

For the love OF TREES

Take a walk on the wild side this autumn at Gliffaes in the Brecon Beacons, where the trees take centre stage

PHOTOGRAPHS JOHN CAMPBELL | WORDS STEPHEN ANDERTON

First, there's the winding woodland drive beside walls dripping with ferns. Young pheasants stroll nonchalantly off the road and into a grove of towering redwoods as if they own the place.

There's a glimpse of river down through the trees, and an Italianate lodge cottage appears, brown as the sandstone below it. This could be Scotland, and yet you are only two-and-a-half hours from the M25. You have reached Gliffaes Country

House Hotel in the Brecon Beacons of East Wales. On a clear day from the higher hilltops, you can see the Severn Bridge crossing to England.

Visitors head to Gliffaes for the fishing (there are salmon and otters in the River Usk), and locals make a beeline there for its famous afternoon teas. And if you are a gardener, it's likely you have gone there for the trees. The owners of Gliffaes have been keen on trees for 180 years, and still are. It's a rare hotel that has such a collection.

The hotel was originally built in the 1880s as a private house, with money from the iron industry, and topped with two campanile towers in the Italian style; it's not what you might expect in the Welsh mountains, but there it sits, perched on its eminence, backed by a forested hill and looking south over the Usk to the hills beyond. There's not a dwelling in sight, although occasionally in winter, you might see through a gap in the trees a prettily painted narrowboat proceeding ▶

PREVIOUS PAGES
The magnificent
Acer palmatum
'Septemlobum
Sanguineum' in all
its autumnal glory.

RIGHT The coastal
redwood towers
over visitors to
Gliffaes. **BELOW**
The native field
maple, *Acer*
campestre,
and *Acer*
cappadocicum,
from the Caucasus,
turn a rich buttery
yellow at this
time of year.

along an otherwise-invisible
canal to Brecon.

In its heyday, Gliffaes
had 14 gardeners on
its 33 acres and
a substantial kitchen
garden, but time and
money played their usual
tricks. It was little used or
empty after 1936, and in 1948 Sam
and Jane Brabner bought it to be a
hotel. Their granddaughter Susie now
runs the hotel with her tree-loving and
chainsaw-wielding husband James
Suter. 'Overgrown beds and pergolas
were cleared away to create
a simpler, more manageable style of
garden,' says James, 'and Susie's
parents introduced a range of
flowering shrubs to take their place.'

Where once were manicured beds
and intricate paths, Gliffaes today has
open lawns, its wonderful terrace
overlooking the river, some magnificent
old shrubs including itea, eucryphia,
clerodendrum and berberis, but its
glory is still in its trees. The Suters
are well aware of this, and James leads
several tours of the trees and grounds
every year in autumn, especially when
the colours are good and there are
sweet chestnuts on the ground. Better
still, he is happy for anybody to come
to the hotel and look at the trees.
'We sell a guide for £1 showing the
route and the names of the trees,' says

James, 'and the cost is redeemable
against a meal in the hotel.' Now
there's temptation.

Beside the old tennis courts grows a
Japanese maple, a purple form with

felted-leaved whitebeams (*Sorbus aria*
'Majestica') bearing red autumnal
berries; a good handkerchief tree
(*Davidia involucrata*) now
comfortably producing its white



**GARDEN
NOTES**
33-acre garden &
woodland of Welsh
manor hotel

*Gliffaes has open lawns, a terrace overlooking the river and magnificent
old shrubs, but its glory is still in its trees*

cut leaves called *Acer palmatum*
'Septemlobum Sanguineum'. It's so
old, you can walk inside its canopy to
admire its gnarled branchwork. There
are young snake-bark maples too,
such as *Acer capillipes*; its bark
streaked with green and white,
growing in a fringe of new woodland
that backs onto the forest, planted to
celebrate the Millennium. Easy to
spot is the paperbark maple, *Acer*
griseum, whose flaking, cinnamon-
coloured bark and modest size has
made it popular in domestic gardens.

More venerable than these are trees
planted by Susie's father which are
now healthy, mature specimens:

flappy flowers; and a Japanese lime,
Tilia maximowicziana, whose
toothed leaves are covered in grey felt
on their undersides.

