

THE TALBOT BOTANIC GARDENS – HISTORY

Lord Milo's epitaph reads:- "He was a good and generous friend". There are many Malahide people today who would certainly vouch for these sentiments. The Castle Gardens are tangible evidence of a man devoted to horticultural pursuits.

The earliest walled garden was formed in the late seventeenth century. It was in front of the Barbican Gate Tower, which dates to the 14th century. In front of the tower, a sunken oval pond of generous proportions offers an effective setting for a collection of water-lillies. A weeping willow embellishes the scene. Remnants of the old garden still exist in the Haggard, The Fresco Wall and the Chicken Yard.

The Gardens, as we know them to day cover an area of about twenty acres and were largely created between 1942 and 1973 by Lord Milo. In all, there are in excess of 5,000 different species and varieties of plants present. The present day Garden is, in effect, a small botanic garden.

Milo, Lord Talbot de Malahide, was undoubtedly the most knowledgeable Irish gardener of his time. If the word "fanatic" didn't have derogatory connotations, you could certainly apply it to Milo. With evil-smelling heaters as company, he spent many a cold frosty night alone with his plants. To build up his plant collection, Lord Talbot journeyed extensively abroad. In the 'sixties he visited Australia, Ethiopia, Chile, Kashmir, Mexico, Afghanistan and Nepal. He was soon operating one of the largest private botanical networks in the world connecting such places as Yalta, U.S.S.R., Zagreb, Yugoslavia and Nanking in China. For the botanist, the Talbot Garden Books make most interesting reading. In the 1973 book there is a record of two plants from seeds which Khrushchev had originally given to the King of Sweden and which had been planted in the Botanical Garden of Gotenburg. When a bushfire wiped out all traces of a particular plant in Tasmania, Lord Talbot came to the rescue and gave back to Tasmania plants raised from seed which he had collected in 1964.

The fact that Malahide lies in the driest part of Ireland proved to be a pitfall rather than an asset to Lord Talbot, and the choice of plants in the Castle Garden is also limited by the alkalinity of the soil. Nevertheless, it has been found that an astonishingly wide range of plants appear to grow happily in the Malahide conditions.

Lord Talbot's greatest contribution to botany was perhaps the financing of Dr. Curtis's "The endemic flora of Tasmania", illustrated by Margaret Jones. Four volumes were completed before his death, and the publication of the remaining two volumes was continued by his sister, the Hon. Rose Talbot, as a memorial to him.

Today, the Gardens, which are open to the public, continue to be a place of pilgrimage for garden lovers and botanists from all over the world.