



Exbury Gardens, 1919 - 2019
Photographs by Lionel de Rothschild

1. The author with his dogs in front of a bank of azaleas
2. *R. quinquefolium* 'Five Arrows', foliage
3. *R. quinquefolium* 'Five Arrows', flower
4. *R. augustinii*
5. *R. cerasinum*
6. 'Angelo'

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Lionel de Rothschild

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One hundred years ago my grandfather and namesake, Lionel de Rothschild, embarked upon the creation of his garden at Exbury, a woodland garden devoted above all to rhododendrons. By the time he died, aged only 60 in 1942, his garden covered some 200 acres (81 ha), and I have been told that had he lived, he had intended to incorporate a further wood to the north, partly in order to have the longest possible drive through the gardens to the house.

I did not know him, but all I have heard points to a man of drive and passion. He was also a man of good taste and determined to create not just a botanical collection but also a landscape garden with plants carefully placed using the contours of the land. In this he was inspired by William Robinson and also by James Hudson, who had worked for Lionel's father Leo at Gunnersbury outside of London. (Hudson, incidentally, was the first man ever to score full marks in the RHS exams.)

My grandfather also took the advice of those who had gone before him, especially the cousins J.C. and P.D. Williams from Cornwall, whom he referred to as his "gardening godfathers". This pair was joined by the formidable W.J. Bean. According to my father, however, Bean would not always commit, preferring to reserve judgement. This led to surreal conversations at the dinner table; with Bean suddenly blurting out the name of a tree they had been puzzling over hours earlier. Lionel sought Bean's advice on an arboretum he planned across the road that was to contain every tree and shrub hardy in the British Isles, thus following Bean's *magnum opus* entitled *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*. With characteristic directness



Lionel de Rothschild, grandfather of the author

Lionel blew holes in the ground with dynamite for planting. The arboretum survived the war but – criminally – was grubbed up afterwards; the only record was a photo taken by the Luftwaffe on reconnaissance.

Lionel's great-grandfather, N.M. Rothschild, came to England from Frankfurt in 1798 and first broke into the big league, as it were, by supplying gold and coin – “specie” – to Wellington's armies in Portugal and Spain (the Peninsular War) and again in the Waterloo campaign. I like the idea that a fortune made from specie was spent on species. New rhododendrons were flooding in, and Lionel was determined to have every one (except *R. afghanicum*, which he deemed too poisonous).

He helped fund all the great plant hunters of the day, usually operating in a syndicate and sharing the seeds on the return. Seeds were also sent to Kew and Edinburgh, those great reservoirs of plants and knowledge. He paid for Forrest's burial in Tengyueh (now called Tengchong) in 1932, and for the return of what Forrest had collected. He circulated the seed, however J.B. Stevenson of Tower Court wrote to say how little had germinated. Lionel replied that his experience had been the same and lamented Forrest's untimely death.

He was involved in funding expeditions by Joseph Rock, Reginald Farrer, Harold Comber and above all, Frank Kingdon-Ward. He planted azaleas from the “Wilson 50” (the first azaleas to be introduced to cultivation in Europe/United States after Wilson's trip to the Kurume area of Japan in 1918) round the Lower Pond; we hope to add new azaleas from the area of the Noto Peninsula on Honshu Island.

Wearing my other hat for a moment, I am a trustee of The Rothschild Archive in London. There we have the correspondence between the plant hunters and my grandfather, and we welcome researchers who wish to view it. That period was a relatively quiet time for the family bank since, if I am honest, its glory days lay in the previous century. So most of Lionel's correspondence concerned plants – at a very rough count, maybe 90%.

There is no doubt that Lionel was held in some awe, even by men who had braved the rigours of the Himalayas. Kingdon-Ward visited often, even, according to my grandmother, when he really should not have: apparently he was at lunch and

rather silent. “Kingdon-Ward, you look unhappy: are you alright?” she asked. “Yes, thank you Mrs. Lionel. I just got married.” “That is wonderful news. When?” “Today.” “Today? What are you doing here then? You should be with your bride.” “Mr. Lionel asked me to lunch.” “Lionel,” she called, “Kingdon-Ward has just got married. Send for the Rolls-Royce.” And off he went. While it is possible it was not the actual day of his wedding – stories do get exaggerated – there is no doubting the awe in which Lionel was held. Nobody who visited Exbury could fail to be impressed. In 1923 Kingdon-Ward wrote to Wright Smith, Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, about his recent visit to Exbury, “Within five years it will be the eighth wonder of the world.”



