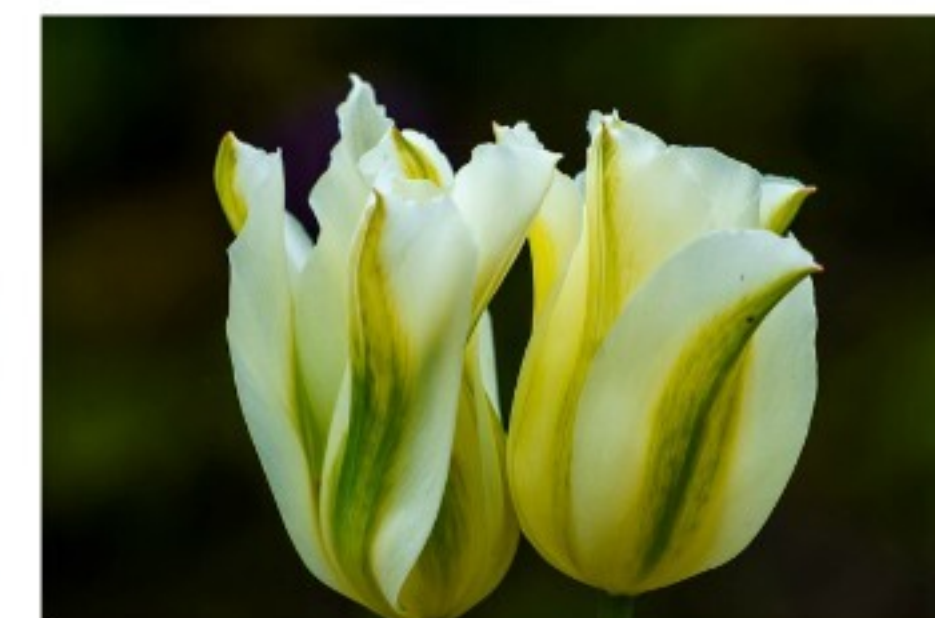


## Gardens of South Wales April 2025

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## Day 1 Thu 10 Apr 25 Cambridge to Skenfrith via Malvern

We're off on another Brighwater holiday and this one's to South Wales and our guide will be Tony Russell who did such an excellent job when he looked after us in North Wales in 2022.

The tour doesn't start until tomorrow but to avoid a train and bus journey on Friday we've booked an overnight at the Bell in Skenfrith, Monmouthshire.

We set off a little before 10 and it's an overcast day but we're promised sun later on. Sadly the good weather of the last two weeks is forecast to run out on Sunday.

1050 is a good time for coffee so it's Starbucks on the A14 near Kettering. I'm not a fan of Starbucks, I reckon they don't pay enough UK tax and I don't like the fact that their small coffees are still rather large. But they serve a need, the café was clean and empty and the service was excellent. Fuelled me up until I could get lunch.

It's an incident free journey, the sun comes out as we sight Birmingham from the M6 and we park in Malvern soon after 1300.







