

## The maples of Westonbirt

Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire has an unusual collection of exotic trees, including a remarkable array of Japanese maples, some of which were planted for their colour alone. Text and photographs by Jane Gifford



FOUNDED IN 1829, Westonbirt Arboretum is designed to bring pleasure to its visitors throughout the year. In spring, wild flowers cover the ground beneath canopies of cherry blossom. Then rhododendrons begin to bloom, and by early summer the woods are basking in colour and scent. Autumn brings a celebration of scarlet and gold, and bright leaves still lie thickly underfoot as the first frosts of winter trace

the contours of the bark.

The collection was started by Robert Stayner Holford – an energetic tree enthusiast and a rich man – on open pastureland at Westonbirt House in Gloucestershire. His father, Peter Holford, was Governor of the New River Company which supplied water to London, and the family fortune certainly helped sustain his son's passion for collecting.

When planting began at Weston-

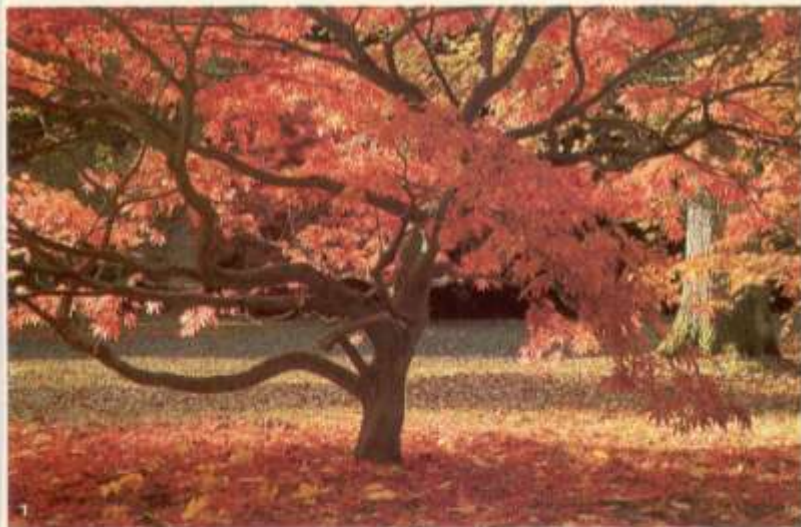
birt, many now-familiar trees like the Douglas fir had not yet been introduced. Intrepid plant hunters were exploring remote parts of North America and Asia, sending back new species which could thrive in Britain. Private estates were in fierce competition to acquire and raise these new trees. Out of their rivalry have grown some of the most diverse and comprehensive tree collections in Europe today.

**1** Looking through Old Acer Glade, planted around 1875, and down Leyshon Avenue. **2** The pure red foliage of *Acer palmatum*.

**3** In November, the floor of Old Acer Glade is bright with fallen leaves.

**4** *Acer palmatum* Osakazuki, probably one of the first of its kind to enter Britain. Steel wires prevent this old cultivar uncoiling in its decline.

**5** *Acer palmatum* – this tree is about twenty-five years old.



Holford's first plantings were of oaks, pines and yews. By 1852, he had created an extensive woodland of Scots pine, chestnut, beech and larch. Two giant redwoods flanking the old carriageway were planted in 1855. Grown from some of the first seeds to be introduced into Britain from the USA, they were scarcely three metres tall when planted at Westonbirt. Now they stand at ten times their original height.

