Donald Beaton (1802-63) : The Experimental Gardener

By **Barbara Simms**

Many discoveries made during the first half of Queen Victoria's reign (1837-1901) had a significant influence on the progress of horticulture and the development of England as 'a nation of gardeners'. In 1822 John Claudius Loudon (1783-1843) wrote that 'no art has been more extended in its objects, or improved in its practices within the last fifty years than Gardening'. [1] He later confirmed that:

> The nineteenth century has commenced with the most promising appearances as to floriculture and botany. The Linnaean [1788] and Horticultural Societies of London [1804] have been established; and florists' societies are increasing ... The number of plant-collectors sent out is greatly increased ... The botanic gardens of Liverpool [1803] and Hull [1812] have been established, and others are in contemplation. [2]

Later important developments included the establishment of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, as a national institution (1840); the foundation of *The Gardeners' Chronicle* (1841) and *The Cottage Gardener* (1848); and the gaining of a royal charter by the Horticultural Society of London (1861). Of practical importance for amateur gardeners was the availability of cheaper glasshouses due to the abolition of tax on glass (1845), the patenting of the sheet glass process (1847), the abolition of the brick tax (1850) and a decrease in timber duty (1851). Glazing and heating for glass houses also underwent continuous improvement. Furthermore, the enthusiasm for glasshouse ownership was fuelled by Paxton's Crystal Palace, designed and built for the Great Exhibition 1851. For both amateurs and professionals, glasshouse cultivation and experimentation on the hardiness of newly introduced tender plants were major occupations in the early Victorian garden.

By the end of the nineteenth century plant breeding had become a competitive commercial business, but during the first half of the century plant reproduction and hybridization were little understood – this was before publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1858) by Charles Darwin (1809-82) and Gregor Mendel (1822-84)'s groundbreaking paper on plant hybridization (1865).[3] Thomas Fairchild (1667-1729) had demonstrated the possibility of producing hybrids in the early eighteenth century, but no systematic programme of hybridizing was carried out until William Rollisson (1766-1842) began breeding Cape heaths at his south London nursery in the 1790s and William Herbert (1778-1847)'s work with amaryllis and gladiolus in the 1820s. Thomas Andrew Knight (1759-1838), president of the Horticultural Society 1811-38, was also one of the first to undertake systematic work with hybridization.[4] John Lindley (1799-1865)'s *Theory of Horticulture* of 1840 helped to disseminate knowledge, but horticultural progress was also driven forward by the experiments of early Victorian gardeners.

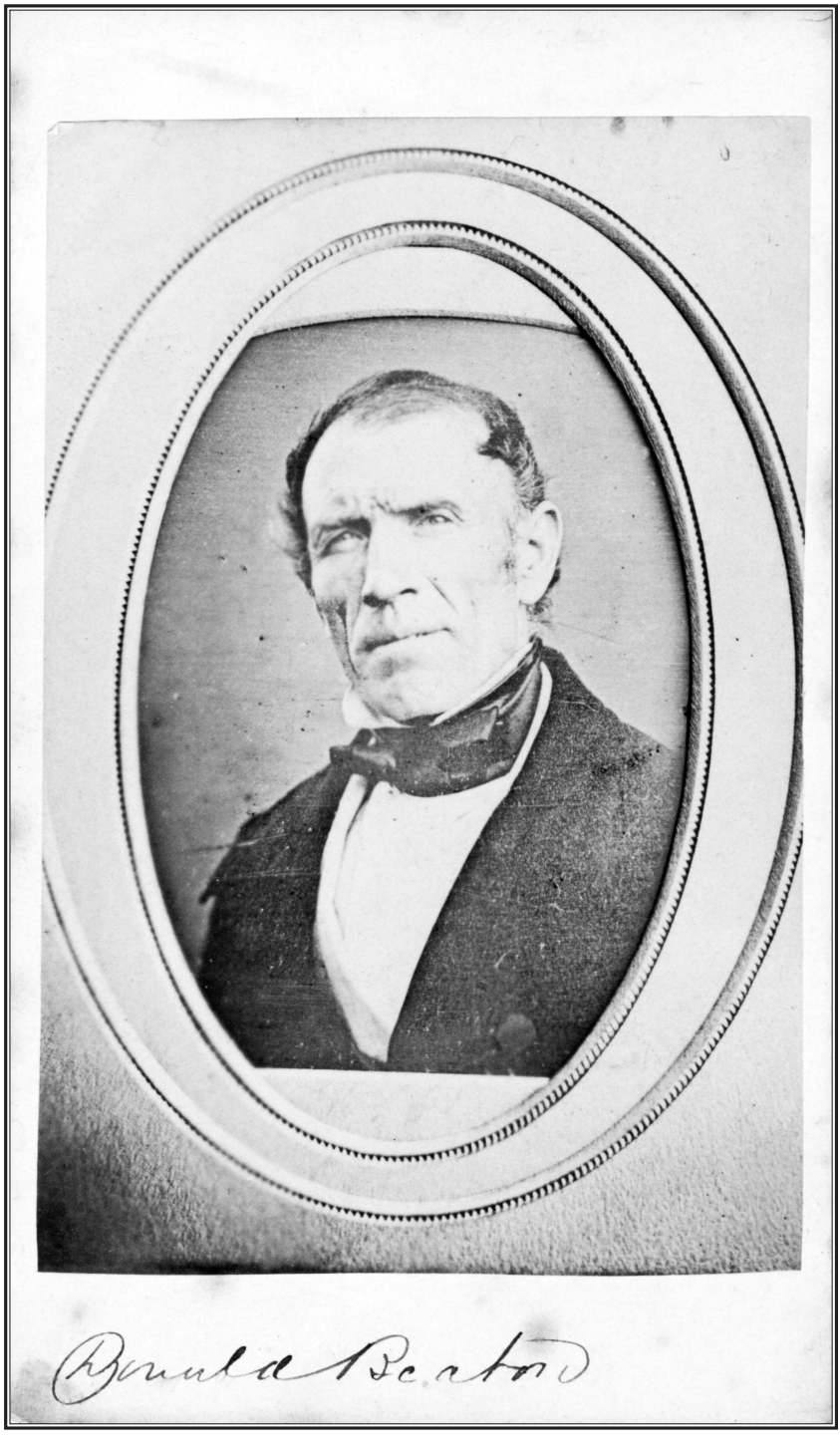
Donald Beaton (1802-63), head gardener at Shrubland Park, near Ipswich in Suffolk 1839-51, was at the forefront of horticultural experimentation, stating that:

> Without trying some experiments, I do not see, myself, what is the real use of a garden at all. The best gardeners in the country try experiments every week of their lives, and, at the end of the longest life, one only begins to see how much more there is to do and to learn.[5]

(fig. 17)

Written in 1858 after he had retired from Shrubland Park, Beaton continued to be involved in experimentation in his local home community of Surbiton, Surrey (since 1965 part of the London Borough of Kingston). There are few known archives relating to his

1. John Claudius Loudon, *An Encyclopaedia of Gardening* ... (London, 1822), p.iii.
2. *Ibid*., p.86.
3. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London, 1858); Gregor Mendel, 'Versuche über Pflanzen-Hybriden' (Experiments on Plant Hybridization), read at the 8 February and 8 March 1865 meetings of the Brünn Natural History Society; available in English at http://www.esp.org/foundations/ genetics/classical/gm-65.pdf (accessed 29 December 2025).
4. For further details, see Noel Kingsbury, *Hybrid. The History & Science of Plant Breeding* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp.80-83.
5. Donald Beaton (henceforth DB), 'The Best Time to Strike Bedding Plants', *The Cottage Gardener* (henceforth *CG*), 20 (1858), p.270. The full title of the journal was *The Cottage Gardener, Country Gentleman's Companion, and Poultry Chronicle*. It was subtitled *A Journal of Horticulture, Rural and Domestic Economy, Botany and Natural History.* The editors in 1855 were George Johnson (its founder) and Robert Hogg.