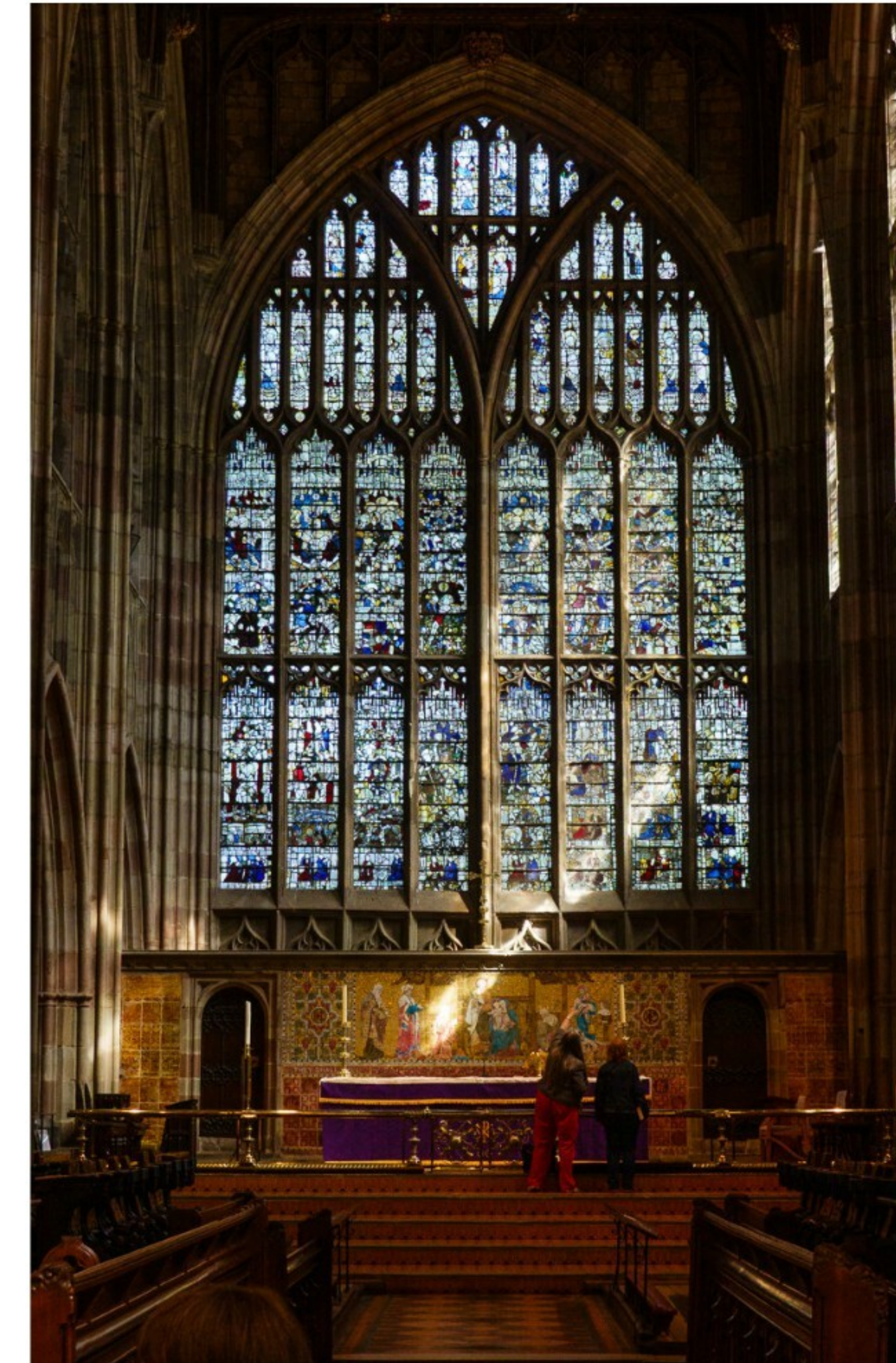
Wikipedia describes Malvern thus:

*Malvern is a spa town and civil parish in Worcestershire, England. It lies at the foot of the Malvern Hills, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The centre of Malvern, Great Malvern, is a historic conservation area, which grew dramatically in Victorian times due to the natural mineral water springs in the vicinity, including Malvern Water.*

We enjoy lunch at the Lyttelton Well which is a social enterprise run by the local churches. It's pleasant enough and quiet. They say they get busy at tea time.

We visit the tourist office where we are expertly served by Nathan who encourages us to spend a few days in the area!

After lunch we visit the Priory which is impressive with appropriate background music which enhances the experience. We then head up to Rose Bank Gardens to get a good view across the plain below the hills on which Malvern sits. Then beyond the Gardens we climb up to St Ann's Well which would have been more impressive if the café had been open. It was quite a climb.







It's then just an hour's drive down to the Bell where we have a very pleasant room. All the rooms are named after flies, as used in fly fishing, and ours is 'march brown'.

Skenfrith itself is rather modest. There's a castle and a nice church. There's a phone box which appears to be still functioning and which offers 'calls text email'. There's a village hall and there was a shop but that's now a house, The Old Shop. I guess there's 20 dwellings so that makes it a hamlet. It's Welsh name is Ynysgynwraidd

Dinner is first class and we are looked after by Kat from the Czech Republic who serves us with knowledge and simple competence. I enjoy a Negroni and a glass of Malbec with super rump of Welsh Lamb and then we share a rhubarb panna cotta. I finish with an espresso. In total not cheap but excellent.





## Day 2 Fri 11 Apr 25 Dyffryn Gardens and Beggar's Reach

The day starts well with smoked salmon and scrambled eggs and an excellent Americano. Minor demerit though for the unexciting diced, albeit, fresh fruits.

The Bell really has been a super hotel with lots of space, absolute calm and excellent service. This morning it was Maria who checked us in yesterday. Maria is from Bulgaria but speaks with a trace of a Welsh accent.

We have an easy drive down to Dyffryn Gardens where I immediately spot Tony Russell who was our guide when we did North Wales three years ago.

We have lunch but it's the usual National Trust nonsense with a limited menu, not all of which is available, and less than sparkling service.



The National Trust website says:

*The Dyffryn estate can be traced from the 7th century right up to the present day. Many of the large homes in Wales during the late 19th century were built on money made from the industrial revolution. Dyffryn was one of these homes and was built to the grand scale you can see today on wealth made from the coal industry.*

Not quite as bad as the slave trade but another example of money being made on the backs of others!

But this is an impressive estate and it's slowly being brought back to life and reflecting its former glory. The view from the house southwards is especially impressive.