Lao Chao, chief collector for George Forrest

Lionel managed everything down to the last detail. My cousin Barbara once asked my grandmother what her honeymoon had been like. “Oh, it was alright,” she said, not exactly evincing enthusiasm, “Your grandfather spent his time planning the menus for the next two years.” Some of the anecdotes make him seem rather out of touch, others rather too grand, but I think it was more that he was immersed in his own world. “No garden, however small,” he is said to have told the City Horticultural Society, “should contain less than two acres of rough woodland.” Only someone completely absorbed in a life which included a vast estate could pronounce such a dictum as a general rule of thumb.

Writing of subseries *Argyrophyllum* (now subsection *Argyrophylla*) in *The Rhododendron Year Book* of 1933, he declared that, “they must be regarded more as the Queen Anne walnut table, which just fits into the drawing-room beside the armchair and helps to make the room feel comfortable and homely and sets off the Reynoldses and Romneys that grace the walls.” Well, the Romneys and Reynoldses are long gone, and the Queen Anne walnut table too, but the garden remains and I know which I would rather have – and you too, I imagine. I do think that sometimes he acted for effect. My grandmother was French and only 20 when she married my grandfather. Thinking she might value advice on English ways in the country, Lionel arranged for a Mrs. Crofton, who had run one of the farms, to be her companion; my father, uncle and aunts uniformly loathed her for getting between them and their mother. Mrs. Crofton had firm views on everything, and one day saw some of the senior staff going off at lunchtime. “Where are they

going?” she asked Lionel. “I imagine they are going off to have a glass of sherry,” replied my grandfather. Mrs. Crofton duly inveighed against the drinking habits of the working man, only to be cut short by my grandfather: “Oh no, they would only drink the very best sherry!” Later my grandfather took them aside and said quietly, “Carry on: I really do approve.”

After Lionel’s death, my grandmother flourished out of his shadow. She kept the gardens going with only a skeleton staff of old gardeners till the war ended and clearly had considerable knowledge in her own right. She never lost her French accent, rolling her “r’s”, and I am afraid we children quickly learnt certain plants just so we could ask her their names – *R. irroratum* and *R. ‘Rubaiyat’* for example.

Lionel’s attention to detail was phenomenal. He kept detailed card indexes showing the location of trees and shrubs and, separately, of rhododendrons, indicating the day they flowered each year and occasionally adding planting notes. For example, on *Magnolia stellata*, he scrawled (he had terrible handwriting), “An attractive picture is made by planting this shrub in a group, growing beneath it thickly grape hyacinths (blue). The two flower together.”

We now have a database with the vast majority of the rhododendrons (but not all the azaleas) and the key specimen trees tagged; we have over 20,000 accessions. Lionel did not write down how he saw his garden developing or how he planned it. It was always “a work in progress”, and he strode around (his “little walks”), pointing with his stick and saying, “plant it here”, or moving plants if he thought they were unhappy or that the colours clashed with those adjoining.

He did, however, write for *The Rhododendron Society Notes* when he was first starting, in 1920 and 1921, and for *The Rhododendron Year Book*, both on species and, to a lesser extent, on hybrids, between 1933 and 1939, with two sections published posthumously in 1953 and 1954. These (and head gardener, Francis Hanger’s article in 1946) are worth reading.

He makes interesting observations: “It is curious to note that in all cases where late flowering species have been crossed with earlier flowering species, the flowering period of the hybrid is invariably nearer the earlier date than the later date.” He praises the plant hunters who brought him their treasures, for example ascribing *R. leucaspis* to “Kingdon Ward’s uncanny knack of picking seed from likely-looking plants, even if they are not in flower, and hitting on a ‘winner’”. He praises other people’s crosses – “The most remarkable cross made by Williams at Caerhays ...” – but is willing to be more critical of himself: “It [*R. cinnabarinum* x *R. ambiguum*] certainly is not a cross worth making and I shall have a glorious bonfire of my seedlings ...”

