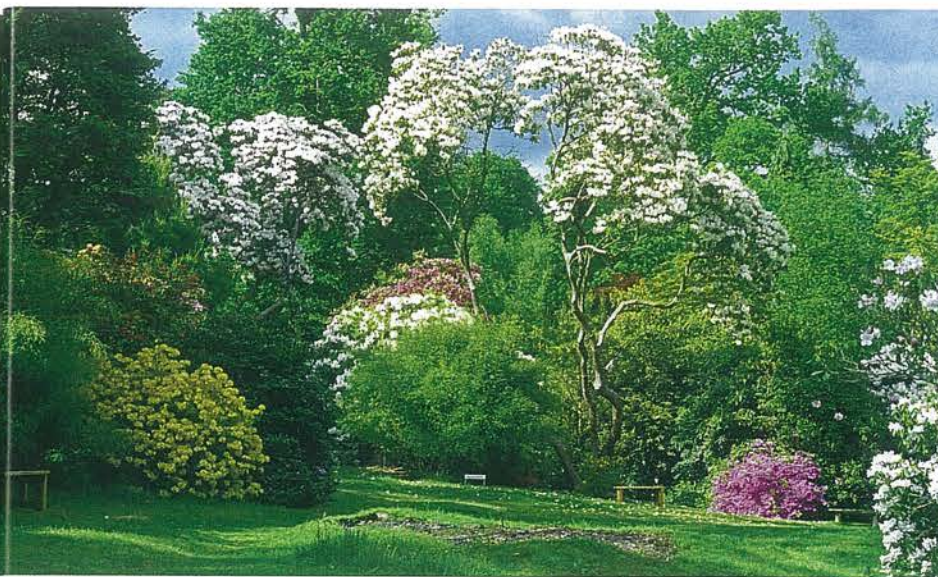




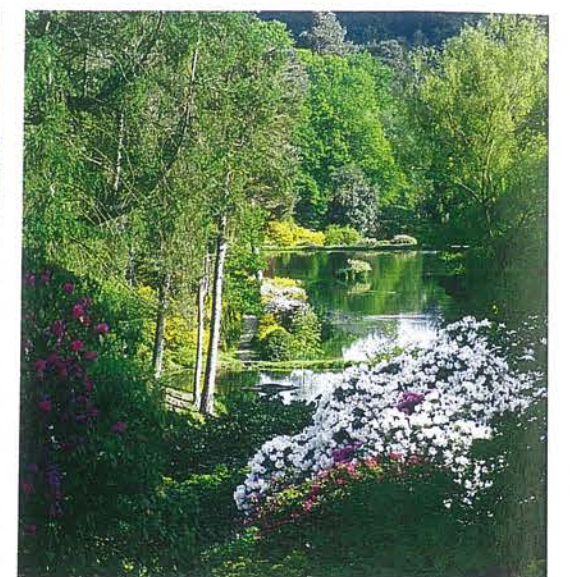
It's hard to imagine that the lakes were created for the country's iron industry



Loderi White Rhododendron



One of the best times to see the gardens is in spring when the rhododendrons are in flower



Colourful rhododendrons line the lakes

> developed, including the well-known Loderi King George (named after King George V) and Loderi Sir Edmund. The gardens feature superb specimens of both along with 450 species of rhododendrons, about half the number of world's species.

Some, such as the rare Rhododendron Hodgsonii, with smooth, peeling bark, blowsy flowers and big leathery leaves, thrive at

Leonardslee but are threatened in their natural habitat in China, where the valleys where they once flourished are now dammed and flooded.

Leonardslee's collection of other trees and plants is exceptional in its diversity, too. There are 190 plants on the red list of endangered species, and 22 champion trees – recognised as the best living examples of the species in the UK. The Sicilian fir (*Abies*

nebrodensis) is a fine example, and at over 65 feet it is the tallest in the country.

Leonardslee shares a seed bank with Kew and the London gardens now have seedlings for the conservation of the rare fir and other endangered species. A major propagation project is planned to create new plants so no species is lost to disease or natural death.

Clearing the overgrown gardens has been an epic task, and it is far from complete. Thirty gardeners were taken on to untangle fine species from a mass of overgrown plants, remove the algae from the succession of lakes, restore and clear 10 miles of pathways and make a start on the mammoth task of cataloguing and electronically tagging 10,000 trees and shrubs.

The best time to visit is from March to June, with the most colourful floral displays from May to mid June. The first of the ericaceous plants to flower are the camellias, the towering magnolias and some of the larger-leaved rhododendrons and pieris. From April there is a riot of colour from rhododendrons and azaleas, then come the bluebells in May.

The rock garden, created in 1890 by Victorian landscaping company James Pulham and Son, is stunning in spring, its trees and plants creating a

kaleidoscope of colour. In June, rare shrubs and trees come into flower, wisterias climb 80-foot-high trees, and palm trees make a splash with their bright yellow sprays.