The ride on to Pembroke is simple enough but the M4 is a moving traffic jam. However we get to the hotel well ahead of the coach which proves useful because our room is small and dark and I've got the chance to complain and now we're in room 12 upstairs and looking out over the fields at the front of the hotel.

Dinner is adequate. It's becoming clear that the hotel is understaffed and that the staff that it has are not up to the challenge. They try hard but there's little they can do. My prawn cocktail was rubbish and my salmon just about adequate. I notice the roast beef that others ordered would have challenged an experienced cobbler. Fortunately there's decent drinks available at the bar but the system doesn't allow these to be charged to one's room.

I enjoy a G&T and then a glass of Casillero del Diabolo Malbec.

There's a clear sky and a full moon.



## Day 3 Sat 12 Apr 25 National Botanic Garden of Wales and Aberglasney

Now comes the big test, the buffet breakfast: It's a typical limited and rather sad hot offering, just an orange for fresh fruit, no bread except for toast and industrial coffee. But ... when I ask I get poached eggs (actually just one) and an Americano.

There's an old rather unhealthy looking man helping to clear tables. My guess he's the owner.

(Wrong. He's just an employee. My next guess is that he came with the hotel when the new owners took it over)

Two gardens today and the first is one we've been to before viz the National Botanical Garden of Wales. We were there for David Norbury's wedding anniversary party in 2016.





The weather's not so good today, we're promised rain at midday but it holds off for our stay and it probably means fewer visitors.

The garden is impressive with a spectacular dome which is the largest single-span glasshouse in the world.

There's an exhibition of apothecary plants and a reconstruction of an old chemist's shop which reminds me of Johnny Roberts' chemists shop in Golftyn back in the 1950s.

We have a very pleasant al fresco lunch before setting out for garden number two. And it hasn't rained with it now being forecast for 1600.









As Tony says it couldn't be more different. Whereas this morning's had been a 'new build' this afternoon's, Aberglasney, is a restoration.

He's right and it's truly impressive. It's a little smaller than Dyffryn yesterday which makes it easier to get your head around. It's also got impressive displays of tulips. There's also an Asian garden with rhododendrons and azaleas. It's run by an independent trust which does appear to be able to fund the operation well.







We're back on the bus at 1600 and soon after it starts to rain.

Dinner is little better than last night but after a little light internet searching we find out that the hotel was bought recently for £950k by a family that runs a fish and chip shop in Tenby! The staff is trying hard but basically they're making it up as they go along. I'm surprised that a change of ownership didn't trigger some action from Brightwater to ensure some element of continuity of service.

Glen the driver makes himself the centre of attention (again). He's got a strong Nottinghamshire accent and is obviously very intelligent but methinks he reckons he's had a raw deal in life. He has opinions about everything and shares them!

BTW the bus (Glen actually insists it's a coach) company is the one I encountered in Switzerland when its driver got stuck on the train.

I have a glass of Casillero del Diabolo Merlot with my dinner.





## Day 4 Sun 13 Apr 25 Picton Castle and Dyffryn Fernant

At least we start the day with sunshine and although the forecast is not bad it does include some rain. I must remember to take my hat with me.

We start at Picton Castle which is another well restored garden of manageable size. It's another well managed operation with a nice historic representation of how it was in the past

There's a café which says it does some fairly ambitious lunches but with a departure time of 1315 that might be tight.

And so it proves. I'm in the queue at 1230 but it moves at glacial pace. There's no EPOS here and there's a lady in charge who writes every order down long hand then goes to the till to calculate the cost. Add in the slowness of people ordering and by the time it gets to being my turn it's too late. My request for something quick falls on deaf ears.









After lunch, in fact after no lunch, it's something different. Dyffryn Fernant, a garden developed by Queen Camilla relative Christine Shand. It's a wandering development on the side of the hill simply exploring the natural landscape. Quite magical.



