

Henry Thomas Ellacombe (1790–1885): An Indefatigable 19th-Century Polymath and the Creation of the Bitton Vicarage Garden

By JAN BROADWAY

In his *Reminiscences, Chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, Thomas Mozley wrote of Henry Thomas Ellacombe:

He is of that fortunate race – ‘sons of the gods’ they may be truly called – that care for everybody and everything ... I had heard of Ellacombe’s addiction to church bells, to plants and flowers, to armorial bearings and genealogies...¹

At this Society’s meeting held in Bristol in 1878, Ellacombe, the former vicar of Bitton, was described as an ‘able and veteran archaeologist’, and in 1926 Roland Austin numbered him among those distinguished for their knowledge of the history and antiquities of Gloucestershire. He was also the initial creator of the plantsman’s garden at Bitton, which was to become celebrated through the publication of *In a Gloucestershire Garden* (1895) and *In My Vicarage Garden* (1902) by his son Henry Nicholson Ellacombe (1822–1916). Important archival resources provide us with a unique record of a middle-class plantsman’s garden at the beginning of the reign of William IV and of the sources of the plants that filled it. Despite his varied extra-curricular activities, Ellacombe’s primary role was always his ministry as an Anglican vicar. What follows is a brief account of the life, interests and the garden of this 19th-century polymath and clergyman, who according to Joseph Leech was ‘one of the most indefatigable men in the world’.²

A brief account of his life

Henry Thomas Ellacombe grew up in Alphington, near Exeter (Devon), the youngest son of the large, but comfortably off, family of the rector William Ellicombe.³ Two of Ellacombe’s older brothers entered the Church on leaving university. In time they took over the family livings of Alphington and Clyst St George (Devon) as they were vacated by their father and a maternal uncle. Two others joined the army and another became a lawyer. When he was 18, Ellacombe entered Oriel College, Oxford, suggesting he was intended for a clerical career. His family were, however, clearly open to other possibilities, and there were no more family livings to give him a guarantee of future preferment in the Church. When he went to Oxford, one of his elder brothers was in the

1. T. Mozley, *Reminiscences, Chiefly of Oriel College and the Oxford Movement*, 2 vols (1882), I, 75–81.

2. Anon., ‘Transactions at the annual meeting held at Bristol’, *Trans. BGAS* 3 (1878–9), 28; R. Austin, ‘The Society, 1876–1926’, *Trans. BGAS* 48 (1926), 55; J. Leech, *The Church-goer. Rural Rides: or Calls at Country Churches*, 2nd series (1850), 43–53.

3. The basis for this account is taken from the biography of his son: A.W. Hill (ed.), *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe: A Memoir* (1919), 11–31.

Royal Engineers and then working at the Chatham dockyards in Kent.⁴ As the Napoleonic wars convulsed Europe, military engineering was a lucrative and apparently secure profession. Since Ellacombe had developed some skill at drawing and model making, engineering appeared a more attractive possibility after he graduated in 1812 than life as a poorly paid curate. Some samples of his work were shown to Marc Isambard Brunel, who undertook a great deal of work for the navy, and Ellacombe was offered a position in Brunel's office. Shortly after, however, the French defeat at Waterloo brought peace and a consequent reining in of military expenditure. The uncertainty of his career prospects was brought home to Ellacombe, when the Navy Commissioners questioned his salary. He had by this time met his future wife Anne Nicholson, the daughter of a government contractor in Rochester (Kent). The end of the war also meant difficulties for her father, who had been engaged in building defences against a possible French invasion. The need to secure his future before he could marry persuaded Ellacombe to abandon engineering as a career and to seek the more secure embrace of the Church. Nevertheless, he maintained his practical interests throughout his life, continuing to make models and even turned his hand to the intricate task of watch-making. He also remained a member of the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce after he had settled in Gloucestershire. In 1830 Isambard Kingdom Brunel visited Bitton while working on the design for the Clifton suspension bridge.⁵

In 1816 Ellacombe was appointed curate at Cricklade (Wilts.) to the vicar William Macdonald, who was also vicar of Bishop's Cannings (Wilts.) and a prebend at Salisbury cathedral. When the following year Macdonald swapped the vicarage of Cricklade for that of Bitton, Ellacombe moved to the new parish. Bitton was a large parish of 7,165 acres, which included the chapelry of Hanham, the hamlet of Oldland and the district of Kingswood. The church at Bitton was in the south of the parish, 6 miles east of Bristol and a similar distance west of Bath. As curate at Bitton, Ellacombe's salary was £100 a year plus the house and garden.⁶ He supplemented his income by taking pupils, who he prepared for admission to Oxford.⁷ He also inherited some shares in the New River Company, which provided a significant part of London's drinking water supply. Once established in the vicarage, Ellacombe married Anne in 1818.

