may have led to his appointment at Poltimore gardens.⁴ At least two of Slade's predecessors as Victorian head gardeners had had strong connections with the Veitch nurseries in Exeter. Mr Slade though, as befitted a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS), was the first to draw on his experience to write and publish. He was a regular correspondent to the *Gardener's Chronicle* on a wide range of topics: in 1906–7 he had letters published on how to plant conifers, the merits of Mabbott's Pearmain and the results of summer pruning of fruit trees, as well as contributing to the 'Remarks on the condition of fruit crops'.⁵ His notes on *This Week's Work in the Flower Garden*, published fortnightly in the *Gardener's Chronicle* in 1901 have provided a clear picture of at least one of the aspects of work at Poltimore Gardens.⁶

The Garden Tour

The Poltimore garden tour with Alfred Wilcox started from Mr Slade's four-bedroomed cottage just outside the gardens, and proceeded down the long lime avenue that runs from the church to the flower garden situated on the east side of the house (see Figure 2). Wilcox's attention was then 'attracted by the striking collection of araucarias' which, Slade informed him, 'were planted about 1847 after Bicton'. When asked about his scheme of summer bedding in the flower garden, he replied that it had been for several years 'a Study in Scarlet'. 'Great care', he said, 'is taken to avoid clashing of colours'. There is evidence of his strong sense of design in the scroll pattern which characterised the flower garden. 'I laid it out, including the croquet lawn at one end, and the tennis court close to the house'. Lord Poltimore was happy to let his head gardener extend his skills beyond the garden itself.

The tour continued in a north-easterly direction, away from the house towards the 'Pond Walk' (now lost), passing a large bed containing periwinkles, Japanese maples and azaleas. From there the two men passed on to another lime avenue, half a mile long, with an adjacent avenue of *Cedrus deodara*, part of an extension planted by 'the late Mr James Veitch'. Amongst the large specimen trees in the pleasure grounds, which covered about forty acres, were 'two of the finest Wellingtonias in England' and immense quantities of early rhododendrons. The pair proceeded along the avenues, which Wilcox noted were carpeted with primroses in the spring, to a rosary enclosed with laurel hedge. Slade's planning was again evident when he talked about the design of the rosary. 'The central design of low arches is to form a kind of rose web ... The design on the surrounding grass was laid out last autumn'. He then listed the numerous varieties of roses planted there. Demonstrating a desire to cultivate a garden that was up-to-date with current planting trends, he

