IS THOMAS HANBURY'S IDEA OF GARDEN STILL ALIVE?

PAOLA PROFUMO

Associazione Amici dei Giardini Botanici Hanbury, Corso Montecarlo 43 18039 La Mortola Inferiore - Ventimiglia (IM) - Italia

An easy, direct way of answering this question is to look at the people who visit the Garden and who are living proof of its undiminished vitality.

But there is more to Thomas Hanbury's approach than a collection of beautiful and interestingly exotic plants. His garden design is more complex than it might appear; the felicitous outcome of his endeavours is the fruit of thorough-going research which used tools such as the herbarium, intensive morphological study and advanced nursery techniques. And, no matter that a hundred years have passed and that technology has moved on, this must remain the basis of our work today.

My point is that Thomas Hanbury's work, whilst it was the direct result of his expeditions, which brought him into contact with plants from remote countries and was part of the *mania* for collecting typical of the Nineteenth Century, was underpinned by an intellectual seriousness which set this English gentleman apart from many of his contemporaries.

To create his garden Thomas chose Ludwig Winter, who by judicious landscaping and gardening practice, was capable not only of « getting flowers out of a stone », as the Germans say, but, thanks to the experience of hybridization and design gained during his youth, of carrying out thorough taxonomic research. After Winter, other botanists appointed to look after the Garden carried forward systematic research, as is evidenced by the catalogues of Cronemeyer, Dinter and finally Berger, thanks to whom a level was attained which, after the two world wars, was never to be reached again.

This is where the question of the Garden's present-day role comes in. The resources now at the disposal of researchers, molecular research and so on, are infinitely more sophisticated than those available to Thomas Hanbury. It is absolutely imperative to use these resources as part of on-going exchanges of information and experience and to realise that in Thomas Hanbury's and Berger's times only the first tentative steps were made, whereas now so much more is expected because the potential for achievement is so much greater.

The environment in which Thomas Hanbury implemented his design needs to be studied, not to protect it against change but to preserve its significance: any restructuring of parts of the Garden must, as far as at all possible, respect its spirit, because the philosophy of its creator has not disappeared over the years, but has survived in ways which we keep on discovering every day, as a response to the man who created the Garden and to those of us who have the task of looking after it today.

Consider, by way of example, the decision taken in the early 1990s to restore the South Terrace, which had fallen into a state of general decay; the design was then as desired by Lady Dorothy, Thomas's daughter-in-law, with a central rectangular flower bed bordered by lavender. However, this picture of the terrace contrasts with that shown by the photographs taken in Thomas's time when the ladies taking tea on the *loggia* looked out over an elliptical bed of mostly succulent, exotic plants - the Garden's main focus.

Therefore, it was decided to highlight the date of the garden's foundation (1876- still featuring on the main entrance to the *Palazzo*) by restoring the South Terrace to its original design. The rubble was removed,

dead and dying plants were pulled up, the ground was prepared and all the gardeners of the domain, without exception, were called upon to play their part in this highly symbolic adventure, which was a kind of homage to Thomas Hanbury.

There were no designers for the flower beds, which have their faults still today. But the first palm tree was planted at the correct depth by the head gardener himself, Guido Novaro, whom we all remember. Other plants were gradually brought in, the side beds were redesigned and filled; Dorothy's pomegranate had pride of place there. Thus, the small event takes its place within the great history of the Garden and details become part of the big picture.

The same thing happened lower down, in the Perfumed Garden which Lady Dorothy had laid out in 1928 next to the Sun House: the photos taken in 1987 show scarcely any trace of what was there before, so the *Soprintendenza per i Beni Artistici e Culturali* (government body responsible for protecting the environmental and architectural heritage) set about restructuring it whilst the University renewed the plant collections and their displacement: within two years the Perfumed Garden was restored to the condition intended by its creator. Guilio Einaudi himself – the editor - commented appreciatively on the restoration.

The two cases I have just described are typical of the restructuring operations which have been carried out to transform the Garden and rescue it from a state of profound decay, taking care both to show the utmost respect for the past and face up to the challenges of the present. In short, we wish to recreate the environment in which Thomas Hanbury assembled his plants according to a clear design. This is evidenced by the very wide diversity of plants attested by taxonomic studies, which show how they were grouped together systematically according to family. He was also acutely aware of the environmental conditions that his plants preferred, and he loved to study and recreate those conditions and in so doing create an acclimatization garden.

