



Signs of Spring

This woodland garden provides a natural nursery for massed drifts of snowdrops, which have flourished here since medieval times

FEATURE **JACKY HOBBS** PHOTOGRAPHS **MICHELLE GARRETT**

Thick, luxurious carpets of snowdrops furnish the extensive woodlands at Welford Park, scramble across the parkland and along the banks of the River Lambourn and briefly into the garden, before leaping the walls into the neighbouring Churchyard of Welford St Gregory.

The swathes of snowdrops at Welford have slowly expanded and advanced over the centuries, with the occasional, gentle helping horticultural hand.

Welford Park, near Newbury, was originally the site of a Norman Benedictine Monastery. The snowdrops here are thought to have been planted in the Middle Ages, but the site does have Roman origins and the colony may be even older. February-blooming snowdrops would have been gathered by the monks and were traditionally used to decorate chapels to

celebrate Candlemas, a candlelit festival held on 2 February to honour the Virgin Mary, with the snowdrop symbolising Mary's purity. This annual ritual engendered other popular names for the simple snowdrop, including 'Candlemas Bells', 'Mary's Tapers' and 'Fair Maids of February', the latter referring to the procession of white-robed young women that would be present at the Feast of Purification.

Snowdrops have been in residence at Welford Park for centuries, seeming to have a particular penchant for the Lambourn Valley chalky soils, and masses of flourishing snowdrops continue to decorate the churchyard and the parkland today, still clinging to their ecclesiastical roots.

With the dissolution of the monasteries, Henry VIII took over Welford Park, to perform the royal ▶

ABOVE LEFT Owner Deborah Puxley, who is a keen galanthophile **ABOVE RIGHT**

The snowdrop has a long ecclesiastical association and is found in many churchyards

OPPOSITE TOP The huge swathes of *Galanthus nivalis* attract earlier pollinators

OPPOSITE LEFT A stone cherub contemplates the garden at Welford

OPPOSITE RIGHT *Galanthus elwesii* 'Deer Slot', so named after a green 'deer-hoof print' on the inner petals





'Spectators marvel at the vast, dense quantities of snow white bulbs'

duty of 'hunting lodge', and thus less needy of floral decoration, but the snowdrops continued unabated. The lodge, a two-storey Tudor manor house, was then granted to Sir Thomas Parry, was sold in 1618 to Sir Francis Jones, and has remained in the family ever since. In 1652 wings were added to the house and when Thomas Archer, an architect, became master of the house through marriage, it was transformed into the existing Queen Anne architectural gem.

Welford Park's current owners, James and Deborah Puxley, have continued the tradition of sharing the amazing snowdrop spectacle with the public, opening the park each February, as their family has done for the previous 50 years, to spectators who can only marvel at the vast quantities of snow white bulbs.

There are, quite literally, thousands of snowdrops, largely *Galanthus nivalis*, the common snowdrop and its cousin *Galanthus nivalis* 'Flore Pleno', the double-flowered variant, which throng, petal to petal, almost without break, throughout the seven acres of beech wood, probably the biggest mass of snowdrops anywhere in Britain, quite unlike any other snowdrop garden. Their mass is breathtakingly beautiful and the winter air is filled with a discreet but distinct scent of honey, attracting a surprising number of early pollinators, particularly bees, who dangle from the delicate flower heads in search of nectar. Casually they pollinate the flowers and perpetuate the naturalisation of snowdrops in the grounds at Welford.

While the collection is these days totally dominated by *Galanthus nivalis*, there are other snowdrop species and varieties in the gardens, though sadly in diminished numbers. Beyond the wood, following the banks of the River Lambourn, which wends its way through

the garden, once spilled drifts of *Galanthus rizehensis* 'S. Arnott', a beautiful, statuesque snowdrop with large, opaque flower heads. Down the river, *Galanthus elwesii* had taken a good foothold, to be replaced by ever-advancing *Galanthus nivalis*, which despite severe recent flooding, nevertheless maintains its bankside position. These and other plantings can be attributed to James' great uncle, Henry Archer-Houblon (1877-1954), who managed to acquire the then rare snowdrops and cultivate them in the gardens and parkland at Welford.

Towards the house, there are more smatterings of snowdrops, and in the walled private garden Deborah Puxley now nurtures her own personal favourites, a few gems selected from the almost 600-strong species and varieties available. Favourites include many double flowered varieties: *Galanthus nivalis* 'Blewbury Tart', its inner rosette of petals almost entirely emerald green; *Galanthus* 'Lady Elphinstone', with unusual yellowy, apricot coloured ovary and petal markings; *Galanthus* 'Ophelia', with distinctive deep emerald inverted hearts on its flurry of inner petals; and *Galanthus* 'Desdemona', another vigorous heart-emblazoned specimen. Single early-flowering *Galanthus* 'John Gray' and several examples of *Galanthus elwesii* join the ►

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT The house at Welford is a Queen Anne architectural gem; *Galanthus* 'Lord Lieutenant', with its characteristic 'scissor shears' emblem on the inner petals and seer-suckered outer petals; a trug of *Galanthus nivalis* awaiting replanting; *Galanthus* 'Robin Hood' has white outer petals and paler, smudged markings at the top of the inner petals; Deborah with a wheelbarrow full of snowdrops, ready for redistribution; the unusual yellow marked snowdrop, *Galanthus nivalis* Sandersii Group 'Wendy's Gold', has a yellow ovary as well as an elongated golden heart on its inner petals

FACT BOX

Location Near Newbury, Berkshire

Character An extensive garden, on the site of a former Benedictine monastery and Tudor hunting lodge, with a mix of planting character.