17. *Carte de Visite* of Donald Beaton (1866)
(RHS Lindley Collections Image no. lib0006059, object number p/cdv/b/33)

early life but we do have a potted history of his career in an article he wrote for *The Cottage Gardener* in 1854.[6] This describes his journey from a child in a small turn-of-the-century Highland community to journeyman gardener at the time of Loudon's 1822 publication and later work, including in two London nurseries. The pinnacle of Beaton's career was as head gardener at Shrubland Park, one of the celebrated gardens of the day, which was followed by active retirement in Surbiton.

From Beaton's article we know that he was born on 8 March 1802 in Strathconon in the parish of Contin, Ross-shire, in the old Scottish county of Ross and Cromarty, the second of five children in a Gaelic-speaking Highland family. He located his birthplace as 'about sixteen miles from the then parish church of Urray', a largely farming community set among picturesque burns, woods and mountains.[7] However, he was not at Strathconon for long, as during his early childhood his father's work as a cattle dealer and breeder necessitated a move 'to the neighbourhood of Inverness' – to the 'grazing lands around Beaufort Castle' then owned by the Hon. Archibald Fraser, chieftain of the Fraser Clan.

Beaton gave brief details of his childhood: his mother died when he was seven and he was brought up by a housekeeper and his grandmother. He went to a local school - although his early education seems to have been more in farming, country pursuits and survival skills rather than classroom lessons.[8] Nonetheless, Beaton maintained that he studied hard from ten to fifteen years, but his hopes of further education were 'blighted' when his father's income was affected by the unstable economic situation caused by 'The fall of Napoleon in 1815, and the hard harvest in 1816, to say nothing of the losses during the hard winter of 1814'. [9] He was still having difficulty with English well into his teens but by 1818 he was working as tutor to the four children of a Mr Strachen, the estate manager at Beaufort Castle, where he 'was treated more like a son than a teacher' and had the opportunity to attend the Inverness Academy, a grammar school, with the eldest child, Tom.[10] However, his relatively poor English and inconsistent academic performance denied him the possibility of progressing to King's College, Aberdeen.

Aged about eighteen, Beaton accepted a temporary job as deputy gamekeeper at Beaufort Castle for Thomas Alexander Fraser (1802-75), who had inherited the Lovat estates aged thirteen, but by 1820 had determined to make landscape improvements.[11] Beaton was at Beaufort Castle when the plans were proposed, although his duties at that time were primarily to assist during the shooting season rather than work with the gardeners.[12] He initially regarded this as a stopgap 'till something cast up', but when he realized this was unlikely to happen he 'began to think seriously of being a gardener instead'. [13]

Beaton recalled that once this decision had been made 'every one assisted me to make up for lost time: all their books were open to me, the news spread, and I was admitted to see other gardens and systems round about'.[14] In about 1822, therefore, he embarked on his gardening career with enthusiasm, while admitting that this was the first time 'I took a tool in hand to do a regular day's work ... I could hardly dress myself for the pains and penalties of earning bread by the sweat of my brow'.[15] He was determined to excel, becoming 'complete master of the Linnean system of Botany' and learning from what he saw in the gardens he visited. A few years later, he went to work for William Gordon-Cumming,

6. DB, 'My Autobiography', *CG*, 13 (28 November 1854), pp.153-58. See, also, Brent Elliott, *Victorian Gardens* (London: Batsford, 1986), pp.123-34; 'Donald Beaton: the greatest gardening journalist of the early 19th century', *The Garden*, 116 (February 1991), pp.64-67.
7. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.153. See, also, Francis H. Groome (ed.), *Ordnance Gazetteer of Scotland: A Survey of Scottish Topography, Statistical, Biographical and Historical* (London: William Mackenzie, 1894), p.355.
8. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.153.
9. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.155.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.153, 156.
11. The documentation in the Scottish Record Office and elsewhere relating to the early history of Beaufort Castle is summarized in H. W. Harrison, *A History of the Parish of Kiltarlity* (Kilmorack: Kilmorack Heritage Association, 2006), pp.92-98 (p.98).
12. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.156.
13. *Ibid.*, p.153.
14. *Ibid.*, p.156.
15. *Ibid.*, p.153.

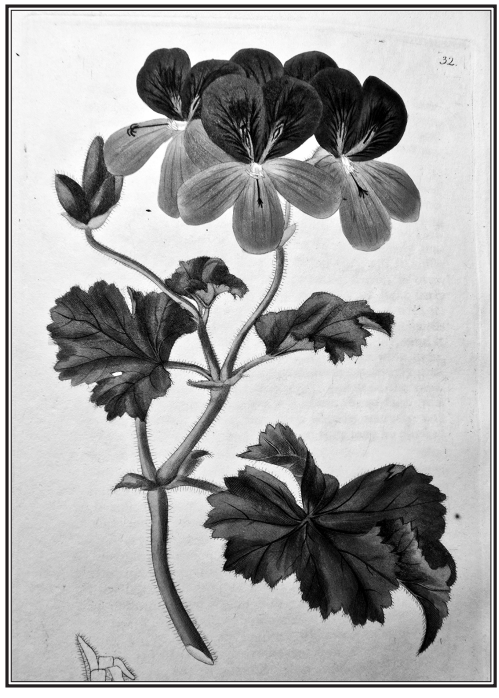
2nd Baronet (1787-1854) at Altyre House, Forres, east from Inverness. He wrote that he 'jumped at the offer' of the job, describing Altyre as 'one of the best gardens in Scotland' and Lady Cumming as his mentor for crossing bedding plants and bulbs.[16] Altyre also had good library facilities for its gardeners and Beaton took the opportunity to read current periodicals and books, including those by the botanist and horticulturist Robert Sweet (1782-1835). One of Sweet's early publications was an illustrated five-volume work on geraniums, possibly the inspiration for Beaton's later fascination with hybridizing these plants. [17]***(fig. 18)***

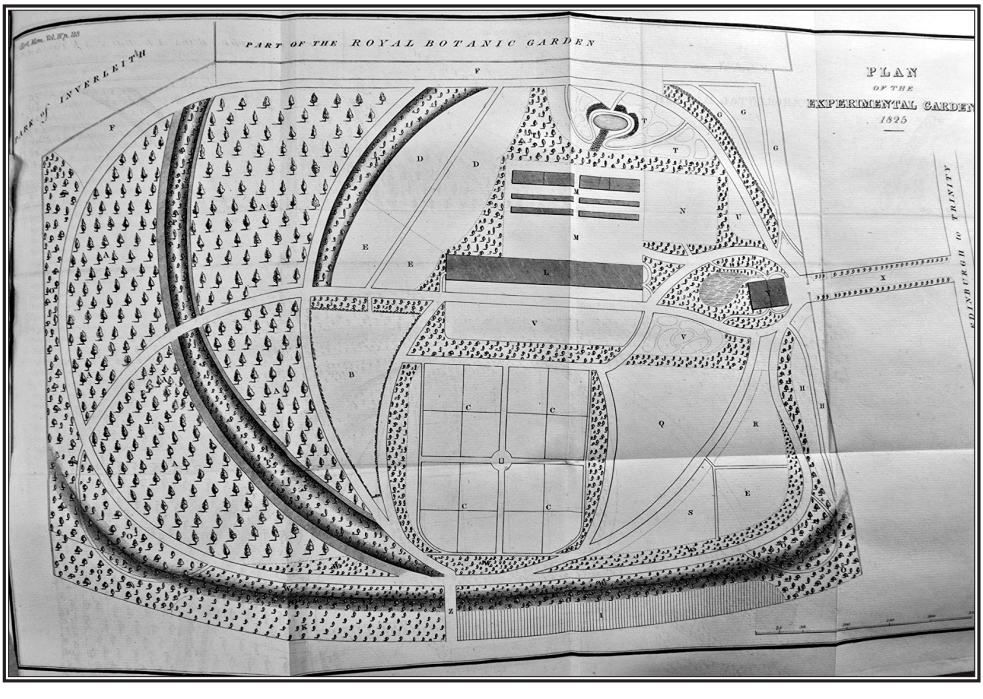
It is not clear when Beaton left Altyre, but in about 1825 he travelled south to Perth, 'the best neighbourhood in Scotland for gardening', to the nursery of Dickson & Turnbull.[18] A few years earlier the nursery (then Dickson & Brown) had been credited by Joseph Sabine (1770-1837), secretary of the Horticultural Society, as being the first to produce 'Double Scotch Roses' in the later eighteenth century and by the time Beaton arrived, there were about two hundred new double cultivars available.[19] We have no details of Beaton's work at Perth, but he left a few years later for a post with the Caledonian Horticultural Society in Edinburgh, possibly on the recommendation of Dickson, an early member. [20]