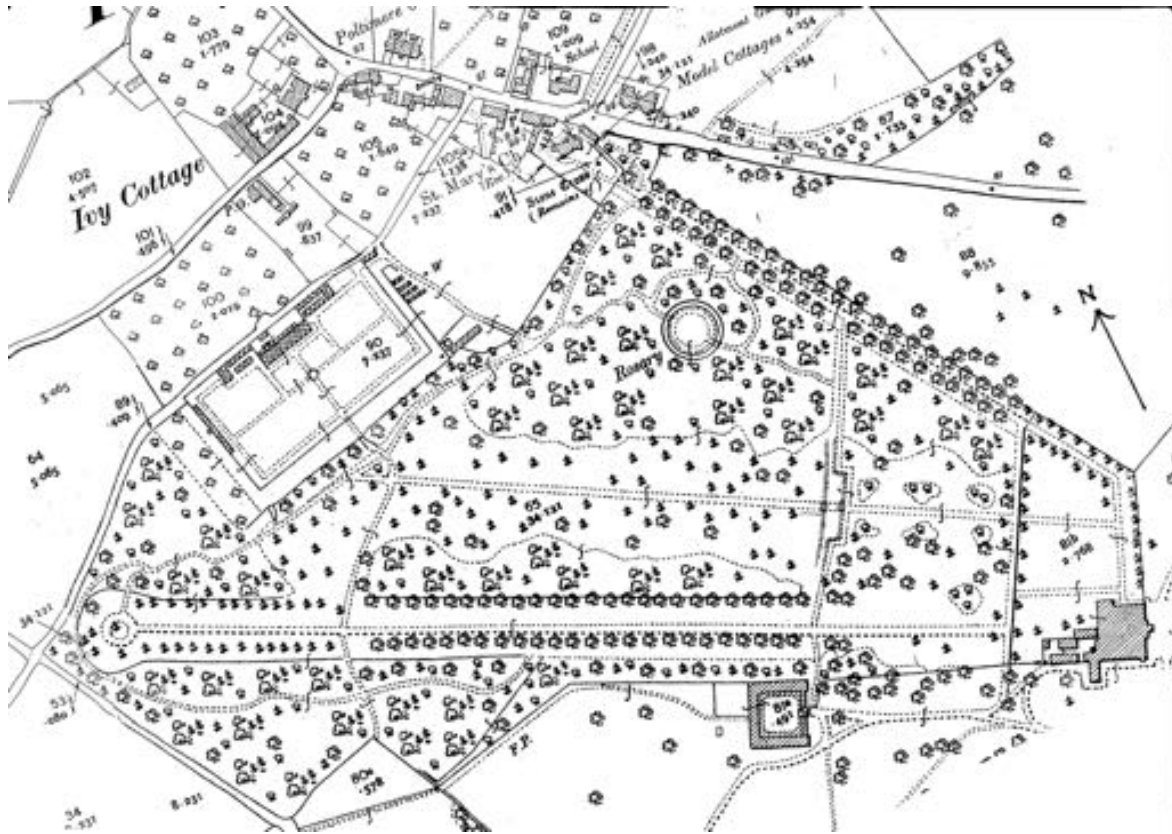


Figure 2. The Gardens at Poltimore Park, shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1886

commented: 'I am trying also most new varieties as they are introduced'.

Next they arrived at the eight acre kitchen garden. Pears and a few peaches were grown on the outside of the walls; inside there were apples, largely grown on espaliers but also on pyramids, bush trees, and other hardy fruit. 'Plums do particularly well with us ... [as] the heavy loam soil suits them but in working it we have to watch the weather carefully'. Peaches, nectarines and apricots were also grown, although Slade acknowledged that the ground was 'too rich' for apricots and that he only grew half a dozen varieties. Lily of the valley was grown at the base of the fruit trees. Small borders in front of the espaliers were reserved for flowers for cutting in large quantities such as penstemons and larkspurs. Violets were grown in frames and pots. There were a number of larger herbaceous borders which featured herbaceous and tree peonies and several yards of sweet peas. Strawberries and other soft fruit were grown in cages and cherries grown as pyramids and on the west wall.

Slade and Wilcox subsequently moved to the vegetable area where sixteen pea varieties were grown covering over one thousand yards, surely far more than the family needed, even if some were sent to their London residence. Slade's interest in new and emerging varieties is again seen in his comment that new varieties were tried and old ones 'which do not thrive' discarded. Other vegetables grown in quantities included runner and dwarf beans, lettuce, turnips, onions and asparagus. Potatoes were grown in succession in frames outside.

In the glasshouses the tour began with a 'late peach house', also used for strawberries, tomatoes and bedding plants, and

the climbing rose 'Perle des Jardins' which Slade described as 'a very good rose to grow under glass, providing three crops'. There were two further peach houses, the early house was sixty feet long, twelve wide and ten high, and four vineries measuring 120 feet long and six yards wide. Grape cutting in the early house began at the end of May and continued through to the late vinery, with eleven varieties in total. There was a house for tomatoes and melons, which were also ready from May. In a former vinery were cucumbers, and plants for cutting and household decoration such as Clerodendrons and ferns.

The fuchsia house had previously been a camellia house, then used to grow roses, but had been planted seven years earlier with fuchsias which had grown to form an arch through the length of the house. Under the fuchsias on a flat base were groups of Schizanthus, 'Malmaison' carnations, Cinerarias, Pelargoniums and *Celsia arcturus*. Slade explained that the flat base 'gives more opportunity for effective arrangement'. His perspective on his work seemed to incorporate a constant and unwavering consideration of his employers' needs. It is even as if Slade set out his planting schemes with harmonious table decorations in mind for certain rooms within the house, 'it being requisite for the flowers to harmonise with the prevailing colour in the rooms'.