In 1823 Macdonald became a canon at Salisbury and appointed a new vicar, Maurice Hillier Goodman, in his place at Bitton.⁸ Ellacombe continued to live in the vicarage and serve as curate. His family grew rapidly, and by 1825, when Anne died, the couple had one son and five daughters. In 1827 Ellacombe married Ann Bridges, whose father had been a wealthy banker and merchant from Manningtree (Essex). The Bridges family had been painted by John Constable when Ann was a baby.⁹ The end of the Napoleonic Wars had brought her father close to ruin, while the elopement of her clergyman brother with a Jamaican heiress tinged the family with scandal.¹⁰ By

4. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. Ellicombe, Sir Charles Grene (1783–1871), army officer. The Devon family spelt their name Ellicombe. Henry Thomas Ellacombe changed the spelling of his surname when he became vicar of Bitton in 1835, but to avoid confusion the later spelling is here adopted throughout.
5. *Transactions of the Society Instituted at London for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce* 38 (1821), xiii – Ellacombe was an active member, who had served as steward; University of Bristol Library Special Collections, DM 1277/1.
6. H.T. Ellacombe, *The History of the Parish of Bitton* (1881), I, 1–3; *The British Magazine* 3 (1833), 707.
7. His pupils included Sir Thomas Gladstone (1804–99), older brother of the prime minister; the antiquary and bibliophile Beriah Botfield (1807–63); and the photographer John Dillwyn Llewelyn (1810–82).
8. *Oxford University and City Herald*, 28 June 1823.
9. The painting is now in the Tate collection, ref. N06130.
10. J. Hannavy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography* (2008), 211–12.

the time of her marriage Ann and her family were living in reduced circumstances at Cold Ashton. In April 1831 Ann died following the birth of their second child.

In 1835 Ellacombe married for a third time. His bride Charlotte was the 36 year-old daughter of Robert Palk Welland. Palk Welland was the nephew of Sir Robert Palk of Haldon House, Devon, who had appointed him to the neighbouring, consolidated livings of Shillingford and Dunchideock (Devon) in 1793. Growing up in a neighbouring rectory, Ellacombe would have known the family throughout his life. Palk Welland shared Ellacombe's interest in botany and had made several contributions on the local flora to Richard Polwhele's *History of Devonshire* and to the *Flora Devoniensis* published in 1829. The marriage ceremony was performed by Charlotte's brother Lawrence, who had been a contemporary of Ellacombe's at Oxford. Later in 1835 Goodman resigned as vicar of Bitton and Macdonald then appointed Ellacombe in his place. This meant that his income from the Church rose to £800 a year. This improved income allowed him to greatly extend the vicarage, creating the Tudor Gothic edifice that remains today.¹¹

His elder son, Henry Nicholson Ellacombe, followed in his father's footsteps and was ordained in 1847. After a year as curate at Sudbury (Derbys.), he returned to Bitton as his father's curate. When his brother died in 1849, Henry Thomas Ellacombe succeeded to the family living of Clyst St George (Devon) and his son was appointed vicar of Bitton by William Macdonald, despite his relative youth and inexperience.¹² In 1852 Henry Nicholson Ellacombe married Emily Aprilla Wemyss. Her father, Thomas James Wemyss, was an army officer who served for over 50 years from the Peninsula Wars to the Crimea, ending his career as a General. The marriage produced three sons and seven daughters. Ellacombe's younger son by his second marriage, Walter Bridges Ellacombe, died in 1853, while a student at Oriel. Marianne, the only one of his six daughters to marry, became the second wife of his brother-in-law Lawrence Palk Welland in 1856.¹³ Ellacombe's wife died in 1871. He continued as rector of Clyst St George until his death in 1885, aged 95. After the funeral his body was taken to Bitton for burial.

His religion

At Bitton, Ellacombe was an indefatigable vicar in a sprawling parish. Many of the parishioners lived a long way from the church and consequently rarely, if ever, attended services there. Although there was a substantial number of independent congregations, they were small, if well attended. According to the *Christian Remembrancer*, under these circumstances the mining community in Kingswood had become notorious for 'wickedness and gross immorality'. Following his arrival in the parish, Ellacombe worked to raise money for a new church for Kingswood, while Macdonald agreed to the appropriation of some of the Bitton tithes for its endowment. Holy Trinity, Kingswood, was consecrated by the bishop of Gloucester in 1821, with Ellacombe conducting the first morning service in the new church. The first incumbent at Kingswood built a parsonage and schoolhouse. At the consecration of Kingswood a petition was presented to the bishop, making the case for further church building in the parish. Ellacombe was the moving spirit behind the fundraising that was required before two more churches could be built. At St Anne's, Oldland, the existing medieval chapel was rebuilt to provide greater accommodation in 1830 and a large

11. D. Verey and A. Brooks, *The Buildings of England: Gloucestershire 2* (2002), 193. A surviving inscription in the courtyard dates the main work on the vicarage to 1835.
12. Ellacombe's nephew Francis Rous Ellicombe, the only son of his brother and predecessor as rector of Clyst St George William Rous Ellicombe, died at Oxford in 1834.
13. Palk Welland died in 1859. By his first wife Caroline Stone of Chiselhurst, Kent (d. 1844), he had a son Lawrence (1842–87), who succeeded his father as rector of Talaton (Devon).

schoolhouse was built nearby. In 1842 Christ Church on Jefferies Hill, Hanham, was consecrated. Here the substantial church was accompanied by a parsonage and schoolroom.