This was an exciting time for the Society, but unfortunately much of its archive has been lost or destroyed and Beaton gave no information on his two years there. [21] The first volume of the Society's *Memoirs*, however, provides information on its early history. The Society was formed in 1809 with its aim as 'the promotion and improving the cultivation of the best kinds of Fruits, of the most choice sort of Flowers, and of those vegetables which are most useful in the Kitchen'. [22] The creation of its own garden was high on the Society's list of priorities and in 1823 it took a lease on ten acres of land in Inverleith, adjacent to the new site of the Edinburgh Botanic Garden. William McNab (1780-1848) was appointed curator and in 1825 he drew up an ambitious plan for an 'Experimental Garden' ***(fig. 19)***.[23] Beaton was at the garden in the early years of its development, under head gardener James Barnet, 'a most intelligent and thoroughly informed gardener' and may well have stored up his experiences there for the development of his own experimental garden many years later. [24]

In 1829 Beaton sailed from Edinburgh to London to work at the celebrated Clapton Nursery of John Mackay (1795-1888) on the Upper Clapton Road, Hackney, under foreman Hugh Low (1793-1863), both from Scotland. [25] Although Beaton again provides no details of his time there, he later described its nurserymen as 'expert propagators' by providing 'sweet air, moist atmosphere, gloaming light, and from 75° to 85° of close heat, patience, skill, and judgment'.[26] A German visitor was also impressed when he visited in 1829, writing: 'I was struck by the neat construction of the houses, the beautiful and rich collection of Cape and New Holland plants, and their excellent management … All that I saw in this nursery exhibited superior taste and knowledge, and consequently the plants were in a very luxuriant state.'[27] The

16. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.156.
17. Robert Sweet, *Geraniaceae. The natural order of gerania*, 5 vols. (London, 1820-30).
18. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.157. See, also, Forbes W. Robertson, *Early Scottish Gardeners and their plants* (East Linton, Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 2000), p.200.
19. See Peter D. A. Boyd, 'Romantic Survivors: Roasa spinosissima, Scots Roses and the North American connection', *Rosa Mundi*, 22/3 (Spring/ Summer 2008), pp.4-31. Available at www.peterboyd.com/rosapimp14.htm (accessed 29 December 2025).
20. Joseph Sabine was honorary secretary of the Horticultural Society of London from 1810 to 1830, and treasurer. The society's gardens at Hammersmith and Chiswick were established under his guidance.
21. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.157.
22. 'Regulations, Sanctioned by the General Meeting, December 3 1811', *Memoirs of the Caledonian Horticultural Society*, 1 (1814), p.3 (from henceforth *Memoirs*).
23. See 'Documents regarding the Experimental Garden', *Memoirs*, 4 (1829), pp.113-14. See, also, Forbes Robinson, *Patrick Neill: Doyen of Scottish horticulture* (Dalbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2011), p.49. The main development in the experimental garden did not take place until James McNab (1810-78) took over from his father as curator in 1835.
24. 'Review of Memoirs of the Caledonian Horticultural Society Part 1. Vol. IV', *Quarterly Journal of Agriculture* 1 (May 1828-August 1829), p.225. James Barnet had previously worked in the Edinburgh Botanic Garden, Kew Gardens and the London Horticultural Society garden before being recommended for the post at the Caledonian Horticultural Society by Sabine in 1826.
25. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.157. Low later took over the nursery.
26. See DB, 'Clapton Nursery', *CG*, 15 (11 March 1856), pp.422-24 (p.424).
27. Jacob Rinz, 'Remarks on various Gardens about London ….', *The Gardener's Magazine* (henceforth *GM*), 5 (November 1829), p.379.





18. 'Pelargonium Davetanum'; Robert Sweet, *Geraniaceae. The natural order of gerania*, 5 vols (London: James Ridgway, 1820-30), vol. 1 (1830-32), plate 32

19. William McNab's plan of the CHS experimental garden 1825; *Memoirs of the Caledonian Horticultural Society,* vol. 4. Main area: B - enclosed experimental garden; C – kitchen garden; E – nursery for seedlings; M – frames; N – greenhouse shrubs; Q – perennial herbaceous plants; R - annuals; T – American shrubs; V – ornamental flowers and bulbs (florists flowers) (RHS Lindley Collection 58690-1001)

nursery was particularly noted for introductions of Australian and South American plants into cultivation, those in Western Australia being collected by William Baxter in 1823, 1825 and 1828-88.[28] Beaton described many such plants in his later articles.[29] The nursery had also been inspired by Loudon's 1827 exhortations in *The Gardener's Magazine* to set up a garden library, reported by William Rentoul, secretary of the Clapton Nursery Library, to contain over two hundred and sixty books:

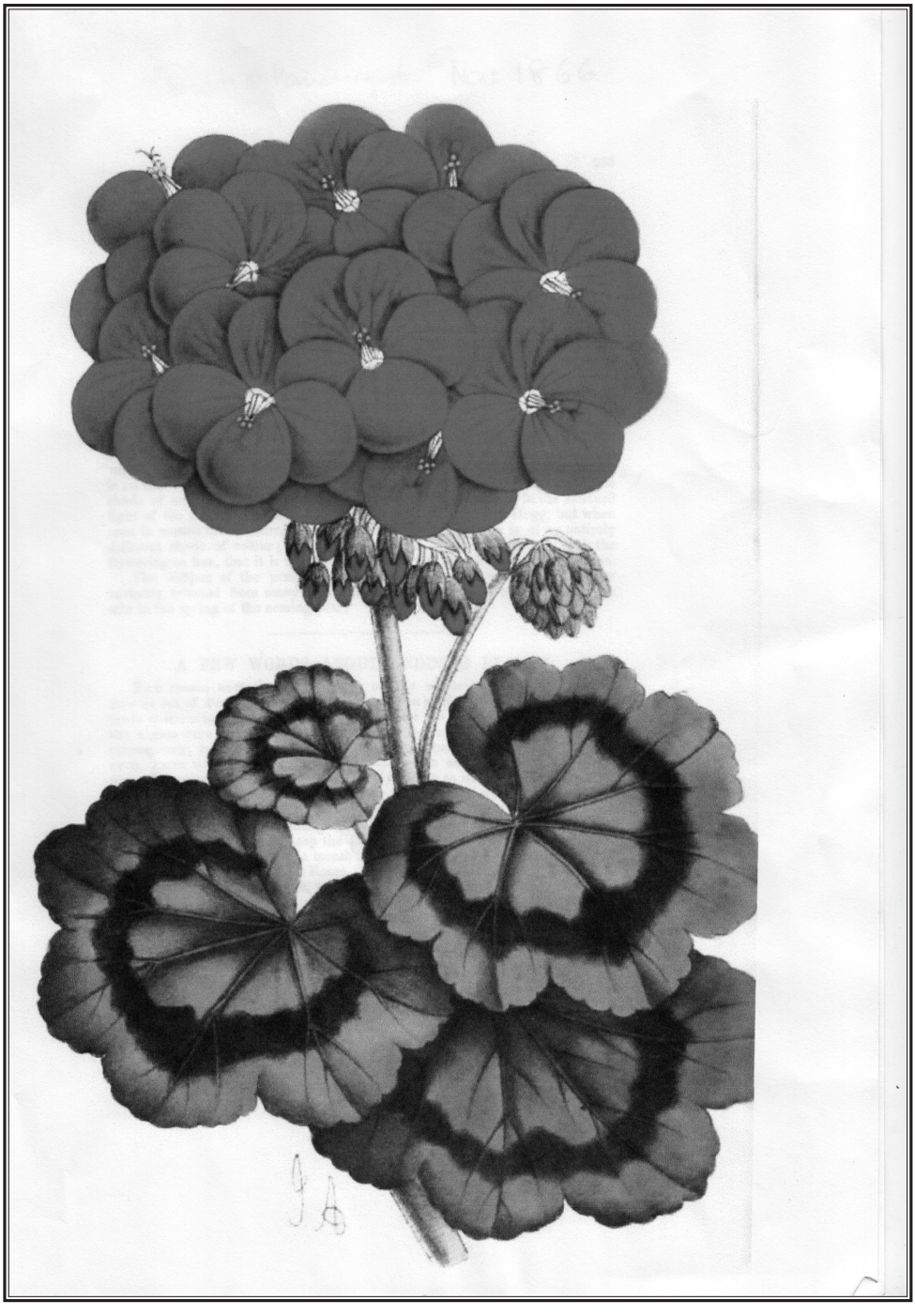
> Sir, - I have the pleasing task imposed upon me by my fellow workmen, of informing you that in this nursery a garden library, according to the plan you suggested in the last number of your valuable Magazine, has been established ... The next morning after its appearance, our liberal employer, Mr. Mackay, informed us that he meant to purchase books for our use ... How far the diffusion of knowledge may be promoted among gardeners by the establishment of garden libraries, time alone can prove. [30]

After six weeks at the nursery Beaton 'was sent into Herefordshire, to Haffield, near Ledbury', to a 'Mr. Gordon', where his responsibilities included the development of a pinetum and the management of a four-acre kitchen garden and twelve acres of pleasure grounds.[31] While there he continued his experimental hybridization, as at least the names of two flowering currants testify; *Ribes x gordonianum*, a hybrid between the buffalo currant (*R. odoratum*) and the ordinary *R. sanguineum*, was named after William Gordon, and *Ribes x beatonii*, a cross between *Ribes aureum* and *R. sanguineum*, carries his own name. However, his post at Haffield ended abruptly with the death of Gordon at only forty-one in 1836. Beaton stayed for a year to 'see everything finished' on the estate and in the garden and then travelled north to Scotland, before returning to London.[32]

In 1835 Beaton had felt bold enough to publish an article on fuchsia hybridization in which he criticised the views of John Lindley, then the London Horticultural Society's assistant secretary, on the differences between plant species and varieties.[33] In a similar challenging tone in a letter published in 1837, he took issue with Clement Hoare's suggestion that 'the circumference or diameter of the stem of a vine has anything at all to do with the weight of crop that vine is capable of producing'.[34] This was the beginning of Beaton's publishing career, the confident and critical tone of his early articles providing a preview of his future controversial writing style in *The Cottage Gardener*.

On his return to London about 1838, Beaton worked on the 'celebrated' plant collection of Thomas Harris at 15, Kingsbury on the Edgware Road. Lindley refers to Harris as an importer of Mexican plants, 'a most zealous collector of rare plants',[35] and to Beaton as 'Mr. Harris's intelligent gardener'. [36] In 1840, Loudon described Kingsbury as having grounds 'ornamented by plantations of select trees and shrubs [with] a large conservatory [connected to] a series of green-houses and hot-houses, containing ... one of the finest collections of plants in this country, managed by Mr. Beaton, one of our first botanical gardeners'.[37] Beaton's work there was in propagation, hybridization, experiments in hardiness and trialling newly introduced plants, especially those from Mexico and Australia, about which he wrote a number of articles.[38] His post was curtailed after three years when Harris sold his collection 'under

28. See E. J. Willson, *West London Nursery Gardens* (Fulham and Hammersmith Historical Society, 1982), pp.105-6.
29. DB, 'Clapton Nursery', *CG*, 17 (7 October 1856), pp.4-6; 'Clapton Nursery; Messrs Low & Co', *CG*, 21 (30 November 1858), pp.127-30.
30. J. C. Loudon, 'Garden Libraries', *GM*, 2 (January 1827), pp.243-49 (p.244).
31. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.157.
32. *Ibid.*
33. DB, 'Fuschia, Opinions and Facts on the Nature of the Relations of Certain Kinds of, one to another, and Facts in relation to the Extent to which they will hybridise one with another', *GM*, 11 (1835), pp.580-2.
34. Clement Hoare, *A Practical Treatise on the Cultivation of the Grape Vine on Open Walls* (London: Longmans, 1835). Beaton supported his criticisms by the results of his own experiments; DB, 'Growing grapes in the open air in Herefordshire', *The Farmer's Magazine*, 7 (July-December 1837), p.147.
35. John Lindley, 'Inga Harrisii. Mr. Harris's Inga', *Edwards's Botanical Register or Ornamental Flower-garden and Shrubbery*, 25 (August 1839), p.xliv.
36. John Lindley, 'Ipoivkea Purga', *ibid.*, pp.85-86.
37. John Claudius Loudon, 'Select Suburban Residences', *GM* (May 1840), p.233.
38. See, for example, DB, 'On grafting Ipomoeas, and more particularly *Ipomoe'a Hors-fálliae*', *GM* (May 1840), p.161; 'Notice of *Galphimia Glauca*, and of a new Wistaria', *ibid.*, pp.400-2; 'On *Cèreus senilis*, the Old-Man Cactus', *ibid.*, pp.549-52.



20. Pelargonium 'Dr Hogg', a Beaton hybrid 1837; *The Florist and Pomologist*, 5 (November 1866), p.233

the hammer of Mr. Stevens', possibly due to financial difficulties.

Beaton's next post, and his most prestigious, was at Shrubland Park, where he succeeded a Mr Smith as head gardener for Sir William Fowle Middleton, then Sheriff of Herefordshire, and his wife Anne, an avid gardener. The garden in Beaton's time is scarcely recorded and much of the information available is from his reminiscences in *The Cottage Gardener* from the 1850s onwards.[39] We know from these that Lady Middleton encouraged his horticultural experiments, both in hybridization and with the then newly fashionable bedding out. Certainly, the many hybrid pelargoniums he produced while there continued to be used to raise further cultivars. *The Florist and Pomologist* of November 1866 features an image of *Pelargonium* 'Dr Hogg' raised by William Paul of the Waltham Cross Nurseries ***(fig. 20)*** with the comment that:

> Beaton's race is now so widely known, and so generally appreciated, that it scarcely requires any commendation at our hands. The majority of kinds have been planted extensively in the Royal Gardens at Kew, and at Battersea ... Alexandra, Amy Hogg, Indian Yellow, Duchess, Glowworm, Orange Nosegay, Mrs. Wm. Paul, and Waltham Seedling are now almost universally known and appreciated.[40]

Beaton left Shrubland Park in 1851, a year after his second wife Lydia (about whom we hear nothing else) died and during the period when Sir Charles Barry (1795-1860) was preparing plans for the redesign of the house and gardens along Italianate lines, which obliterated most of Beaton's planting. Nonetheless, Beaton had fond memories of Shrubland Park and its owners:

> This is the university at which I took my degrees; the hospitable owners were my professors … but accelerated every step of the way towards it. Then, having saturated my mind with their own high notions of flower-gardening, I went on my way rejoicing; and when I am invited to return at stated periods ... it is to compare notes and ideas.[41]

He retired to Surbiton at fifty years old, 'on an allowance sufficient for all my wants, but not enough to allow me to indulge in hazardous speculations, or foolish experiments'.[42] An editorial note in *The Cottage Gardener* announced that 'After thirty years' service our able coadjutor, Mr Donald Beaton has retired into private life … he has fixed his residence near London, that by easy access to gardens and societies in and around the metropolis he may be the more able to enrich our pages'. [43]

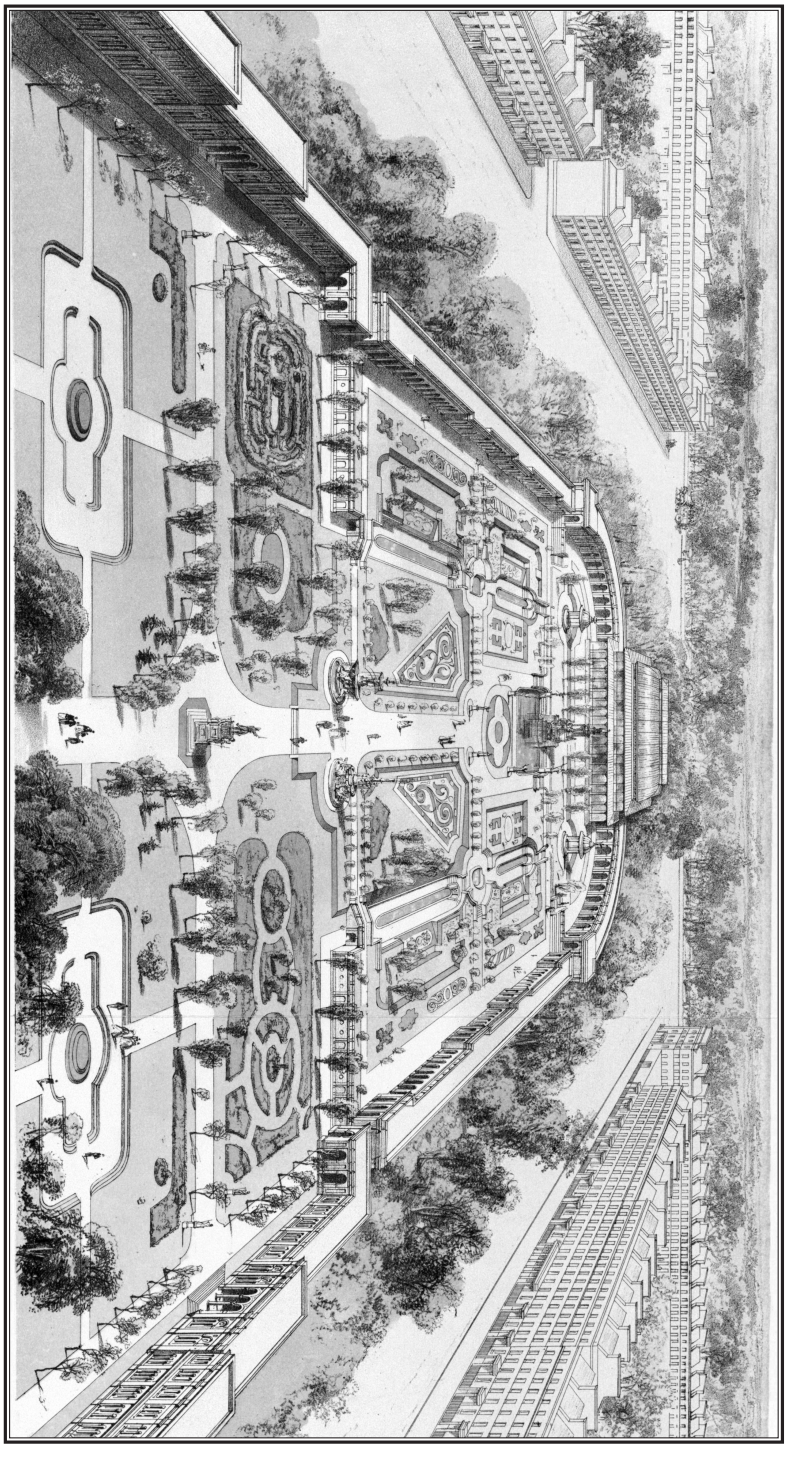
Kelly's Directory of 1855 lists Beaton at 1, Flora Cottages, Victoria Road, near to Surbiton Station. Mid-nineteenth-century Surbiton was described by a local antiquarian 'as having the appearance of a neglected, uncared-for suburb – partly country, partly town like – with many of the houses and villas in an unfinished state, with bad roads and few paths'.[44] Beaton chose to be near London so that he could be near 'old friends and associates' and could keep up with what was happening in the horticultural world: 'the pleasures of seeing new plants, of hearing about all new projects in gardening, as they appear', much of which he wrote about in *The Cottage Gardener.* [45]

Beaton's writings were primarily concerned with the flower garden, its design and cultivation, but he also wrote detailed articles on the London gardens he visited:

> Having seen the Crystal Palace gardens, I went to Kew the day after, and to Hampton Court the day after that. I did intend to see the Chiswick Garden, that is to say, the garden of the Horticultural Society, and that of the Duke of Devonshire at Chiswick House ... These, with the garden of the Royal Botanic Society at the Regent's Park, being the principal gardens round London, one may learn in them the state and progress of flower-gardening just as well as by travelling far into the country.[46]

In 1861, he said of Nesfield's parterres at the Society's garden at Kensington: 'I never yet saw flower gardening carried on in such high

39. For a chronology of the garden, see Tom Williamson, *The Landscape of Shrubland Park: a short history* (Suffolk: Verner & Tuffill, 1997).
40. Robert Hogg, 'Pelargonium Dr. Hogg', *The Florist and Pomologist* (November 1866), p.233.
41. See DB, 'My Autobiography', p.157.
42. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.153.
43. George Johnson, 'Gardening Gossip', *CG*, 7 (11 December 1852), pp.159-60 (p.159).
44. See Rowley W. C. Richardson, *Surbiton. Thirty Years of Local Self-Government, 1855-1887* (Surbiton: Bull and Son, 1888), p.21.
45. DB, 'My Autobiography', p.153.
46. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG*, 15 (16 October 1855), p.35.