Slade then described the features of the stove and palm house where he raised amaryllis from 'his own seedlings' brought from Lea Park. Dracaenas, Gloxinia and ferns were also grown in that house. In the carnation house, viewed next, both 'Malmaison' and tree carnations were grown. Here too were seedlings 'of my own hybridising from some of the best varieties, such as Robert Craig'. He gave a description of the

colours of two of his own seedlings, ‘one on a white ground flecked with pinkish-blue, and the other fine white, buff and cream ground, scarlet and salmon’ ... ‘I have raised the very best with good calyx and good stem, and I am hoping to get a yellow flower’. (He appears to have succeeded in this ambition, as the wreath sent by Lady Poltimore to Lord Poltimore’s funeral a year later was composed of red, pink and yellow carnations from Poltimore gardens).⁷ Although he claimed at the end of the interview to have no particular preference between flowers, fruit and vegetables, Slade’s final comment revealed a keen interest in floral decoration: ‘House and table decoration has always been a study which I enjoy’. This enjoyment had been shared with members of the Devon and Exeter Gardeners’ Mutual Improvement Association in 1902 which showed that he considered a knowledge of table decoration invaluable, demonstrating cultivated taste.⁸

Lavish and Extravagant Expenditure

The Poltimore estate already had a reputation for exotic planting dating from the mid nineteenth century when James Veitch first laid out the arboretum and the first Lord Poltimore built the walled garden and the glasshouses, probably stocked from the Veitch nurseries. Alfred Wilcox’s first impression was that the grounds were ‘on the lines of a French chateau’, and this suggests the ambitious plans for its development, combining style with luxury and abundance.

There were more than two and a half thousand rose varieties available by the time of the visit in 1907, but Slade and Lord Poltimore had selected fifty or so varieties, not just for vigour, colour or scent but especially for novelty. These included ‘Perle des Neiges’ (introduced in 1903), ‘Lady Gay’ (1905), ‘Wedding Bells’ (1905); ‘Henri Marrell’, ‘Earl of Warwick’ and ‘Betty Berkley’ (1904). Slade grew roses on garden walls with fruit trees, on tree stumps, over arches, in containers, as specimens in beds and under glass, twenty of them newly introduced and abundant in the newly redesigned rosary, where ‘Frau Karl Druschki’, ‘Alister Stella Gray’ and ‘Madame Abel Chateney’ placed Poltimore at the height of fashion.

Gertrude Jekyll’s *Roses for English Gardens*, (1902), recommended simple symmetrical architecture with a profusion of unruly blooms and may have influenced the

Poltimore rosary where a dozen of her recommended exhibition roses, such as ‘Queen Alexandra’ (1901) and ‘Clara Watson’ (1900) were planted.⁹ Eighteen others listed by Slade were included in Dean Hole’s *A Book about Roses*, the key reference work at the time, and five of Barbier’s most famous French varieties also appeared at Poltimore.¹⁰ The planting of French varieties may perhaps have been influenced by the Poltimores’ strong connections with France, where Lady Poltimore had been born and Lord Poltimore had spent much time as a child, and which they continued to visit regularly. The French had been at the forefront of popularising rose-growing in the early nineteenth century.

Technical advances of transport, electric light and the telephone were becoming everyday items in the social circles in which the Poltimores moved. This allowed communication, ease of transport and brighter illumination and had an impact on the modern gardener who wanted to access the best products, to exhibit his produce both locally and nationally and to enhance the décor in the house. That the Poltimores and Mr Slade were keen to be at the forefront of fashion is also indicated by their huge collection of herbaceous perennials, some in the glasshouses, many grown for cut flowers. These included heucheras, montbretia, lobelias, spiraea, astilbe, Michaelmas daisies, begonias, geraniums, gaillardias, penstemons, daylilies, and especially fuchsias and peonies. There were also twelve varieties of sweet peas, tree carnations, camellias and a new creeper, *Vitis coignetiae*, with scarlet leaves and dark fruit.

Mr Slade presided over eight acres of kitchen garden where he grew most vegetables in great quantity, often exhibiting locally and at the RHS. He was trialling fourteen varieties of potatoes, possibly for commercial purposes. In the *Gardener’s Chronicle* in 1902 and 1904 he had joined in correspondence discussing potatoes, making the point that different varieties would do better in different areas.¹¹ He was aware of the development of disease resistant strains against the potato blight, caused by *Phytophthora infestans*, which had led to famine in Ireland in the middle of the nineteenth century and was still a problem. Seed potatoes were often imported from Scotland where the disease had not affected the crop.

