

Visit to Mertoun Gardens on 4th September 2025, led by Liz and John Towner.

Mertoun Gardens, is one of the oldest gardens in the Borders. Its old walled garden has been described in Kenneth Cox's guide for Scotland's Gardeners (2014) as, "*Mertoun's jewel*" because it is "*probably the nearest to a full production Victorian or Edwardian Garden still in existence in Scotland.*"

This Field Visit followed on from a BNC Publication from 2024, "Apples and Pears, a History of Orchards", by John and Elizabeth Towner, where Mertoun Gardens and its gardeners were featured.

Thirty-one BNC members and friends gathered near the gate of the walled garden in the early afternoon of 4th September for our visit. After an extremely dry spring and summer in the Borders (and all around the country), there had been some heavy rainfall the previous day and most participants had experienced heavy showers on the way. We were fortunate that the skies cleared and most of the afternoon remained fine. The tradition of kitchen gardening has continued into the present day under the direction of Head Gardener, Rupert Norris. We had guided walks by both Rupert and Gardener, Reece McNaughton who led us around the 3-acre walled garden and part of the remaining estate down to the Main House. Their enthusiasm was apparent, both for the gardens and their work in continuing the long tradition of gardening in these beautiful surroundings, whilst introducing changes to increase biodiversity and manage the issues related to climate change.

There were a number of keen gardeners in the group, who were interested in the mix of different fruits and vegetables grown, the different varieties of plums, green gages, apples and pears and how they had fared during the drought conditions of 2025. Rupert discussed how gardening over the decades had led to over-nutrition of the soil, with an excess of potassium being measured in soil samples. We were able to observe the size of the pumpkins in some of the plots and the carefully tended beetroot, as well as a number of herbs, mixed in with patches of wild flowers between the beds.

The gardeners described their work with Borders College horticulturalists in Newtown St Boswells and how they took excess produce to Community Larders in Kelso and nearby towns. Their work with local schools was also developing well. Here, the Walled Garden provided an ideal open-air classroom for school children to observe and taste and smell different plants and how to harvest the produce. A new Classroom is planned for 2026 for community groups in one of the old garden bothies, where in past years journeymen/ travelling gardeners would have been housed. Within this 'Classroom bothie', we caught a glimpse of a large mural of a former gardener, potting up his plants.

In addition to the walled garden and its flourishing produce, we were able to walk around by Old Mertoun House the pink-harled, seventeenth century house. This house continues to be the home of the Head Gardener. Rupert and his family, like his predecessors back to the nineteenth century live within the garden. On the way down the valley to the main house, there still remains an old Doocot, said to be one of the oldest in Scotland. We had the opportunity in 2025 to experience a field visit to Mertoun, in much the same way as a BNC group in 1871, when William Fowler, the Head Gardener who lived in Old Mertoun House, "expertly guided the visiting BNC group around the gardens" (HBNC 1869-72, p.181-2). One notable difference, however, was that the 1871 group approached Mertoun, having glided across the Tweed in a boat, "kindly provided by Lord Polwarth".

We would like to thank both Rupert Norris and Reece McNaughton for their stimulating observations and Angela Dodds and the Mertoun House Trust for helping to set up the Field Visit.

Liz & John Towner



Mertoun Gardens. The field visit in progress. Photograph by Liz Towner

The walled garden.
Photograph by Ann Henderson



Gardens & Old Mertoun House.
Photograph by Liz Towner

Annie Elizabeth Apple Tree.
Photograph by Ann Henderson



Produce & Glasshouses.
Photograph by Liz Towner