21. *View of the Gardens from the International Exhibition*. [Plan of the RHS gardens at Kensington]; from Andrew Murray, *The book of the Royal Horticultural Society: 1862–1863* with illustrations and photographs by John Leighton, Thomas Scott and C. Thurston Thompson (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1863), p.181 (RHS Lindley Collections Image no. lib0002492)

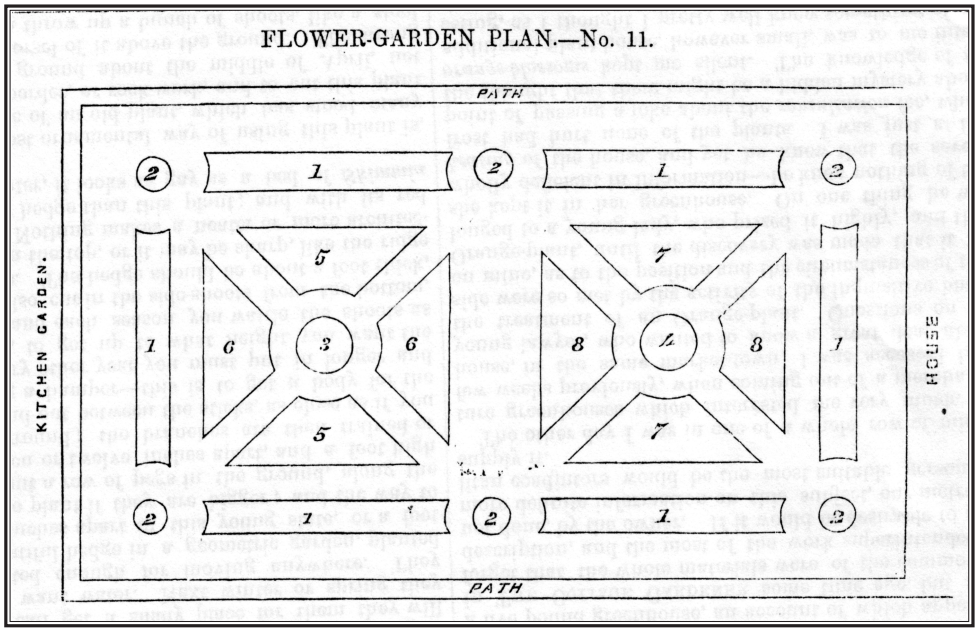
order, or the plants and flowers looking more perfect than at South Kensington, and there is no place that I know of where a young gardener could learn so much as there', a turnaround from his earlier criticism of Nesfield's use of gravel instead of plants.[47] ***(fig. 21)*** Beaton's comprehensive botanical knowledge was evident in the descriptions of plants and their cultivation in the gardens and nurseries he visited. From late summer 1856, a few months after he had obtained his experimental garden, he wrote: 'I have a good deal of time on my hands at certain periods of the day … I might do worse than call on those nurserymen who are near enough who contributed handsomely to the Experimental Garden'. [48] The first visit in August was to the Wellington Road Nursery at Swiss Cottage, but during the autumn and winter 1856/57 his visits and articles included the Clapton Nursery, the new Richmond Nursery, the Kingston Nursery and Veitch's Exotic Nursery on the King's Road, presenting a detailed account of their nurserymen and popular plants of the mid-nineteenth century. [49]

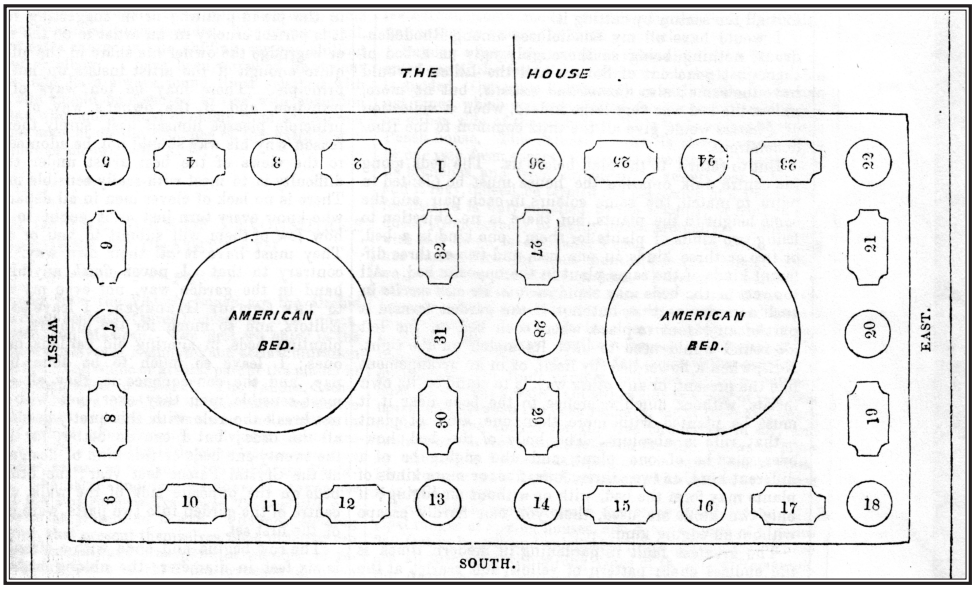
Some nurseries warranted more than one visit and some several articles, one being the Kingston Nursery owned by Beaton's Surbiton neighbour, Thomas Jackson. The Kingston Nursery had been in existence as early as 1837 and a catalogue dated May 1851, in addition to plants and prices for items such as 'an extensive collection of dahlias and florist's flowers … New culinary and flower seeds, mushroom spawn, Russia mats, garden vases', carries the following description: 'Thomas Jackson and Son having the royal Forcing grounds at Hampton Court, possess a large stock of fruit trees and fruit bearing plants, established in pots, comprising vines, pines, figs, peaches, nectarines, strawberries, cherries'.[50] By Beaton's visit in 1856, the nursery had 'a fine large showhouse' and thirteen glasshouses, each house being kept at the appropriate temperature and humidity for particular plants.

Beaton's articles also focused on London exhibitions and policies of the Horticultural Society. In the mid-1850s he was again in dispute with Lindley, this time over colour theory as applied to bedding. Lindley proposed that plants should be grouped according to the notion of complementary, harmonious colours, a proposal based on the principles of the French research chemist, Michel-Eugene Chevreul. This proposal was strongly opposed by Beaton, who believed that the ground colour provided by the green leaves of a bedding display cancelled the effect of complementary colours. [51] The results of trials using graded sequences of warm and cold colours in flower beds at Hampton Court and the Society's garden at Chiswick, supported Beaton's views and Lindley eventually abandoned his theory. [52] In response Beaton was able to ridicule him saying: 'is it not a cause of rejoicing to see a man like Dr. Lindley turned as completely round from the errors of his flower-garden notions, as if his face were between his shoulder-blades?'. [53]

Beaton often featured planting designs in his articles, sometimes submitted by readers, but always promoting his own views on colour schemes and layout. In 1853 he provided a plan for 'a geometric garden for a small space behind a house ... or [with some modification] for a front garden, between the house and the road or street' ***(fig. 22)***.[54] In this he proposed his favourite pillar roses with long rectangular beds of dwarf roses and herbaceous plants, such as *Mimulus*, violets, pansies and poppies. For spring display, the central circular beds were for a mixed tulip display surrounded by larger beds of crocuses, snowdrops, snowflakes and *Ranunculus*. These would be replaced by summer bedding, including *Fuschia* 'Tom

47. DB, 'The New Garden at South Kensington', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* (renamed from *CG*), 1 (11 April 1861), p.375.
48. DB, 'Wellington Road Nursery', *CG*, 16 (12 August 1856), pp.144-46 (p.144).
49. DB, 'Clapton Nursery', *CG* 17 (7 October 1856), pp.4-6; 'Richmond Nursery', *ibid.* (28 October 1856), pp.54-55; 'Kingston Nursery', *ibid.* (11 November 1856), pp.88-89; and 'Exotic Nursery, King's Road, London', *ibid.* (25 November 1856), pp.125-27.
50. *The Kingston Nursery Catalogue* 1851; Kingston Local History Room.
51. For a detailed discussion of colour theory and the bedding system, see Elliott, *Victorian Gardens*, especially pp.123-34.
52. DB, 'Hampton Court Gardens. Arrangement of Colours in Bedding', *CG*, 21 (12 October 1858), pp.17-19.
53. *Ibid.*, (22 March 1859), p.377.
54. DB, 'Flower-Garden Plan – No. 11', *CG*, 11 (22 December 1853), p.213.





