

Farrer exhibition (2003): display boards

This document is a transcript of the text of the display boards of the Farrer exhibition held in The Folly in 2003: images are not included here although they are listed.

The following boards are transcribed:

1. The Father of Rock Gardening
2. The Early Years
3. Gardener and Traveller
4. Plant Collector and War Correspondent

The Father of Rock Gardening

When Reginald Farrer was born he was found to have a hare lip and cleft palate, the consequences of which were to shape his character and affect the pattern of his life. In childhood he underwent a series of corrective operations and was therefore educated at home.

He grew to be a solitary man and the difficulties of his early life fostered in him a stoicism and single-mindedness that enabled him to endure the great hardships he encountered in his later journeys of exploration.

As a child he developed a love of plants and his enthusiasms led to his later journeys in the mountains of Europe and Asia, his experiences vividly described in his writings. In his twenties, while on a visit to Ceylon, he converted to the Buddhist faith.

Farrer was gifted with a diversity of talents - a writer, an intrepid plant-hunter, a painter, who was also a practical gardener. He had a profound influence on subsequent garden writers and his memory is enshrined in the many plant introductions which bear his name.

Images

- *Gentiana farreri*
- Reginald Farrer
- Ingleborough Hall, Clapham, North Yorkshire, the family home of the Farrers

The Early Years

Farrer's mother was keen on horticulture and both his parents encouraged his interest in plants. During childhood visits to Europe he became familiar with the flora of the Mediterranean region and the Alps.

He explored the limestone crags around his Yorkshire home and became a competent botanist while still a boy. At the age of fourteen he was building his first rock garden and contributed a note on *Arenaria gothica* to the *Journal of Botany*.

In 1898 he went up to Balliol College, Oxford, which must have represented a striking contrast to the solitariness of his early education. During his university years he helped to build a rock garden in St. John's College and also worked on the Ingleborough Hall rock garden on visits home.

Farrer was a prolific letter writer and his letters from Oxford to his mother are full of instructions about the garden.

Images

- Reginald Farrer drawing in Cannes at the age of 11
- Farrer's mother collecting plants on a scree
- *Primula farinosa*
- The rock garden which Farrer helped to construct at St. John's College, Oxford

Gardener and Traveller

Farrer's knowledge of plants and their habitats, coupled with his feel for the practicalities of gardening, led him to begin in 1901 another venture, the Craven Nursery. Here he made a new rock garden, incorporating a moraine, 'the particular pet joy' of his heart and was soon exhibiting and winning medals at Chelsea.

Farrer strongly believed in re-creating for his alpine plants the conditions that made them flourish in their native surroundings, including free-draining soil and natural rock formations. Another major enterprise was the development of the archetypal natural rock garden on a steep cliff above Ingleborough lake.

Farrer's zest for plants was closely linked to his love of travel and his appreciation of colour and pattern. He journeyed extensively to the Alps, Japan, Korea, Canada, Ceylon and China, where he collected plants and relished the diversity of cultures. In 1907 he converted to Buddhism, which strongly appealed to his 'craving for a reasonable and coherent view of the scheme of things', but which created shock waves amongst his family and friends.

Above all, Farrer wrote incessantly. In the course of his short life he produced twenty one books, as well as countless articles and thousands of letters. His gift for vivid description, captivating the reader with his own boundless enthusiasm, changed the style of garden writing for ever.

Images

- The cliff garden, seen across Ingleborough lake
- Farrer's shuddering rejection of the Victorian 'almond pudding' style of rockery is well known to this day.
- A correctly designed rockery
- Reginald Farrer as a young man in Buddhist robes
- The Craven Nursery at Clapham

Plant Collector and War Correspondent

The first of Farrer's major plant-collecting expeditions was to Kansu in China in 1914–15. He was fortunate to have as his companion William Purdom who had already collected in China and was a talented and resourceful man.

The expedition was highly successful despite the dangers of attack from roving bands of brigands and resulted in the introduction of many new species, including the much-loved *Gentiana farreri* and *Viburnum farreri*.

The Kansu expedition coincided with the outbreak of the First World War and in 1916 Farrer returned home and worked for the Department of Information under John Buchan. His 'Letters from Three Fronts', published as *The Void of War*, were praised by Buchan.

As soon as the war ended, Farrer set off on what proved to be his final expedition, to Upper Burma, in the company of Euan Cox a young collector. When Cox returned home in January 1920, Farrer was left alone with his devoted Gurkha staff.

His energy and stamina in the mountains were legendary and he continued to explore and collect towards the Chinese frontier. But by early autumn the incessant monsoon rains had taken their toll of his strength and spirits. He became increasingly weakened by illness and died at Nyitadi on 17 October, 1920. His body was carried down to Kawnglanghpu and buried in a lonely grave above the village.

Images

- Map of the route taken by Farrer in Kansu
- Plant collecting in the mountains with (inset) Farrer's seed preparation 'laboratory' 1914
- Reginald Farrer's memorial in the grounds of Ingleborough Hall is inscribed 'He died for love and duty in search of rare plants'.
- (inset) *Rhododendron facetum*
- Farrer's grave in Upper Burma

Acknowledgements

North Craven Building Preservation Trust acknowledges with grateful thanks assistance from the following organisations and individuals in the preparation of this exhibition:

Dr. and Mrs. John Farrer

The Trustees of the Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth Collections, Gawthorpe Hall

Mr Barry Brook

Mr Michael Brown

Mr Bill Mitchell

Mr John Westwell of the Heritage Trust for the North West