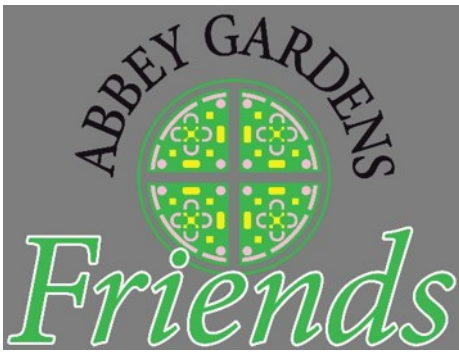




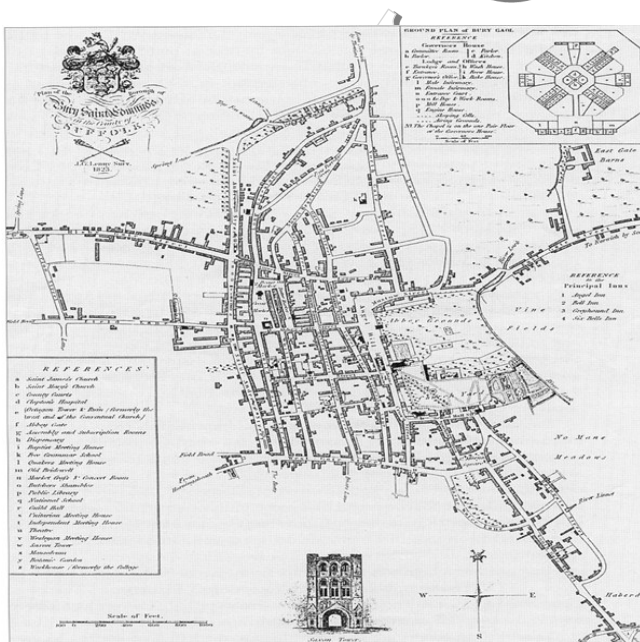
A brief history of the Bury Botanic Garden by Paul Marsh, AGF Chair

It's a long and involved story of how a small unassuming provincial town in Suffolk came to boast a botanic garden alongside the much wealthier towns and cities of Georgian Britain.

The early 19th century saw a huge interest in the natural world beyond Britain and botanic gardens were a way of showcasing new and "exotic" plants, giving botanists the opportunity to study them closely and consider how to best exploit them. Botanic gardens appealed to the affluent classes as they were a place they could socialise and enjoy a rather sanitised version of the unfolding natural world.

Admittance to the Bury Botanic Garden cost 2 guineas a year, or a costly day ticket at 1/- which ensured the lower orders were excluded. The Bury botanic gardens existence was rather short lived, almost certainly because it lacked the support that universities such as Oxford [Botanic Garden founded 1621], Cambridge [1760] and Glasgow [1817], provided and which continue to flourish to this day as teaching resources and research centres. In addition, the Bury gardens were never able to enjoy the continuous support of a wealthy benefactor such as that provided by William Roscoe at Liverpool/Wavertree [1802].

The Abbey Gardens were once part of the Great Court of the Abbey of St Edmundsbury, one of the largest abbeys in Western Europe, which existed until it was dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539. After this the Abbey grounds passed through many owners until 1806, when they were inherited by Frederick William Hervey, 5th Earl, later 1st Marquess, of Bristol from Sir Charles Davers of Rushbrooke Hall [Davers had many children, but none legitimate who could inherit his estates]. This is really where the story of the Abbey Gardens begins.



Richard Paynes map of 1834.

Public domain image courtesy of Catalogue of British Towns website



Engraving by Rock & Co. London of the Abbey Gate.
Published 1st March 1851 with later hand-colouring.
Public domain image/copyright free.

Nathaniel Shirley Harness Hodson, born in 1786, 12th child of 17 children of Francis and Anne Hodson of Cambridge, is the man who started the garden. His father, Francis Hodson, was the founder and editor of the Cambridge Chronicle newspaper. Nathaniel Hodson's early life details are somewhat sketchy, but it's reasonable to assume, given his family background, that he was well-educated, perhaps by private tutor, possibly by a Mr Lodge who often advertised in his father's newspaper. Note the reference to maths and accounts:

.....'young gentlemen are genteelly boarded' in Linton, run by a Mr George Lodge. Boys, paying 16 guineas per year, would be 'tenderly treated, and assiduously instructed' in the classics, maths, accounts and trade, 'necessary to qualify them for the University'. French, drawing and dancing could be taught – at extra cost – if required."