22. Donald Beaton, 'Flower-Garden Plan – No. 11', *Cottage Gardener*, 11 (1853), p.213.
Key: 1 - dwarf roses and herbaceous plants; 2 – pillar roses; 3 and 4 – early tulips in spring and white bedding plants in summer; 5-8 – smaller spring bulbs replaced by red and yellow bedding plants in summer

23. Beaton's plan for the Rectory flower garden
(Reproduced from Donald Beaton, 'Flower-Garden Plan', Cottage Gardener, 18 (1857), p.24)

Thumb' and yellow calceolarias (a Mexican introduction), with white *Verbena* or alyssum (*Lobularia maritima*) in the central bed. Beaton used this example to express his opinions about using scarlet-coloured flowers in the centre of beds and the use of 'abominable-shaped beds, as stars, triangles, kidneys, pears, oak-leaf shapes' instead of simple geometric layouts.

Although not generally taking on commissions in retirement, as 'he has not time to attend to his own garden as he would like', Beaton did design a flower garden for the Revd E. Phillips at the rectory of St Mark's Church, Surbiton, the only known planting plan for a small suburban garden in the area for this period ***(fig. 23)***. Implemented in 1853, Beaton considered the plan, 'one of the best ways of laying out flower gardens on a limited scale', although it was amended for the rectory garden: '[It] was altered four years since, and at my suggestion all the flower beds were arranged as in this plan, except that there are no beds in the centre, nor circles in the corners.' [55] He used a combination of brightly coloured flowers - red, pink, yellow, purple and blue - with 'relief' edgings of variegated mint and Virginia stock, according to the rules of colour theory:

> The beds along the centre walk opposite the house must be planted in pairs to match, the same colours in each pair, and the same height in the plants, but there is no objection to using two kinds of plants for them; one kind in a bed or two or three kinds in one bed, and two or three different kinds of the same plant in the opposite bed.

Beaton was also an advisor to Kew Gardens from soon after he retired, on 'condition that I should be allowed to charge nothing for my talking'.[56] In an 1858 article he described how his earlier indiscrete comments to the press about Kew's intention to dispose of plants were rewarded many years later:

> Just fifteen years after that I was called in by Sir W. Hooker, and the Curator, Mr. Smith, to consult about the flower gardening at Kew; and, to my great surprise, I found the greatest and most promising botanist of the age, Dr. Joseph Hooker, to be a regular flower-garden man. He helped me out in some of the suggestions I made, which, I believe, would not have been adopted, were it not for his valuable assistance. [57]

In his advisory position, Beaton reports: 'They made a very bold start at first, when they began to flower-garden here, a few years back, and I gave them all the help I could in kinds of plants', [58] and on the placing of vases on grass plats outside the 'grand conservatory':

> 'there are rules by which all such things can be judged, which are as true as those by which the world and the rest of the planets move in space; and to discuss them, even in my small capacity, will assuredly help to infuse a more correct taste for flower gardening than all that I could write about bedding plants in a twelvemonth.' [59]

Although Beaton's suggestions were not always heeded, following an 1858 visit, he was able to say: 'How much more pleasant it is to write about the progress of improvement, and the steady reformation of character, than to be obliged to record, and to endeavour to rectify, the defects and imperfections of a body of gardeners - say, like that of the Horticultural Society'.[60]

When *The Cottage Gardener* was established in 1848, its editors aimed 'to improve the gardening of the many'. It was addressed 'to those who have gardens of moderate extent' and to 'everyone who has space sufficient for a bed of cabbages, a row of currant trees, and a flower border'.[61] In contrast to facilities during his professional gardening career, Beaton reported soon after his move to Surbiton that 'at present I have neither border, bed, or Geranium', yet he intended to continue crossbreeding experiments: 'improving the races that we use in the decoration of the flower-garden is my peculiar hobby'. [62] He felt

55. DB, 'Flower-Garden Plan', *CG*, 18 (14 April 1857), pp.23-25 (p.23).
56. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG*, 20 (7 September 1858), pp.357-59 (p.358).
57. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG*, 20 (7 September 1858), pp.357-59 (p.358). There is no reference to Beaton's involvement in the Kew archive.
58. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG*, 15 (23 October 1856), pp.50-52 (p.52).
59. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG*, 18 (22 September 1857), pp.388-90 (pp.389-90).
60. DB, 'Kew Gardens', *CG,* 20 (7 September 1858), p.357. See, also, Ray Desmond, *The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew* (London: Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, 2007), pp.175, 176, 196, 347.
61. George W. Johnson and Robert Hogg, 'Introductory', *CG*, 1 (October 1848), p.1.
62. DB, 'Bedding Geraniums', *CG*, 7 (15 January 1852), pp.238-40 (p.238).

part of the local community, writing 'we are all gardeners here in Surbiton' and built up a detailed picture of the importance of gardening, not only in central London, which he regarded as the centre of horticultural advances and fashion, but also in the everyday lives of his neighbours in their smaller suburban gardens. [63]

Beaton introduced readers to local gardening personalities: Mr Walton, the inventor of a bottom-heated case for striking cuttings – 'There is nothing better in any of the London nurseries'; [64] Mr Macrostie, a glass merchant in Kingston, who was the inventor of a new type of hothouse; Mr West, 'the skillful mechanic … who made the first case for Mr Walton'; [65] the manager of the Coco-nut Fibre Mills who provided 'a better compost for the flower garden than any of us ever yet dreamed of';[66] the Revd E. Phillips, 'the incumbent of Surbiton', whose flower garden Beaton designed; [67] and 'My next door friend Mr. Jackson', owner of the Kingston Nursery. He was held in high regard, being described by Mr Walton as 'Mr. Beaton our gardening authority here'. [68] He delighted in his role stating that: 'After all, there is nothing about gardening, from beginning to end, half so interesting to most people as striking cuttings and rearing seedlings from seeds of their own saving.' [69]

In addition to having 'neither border, bed, or Geranium', Beaton states that he had 'neither a hand-glass, nor a frame, cold or hot, nor a greenhouse, nor a stove, nor an orchid house'.[70] Nonetheless, he continued his experiments, making use of what was available to many amateur gardeners. He reported that 'my seeds were in the driest place for seeds ... they were under the glass roof which covers my back kitchen, the ridge being twenty feet above the stew-pans'.[71] He showed that good results could be had under makeshift conditions and gathered together an enthusiastic group of gardeners, keen to participate in 'scientific' horticulture: 'I have many kind neighbours here, who have assisted my experiments materially, by allowing me to see how the plants would stand the greenhouse, the conservatory, the lobby and front hall, the flower-beds and the vases, after they were lifted from the bed in full bloom.' [72] He encouraged reader participation by suggesting simple recording activities based on his own gardening projects:

> What plants do you grow or prefer for 'spring flowers', either as beds, or as edgings to beds, or in mixed patches on a border? Or if you have no garden or plants, could you not tell us the names of all the flowers you recollect to have seen since last Christmas in the gardens of your friends and neighbours, or in those by the wayside … There is nothing more simple than to note down the names of plants as they come into flower in the open ground between this and the middle of May, with or without remarks about them. [73]

Beaton's ambition in retirement was to establish an experimental garden, which he obtained in April 1856, and his readers keenly followed his series of articles on the 'Experimental':

> I have undertaken an experimental garden at last, which will hold 2,000 geraniums, and a proportionate number of all other bedding plants to begin with. Here I shall go over all those hints, suggestions, and general rules, which have appeared, from time to time, in these pages, on the subject of crossing and constraining crosses to sport; and, in addition, I shall have the opportunity of proving any new seedlings which may be sent to me for impartial judgement. [74]

Curiosity was aroused by the 'Experimental', but Beaton refused to give details of its location, as it was 'not my property, neither have I got a lease of it', only admitting that it was in a private garden in

63. DB, 'Potting Cuttings and Seedlings', *CG*, 15 (19 February 1856), pp.364-65 (p.364).
64. DB, 'The Waltonian Propagating Case', *CG*, 15 (11 March 1856), pp.429-31 (p.430).
65. *Ibid.*, p.429.
66. DB, 'Old and New Compost – Keeping Bedding Plants', *CG*, 19 (27 October 1857), pp.48-49 (p.49).
67. DB, 'Flower Garden Plan', *CG*, 18 (14 April 1857), pp.23-25.
68. DB, 'The Waltonian Propagating Case', *op. cit.*, p.430.
69. DB, 'Propagation', *CG*, 12 (5 September 1854), pp.432-34 (p.432).
70. DB, 'Geranium Seeds and Seedlings', *CG*, 12 (13 July 1854), pp.274-75 (p.274).
71. DB, 'Geranium Seeds and Seedlings', *op.cit.*, pp.274-75.
72. DB, 'Pompone Crysanthemums', *CG*, 15 (11 December 1856), pp.175-77 (p.176).
73. DB, 'Spring Flower Beds and Mixed Borders', *CG*, 18 (21 April 1857), pp.32-33.
74. DB, 'Bedding Geraniums', *CG*, 16 (1 April 1856), pp.2-4 (p.3).