It's the spongy-barked redwoods
that always capture people's
imagination. There are two
species, both from California: the
wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron*
giganteum), which has reached 40m
here, and the coastal redwood
(*Sequoia sempervirens*) at 45m.
'We've had it measured - it's our
biggest tree,' says James, 'and it's
still going strong.' With luck, it'll
stay that way - often when redwoods
get their heads above the hilltops or ►



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Sweet chestnuts create a carpet on the woodland
floor; mahonia turns a rich scarlet red in autumn;
grapes are ready for picking from the vine; the
peeling bark of *Acer griseum*; cornus are good
for interest all through the year; *Viburnum opulus*
(guelder rose) berries; the bark of Cedar
of Lebanon; *Clerodendrum trichotomum*,
from China and Japan, has white
flowers that smell delicious, and blue
and pink fruits that follow.



RIGHT Paths lead the way through the woodland, past many tree fine specimens.

BELOW LEFT Watch out for wildlife by the River Usk, which runs through the estate.

BELOW RIGHT The hotel and its grounds have scenic outlooks across the valley.

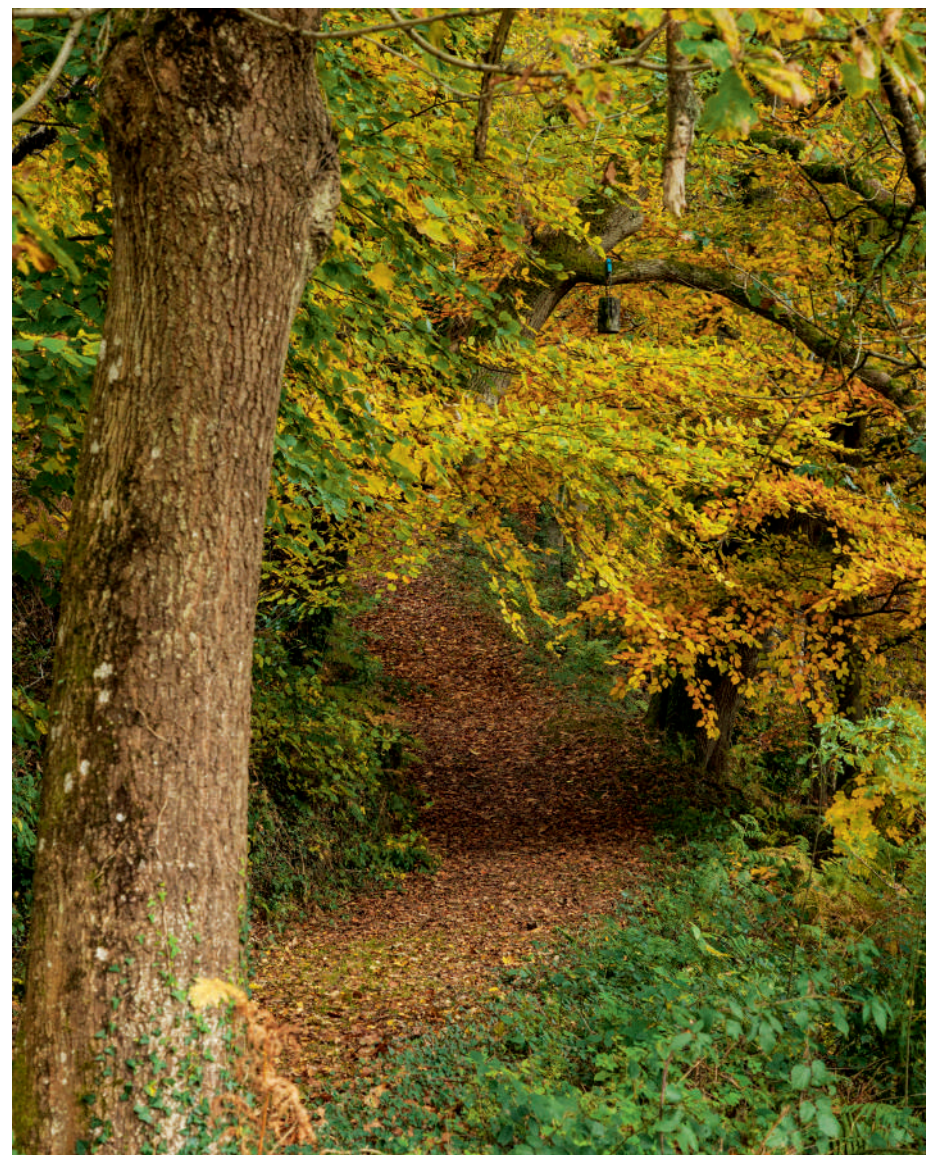
surrounding trees, lightning strikes and takes the top out.