In summer some of the late-flowering rhododendrons and azaleas have striking blooms and strong perfume. Acers, with their new growth, are looking good, and there are some rare species with unusually shaped, feathery leaves in a variety of colours.

In autumn the leaves of the trees create dazzling displays of vivid yellows, brick orange and fiery reds. In winter the gardens are at their most tranquil and look truly magical on frosty mornings. Bring binoculars – unusual migrant birds come to shelter and feed on the berries here at this time of year. To date, 65 different types of bird species have been recorded at Leonardslee.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION
Leonardslee Gardens, Brighton Road, Lower Beeding, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 6PP; 0871 8733389; leonardsleegardens.co.uk.

Open daily April to October 10 am to 6 pm, November to March 10 am to 4 pm. The nearest station is Horsham and Leonardslee is a 10-minute taxi ride away from the station.

The Clocktower Café & Farm Shop offers light lunches, cakes and pastries. The seasonal Courtyard Café offers a range of snacks and the bar is open in summer.

The Courtyard is home to the Beyond the Doll's House Exhibition, an exquisite and extensive doll's house display, depicting scenes of a country estate and market town from the 1900s.

GARDENS AND GOURMETS

Wallabies and deer are not the only foragers at Leonardslee. The Michelin-starred Restaurant Interlude (open evenings only) focuses on ingredients foraged, cultivated and raised on the estate or close by.

The chef is award-winning Jean Delpont, a notable innovator who Penny Streeter brought over from his native South Africa. The 14- or 19-course tasting menus deliver dish after dish of exciting and unusual combinations, each a work of art. Guests dine in the restored mansion, originally built in 1855, with views of the gardens. With just 10 tables, it feels like a small, exclusive dinner party.

The menu changes according to season, but some of the delights which may feature include salmon roe and a smoky dressing flavoured with oca grown in the gardens; the yolk from a happy hen's egg with Exmoor caviar; a corn and potato foam presented in a ceramic egg; a pink slice of pigeon breast with blackberry jus and barbecued pigeon legs served on a grill.

Desserts might be

sheep's milk sorbet served with rich, syrupy birch tree sap (from estate trees), buttermilk sponge and poached quince; estate-acorn mousse in a shell of chocolate or Japanese Dogwood ice-cream served in a cone.

Courses are complemented with fine wines. In a couple of years corks should be popping at Leonardslee's own vineyard. The first commercial Pinotage vines in the UK were planted here in 2018, while the vines at nearby Mannings Heath will be producing Estate Sparkling Wine by 2023. The soil, climate and topography are perfect for grape-growing, being similar to that of Champagne. Indeed, Taittinger in 2017 made history by becoming the first Grande Marque Champagne house to plant vines in the UK (in nearby Kent).

Another gourmet option at Leonardslee is cream teas, served in the mansion from Wednesday to Sunday. These are elegant affairs with garden views, enticing patisserie and an optional glass of Benguela fizz.

Restaurant Interlude:
Evenings only. Prices from £90 per head. Book online, www.restaurant-interlude.co.uk.
Afternoon Teas served Wed-Sun. Booking recommended. Prices from £40 per head. 01403 289490.



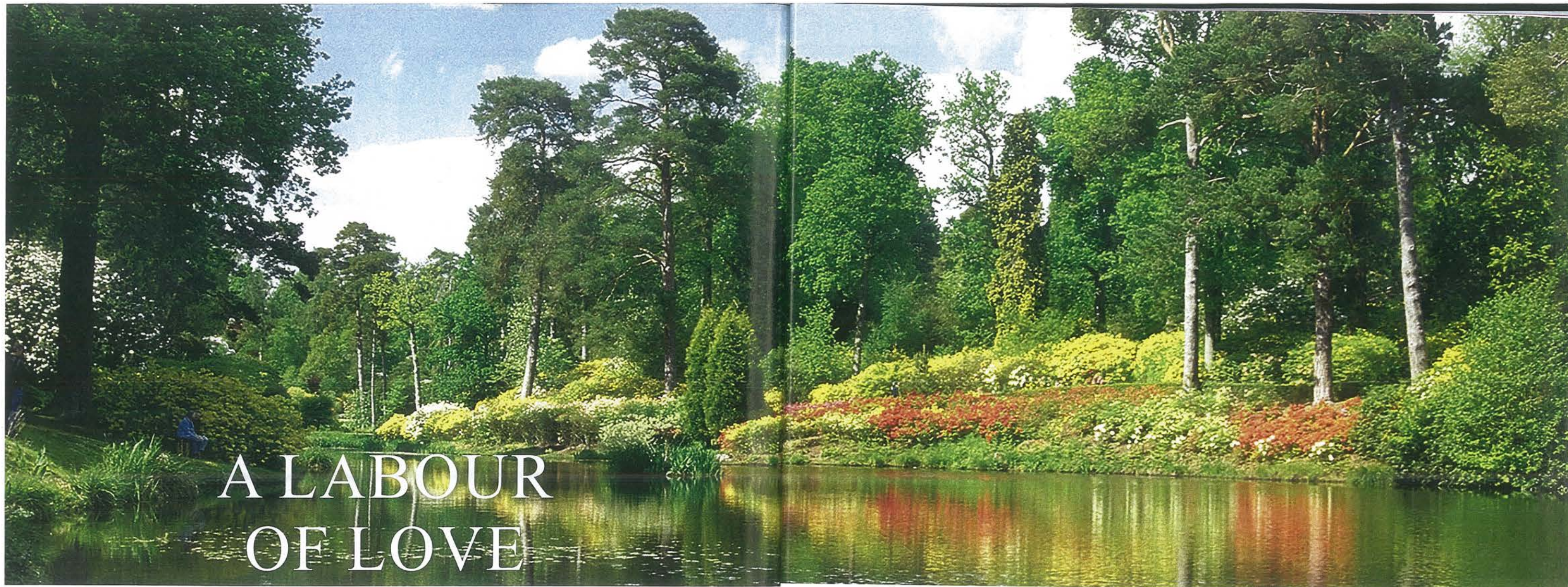
The restored mansion where Interlude serves innovative dishes