The first glasshouses at Poltimore dated from the remodelling in 1840–1. They were installed by John Weeks of Chelsea, but Lord Poltimore had also had extra glasshouses built and extended in the 1860s. The heating and pipework for the 1860 developments were provided by a local Exeter iron foundry, Garton and King.¹²

Despite the expense, exotic fruit production at Poltimore included ten varieties of peaches, four nectarines, nine plums, six apricots, seven gooseberries, cages of various raspberries, red and black currants, nuts, eight varieties of cherry including Morello, fourteen vines including Lady Hastings, Lady Hutt, Lady Downes, Black Hamburg and Muscat of Alexandria, four green-fleshed melons and cucumbers. Nine varieties of strawberry were grown, including Monarch, Laxton’s Leader, Auguste Nicaise, Royal Sovereign and a French variety sent by Lady Poltimore’s friend, Princess Frederica of Hanover, from Biarritz; she had stayed at Poltimore House in 1905. Interestingly there were only two varieties of tomato, Hipper and Sunrise; tomatoes which were not widely eaten in 1907.

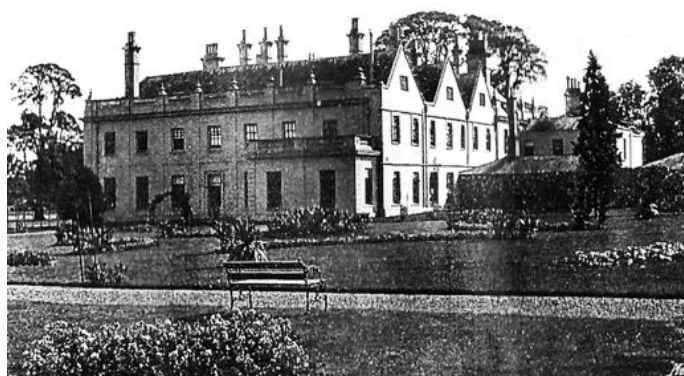


Figure 3. Poltimore House as Mr Slade would have seen it from the end of the lime avenue

By 1907 the orchards were well established with reliable varieties rather than those at the height of fashion. There were 24 varieties of pears and 28 different apples, some of which were used for cider. Many trees were trained on decorative espaliers and pyramids to show off their colour and support the weight of fruit. Where previous head gardeners had exhibited and taken prizes at the Devon and Exeter Horticultural Exhibitions for fruit, Slade sent displays there for exhibition rather than competition. However, he regularly showed apples and pears at the RHS autumn shows of British grown fruit and won prizes for them, with the first reference for an award being in 1898.¹³ He received a cultural commendation from the RHS Fruit and Vegetable Committee in 1906 for excellent fruits of the Michaelmas Nellis pear.¹⁴ In 1907, with the fruit Alfred Wilcox had seen setting on the trees at Poltimore, he won first prize for a dish of dessert apple Adam's Pearmain and first prize for dessert pear Charles Ernest.¹⁵

There had been twelve gardeners, in addition to Mr Slade, listed on the census of 1901 and it is likely that this level of staffing had continued into 1907. Only two of the men were then over 30. There were four young men in the bothy and another two boarding out in the village, and four junior members of village families aged between 16 and 20, the 'garden boys'.

How the 1907 article contributes to a greater understanding of the Edwardian gardens at Poltimore

Before the *Garden Life* article was discovered there were few sources to tell us what Poltimore's gardens were like in the 1900s. The skeleton of the park, the avenues and some of the specimen trees remain; the OS map, updated in 1905, showed the basic layout of the original rosary; Mr Slade's publications and the talks he gave to the Devon and Exeter Gardeners' Association provide some of the detail about the plants grown, but the article from a not very well-known magazine,

has enabled us to gain a better understanding of the gardens as an ensemble.