Again and again he reaches for superlatives, describing *R. schlippenbachii* as “one of the most beautiful azaleas that has ever come back from Asia to our shores” or *R. nuttallii* as “certainly the most glorious of all rhododendrons”. I wonder whether

only with flowers did he lose a certain reserve and express himself with rapture – but perhaps I am reading too much into this with twenty-first century eyes. It is not just the blooms that attract him: he says *R. bureavii* “is worth growing if only for its foliage and, in my opinion, it ... should be in every garden”. He makes comments on placement which still hold true today: “It [*R. niveum*] has tight trusses of dull plum-colour flowers, which clash horribly with blood red *arboreum*, but are attractive by themselves in the woodland.” So concerned is he with avoiding colour clashes that sometimes he seems to be thinking aloud: “It [*R. reticulatum*] must, however, be kept by itself, or it can be grown alongside any white *Rhododendron* or *R. amoenum*, but must be kept away from clearer colours, though obviously it would go with any of the sulphur-coloured ones.” He exhibits wry self-knowledge: *R. rubropilosum* “not worth growing except for the rhododendron maniac who wants to have one of every species - I have it at Exbury, but one plant is enough ...” He also reflected on how his views had altered over time: “Tastes differ and change, and first it is blood-red that attracts a *Rhododendron* collector, but it is not long before he finds that white and pinks, yellows and even purples have as great, if not greater charm. I know that at first too many reds were planted at Exbury and these have long ago given place to others of softer hues, though of course reds still exist there in large quantities.”

Lionel was lauded in his own lifetime, though he remained, I think, a modest man: he never wanted any plant named after him – *R. ‘Lionel’s Triumph’* and *R. rothschildii* were both named after the war, years after his death in 1942. Hanger estimated that about thirty First Class Certificates and well over one hundred Awards of Merit had been given by the Royal Horticultural Society to plants shown from Exbury. Barber (*The Rothschild Rhododendrons*, pp. 110-1) lists 49 species that received awards between 1924 and 1965, and I wish to single out a few.

First, from the Rhododendron House, a wonderful structure fully 100 feet long by 50 feet wide, destroyed by a bomb in the war, there was a fine *R. edgeworthii* (as *R. bullatum*) and a *R. taronense* (now *dendricola*), both collected by Forrest, and *R. pachypodum* and *R. nuttallii* var. *stellatum* from Kingdon-Ward and Rock 59557. This last is described by Hanger as almost identical to *R. nuttallii* but having “a variation of leaf” and “was never named as far as my memory serves me”. However, I think Hanger’s memory did not serve him well, as the *Rhododendron Handbook* clearly listed R 59557 as *R. megacalyx*, but neither Barber nor any of the books on species that I have consulted list Exbury as having won an FCC with this flower, and I cannot see any other *Maddenia* in Barber’s list. Perhaps one of your readers can help? (I should add that Hanger was a fine gardener, but here at Exbury we have never quite forgotten that he took the FCC form of *R. yakushmanum* with him when he went to Wisley!)

Perhaps most exciting to me is that we received an FCC for one of my all-time favourite rhododendrons, *R. dalhousiae* var. *rhabdotum*. Those red stripes are quite unlike any other rhododendron. (However, I am also fond of *R. cerasinum* ‘Cherry

Brandy', which sometimes has a picotee red edge and is sometimes almost bicoloured, so perhaps my eye is drawn to the unusual.)

Now here I would like to correct an error I made over 20 years ago in *The Rhododendron Story*. I wrote in my article "Hybrids in the British Isles: the 19th Century" that poor Lady Dalhousie died of seasickness. Quite where I got that information from I no longer know, but in the days of the web it is now easy to check, and while many, myself included, may feel like death when sea-sick, and a very few may indeed perish from consequent symptoms, Lady Dalhousie, while she died far too young, was not one of them.

With the destruction of the Rhododendron House went Lionel's tender species, but very recently we have acquired some lovely specimens from Ken Cox and I am anxious one day to restore a small greenhouse in the public area in which to display them, along with our small collection of vireyas. From the list of other species that received awards, I would single out *R. augustinii* var. *chasmanthum*, *R. lutescens*, *R. quinquefolium* and *R. souliei* 'Exbury Pink'. The first two I mention because I am particularly fond of Triflora. Lionel preferred to breed in with *R. augustinii*, trying to achieve greater hardiness and a variety of purple and smoky lavender hues.

In the case of *R. quinquefolium*, Exbury won an FCC in 1967 for a beautiful form it had named *R. quinquefolium* 'Five Arrows', the 'Five Arrows' name linking the five leaves to the five arrows on the family's coat of arms. This is a beautiful plant both in flower and in autumn colour. Finally, in the case of *R. souliei*, another beautiful plant, while I was wrong about Lady Dalhousie I was right about Père Soulié, who was tortured and murdered by Tibetan lamas.