The Rock Garden designed in 1890 by landscape gardeners, James Pulham and Son



Leonardslee is home to both wallabies and deer



A LABOUR OF LOVE

The restoration of Leonardslee is regarded as the biggest garden revival project since the Lost Gardens of Heligan. Susie Boulton visits

WHEN the 240-acre Leonardslee estate was sold to an international businessman in 2010, garden-lovers wondered if they would ever see the landscaped woodlands again. For a century, visitors had come to this quiet corner of West Sussex, attracted by the spectacular displays of azaleas, rhododendrons and camellias.

Ranking among the finest woodland gardens in England, the estate saw around 50,000 visitors annually. But the new owner's vision for redevelopment never materialised and the gardens were abandoned.

It is thanks to a Rhodesian-born entrepreneur and her family that Leonardslee has seen a new lease of life. Penny Streeter spotted a For Sale

sign for Leonardslee and bought it in 2017. Since then it has been all hands on deck to restore the woodland gardens to their former glory. Penny, who lives in Cape Town, handed over control to her son, who has overseen the 18-month intensive restoration programme of both gardens and mansion.

The estate's name derives from the lea or valley of the ancient St Leonard's Forest in the High Weald. This remained a natural woodland and hunting ground until the 16th and early 17th centuries, when the region became the centre of the country's iron industry. Streams and rivers were dammed to create "hammer ponds" which were dug out for iron ore, used to produce cannons and cannonballs along with cauldrons, fire backs and horseshoes.

These seven man-made ponds at Leonardslee, reclaimed by flora and fauna, have now been converted into ornamental, interconnecting lakes.

Early records show that part of St Leonard's Forest was granted by Charles II to his travelling physician, Sir Edward Greaves. This passed to the Aldridge family, then in 1801 was bought by the Beauclerks, keen plant collectors who started the ornamental plantings at Leonardslee.

It was Victorian businessman and plant collector Sir Edmund Loder who introduced the collections of exotic flora and rare trees. Reputedly the richest man in England at the time, having made his fortune shipping minerals and other goods from Russia, he funded plant-collecting expeditions around the world and took the pick of the bunch when the boats returned.

Loder also imported animals which, according to his great-grandson, Robin (the last of the Loders to own Leonardslee) ranged from gazelles to prairie dogs, mountain goats and kangaroos, plus a colony of wild wallabies which still roam free in the gardens today.

Robin Loder referred to them as "ground maintenance contractors, mowing machines – no wages, no petrol, no holiday no pension fund, no unions . . . They don't eat our bluebells, but they nibble the grass in between and fertilise the soil."

Today, the wallabies more or less look after themselves, though the babies are protected from foxes in an enclosure. Among the other wildlife are fallow or sika deer, which roam in the woodlands.

Edmund Loder developed an exceptional collection of rhododendron hybrids, the most famous of which is Loder's White. The group name Loderi is attached to more than 30 varieties which he

WHO IS PENNY STREETER?

Penny is the owner of the Benguela Collection, a wine producer and hospitality group founded after she acquired the Benguela Cove Wine Estate in South Africa in 2013. Penny came to Britain in 1979 at the age of twelve, left school at sixteen and worked in recruitment. She started her own business, but the venture failed, her marriage collapsed and she was left homeless and penniless with three children to look after. With determination she worked her way up in recruitment and set up the A24 Group in 1996, a round-the-clock medical staffing agency. By 2002 Fast Track 100 declared it the fastest-growing UK

company; in 2003 she had become the CBI Entrepreneur of the Year and in 2006 she was awarded an OBE for services to women's enterprise and business. From 2013 Penny started to build up her property portfolio. She bought the nearby 400-acre Mannings Heath Golf Club which is how she spotted the For Sale sign for Leonardslee.

