

Hmmm... what this garden needs is a bit of Japanese Knotweed



# Improvement and Inspiration

THE LAURELS, CROWBOROUGH, SUSSEX

4th May 1885

Dear Henrietta,  
We are all nicely settled in our new villa in the High Weald. We have had the house completely redecorated, so now for the garden!

Nature is all well and good, but it is rather untidy, don't you think? Nothing grows in the right place. I'm sure we can improve on it. I think we could do with a few shrubs at the edge of the garden, just where it borders the woodland. I've heard rhododendrons are all the rage, especially the type called ponticum. I think if I plant those, I can't go wrong. The flowers will look splendid in my new Japanese vases in the drawing room.

Apparently there are other new plants too, like Himalayan Balsam and Japanese Knotweed. They are supposed to rival the exotic plants they have at Kew, but don't need to be grown in a hothouse. You get a lot of plants from a packet of seeds and they spread, so they'll make a good display.

Now you can get the train from London it will be easy for you to visit us often. We can go on walking tours all over the High Weald. The rocks and gills here are rather like the highland glens so beloved of our dear queen and her prince consort. The heathy commons with their clumps of pine remind one of Scotland too. And of course, the pine-scented air is so healthy and will cure your consumption. Look forward to seeing you soon.

Your loving sister,

Agatha

## Victorian good ideas?

What seemed like improvements to the Victorians have sometimes become problems for us today. Plants such as *Rhododendron ponticum*, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Balsam have escaped from gardens into the wild. They are able to spread rapidly and smother native vegetation and wildlife.

Victorians and Edwardians enjoyed the English countryside and nature, but new things were happening. Plant explorers were bringing back exciting new specimens from other continents. Landscape artists were painting romantic far off lands. Gardeners were inspired by this new mood. Many gardens in the High Weald today were begun in Victorian or Edwardian times and reflect these ideas. Some of these can be visited.

Leonardslee was planted with shrubs like camellias, rhododendrons and magnolias and set out in the style of a landscape painting. The Victorian owner imagined it to be like the Himalayas. High Beeches was planted with new specimens from around the world. Marle Place

has a scented garden in the Italian style, a Victorian kitchen garden and restored Victorian glasshouse.

Great Dixter, a garden created in Edwardian times



Great Dixter Archive

William Morris was a Victorian artist, designer and thinker. He believed that people should live simply, and work at making the things they needed for their own every day lives. In this way their work would be enjoyable and fulfilling and their lives more meaningful.

He was inspired by medieval craftsmanship – he admired how buildings, furniture and decorative items like tapestries were made in the Middle Ages. He was also inspired by nature. You can imagine him wandering around the High Weald appreciating its timber-framed houses and stone churches, or getting ideas from the variety of wildlife and the colours and textures of the area's natural features.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a Victorian group of artists, were friends with William Morris. Some of their members spent time in the High Weald making paintings. They wanted to show the beauty of nature in great detail and used intense, glowing colour. One of the group, William Holman Hunt, made a painting of sheep on a cliff in Hastings Country Park. It is called "Our English Coasts" and now hangs in Tate Britain, London.

Another group of High Weald artists was the Cranbrook Colony. They painted scenes of rural everyday life, but made things look rosier and more romantic than they really were. Their paintings were popular with wealthy factory owners in the Midlands.

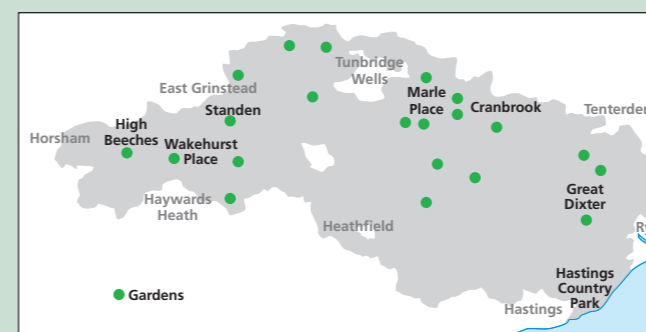
His wallpaper and textile designs usually featured birds, plants and animals painted in a medieval style. These are still popular, almost 180 years after his birth. He designed the furniture, carpets, fabrics and wallpaper for Standen, a Victorian house and garden in the High Weald that you can visit today.

## Broadening the mind

The new railway system made travel easier for the Victorians. The beauty of the High Weald attracted all types of visitor and many writers and artists found inspiration here.



## WHERE IN THE WEALD?



You can visit many grand gardens begun by Victorians. Find out where at: [www.highweald.org/explore/attractions](http://www.highweald.org/explore/attractions)  
Cycle, walk or ride along disused railway lines built by the Victorians at: [www.eastsussex.gov.uk/leisureandtourism/countryside/walks/cuckootrail/default.htm](http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/leisureandtourism/countryside/walks/cuckootrail/default.htm)  
[www.eastsussex.gov.uk/leisureandtourism/countryside/walks/forestway/default.htm](http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk/leisureandtourism/countryside/walks/forestway/default.htm)

Exhibits at:  
**Cranbrook Museum; Eden Valley Museum; Hastings Old Town Hall Museum; Tenterden Museum; Tunbridge Wells Museum; Rye Castle Museum; Yesterday's World, Battle**

More online at:  
[www.highweald.org/Edward](http://www.highweald.org/Edward) – video of a Victorian garden owner  
[www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/collections/browse\\_collections/art/cranbrook](http://www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/collections/browse_collections/art/cranbrook)

## High Weald

1841 Balcombe Viaduct built over the River Ouse on the London-Brighton Railway Line using 11 million bricks

1851 Sussex trugs became popular after being shown at the Great Exhibition

1866 Railway line opened between East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells

1870s William Robinson of Gravetye introduced idea of wild gardening

1878 Hop production reached a peak in the area

1885 Board of Conservators set up to manage Ashdown Forest

1902 Batemans bought by Rudyard Kipling

## EVENTS

1837 1840

Queen Victoria came to the throne

1850

1850 First garden gnome brought to England

1851 Great Exhibition Crystal Palace, Hyde Park

1860

1859 *On the Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin published

1870

1866 Dr Barnardo opened home for orphans in London

1876 telephone invented by Alexander Bell

1880

1885 Bicycles became popular for everyday transport

1890

1900 1910

1901 Queen Victoria died, Edward VII became king