

REPORT OF VISIT TO THE HARROGATE FLOWER SHOW AT NEWBY HALL, FRIDAY 17 SEPTEMBER

For the first time the Harrogate Flower Show has been hosted, conveniently from our point of view, at Newby Hall near Ripon: a simple glide down the A1 through the morning mist. Which had burnt away by the time we joined the long snake of cars edging its way along miles of cart track to the parking field. To get an impression of this event, think of three concentric circles, the outer one being Newby Hall and gardens, about which more later. The middle ring was an enormous tented retail park, the tents being of that peaked design in which old films depict mediaeval armies encamped. Streets of them, their wares portraying careful marketing analyses of the buying habits of people who go to flower shows: crafts and more crafts, outdoor clothing, health aids, gardening aids, artisan groceries, and of course things for the shoppers to eat and drink, and be entertained by: a complete tented town. In the middle of which, the inner circle, the core, the whole point of it all, was the flower show. Not that extensive, frankly, but full of beautiful and interesting things.

The floral tent was an enormous oblong space, filled with thousands of brightly coloured blooms, and the people showing them, and the people looking at them. Where to begin? Banks of brilliant dahlias, and rows of beautiful chrysanthemums grouped in vases. Rows of impossibly huge individual chrysanthemums, bigger than one's head and better groomed, in startling colours. Bonsai trees, small and large, if that's not an oxymoron, and everything else, everything even vaguely in season right now.

The vegetable tent was somehow calmer, and deeply traditional: perfect produce speaking for itself. Beautifully pampered specimens of roots and fruits, laid out perfectly, that would be nice to eat. Then the monstrosities, which would probably not be: huge gnarled beetroots, leeks like newel posts, and cabbages that would be too heavy to lift single-handed. Impressive.

The ground floor of Newby Hall itself was open to view, its graceful and very pretty interior festooned and garlanded with arrangements of flowers and autumn produce of various kinds. These were of sculptural proportions: great dominant structures of artistic expression.

Outside, the gardens were wonderful. Extensive, beautifully designed and maintained, with vistas, variety and colour. The garden runs down to the banks of the River Ure, where trips could be taken on a converted barge. A tranquil voyage past nesting swans, the remains of an old chain ferry on which the hunt used to cross, places where otters live, and offering nice views of the house. There are no cables of any kind spoiling the view, so the place is popular with film-makers.