

# And we counted them all back on!

*Penny Walshe*

**O**n a bright sunny morning in early July, 27 keen lady gardeners boarded the coach in Ross-on-Wye to visit the east of England to see what green fingers there could produce in drier climes. As our coach driver, Phil, carefully loaded our cases on the coach little did he know what was in store.

South Herefordshire group has been organising short holidays to visit gardens in other areas every other year for some time, and they have always been great fun. This, however, was the first year that myself and my colleague Jo had been responsible for the arrangements - so it was fingers crossed that all went well. We had planned our itinerary with care, aiming to see a variety of places from the famous gardens of the RHS Hyde Hall and the inspiring Beth Chatto Gardens to smaller gardens opening for the NGS. Our first stop was one of our own cottage garden society members - a beautiful plantswoman's garden called 'Dragons' in the village of Boyton Cross. The owner had kindly arranged for some Essex CGS members to join us there, and we had a lovely afternoon exploring the many features and sharing tea, cake and gardening experiences with everyone. There were, of course, a few plants for sale and we duly indulged! Our driver carefully put them in the coach for us and we drove to our hotel; our holiday was all off to a good start.

The next day began with a visit to Beth Chatto's, which we all enjoyed. We were pleased to see the lady herself dressed in her gardening gear pushing a wheelbarrow across the lawn off to do some work! After a nice lunch and an even nicer trip around the nursery we boarded our coach for the next stop. 'Oh' said Phil 'I see you have got a few more plants' - massive understatement! A quick head count ensured that everyone was with us and 15 minutes later we were at our next garden, 'Moverons', in Brightlingsea looking over the River Colne. The sun was shining as we drove in, after only a minor detour, (Phil is very good at reversing) and we were greeted by the owner. Another delightful garden, quite different in style from Dragons, and what a pleasant way to spend an afternoon in such a lovely setting with tea and cake and more plants for sale. Phil was getting a bit more adventurous by now and looked around the garden. He was definitely getting the hang of it when it came to loading up the plants.

Day three we headed off to RHS Hyde Hall for the morning. The gardens were looking beautiful and it was interesting to see what you are able to grow in an

area that has significantly less water than our home patch. Phil accepted his free pass to visit with alacrity. After a nice lunch and a visit to the sales area we loaded up again and departed for our afternoon destination, Wickham Place Farm Gardens. This was featured recently on Gardeners' World - a two acre walled garden dating from 1706 boasting a 250ft long wisteria. After yet more tea and cake we topped up the plant collection with a few more specimens and headed back for our final night at the hotel.

Sunday morning and it was time to start for home with one more visit on the way. Firstly, however, we had to get our luggage on the coach. Suitcases did not pose much of a problem but when it came to the plants, that was another kettle of fish. Most of us had taken them into the hotel for a drink (the bath was very useful!) and now they had to all be safely packed in the right order for our three drop off points on the way home. Good natured Phil was brilliant as were the extra luggage labels the company had provided us with, and before 10 o'clock we were on our way. Our final visit was a bit of a diversion, but in a very good cause, for we were off to Barnsdale. On arrival the manager came out to help us park and distribute tickets as we got off the coach. New convert Phil piped up 'Can I have one too?' The gardens looked lovely, as was lunch, and we were all very pleased to have visited our President's garden. We squeezed in a few more plants and for the last time Jo and I counted everyone back on the coach for home. Twenty seven members all present and correct and, at an estimate of about 10 plants each, two hundred and seventy plants were safely conveyed back to Herefordshire - Jo and I breathed a big sigh of relief.

It was a great holiday, blessed with proper summer weather, and we visited some very interesting gardens and met some nice people. Would we arrange a holiday again? I think the answer is almost certainly 'Yes' and we would encourage other groups to give it a go, but before you start planning, note - Phil belongs to us!

*Penny is Treasurer of the South Herefordshire Group.*

*Illustration/ Tom Boulton*