Kingston-upon-Thames.[75] However, by piecing together his history of the family and the estate and information from local histories and the 1840 Tithe Map for the Kingston area, it can be identified as in the grounds of Grove House owned by Mary Fassett.[76] The tithe map records that Fassett owned extensive meadowland and property consisting of a 'house, yard, garden and pleasure grounds', but no existing plans or contemporary descriptions of the garden for the 1850s have been found, although its extent can be traced on the 1865 Ordnance Survey Map. [77]

Beaton's articles are the main source of information on the garden at Grove House and indicate that, in addition to its use for plant trials and propagation in the experimental garden, it displayed many features typically found in a mid-nineteenth-century villa garden. He describes what he called 'pincushion beds' under standard roses, beds 'into which you can stick anything out of hand for the moment, or for a whole season'; [78] a conservatory and mixed border opposite the drawing room window; [79] plants of Chinese larkspur, vines, orange trees, camellias and Chinese azaleas;[80] and the erection of a Macrostie hothouse.[81] Beaton also made changes in the main garden, including digging up the old kitchen garden and rosary and transplanting over one hundred mature evergreen trees.[82] The most detailed description of the garden is given in August 1859, more than three years after he first started his experiments there:

> The unique bed, or rustic bed, made out of and round the bole of the old Yew tree, is but one of several rustic beds that give great satisfaction to the owners thereof and to their visiting friends. After the system of baskets and rustic beds … comes the classic vase system; then the promenade method and the rock garden; then through an archway into the real Experimental itself, where is exemplified the composition and balance of colours along the left hand, and the true and beautiful ribbon style on the right. Then, again, there are the mixed borders; in front of shrubberies are lawn plants, as Pampas Grass and *Tritonia uvaria*, with Conifers and concise botanical plants; the rarest to be seen of which is a mathematical grass ... a dwarf grass from the West Indies, which comes to perfection with us out of doors.[83]

When Mary Fassett died in April 1861, Beaton announced in *The Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* (the renamed *The Cottage Gardener*) that 'The owner of the Experimental is no more. The place is advertised for sale, but the executors allowed such plants as were not yet in the hands of the public to be removed to my private garden'.[84] He later reported:

> Mr Nightingale sold this garden, the house and twenty-three acres … on the 16th May, for £15,500. The alterations which were commenced in 1853, consequent on the move for an experimental garden, did not cost altogether over £500, but were acknowledged by good judges in the family to have doubled the value of the estate as early as 1858.[85]

Two years after the closure of the experimental garden, Beaton became unwell – 'suffering from a long continued illness' [86] - and unable to write his articles: 'The Editors will be readily believed when they say that no one feels more deeply than they do the illness which has withdrawn Mr Beaton from their side. They hope it is only a temporary withdrawal, for Mr Beaton is in better health, yet some time before he can resume his pen.' [87] More detail is given of his 'affliction' several

75. DB, 'The Compost Heap. Bedding Geraniums', *CG*, 16 (26 August 1856), pp.380-82 (p.380). He did later state that he had a lease.
76. DB, 'The Experimental Garden', *CG*, 19 (22 December 1857), pp.174-75.
77. The grounds are now covered by Kingston University buildings in Penrhyn Road.
78. DB, 'Pincushion Beds', *CG*, 16 (15 July 1856), pp.271-72 (p.271).
79. DB, 'Visits to Nurseries. Pine Apple Place, Edgware Road, London, Messrs. Arthur Henderson & Co.', *CG*, 18 (23 June 1857), pp.181-82 (p.181).
80. DB, 'Blue Bedder', *CG*, 19 (13 October 1857), pp.16-17 (p.16); 'Pruning the Vine', *ibid.* (20 October 1857), pp.31-32 (p.31); 'Old and New Compost. – Keeping Bedding Plants', *ibid.* (27 October 1857), pp.48-49 (p.49).
81. DB, 'Portable Hothouses', *CG*, 21 (1 February 1859), pp.279-82 (pp.281-82).
82. DB, 'Planting. - Moving Conifers. – Roses and Their Stocks', *CG*, 19 (29 December 1857), pp.192-94.
83. DB, 'Flower-beds and Bedding – Rustic Beds', *CG*, 22 (16 August 1859), pp.283-85 (p.283).
84. DB, 'The Experimental Garden', *Journal of Horticulture and Cottage Gardener* (*The Cottage Gardener* was renamed in 1861, henceforth *JH*), (7 May 1861), pp.94-95 (p.94).
85. DB, 'The Experimental Garden is Sold', *JH*, 1 (28 May 1861), p.156.
86. J. Robson, 'Petunias from New York', *JH*, 4 (5 May 1863), p.327.
87. Eds J of H, 'New Bedding Geraniums', *JH*, 4 (9 June 1863), p.412.

months later:

> We are happy to be able to say that Mr Beaton is physically in the enjoyment of perfect health … The affliction from which [he] is suffering is the rupture of one of the small blood-vessels of the brain … he has lost the faculty of naming both his friends and his plants … In such a state it was necessary that [he] should desist from literary work.[88]

After this first stroke, Beaton continued to 'spend his happy hours' crossbreeding geraniums, until a second stroke in 1863, while 'providing protection for his favourite flowers for the winter', from which he died.[89] He was buried in the churchyard of St Mark's Church, readers donating for a memorial over his grave.[90] Beaton's obituary in *The Journal of Horticulture* catalogued his achievements in the horticultural world, his grasp of botany and his unique ability to bring one to bear on the other with 'an originality of thought, a keen perception, and a strength of intellect'.[91] His last article, published posthumously, was a continuation of a debate on plant breeding with Darwin, who referred to Beaton as 'a clever but damned cocksure man'.[92]

During the years of his retirement Beaton had kept himself, his neighbours and his readers entertained and absorbed by his love of plants and gardening. He had earlier wondered 'what on earth I could do, or be fit for, without a garden, when I left Shrubland Park', but by the time of his death Beaton's experimental work and that of like-minded gardeners in Surbiton and elsewhere had contributed to the impetus for unprecedented progress and enjoyment in the Victorian garden.

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88. Eds J of H, 'Mr Donald Beaton', *JH*, 5 (6 October 1863), p.266.
89. Eds J of H, 'Death of Mr Donald Beaton', *JH*, 5 (3 November 1863), p.349.
90. Eds J of H, 'Memorial to Mr Donald Beaton', *JH*, 5 (17 November 1863), p.385.
91. Eds J of H, 'Death of Mr Donald Beaton', *op.cit.*.
92. Eds J of H, 'The Late Mr Donald Beaton', *JH*, 5 (24 November 1863), pp.415-16. The letters between Darwin and Beaton are summarised in Frederick Burkhardt, Duncan Porter, Sheila Ann Dean, Jonathan R. Topham and Sarah Wilmot (eds), *Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. 11 (1863) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), appendix 2.