The gardens were cultivated for the use and enjoyment of the Poltimores, and marrying the information from the article with accounts of work during the year demonstrates how the planting was tailored for the times when Poltimore House was in use. The important features were the summer bedding and summer-flowering plants, roses and shrubs with less emphasis on spring flowers. Detailed descriptions of the glasshouses and their contents showed the importance of growing plants and flowers for display, both to be admired on a visit to the glasshouses and for table decoration. In 1907 Lord and Lady Poltimore were in their sixties, and only their youngest son remained with them in the family home. The Poltimores led less active social lives than in the days when Augustus was a Master of Fox Hounds, or Treasurer of Queen Victoria's Household. They therefore spent more time at Poltimore. They even visited their other Devon house at North Molton less frequently: in 1907 they only called in on their way to spend a few days in Lynton and again for the Sunday School treat.¹⁶

Their calendar can be reconstructed from references in the *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, which took a particular interest in Lord Poltimore's movements, as he was one of its Directors. The annual pattern was to spend Christmas at Poltimore, go to the South of France at the end of January when Lady Poltimore, who suffered from rheumatism, needed to escape the cold. They usually returned to England in the spring to spend the London season in a rented house, with a brief Easter visit to Poltimore for Lord Poltimore to do his duty at the Assizes and the spring meeting of the County Council. After the 'season' they returned to Poltimore for most of the second half of the year. They would hold one big summer event at Poltimore in July or August, a garden party or a fete: in 1907 this was to be a fete in support of the Primrose League. There would also be guests from the neighbourhood and a house party arranged to coincide with the summer's big event. The autumn shooting party at Poltimore had been



Figure 4. The Kitchen Garden as it is today from Poltimore Churchyard.

a regular feature at the end of the nineteenth century, but by 1907 Lord Poltimore had long let out the shooting, and the autumn house party was an informal family gathering including the Poltimore's eldest grand-daughter, convalescing after illness, her husband, her parents, Lord Poltimore's heir, Coplestone Warwick Bampfylde and his wife Margaret, and her eldest brother.¹⁷ The focus of effort in the gardens was therefore to produce a profusion of summer flowers and items that could be enjoyed indoors or in the glasshouses, during the autumn and early winter.

The article demonstrated the astonishing amount of produce, both fruit and vegetables that was grown in the garden. The amount grown is certainly more than a family of three people, even with a household of fifteen servants, might have required. It suggests that some of the produce was grown for sale to generate income for the estate. There are a couple of clues that the gardens were regarded as a commercial enterprise under Slade's predecessor. At the Devon and Exeter Horticultural Exhibition in 1893 Lord Poltimore won second prize for 'one bushel ... of a culinary apple and half a bushel ... of a dessert apple packed ready for market'. The winner of the class was a professional nurseryman.¹⁸ In the following year the *Gardener's Chronicle* contained an advertisement for seekale from Poltimore, 12 shillings per 100 on rail.¹⁹

In his conversation with Alfred Wilcox, Slade referred to his responsibility for design work in the garden, particularly in relation to summer bedding schemes, the layout of the recreational area and the creation of the rose web in the rosary. He demonstrated his interest in modern varieties, from roses to vegetables. He was also an experimenter, hybridising amaryllis and carnations. He took account of the particular features of the soil at Poltimore both good and bad in determining what to grow, noting with pleasure that the iron rich soil gave hardy fruit a high colour. It would be of great interest to know what work Mr Slade had done to qualify him for election as a Fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society, but unfortunately the records of the RHS do not contain this information.

Finally, the article provided an insight into Mr Slade's career, skills and enthusiasm and makes it apparent that a good working relationship existed between Slade and his employers. At the time the article was written he was in his fifties and had been in post since his late thirties. The stability of this employment is in contrast to the previous period of his life where he held ten posts in the course of less than twenty years following his training at Cardiff Castle. Sadly, when Lord Poltimore died in 1908, and his widow a year after, the new Lord and Lady Poltimore determined to redevelop the gardens to create a 'Chinese garden' along

willow-pattern plate lines and aviaries for exotic birds, an interest they shared. Their plans led to a restructuring of the garden, as a result of which Mr Slade advertised for a new position. He left to work at South Lodge, Horsham, for F. D. Godman Esquire, a retired ornithologist and naturalist who had made his name in South America. It was undoubtedly a less prestigious garden probably with fewer staff. It appears that even this appointment did not last. In the 1911 census Thomas Slade was recorded living in Wimbledon and using his knowledge and expertise in self-employment as a 'travelling seedsman'. Was this an inglorious end for someone who was evidently possessed of much knowledge and talent in all the branches of his chosen profession? Perhaps instead we should rather think of him as spending his last years as a 'consultant gardener'.

References

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4. The creation of an orchard at Lea Park by Messrs Veitch is referred to in an article written after the crash in which Whitaker Wright was ruined, *Investors' Review*, 5 January 1901, p. 2.
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