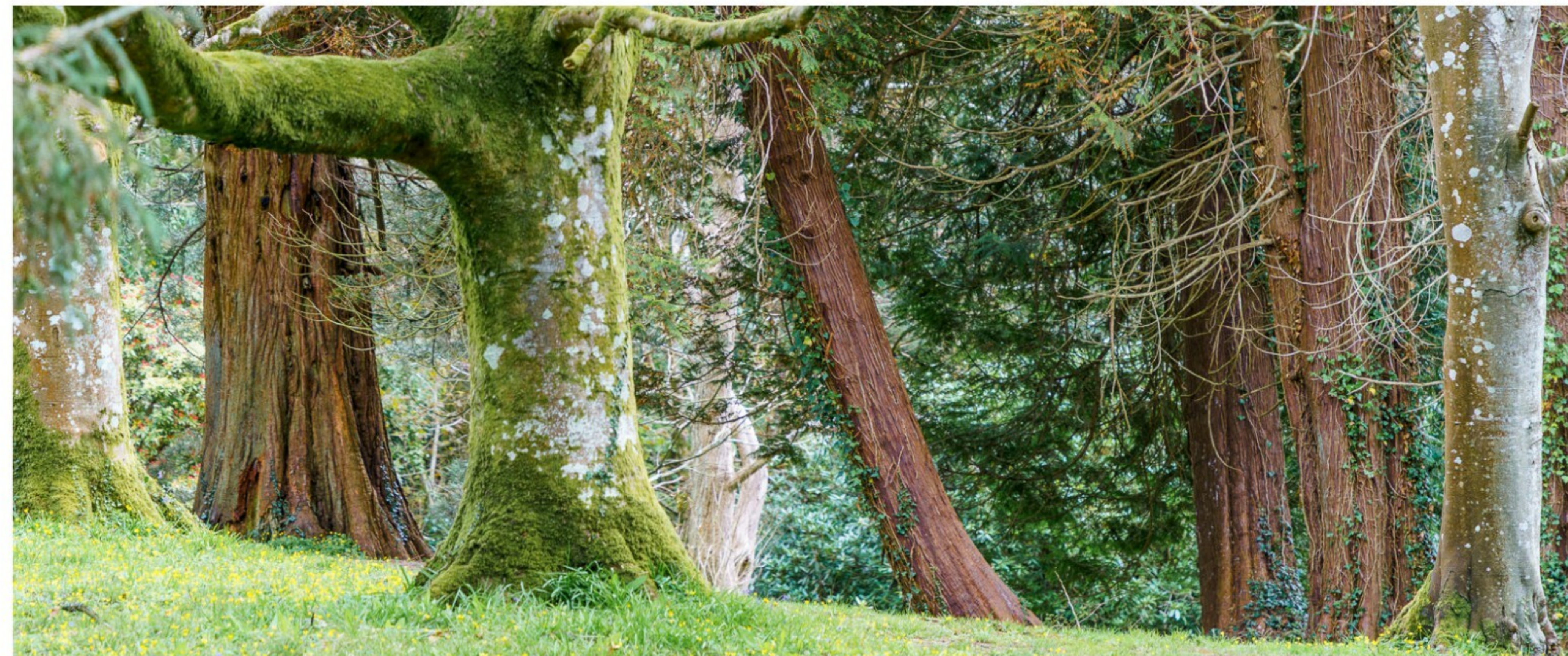




## Day 5 Mon 14 Apr 25 Upton Castle, Laugharne and Llwyngarreg

We wake to a breezy day and I'm sure it'll bring some rain later.

Today it's two more private gardens. Number one is Upton Castle which used to be a charity but is no more. We are shown round by the mistress of the house Prue Barlow. It's another 'recovery' job and inter alia there are lots of potentially photogenic trees. There's also some impressive drift wood carvings made by the son-in-law.



We visit to Pembroke Dock. Nothing to see that can't be missed

Dinner is the usual but as a group there's an element of good humour. I'm surprised by the amount of wine that others drink. The standard measure is 250ml and many move on to a second. I stick with just one glass of Merlot but have a bottle of Peroni before dinner.