Plants, of course, respond favourably to such tender loving care and Thomas's work was a game for him as is often the case for people if they are lucky enough. Thomas enjoyed his work at *La Mortola* and it was doubtless in this spirit of fun that he had the following inscription placed on the gate on the North terrace: *"Inveni portum. Spes et fortuna valete. Sat me lusistis. Ludite nunc alios».*

And this is a sentiment which is addressed to visitors, to ourselves, to all who come after him. Using the Garden as an example is, in fact the duty of those who work in the Garden – and must leave it in a better state than that in which they found it.

This, indeed, is one of the issues of most relevance to garden management: education at all levels. Plant diversity, so precious and now in such danger, is dependent on our ability as botanists to pass on our experience to others, and on the freshness and enthusiasm of our teaching.

Gardeners, nurserymen, laboratory and herbarium technicians, and botanists are all involved in an on-going exchange of vital knowledge which at one time might have coexisted in the same person, given the relative poverty of available resources, but is now spread among many. Cooperation must, therefore, be close and continuing, whilst our teaching must be relevant and inspired by a shared and well-defined purpose.

To communicate to others a sense of the beauty of the plants he had discovered, Thomas, as we have said, tried to recreate the habitats he had encountered. Among his most successful achievements, we can cite the rockeries planted with succulents, the special environment created for the silent Australian Forest, and the pool for aquatic plants just below the house where the Hanbury family lives to this day.

The visitor to the Garden is thus led through a series of miniature worlds and observes plants in the surroundings that best suit their requirements whilst admiring their beauty. Thus, the tasks which are today assigned to horticulture, such as the study of biodiversity, the conservation of species and habitats, and acclimatization, were all expertly carried out by Thomas and his brother Daniel in the succession of climate zones they created throughout the Garden.

Observation of plant response to climate change, albeit limited to the small dimensions of a single garden, a group of plants or even a single plant, makes a strong impression and teaches us a great deal. Why does a banana plant succeed in producing fruit, but yield such small bananas ? Why do so many plants amaze us by the beauty of their flowers, but fail to produce fertile seed ? Why is the colour or habit of a plant different from what we expect it to be ? In each case the answer broadens our knowledge, either in an immediately obvious way or after a little (or a great deal) of research. Climate change, which is now a subject of such concern, but which Thomas could not have anticipated, requires that account be taken of the research into acclimatization carried out by botanists both past and present.

It is a well-known fact that human activity is responsible for the disappearance of many a species; plants now have to defend themselves against both a changing climate and the depredations wrought by mankind. For today the Garden is called upon to accommodate species that have become rare or, for whatever reason, are in danger. Hence the importance of *ex situ* cultivation, i.e. the practice whereby some of the remaining specimens in existence are collected, reproduced in sheltered conditions and, where possible, replanted *in situ* and thereby returned to nature. Once again Hanbury Gardens will be a laboratory, but on a far larger scale than Thomas Hanbury could ever have imagined.

In this instance, the plants concerned will not be exotic species, but plants that live around us. Indeed, these are precisely the plants we need to worry about because the incomparable wealth of our botanical diversity is endangered. With this in mind, the Regional Council of *Liguria* has provided funding for a projected regional Germ Plasma Bank within Hanbury Botanical Gardens. The project consists of keeping the seeds of the most endangered, spontaneous local plants – from the sea up to the Alps - alive, in suitable conditions. Even the seeds of cultivated agricultural crops and horticultural plants may be precious insofar as they are characteristic of *Liguria* itself.

On the ground, therefore, the exotic plant collections so characteristic of Hanbury Gardens are now preparing themselves for cohabitation with precious local plants, whilst in the Ca' Ballini Laboratory the *Index seminum* compiled by the Hanbury family is now accompanied by a Germ Plasma Bank. With the result that a garden created in the late Nineteenth Century is now fully responsive to the needs of the Twenty-first.

To sum up, it is our belief that Thomas Hanbury's approach is relevant not just because it was science-based, but because it already takes on board the issues which are now of such topical interest. So, the more we seek to meet the requirements laid down by international conventions, the more we shall realise that we are merely following the path conceived by Thomas Hanbury and laid out in his Garden.