Whatever the reality of Nathaniel Hodson's education was, he was qualified enough to be packed off to work in London to start a career at the War Office, a most suitable position for an educated young gentleman of 16. He seems to have worked his way through the hierarchy of the Accounting Department, ending his 17 years of service as an Inspector 2nd class on Christmas Day 1817. With the ending of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 the government had no need of its vast military and so set about casting off tens of thousands of personnel from the army, navy and supporting services. Hodson was one of many who were "discontinued" but was more fortunate than most in that he received an annual pension [a guaranteed £270 per annum] to soften the blow.

Nathaniel Hodson married his first wife in 1810 and started a family [he would eventually have 13 children by two wives] and between 1800 and 1815 he gives his address as Chapel Fields, South Lambeth, Surrey. At the time this area was largely rural but becoming increasingly industrialised, mainly along the banks of the Thames. It also boasted many market gardens [the light alluvial soil being particularly good for asparagus and carrots] supplying fruit and vegetables to the ever-expanding capital city north of the river.

Importantly for Hodson it was close to a burgeoning part of the horticultural industry which specialised in propagating ornamental plants and trees for the wealthier residents of London and for distribution to the rest of Britain. In and around Chelsea, on the north bank of the Thames, were around a dozen plant nurseries, prominent amongst them were Colvilles Exotic Nursery and in South Lambeth several other prestigious nurseries, including Griffiths Exotic Nursery, which propagated and imported plants from the Cape, India and the Americas.



Hydrophyllum canadense—Canadian Water-leaf. Plate 242.
The drawing was made from a plant received from Mr Hodson,
South Lambeth. Curtiss Botanical Magazine, Volume 3, 1817.

These nurseries often appear in the botanic journals of the time as suppliers [to purchase or rent] of exotic plants. Their plants were rare and expensive. Their trade was being fuelled by an ever-increasing number of new plants being imported by traders, plant hunters and seamen; all related to Britain's expanding global presence. In this heady mix there were also a number of pleasure and tea gardens, such as Vauxhall Gardens in Lambeth and Ranelagh gardens in Chelsea, which provided a different type of garden experience, a mixture of entertainments, alcohol, music, dancing and gambling. Some gardens were less reputable than others. These must surely have been known, and possibly frequented by Hodson, in his time in South Lambeth. There's no indication of when Hodson's interest in plants began but we do know that in 1812 his name starts to appear periodically in the Curtiss Botanical Magazine [an expensive journal, with a limited circulation, aimed at serious, wealthy botanists] as a supplier of specimen plants. His name continued to appear in this journal until about 1825. Sometimes his name is linked in the text with these nurseries, the implication being he purchased their plants and grew them on.

In 1818 Hodson arrived in Bury St Edmunds with his family. We are not sure why he came, perhaps because his network of botanic contacts suggested the town would like a botanic garden or a lead from his father about land for lease or his botanic or newspaper connections? As Hodson hasn't left much documentary evidence about his reasons for coming [or they have been lost] we shall never know. However, in 1820 he secured a lease from Frederick William Hervey, 5th Earl of Bristol on a parcel of land running alongside the river Lark for £60 per annum.

The area is now covered by the Premier Inn car park off Raingate Street and ran up to the boundary of The Great Churchyard. The land had previously been leased to Murr Hogg [a florist was someone who propagated flowers for sale] who had worked the 3-acre plot to grow flowers and vegetables. The plot was described at the time as being rather "swampy". Hodson planted out his private collection and so began the life of his first botanic garden. Its rather quaint address was Botanic Gardens, The Great Churchyard.

In his first year of occupancy tragedy struck when his first wife Caroline died leaving Hodson with 4 children under the age of 10 to care for. How he coped with this, alongside the development of the garden is not known. He marries his second wife Betsy in 1824 and has 9 further children. Sadly, not all his children reached maturity.