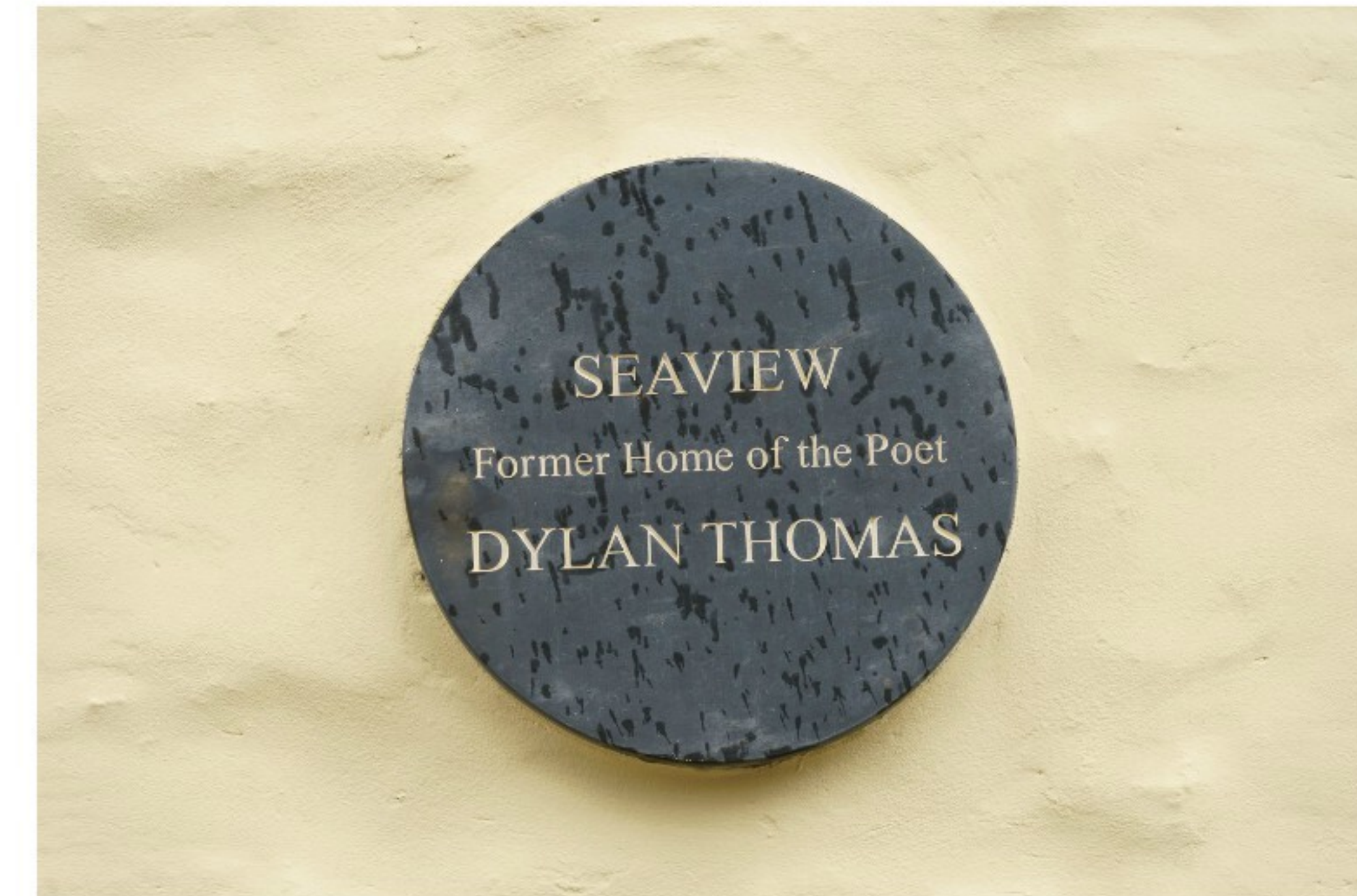


We slowly get rather cold and are rescued at the end by a proper coffee service and a café inside a Native American style teepee. Only problem is the coffee is served in mugs which don't fit the saucers which they're placed on.



Today's our only day for a proper lunch break and we're taken to Laugharne and allowed an hour and a half. Trouble is everywhere's closed. We end up at a delicatessen The Ferryman which is Spanish style and excellent. I get a local ale with a chorizo stew. The Spanish connection comes from a relationship between Laugharne rugby club and a Spanish club.

We're just finished in time for a quick sprint around to see Dylan Thomas' boathouse and his writing shed.







It starts to rain. Nothing heavy but enough to make you wet so at Llwyngarreg we get a first briefing in the greenhouse before a wet stroll around the four acre garden. Liz and Paul O'Neill started this as a self sufficiency operation before realising that gardens were more fun than loss making small farms. The result is super. Still a garden but on an impressive scale with a mix of whatever interests the owners. To some extent this is the highlight of the tour.

I'm reminded that the North Wales tour started with a wet and rainy garden. This one's finishing the same way.







Before dinner I have a glass of Atlantic Pale Ale from Sharps Brewery in Cornwall and then it's a glass of Primitivo.

## Day 6 Tue 15 Apr 25 Tredegar House and Langford

We wake to overcast skies and a pretty grim weather forecast. But we set out optimistic and Tony says he has a plan B.

We have an easy drive to Tredegar House beyond Cardiff and close to Newport and although it's rained most of the way it's dry now. Time for a quick coffee with your usual National Trust service before we assemble in an upstairs room for a talk about the history of Tredegar House and the family, the Morgans, that built it. It's given by Gavin who's not young and hasn't been on the effective presentations course! However it's interesting enough, we're out in half an hour or so and it's still not raining. Time for a final walkabout with Tony.

It's not a big place and the House itself, an impressive Georgian mansion, is sadly closed for repairs. It's famous because of its gates which feature in the closing sequence of Antiques Roadshow. There's lots of tulips in the first garden, an enormous Lebanese cedar in the second and an interesting take on a 'William & Mary garden', with the colours taken from coal, sand and sea shells, in the third.