Conifers play a large role at Gliffaes, although they do not dominate. By the house is a vast tiered cedar, one of several species of cedrus in the grounds: the cedar of Lebanon from Syria, the Atlas cedar from North Africa, and the drooping deodar cedar from the Himalaya. There is a so-called Japanese cedar too, *Cryptomeria japonica*.

Not all conifers are evergreen, of course. There is a dawn redwood, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, identifiable by the sinewy, muscled base of its trunk. Nearby is a swamp cypress, *Taxodium distichum*, which in old age opens out into a softer, more open-headed profile that you would associate more with deciduous trees. There are ginkgos, too, so buttery-yellow in autumn.

Taking the path down to the river you will find another kind of 'cedar', the western red cedar, *Thuja plicata*, from western North America, whose crushed branchlets smell of pineapple. 'It's too coarse,' says James, 'and too dominant. I am having to thin them out - serious chainsaw work.'

Still, it seems pretty quiet down



there by the water - salmon season until mid-October, herons posing in the river, dippers bouncing on a stone and kingfishers flashing by... not bad at all.

Gliffaes Country House Hotel, Crickhowell, Powys, Wales NP8 1RH. For more information, tel: +44 (0)1874 730371 or visit the hotel's website: www.gliffaeshotel.com

It seems pretty quiet down there by the water - herons posing in the river, dippers bouncing on a stone and kingfishers flashing by



GLIFFAES NOTEBOOK

ITALIAN STYLE IN WALES

Gliffaes House was built by the Reverend West in the 1880s. He often travelled in Italy, which could explain the Italianate style, with campanile at each end. It was recently confirmed that it was designed by Browne & Gill of Bath. The Reverend was quite the big spender - he is said to have run through three fortunes and left a penniless widow.



ASIAN INFLUENCE

The Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*, usually grows in a conical shape, but this fine specimen at Gliffaes has multi-stemmed appearance that gives great character. This evergreen offers colour all year through its foliage, and spherical cones in autumn.

WALK & TALK

You can take in the autumn colours on a guided walk around Gliffaes' collection of trees with James Suter, followed by lunch. Dates this year are Saturday 18 October, Tuesday 21 October, Saturday 25 October, Wednesday 29 October. Call +44 (0)1874 730371 to book, as places are limited. Walks start at 11am and cover less than a mile. Coats and wellies advised. Costs £22 per person, including lunch and coffee.



GARDEN CHALLENGES

MAINTENANCE: James maintains 33 acres with only three days' labour a week, some of it his own. He manages by uprooting Himalayan balsam, but strimming bracken and brambles.

ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting Gliffaes, James recommends:

- **GARDEN Tretower Court** A wonderful survival of a 15th-century defensible manor house built around a galleried courtyard, with a small garden attached. An architectural gem. Nearby stands the older Tretower Castle. Tretower, Crickhowell NP8 1RD. Tel: +44 (0)1834 730279.
- **PLACE TO VISIT Talgarth Mill** A restored water mill with bakery, shop and café adjoining. The Square, Talgarth LD3 0BW. Tel: +44 (0)1874 711352. www.talgarthmill.com
- **FARM SHOP Beacons Farm Shop at the Welsh Venison Centre** Established in 1985. The venison is reared here on the farm and sold along with other local meats and delicatessen products. Middlewood Farm, Bwlch, Brecon LD3 7HQ. Tel: +44 (0)1874 730929. www.beaconsfarmshop.co.uk

JAMES SUTER'S TOP GARDEN & TREE TIPS

- **If you are going to use a chainsaw**, find out how to do it properly. Take a few days' training course so you can work safely.
- **Surround yourself with experts.** At Gliffaes, we have a general adviser on forestry, tree surgeons as and when we need them, a wonderful chap, and a wonderful lady who comes in one day a week to look after the detailed gardening.
- **Plant lots of the things that do really well for you.** We are putting in more and more magnolias here. They are such wonderful value in early spring, and they like our slightly acid soil.
- **'Always keep a lawn short** and the edges straight, and everything else will be forgiven,' my father-in-law said. He was right.
- **Plant perfumed species** under your bedroom window for summer nights. We have a huge *Itea ilicifolia* that smells of honey.