While I think it is fair to say that his first love was rhododendrons, Lionel did collect and hybridise with other plants. He made a handful of amaryllis crosses; he made crosses of camellias and clivias, daffodils and freesias. He loved cotoneasters, wrote about them, and made three crosses: *C.* 'Cornubia' (an attractive red) and *C.* 'Rothschildianus' and *C.* 'Exburiensis', both yellow. But it is in two other genera that he really excelled, orchids and nerines. In the case of the former, Lionel had no intention of getting involved in the orchid world, but once interested in the early 1930s, went at it with characteristic vigour. By the time they were auctioned off for the Red Cross during the war some ten years later, he had 28,000 (yes, 28,000!) orchids, of which 21,000 were cymbidiums.

In the case of nerines, a lovely South African bulb in Amaryllidaceae, he focused on the tender (cool greenhouse) *N. sarniensis*. These he bred carefully, and my father kept the collection until the early 1970s, when they were sold. Two years later they were sold on, and that remarkable plantsman Sir Peter Smithers bought part of the collection. Peter was a truly extraordinary man: a friend of Ian Fleming and similarly involved in wartime intelligence, a politician, a diplomat, a photographer, but above all a gardener. I hugely recommend his memoirs, *Adventures of a Gardener*.

He bred the nerines in a careful manner worthy of Lionel, and we bought the collection back in the 1990s. One small greenhouse-full has grown like Topsy, as is the manner with bulbs. We now have a rather large greenhouse-full and put on a magnificent display for our visitors each year in the autumn – their petals sparkle in artificial light.

The preceding anecdote segues neatly into the present, and the challenges facing us today. We are open from early March to early November plus three weekends in December. We start the season with a display of lachenalias – another South African bulb – shown, like the nerines, in the attractive Five Arrows Gallery (this used to be a boiler house, with potting shed above, but in true Lionel fashion is an attractive building). For the early season, we have magnolias, camellias and early rhododendrons. Though we are relatively mild, we cannot compete with Cornwall and our huge *M. campbellii* in the Home Wood are sometimes hit by frost. The *M. x veitchii* ‘Peter Veitch’ by Gilbury Bridge come later and usually escape. We now have three camellia walks, two in the Winter Garden and one nearer the entrance. In the middle of the season the rhododendrons and azaleas are a blaze of glory.

Inevitably some of Lionel’s original plants have matured and died: we lost a giant *R.* ‘Angelo’, one of his early crosses, just last year. The garden has changed, but we will never extend it beyond its existing boundaries nor – climate change permitting – will we alter its fundamental focus on rhododendrons and other woodland plants.

As I have said, my grandfather was determined to avoid colour clashes at all costs. After the war my father had neither the limitless stock of plants nor the seemingly endless resources, and he frequently plugged gaps with what was available; he also delegated more. It also has to be said that his taste could best be described as kaleidoscopic – “anything goes” in the words of the song. Certainly his taste in ties and jackets – if left unchecked by my mother – bore this out! We are now edging back to more careful planting and placing, though most day-to-day decisions are made by Tom Clarke, the head gardener. Watering, weeding and general maintenance take up far more time than exciting new projects.

To be commercially successful, we need more visitors after the high season is over, from mid-May on. To this end, we have planted an herbaceous garden near the gallery, redeveloped the Iris Garden, planted a Hydrangea Walk, and have two enclosed gardens for summer interest. These are surrounded by yew hedges and have a different feel from the woodland informality of Exbury. The first is the Sundial Garden, with its beautiful stone gazebo covered in wisteria and a splendid stone sundial in its centre. This has been through a number of iterations: I have seen a photograph showing tulips in my grandfather’s day, then it was a rose garden in memory of my mother, and now it has a pair of Tasmanian tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) and a selection of herbaceous perennials and climbers on trellis pyramids.

The second enclosed garden, adjoining it, was a derelict tennis court and has been turned into our Centenary Garden by my niece, Marie-Louise Agius, herself a landscape designer. To some extent this mirrors the Sundial Garden. In its centre is a sunken circle in stone paving set with – you guessed it – the Five Arrows; around this are sash bars from an old greenhouse with wires supporting climbing roses. Again there are four beds, this time containing fastigate ginkgos and herbaceous plants and grasses, with a nice curved wooden bench at the end. Pink azalea (with a nod to cloud-pruning) curves behind the bench, flanked by a pair of *Heptacodium miconioides*.

A garden such as has been developed over all these years is a living organism itself, always changing, something to be treasured, nurtured, and enjoyed.



R. calostrotum
nat. size

a. ovary, style. b. stamen. c. capsule. d. capsule enclosed.
e. leaf (lower surface).