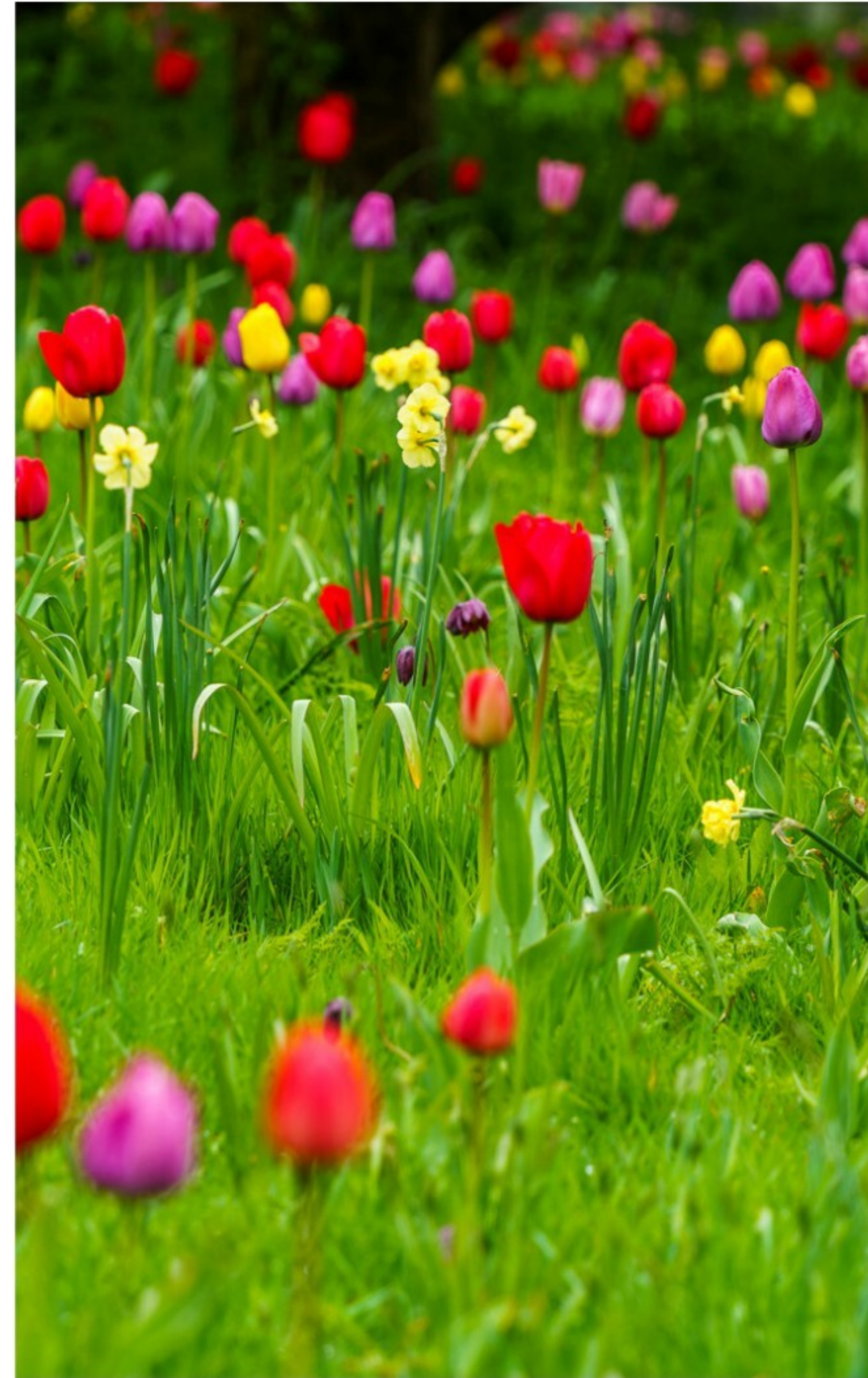
The last 'good Morgan' is famous for having rode in the Charge of the Light Brigade. He was one of only two surviving officers. His horse, Sir Briggs, outlived him and is recognised by street names in the community.

I then celebrate Wales' food with a chickpea and cauliflower curry pastie and a glass of Kentish pale ale.

Then it's an easy enough drive, largely on the M4, to tonight's stop viz the Bell Inn in Langford.









Langford is I guess a typical Cotswold village. It's basically a cross roads with a big church, St Matthews, at one end. None of the houses have numbers, they've all got names and several of 'the old' variety: the Old Post Office, the Old Bakery, the Old Smithy etc. The Bell is the only pub although one of the houses is the Old Crown.

It's threatening to rain and it's rather cold but remarkably it's been a dry afternoon. But there's proper rain now.

Small worry: our room is over the bar and at present you can hear the music coming up the narrow spiral staircase. Not so bad now but if it continues into the night it's not going to be much fun trying to sleep.

Dinner was good if not the high point I'd expected given the restaurant's presence on the Michelin list. It started badly with our table being given away to someone else but then we were taken competently in hand by Jake. I had a Negroni followed by a large glass of Claret and then, unusually, a Laphroaig for a nightcap. For food I had a perfectly good ribeye and then we share jelly and ice cream! I'd grumble that the restaurant was a little too dark as we ate by candlelight.

My fears were unfounded. The music and chatter from the restaurant died away soon after 2200.

