

THE GROUNDS OF EXETER UNIVERSITY

The grounds of the University of Exeter are registered as a botanical garden and recognised as one of the most beautiful and botanically interesting of any British university. The grounds are regarded as a key competitive factor in the marketing of the University.

In 1922 Alderman W.H. Reed, a former Mayor of the City, presented to the then College of the South West, the house and gardens of Streatham Hall. Later the College bought a major portion of the Streatham Estate, which now forms the main site of the University, and is within half a mile of the city centre.

The University of Exeter received its Charter in 1955 and now has around 14,500 full and part-time students living and working on a site of some 153 hectares, of which 100 are gardens, 31 sports fields and the rest farmland.

Soil

The elevation of the site varies from 18 metres to 100 metres above sea level sloping towards the south and west. The soil, which is a rather heavy slightly acid loam, is fertile but it can be difficult to establish young plants, particularly from a spring planting. Geologically, the underlying rocks are culm measures of carboniferous age locally called 'shillet'.

Climate

Dartmoor creates a rain shadow which gives a mean annual rainfall of only a little over 75 cms. The southwest air stream tends to keep the winters mild and damp, which gives rise to late unripened growth and very early soft growth both of which can be killed by hard frosts, -10°C at grassland level in late January, and cold drying easterly winds during February. However, the average highest daytime temperature during February has been 6.5°C enabling grass to grow throughout most of the year.

Reed Hall Gardens

The grounds of Streatham Hall, now known as Reed Hall, were laid out in the late 1860s by the firm of Veitch whose plant collectors travelled across the world in search of new species of plants to adorn the gardens of Britain. Among them were the renowned E.H. Wilson and the Lobb Brothers who introduced *Torreya californica* 'the Californian Nutmeg' to England in 1851. A fine example can be seen in Reed Hall gardens.

University of Exeter

The gardens of Reed Hall gave the inspiration and form the nucleus for the development of the rest of the University estate. The fine Victorian arboretum has been extended throughout the Estate, with particular plantings on Birks bank, the Plantation and Taddiforde Valley. Of particular interest on the Birks bank is *Pinus aristata* of 'Bristlecone Pine'. This species was introduced into Britain in 1863

from the Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico area where specimens have lived to be 2,000 years old. Also on Birks bank is *Pinus coulteri*, the 'Big Cone Pine'. The largest cones may weigh between 2 and 2.5 kilos. This tree comes from southern California and New Mexico. It was discovered by Dr. Coulter in 1832 and was introduced into Britain in the same year by David Douglas.

Growing in the Plantation is *Pinus patula*. This is a beautiful but tender pine from Mexico. This species is being used for forest plantings in Africa, but unfortunately it is subject to attacks by monkeys.

A collection of magnolias has been planted in the Taddiforde Valley. This includes 1,000 *Magnolia stellata* and *Cornus kousa* for the Millennium celebrations.

Also a collection of magnolias is being established on land by the XFi Building. They are planted to show original wild species that have been crossed and the new varieties that have resulted, so that the offspring can be compared with the parents.

Micro-climates created by the topography of the site and buildings are exploited to grow a very wide range of plants and shrubs. Azaleas, rhododendrons, camellias and magnolias have been widely planted throughout the grounds. The range of plants used varies between cacti and ferns and something can be found in flower during most months of the year.

During the 1980s there was a large scale planting of rhododendron hardy hybrids and modern deciduous azaleas on the banks below Lafrowda flats, giving fine displays during May and June.

The Minoprio fountain by Vivien Ap Rhys Pryce, FRBS was donated to the University by the Constance Fund in 1988 and is situated above the pond at the Newman Building. This is one of 23 sculptures in a guided sculpture trail on the Streatham Campus.

Conservation

The University is very supportive of conservation and has joined a consortium headed by Edinburgh Botanical Gardens to establish a wild origin conifer collection in various parts of the country, including the University, which it is hoped will eventually form a truly national collection of conifers.

The University is also working with the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens to establish the National Azara collection. This is sited in various micro-climates within the campus which suit particular species, including the Old Botanic Garden behind Devonshire House, Reed Hall walled garden and Cornwall House. Azara are a small genus of evergreen, mostly yellow flowered, scented, South American shrubs. Centrally organised conservation is the only way to prevent species and gardens from dying out.

Habitat for Wildlife

The University is fortunate in having three streams flowing through the main estate; during the early 1960s these were dammed to form a series of ponds in the Taddiforde and Hoopern valleys and in the Plantation. These ponds have been stocked with a range of fish, including goldfish, rudd and tench, and are also home for duck, geese and the occasional heron.

Birds flourish on the estate and some 53 different types can be seen from buzzards to wrens.

Further Information

For more information please visit our website on www.exeter.ac.uk/grounds. For a self-guided tour of the sculptures on campus please visit www.artsandculturexeter.co.uk/sculpture-collection.

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A GUIDE TO THE GROUNDS