In 1822 Hodson published a catalogue which listed 1534 different varieties of plants in his botanic garden [for comparison, "Hortus Kewensis" of 1798, the catalogue of plants at the royal and very private garden at Kew recorded 5700 varieties]. Hodson donated one copy of his catalogue to the Horticultural Society of London [forerunner of the Royal Horticultural Society] of which he was a member.

Between about 1818 and 1830, Hodson and his family were living at Chapel House, situated near the ruins of St Petronilla's, the Abbey's former leper hospital, and it is this location which is sometimes mentioned in the Curtiss Botanical Magazine alongside botanical drawings of specimen plants which Hodson had sent in. Hodson also writes to local newspapers about his plants, all aimed at promoting his presence in the town.

"We are informed a curious and beautiful plant CACTUS HEXAGONUS or Six Angles Torch Thistle, was in full bloom the night of Friday last in the Green-House at Chapel House, near this town – its corolla began to expand at 6 o'clock in the evening and gradually closed at the same hour of the following morning. It is a native of Surinam, and it is seldom known in this country, but experience has shewn that it may be greatly accelerated by a free exposure to the sun and air during hot and dry weather; the present plant is 7 feet tall and supposed to be about 30 years growth."



Cactus hexagonus—native of South America,
Introduced to Britain in the mid-18th Century—one of
Hodson's favourite plants.
Source: Wikipedia

To finance his botanic garden Hodson targeted the wealthy gentry and professional classes who he charged two guineas a year to visit the botanic garden and enjoy the plants, riverside promenades, seating and views into the surrounding landscape. Subscribers were able to enjoy these facilities without any interference from the lower orders of the town who could not afford entrance.

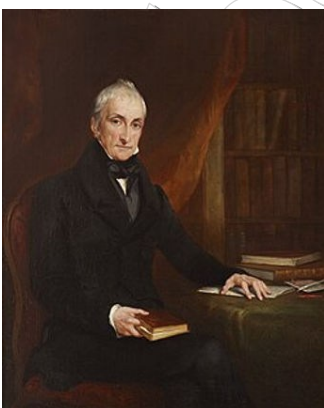
Hodson's self-confident approach persuades several influential people to subscribe, they lend kudos to his endeavours, amongst them are Sir James Edward Smith [the founder of the Linnean Society of London and the country's most eminent botanist], Thomas Gery Cullum-Baronet [a friend of Smith and an eminent local surgeon and respected amateur botanist], Henry Charles Howard 13th Duke of Norfolk, George FitzRoy 4th the Duke of Grafton as well William Frederick Hervey 5th Earl of Bristol. By 1822 he has secured 160 subscribers.

Alongside his endeavours in the Garden in 1828 he is a founding member of the Bury Horticultural Society, a society which will grow to have over 200 members, hold several shows a year, often in the Angel Inn or the botanic garden. Hodson will be involved for the remainder of his lifetime. He invariably enters plants for judging, his favourites, amongst many others, include cacti, dahlias, roses, calceolaria and unusual vegetables. He is very interested in how the lower orders can better provide for themselves and this interest runs throughout his time in Bury.

“.....also, a gourd grown by Mr Buchanan of Stowmarket which weighed eighty-four pounds; specimens of the Red Mangel Wurtzel, grown after potatoes without manure, weighing 12lbs, and upwards, and a Chou Rave or German Turnip Cabbage, sent by Mr Hodson”

Report on the Bury Horticultural Society Show, December 1828.

Hodson enjoyed support in kind from the local gentry, professional classes and foreign botanists who donated seeds, plants from Siberia, China, Nepal, India, The Cape, Brazil and North America. The Botanic Garden remained on the same site until 1830 when, following much speculation in the local newspapers, Hodson is offered the lease on a 6-acre site, near the heart of the town - The Great Court of the Abbey. William Frederick Hervey, now 1st Marquess of Bristol, offers it at £60 per annum, the same price as for the smaller first garden 10 years previously. This is the site that will eventually become the Abbey Gardens of today.