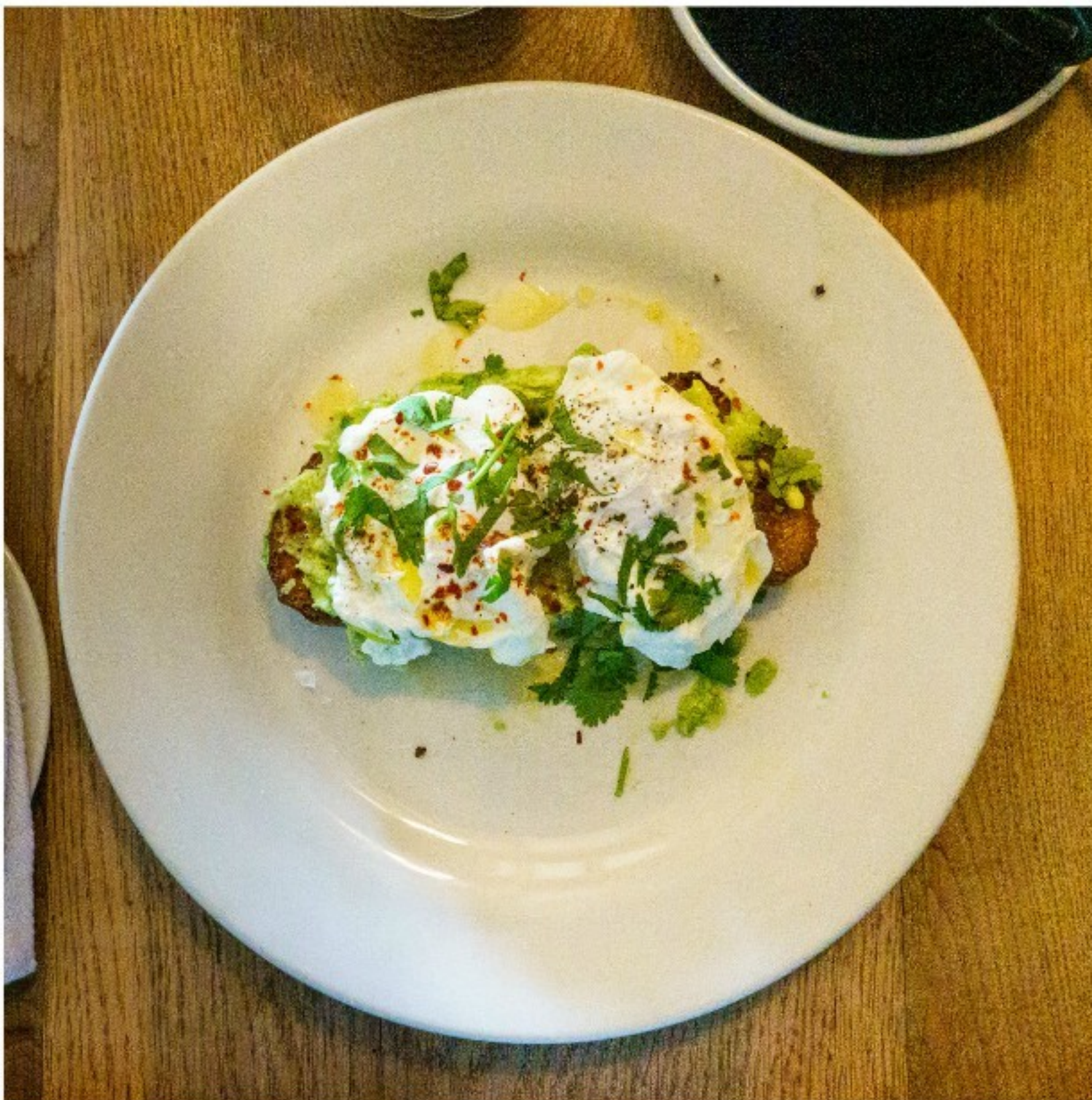




## Day 7 Langford and back to Cambridge

Surprising start to the day: cooked breakfast is extra and it's not as though the cold buffet is that good. However I do go for the extra and get poached eggs with smashed avocado. Plus an Americano which I also get to pay for.

End result is that the hotel is good but not great. Total cost £200 vs £300 at Skenfrith. Although last night was not bad value Skenfrith was better.



We visit nearby Lechlade which owes its origins to being an inland port on the Thames. Nice enough. There's a toll bridge over the river which used to cost a halfpenny, a pleasant church, connections to Shelley and an excellent coffee shop: Lynwood & Co.

It's a little chaotic inside. You queue to order then grab a table. There's a good breakfast menu, a range of pastries (it's also a bakery) and excellent coffee. And today it's full with older 'yokels', young mums, typical middle aged, middle class coffee drinkers and tourists including an Italian family of seven. Chaotic but it works. More Dulcedo Social than Station House.







Our drive home is straight forward and I run the car and phone sat navs in parallel. It seems the former doesn't adjust for traffic conditions.