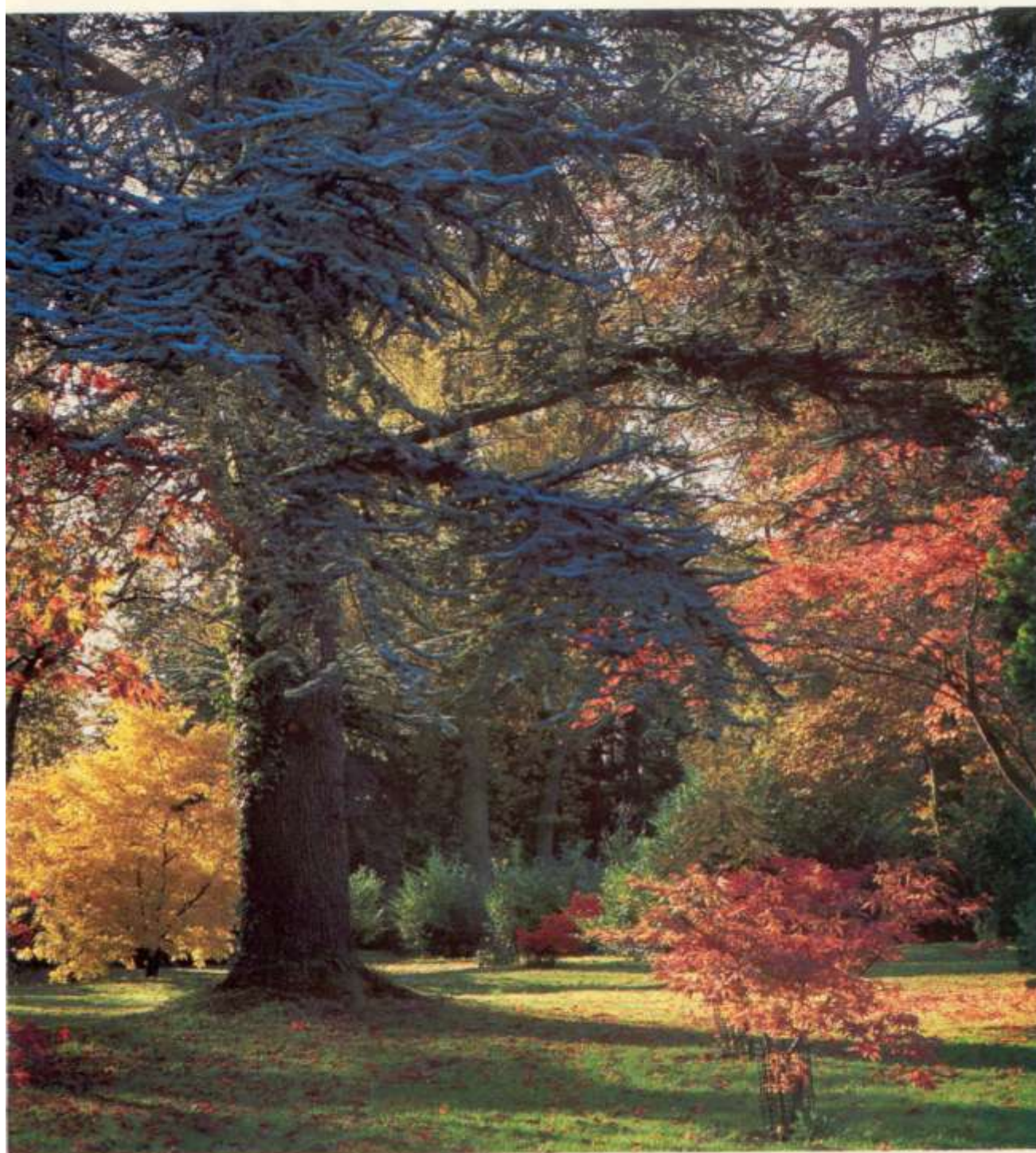
Robert's son, Sir George Holford, took over the collection from around 1875. Both father and son were great admirers of Japanese maples. These have been planted throughout the collection, and to walk anywhere is to appreciate the Holfords' profound understanding of the ornamental value of these trees.

Almost all of the species, varieties and cultivars of the Japanese maple can be found at Westonbirt. The

most common is *Acer palmatum*, remarkable for turning a uniform colour in autumn, usually red, orange or gold. An important cultivar, *Osakazuki*, renowned for its pure red autumn foliage, stands on the western edge of the arboretum. It was probably one of the first of its kind to enter Britain. The maple reaches its optimum age at around eighty, and for the past one hundred years the trunk of this fine old

cultivar has slowly coiled in upon itself. Unobtrusive steel wires now hold the branches together.

Some of the Japanese maples at Westonbirt were planted for their colour alone. Since purity of colour cannot be relied upon when planting seedlings, many trees will have been the result of a painstaking process of culling, selecting only two seedlings out of every hundred. Today, seedlings are mainly produced to pro-



vide healthy root stock onto which carefully selected cuttings can be grafted. This has proved a more reliable and efficient method of accurately reproducing the colour and form of the parent plant.

Robert Stayner Holford died in 1892, leaving Westonbirt in his son's capable hands. By the early 1900s, Sir George and Lady Holford's 'colour parties' had become a regular event on the horticultural culen-

dar. Sir George was succeeded by his nephew, the Fourth Earl of Morley, who, with the help of his curator W. J. Mitchell and the Kew botanist A. B. Jackson, built Westonbirt into one of the most prominent tree collections in Europe.

Lord Morley died in 1951 and, after five years of neglect, Westonbirt was acquired by the Forestry Commission. Planting has been continued in the Holford tradition and a

wide range of trees at all stages of maturity can still be seen here. Major plantings of Japanese maples have continued since 1963 and the Westonbirt Japanese maples are now an approved collection under the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens □

*Westonbirt Arboretum, Tetbury, Gloucestershire, is open every day from 10am to 5pm or dusk.*

**1** *Leyshon Avenue*, planted in anticipation of the decline of *Old Ace* Glade. **2** *Salix alba chermesina* (*Scarlet Willow*) is pollarded every two years to promote growth. **3** *Betula pendula Youngii* becomes a rich cascade of gold in October. **4** *Old Ace* Glade: pines and larches are the perfect foil for these venerable trees. **5** Plantings have continued, and young maples flourish in the dappled shade of a blue Atlas cedar.