Features Over seven acres of beech wood, home to drifts of snowdrops, which are open to the public during the flowering season.



HOW TO DIVIDE AND REPLANT SNOWDROPS

Snowdrops transplant well when they are in leaf and even in flower, and the bulbs can also be divided at the same time – a method known as ‘in the green’. You can then replant new clumps of plants in other places around the garden; it’s a simple way of making more of these beautiful spring flowers. Best done in February to March.

1. Use a garden fork or spade to lift clumps of snowdrops. Dig deeply all round the clump, before levering it out in order to get down to the bulbs.
2. Divide the clumps by tearing them apart. Pick off flower heads to conserve the energy in the bulbs, but don’t remove the leaves, as this will allow next year’s flower buds to form inside.
3. Use a hand trowel to replant small clumps of six to eight bulbs. Make the hole 10cm-15cm deep and place the bulbs at the base of the hole. Fill around the bulbs with soil taken from the hole, ensuring that some of the leaf is above the surface.





‘The monks rubbed the snowdrop on their temples to alleviate mal à la tête’

through but, ‘the very best here at Welford are *Galanthus rizehensis* “S. Arnott” and *Galanthus* “Brenda Troyle”, they do really well’, says Deborah. These snowdrops are beautiful, driving some to theft, depriving Deborah of the rewards of years of patiently cajoling the rarer, more awkward specimens to flower; she removes the labels in February to deter the ‘unauthorised removal’.

Like many galanthophiles (lovers of snowdrops), Deborah comes by many of her bulbs by swapping, presents, or else purchasing from reputable and reliable sources. She does not hold with buying and planting ‘dry bulbs’, considering that the snowdrop is never truly dormant. ‘I like to acquire and pass on snowdrops just as the flower fades, so you can see what you are giving and getting. Depending on the variety and maturity of a given plant, you may have to wait up to five years for flowering, so this is the only foolproof method.’

Deborah digs up many of her snowdrops at the beginning of March in full leaf, commonly referred to as ‘in the green’, with the faded white flag of a flower. Specimens are dug out, with ‘at least the depth of a whole spade ensuring you get to the bottom of the entire clump without damaging the roots’. Clumps are then divided. Mature plants will have large ‘bulbils’ which she refers to as ‘teenagers’ which are ready to be independently planted out; tiny immature bulbils or ‘babies’ are replanted still attached to the parent plant. The snowdrops are replanted at the same depth developing new areas of the garden and plugging any errant gaps. They are particularly suited to the humus-rich soil of the beech woodland where they enjoy the rich pickings of leaf litter, with light

in early spring, followed by foliage protection from unwanted heat during the summer months.

Deborah, fascinated by herbal remedies, recognises the medicinal potential of the simple snowdrop, which the early monks used to rub into their temples to alleviate ‘mal à la tête’. Today galantamine, naturally found in species snowdrop *Galanthus woronowii*, is used to help slow the development of Alzheimer’s disease. Meanwhile, if you want an uplifting and therapeutic outing, head for Welford Park in February and immerse yourself in snowdrops. It’s an experience not to be missed. ↻

Welford Park Gardens in Newbury, Berkshire, is open in February, Wednesday-Sunday, 11am-4pm (car park closes 5.30pm). Adults £5, concessions £4; visit welfordpark.co.uk or call 01488 608691 for details.

ABOVE LEFT *Galanthus nivalis*, the common snowdrop, is a protected plant species and must not be picked from the wild.

It is typified by a set of three white inner petals stained with a faint green heart and three outer petals

ABOVE RIGHT *Galanthus rizehensis* ‘Titania’, a beautiful double snowdrop

MORE SNOWDROP GARDENS TO VISIT

Scotland’s Cambo Estate, near St Andrews on the east coast, boasts over 200 varieties of snowdrops in its 70 acres of woodland garden.

Hodsock Priory, in Nottinghamshire, nurtures a myriad of snowdrops in its five-acre gardens, plus a half-mile walk in the woods with carpets of blooms.

East Lambrook Manor, in Somerset, has been the site of a new snowdrop discovery, *Galanthus* ‘Sir Henry B-C’. The gardens were created by the British gardener, Margery Fish in the 1950s, who popularised snowdrops and made the general public aware of their immense beauty and variety.

Anglesey Abbey Garden, in Cambridgeshire, has more than 240 varieties of snowdrop scattered throughout the 100-acre garden in January and February, including *Galanthus lagodechianus*.

Attingham Park, in Shropshire, where you can watch the woodland floor gradually transform into a beautiful carpet of snowdrops.