Frederick William Hervey

1st Marquess of Bristol

Painting by Francis Grant 1845

Image courtesy of National Trust

Source: Wikipedia

The second incarnation of the garden begins to take shape between 1830 and 1831 as Hodson, and his gardeners move the plant collection from the old to the new site through a newly created opening in the boundary wall of the Great Churchyard and landscape the Abbey grounds. The centre piece of the garden, just over an acre in size, is laid out as concentric circles according to the Linnean system of plants. It is reported to have been modelled on the pattern of the recently opened Royal Botanic Gardens in Brussels. Subscribers could walk on the main gravelled paths which cut through the circular beds but also around the smaller intersecting grass paths. The planting was less about floral display and more about informing subscribers about the plants they were seeing, their origins and to a lesser degree how they could be exploited. This was the scientific aspect of the gardens work which Hodson and his then curator John Denson liked to undertake. Many of the plants were still novelties but as the 19th century progressed many of them such as dahlias, fuchsias and Chinese chrysanthemums would become increasingly commonplace in the gentry's and professional classes gardens. Hodson's original concentric beds remained in place for over 100 years eventually replaced in 1937 by a planting scheme of 64 beds to celebrate the coronation of George VI. This is the flower bed design we see to this day.



Drone photograph of the current flower beds
courtesy of West Suffolk Council/Bury in
Bloom

The Abbey Gate, newly adorned with refurbished gates and iron railings [reportedly at Hodson's expense] formed the entrance to the second garden. It was both highly visible and easily accessible from Angel Hill.

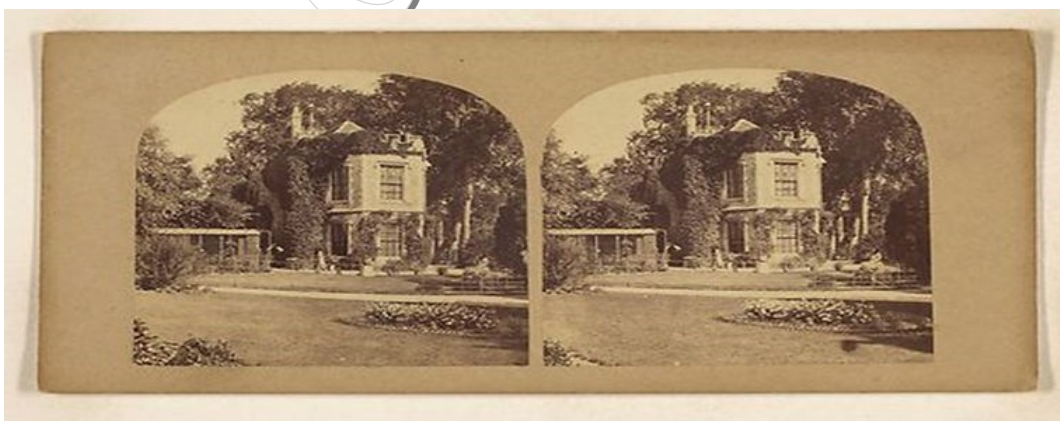
In 1831, Alwyne House was built in the garden for Hodson by the 1st Marquess of Bristol. This allowed Hodson, as its superintendent, instant access to the garden he clearly loved, and he is reported often to "be at work amongst his plants by 4.30 in the morning".

After its opening new amenities were periodically introduced to attract new subscribers and retain the existing ones. Music, both military and civilian from the early 1830s, archery 1832, a menagerie in 1834 with all kinds of exotic birds and mammals, a botanical library in 1840 [for which subscribers paid an extra 5/- per annum], portrait photography in the 1840s and 50s and hot air balloon flights 1850. In 1833 Hodson's name becomes associated with Professor Steven Henslow [Professor of Botany at Cambridge University and Charles Darwin's tutor] at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science [botany group]. Henslow seems to become a friend, and this friendship spans the next 3 decades.

As time passes, we see Hodson selectively opening the botanic gardens to a wider circle of the social classes reflecting the political and social upheavals which were slowly taking place across Victorian Britain. Sometime this had to be with the explicit agreement of the Marquess of Bristol, as the landowner, to whom Hodson always appeared deferential. The widening of access by Hodson included churches of various denominations including their Sunday schools [he himself was involved with St James church], mutual and self-help societies such as the Oddfellows, horticultural shows, firework displays, the Bury Fair, agricultural shows, military and police parades, fire engine competitions and with the advent of the railway line to Bury in the 1840s outings of school children [from Ipswich amongst others] to the garden.

The list of local groups being given regular access to the botanic garden is quite bewildering and reflects how Hodson had become increasingly involved with town life and its population's "improvement".