I take a sandwich lunch as we drive and stop for petrol and groceries at Morrisons in Cambourne. After that we're soon home. Heating's on, WiFi's working and the paper's been delivered. Life's OK.



## My five highlights of the tour.

**Our guide Tony Russell:** Tony is really superb. He knows his stuff and is a great communicator. He also takes great care to manage the tour and to ensure that everything works to the benefit of his group.

**The Bell at Skenfrith:** super hotel and super food. Not cheap but worth every penny.

**Llwyngarreg and its owners:** despite the weather their enthusiasm meant that we still enjoyed our visit.

**The tulips at Aberglasney:** the gardens overall were impressive but the tulips at Aberglasney were in a class of their own.

**The enthusiasm of the staff at Beggar's Reach:** the hotel itself was barely adequate and the staff were clearly unprepared but they were always positive, always smiled and went out of their way to help.





# The itinerary as provide by Brightwater Holidays

Day 1: we depart from our pick-up points (London, Reading, Swindon, Bristol) and travel to Cardiff, near which lies the magnificent Dyffryn Botanic Gardens, a Grade 1 listed Edwardian garden designed by landscape architect Thomas Mawson displaying a series of garden ‘rooms’ enclosed within clipped Yew hedges. There is something to see year round at Dyffryn – a Roman garden; Japanese garden; fountains and pools and an arboretum containing trees from all around the world including the original Acer Griseum collected by ‘Chinese Wilson’. Dyffryn is one of the best 100 gardens in the UK as selected by the British Tourism Association. Our tour manager Tony Russell will join us here and conduct a guided tour of the garden.

Day 2: following breakfast we will travel to the National Botanic Garden of Wales in the exquisite location of a 568 acre estate in the heart of Carmarthenshire. Among the innovative and informative features here are the Great Greenhouses (the largest single span glasshouse in the world – focusing on temperature species, many of them endangered); the oval walled garden; the water discovery centre and the herbaceous boardwalk.

We continue to Aberglasney, set in the beautiful Towy valley. This is a superb 16th/17th century garden, which was rediscovered after 50 years of neglect and has been restored to produce a garden with immense appeal by a young and energetic team of gardeners. Set within nine acres are six different spaces with a rich and diverse collection of plants, including three walled gardens and the unique Elizabethan/Jacobean cloister; a walled garden of concentric herbaceous beds and a parapet walk.

Day 3: after breakfast we depart for Dyffryn Fernant Garden, a plantsman’s garden, created from scratch by Christina Shand and David Allum. They have made a number of ‘rooms’ including an azalea bank, a bog garden and a fernery and camellia walk. These rooms are punctuated by attractive sculptures plus mouthwatering displays of herbaceous shrubs.

This afternoon we visit Picton Castle. The gardens comprise 40 acres of some of the most beautiful woodland gardens in West Wales. Discover woodland walks, a maze and rhododendrons. The Walled Garden has an elegant fountain, rose strewn arches and a door that leads to the fernery, a tranquil and fascinating habitat for less hardy fern species.

Day 4: this morning we visit the gardens of Upton Castle, which consist of 35 acres of listed historic gardens, surrounded by ancient woodlands containing a number of trees listed as veterans. Within the gardens there are spectacular herbaceous borders, a delightful formal rose garden and a fascinating, traditional 19th century walled garden, now being restored to its former use as a kitchen garden. Rare trees and shrubs abound throughout the gardens and include a stunning collection of rhododendrons, tree Magnolias and Camellias whilst the arboretum lists amongst its many unusual specimens a large handkerchief tree, Davidia involucrata, Drymis winteri, Cunninghamia and the fern leafed beech Fagus heterophylla.

We then transfer to the village of Laugharne (pronounced ‘larn’), where the poet Dylan Thomas lived and worked in his later years and which provided many of the characters featured in his poetic works. You may wish to visit his former residence at The Boathouse, now owned by the local council and dressed inauthentic 1950s style, including some of the original furniture, with a recording of Thomas’s distinctive voice playing in the background. This is your chance to ‘rage against the dying of the light’.

Our final visit today is to the private garden of Llwyngarreg, on the Carmarthenshire/Pembrokeshire border. The owners’ objective is to grow the plants they admire in an aesthetically pleasing way, creating drama and colour all year round. They grow a lot of plants which do well in wet, mild, West Wales; Rhododendron, Acer, Primula, Bamboos, blue Meconopsis, Magnolia and some which have been a surprise: Dierama, Agapanthus, Tigridia, and Colocasia.

Day 5: we travel to Tredegar House and explore the gardens, which comprise a wild and colourful orchard garden, a formal garden framed by herbaceous borders and an intricate parterre filled with colourful minerals, reflecting how this garden might have looked over 200 years ago.





There's a blog post at <https://wp.me/phtcF-1Jo> and a photo album at <https://adobe.ly/42Emo7h>