

Snowdrops at Anglesey Abbey

Written by Carol Martino

Saturday, 22 March 2008 07:29 - Last Updated Friday, 31 October 2008 10:17

The harbinger of an English spring

Come mid January, when winter's numbing chill still penetrates bone, the snowdrops appear throughout England. Shivering in their slender, leafy-green cloaks, they fearlessly pierce the frosty earth and softly proclaim the doom of winter.

My introduction to snowdrops came one chilly morning in 2001, shortly after Dan and I arrived in the shires of England for a 2 ½-year stay. Our new village friends took us to a nature preserve a few miles from our home in Langtoft. There, we feasted our eyes on milk-white snowdrops pushing through the site of a medieval quarry where limestone was once gathered to build nearby cathedrals. Their toughness was astonishing. And the fact that the delicate flowers bloomed through such rubble in midwinter intensified the drama.



Glorious snowdrops

During a recent visit to England, I saw the glorious snowdrops once again. The sun was generous the morning I joined my friends Marilyn and Maureen for a stroll through the winter gardens at Anglesey Abbey, a medieval monastery near Cambridge.

We arrived shortly after the gardens opened. A mass of visitors was already parading toward the abbey entrance. Come to find out, winter is the busiest season; an estimated 30,000 people make the annual pilgrimage during January and February to witness the promise of spring. Marilyn said, "Snowdrops signify the beginning of the end of a bloody awful winter. They reassure us that the grey and miserable days are nearly over. ... Who wouldn't go out in a nip of cold to see that?"

Well, I thought to myself, not anyone I know back home. I can't even imagine a scenario where a Midwesterner would mitten-up to see snowdrops blooming in the teeth-ch-ch-ch-chattering cold. And my own penchant for such a venture would be considered "weird." Then again, here

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in America, we don't have the fascinating history.



Snowdrops are prominent in churchyards. A little background on the historical significance of snowdrops: These dainty flowers have flourished in England for centuries, perhaps arriving with the monks as early as the first century. But no one knows for sure. The flowers have long been associated with the church. At one time they were used during Candlemas, a Feb. 2 celebration commemorating the purification of the Blessed Virgin and the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Today, large colonies of snowdrops are still prominent around monasteries and churchyards. They're easily one of the most admired flowers in England, all dressed up in white, three-petal skirts draped over frilly white-with-green-tipped petticoats – poetry in motion, really, when the last breath of winter strays through the blooms. Yes, who wouldn't go out in a nip of cold ...

Walking through the garden gate, our faces were filled with undiluted amazement. Nothing prepared us for such a colorful splash of winter splendor! Clusters of snowdrops, with tiny heads nodding a shy welcome, were splendidly set off by lush plantings of Cornus, a red-twigged dogwood. Within a few steps, we were seduced by the intense fragrance of flowering evergreens known as Christmas Box.

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This was just the beginning of a sensually invigorating adventure, thanks to head gardener Richard Todd, who's been at the abbey more than three decades. He designed the bright and lively winter haven by placing plants so torrents of light pour through, accentuating minute details, such as prickly thorns or restless bits of bark hanging on a tree's edge, and of course the winsome snowdrops. The grounds surrounding the abbey feature an extensive collection of snowdrops along its charming paths which are enhanced with classical statuary.

The meandering path took us past a Tibetan cherry tree with its smooth bark polished to a shine by visitors who are encouraged to "please touch." Who could resist such an invitation?



Tibetan cherry tree polished to a shine

The walk boasts an impressive show of silver birch, and a bench there beckoned us to linger and watch spring unfold as birds fluttered about their business. But time was ticking away. We moved on to a grove of hardwoods, so enchanted by colonies of lime-colored lichens that I imagined flower fairies dancing around the trees.



Colonies of lichens flourish on trees.

Soon, we came to a walled garden where wisteria vines graced the gnarly-knobbed limbs of Lombardy poplars. We slipped through an ancient wooden gate, the doorway to a restored 18th century watermill along a canal rippling with reflections of more poplars. On the other side, a family stopped to let their dogs take an icy, splashing paddle. And beyond, the magnificent Fens stretched as far as the eyes could see. After a brief walk through the mill, we continued on the path as it bent around a boggy hollow, through a wooded dell, and then on to the brooding

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abbey set against the backdrop of a blue sky marbled with pearly white clouds.



Anglesey Abbey The stately manor was once the sight of a 12th century priory built by Augustinian monks. It served as an abbey until King Henry VIII abolished the entire monastic system, expelling the monks, between 1536 and 1540. In today's peaceful setting, it's hard to imagine the abbey dark with sorrow. Birdsong in the garden has replaced the agony of prayer, and beves of snowdrops bloom everywhere! A century-old horse chestnut stands nearby, rooted deep in history and perfumed by snowdrops and aconites that shower the ground.

Beyond the abbey, we reveled in a woodland walk where a sharp eye can spot Mr. Todd's hand-crafted hedgehog hotels, tucked beside tree trunks. He's also provided ready-made homes for bees and other insects by filling hollow logs with bamboo cane and placing them beside tufts of moss.



Bees hives thrive in hollow logs filled with bamboo.

During our stay in England, I learned to appreciate the simple beauty of snowdrops blooming in midwinter. But recently, on a much deeper level, I've grown to recognize how snowdrops offer an oasis of hope. Their hardiness is a true testament that the sprit in each of us can overcome adversity. Just like snowdrops, with a little courage we can push our way through the cold earth of life's cycles and continually blossom into something quite lovely.

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For more information about Anglesey Abbey and the annual winter garden walk, visit www.angleseyabbey.org/gardens/winterwalk



After the garden walk, Maureen, Marilyn and I enjoyed lunch at a pub in Stow-Cum-Quy, a lovely village five miles east of Cambridge.