Outside of his botanic garden enterprise Hodson was also busy, he was a founding member of the local mechanics institute [a forerunner of adult education], the treasurer for a mutual then building society and an active member of Bury and Suffolk Archaeological Society, periodically sharing his finds from the garden. He seems to have been multifaceted. He dabbles in other businesses and in 1840s becomes a shareholder in the Ipswich and Bury Railway Company [though he had first objected to its construction near a house he owned at Thurston] and in the 1850s the Bury St Edmunds Navigation company [whose object was making parts of the river Lark navigable].



Alwyne House, in the heart of the garden, built into the walls of the ruined Abbey in 1831 for Hodson to live in as superintendent.

Stereoscopic photograph taken between 1857-1860 by George Downes.

As Hodson aged he seems to have fully embraced the local community, though he still exerted control over who had access and this would not change whilst he lived. Bury would have to wait until the second decade of the 20th century for free access to the Abbey Gardens, 7 days a week.



Quarter noble coin, Edward III circa 1340 like one found by Hodson in the Abbey Gardens and presented to the Bury and Suffolk Archaeological Society 1853.

Whilst Hodson's contributions to Curtiss Botanical Magazine had stopped in the 1820s his name starts to appear in a number of horticultural books and more often in the newer, cheaper horticultural and gardening journals and broadsheets, such as The Gardeners Magazine [1821- 1844] and The Gardeners Chronicle [1841- 1855]. Steam presses had made printing cheaper and faster but still with only black/white illustrations. Circulation of these new publications soared and Hodson, like many others, writes to them offering advice on topical horticultural matters e.g. how to halt potato blight [which ravaged Ireland between 1845-52], how to deal with weeds, growing grapes and gooseberries, treating bees' stings, propagating plants and many other topics. He imparts wisdom on many garden matters. Below is one of his contributions about eradicating weeds in mud!

"Mud; - N Hodson. You should let it dry in a heap and then mix it with lime and salt, say 40 bushels of the one and 3 cwt of the other per acre of the land on which you intend to apply. Next Spring will tell you whether the seeds in it are killed: but you will probably find that the heap continues bare." The Gardeners Chronicle and Agricultural Gazette, 1847



A postcard of Abbey Gardens printed sometime after 1912, after they had become public.

During the 1850s Hodson becomes involved in local politics [why or how we don't know] as an Alderman and as part of this role presides at the borough Police court [dispensing justice for minor crimes] and in 1855 is elected by his peers as Mayor of Bury. With the death of Hodson in 1861 the garden gradually becomes a pleasure garden with no scientific activity. It has increasingly less to commend it to subscribers or paying visitors and is of little consequence to the botanical world. The lease on the gardens passes to Robert Pettitt, an experienced nurseryman and former farmer who places adverts in the local newspapers.

"Botanic Garden, Bury St Edmunds: The subscribers and Public at large are respectfully informed that a lease of these beautiful Grounds has been granted to MR ROBERT PETTIT, by whom there will be conducted in the same manner as by the late respected Leasee, and who trusts that with his skill and expertise in Horticulture and extensive knowledge of Plants, he will be fully able to maintain the attractiveness of the Garden, and to meet the wishes of the Subscribers from whom he will at all times be happy to receive any suggestions for its improvement of management.

The terms of the Subscription will remain as before. April 4th, 1862."

Robert Pettitt runs the botanic garden until 1891, when he retires in his late 70s, penniless, as the botanic garden, now frequently called the Abbey Gardens, had ruined him. A visitor in 1899 wrote the following

"..... and then we entered the botanic gardens. Anything more dilapidated looking and out of order would be difficult to imagine."

Quote from a letter written by "An Old East Anglian" about his visit to Bury and the botanic garden, published in the Bury and Norwich Post, Tuesday 10th October 1899.

The Abbey Gardens are now one of the great attractions of Bury St Edmunds. Over 1.1 million journeys are recorded through the Abbey Gate every year. It's the green jewel of our town and the legacy of a man from Cambridge who loved plants and created something which every one of us can still enjoy. If you enjoyed reading this article, why not arrange a talk or become a member?

To find out more contact the Secretary of the Abbey Gardens Friends

abbeygardens.bse@outlook.com