Significant restoration and remodelling of Bitton church was carried out by Ellacombe throughout his incumbency, and subsequently continued by his son. Some of the restoration work on doors and windows is dated 1822 and 1823, when Ellacombe was the curate, while the neo-Norman chancel arch dates from 1847. Ellacombe also organized the building of a schoolroom in Bitton, where he ran a Sunday school.¹⁴ When he arrived at Clyst St George, he immediately set about refurbishing the interior and restoring the tower, which had been damaged by lightning in 1846. In 1860 he built a schoolhouse there too.¹⁵

Ellacombe's programme of work at Bitton meant that the number of services in the parish on a Sunday increased from two to eight, more than 2,000 extra worshippers could be accommodated and there was Sunday school accommodation for over 800 children. The children were entertained annually at the vicarage. On 31 August 1836, following his installation as vicar, he entertained nearly 200 children from Bitton, Oldland and Hanham to a somewhat unseasonal lunch of roast beef and plum pudding, followed by sports on the vicarage lawn.¹⁶ The provision of pews, however, seems to have exceeded demand among his parishioners. The figures for church attendance in 1851 show that, when the census was taken, the congregations at Bitton and Hanham occupied under 40% of the available seating, while the incumbent at Oldland refused to make a return, and no attendance figures were provided for Kingswood. The census reveals that, for all his indomitable energy, Ellacombe fought a losing battle against the independent churches and chapels.¹⁷

One factor in Ellacombe's lack of success in filling his churches may have been the nature of his religious observance. Oriel was pre-eminently the college of the Oxford Movement, and Ellacombe was an early supporter. In 1822 the pews at Bitton were modified, so that the whole congregation should face east. Ellacombe introduced chanting into services and the segregation of the men and women seated in the free seats of the church. To the chagrin of the bellringers, he insisted that they should attend the services, rather than loitering in the churchyard until the service was over. He also prohibited the ringing of the bells for non-ecclesiastical purposes, such as elections, lawsuits and clandestine marriages, or for prizes. This was all part of his contribution in the cause of restoring 'a better discipline, and a more legitimate and correct system in all church matters'.¹⁸ Despite his High Church views, Ellacombe was extremely dismayed when reading John Henry Newman's sermons led his eldest daughter Jane to break off her engagement in 1843 and commit herself to a single life. Ellacombe wrote to Newman, a fellow of his old college, seeking his help in persuading Jane to change her mind, but to no avail. Two years later she became one of the founder members of Pusey's sisterhood at Regent's Park, London.¹⁹

14. The schoolroom cost £350, of which £185 came from the National Society and the remainder from local benefactors: *The British Magazine* 3 (1833), 707.

15. *The Parish Church of Clyst St. George* (undated guide); Hill, *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe*, 29. The church at Clyst St George was destroyed by an incendiary bomb in 1940.

16. *Devizes & Wiltshire Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1836; Hill, *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe*, 24.

17. *The Christian Remembrancer*, Jan. 1822, 8–10; 'Biographical Note on H.T. Ellacombe', *Glos. Notes & Queries* 3 (1887), 230–1; A. Munden (ed.), *The Religious Census of Bristol and Gloucestershire 1851* (2015), 380–9.

18. Ellacombe, *Hist. of Bitton*, I, 16; Leech, *Church-goer*, 46. The British Library holds a copy of *A Course of Singing Psalms* (Bristol, 1820) endorsed on the title page: 'For the use of S. Mary's church Bitton co. Gloucester'; H.T. Ellacombe, *Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers* (4th edn, 1878), 2, 5, 23.

19. F.J. McGrath (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, IX (2006), 467–8, 477–8.

Antiquarianism, bells and campanology

From an early stage Ellacombe manifested an informed curiosity in the antiquarian aspects of subjects which interested him. In 1813, while working for Brunel, he wrote to James Watt, seeking documents and drawings concerning the early design of the steam engine.²⁰ In 1814 he subscribed to John James Park's *Topography and Natural History of Hampstead* and his name appears in the visitors' book for the armoury of Dr Samuel Rush Meyrick, which was exhibited in London in the 1820s.²¹ From his arrival in Bitton he began collecting material relating to the history of the parish, and when opportunities arose he examined the records held in London. As early as 1823 he was intending to write a history of the parish, although the idea took decades to produce fruit. He was a contributor to *Notes and Queries* from its first appearance in 1849, but it was only in 1867 that his account of the manorial history appeared in the *Herald & Genealogist*. This account was published separately two years later as *A Memoir of the Manor of Bitton*. That same year the account of Thomas de Bitton, bishop of Exeter (d. 1310), was discovered among the cathedral archives. With the encouragement of John Bruce and the editorial assistance of William Hale, archdeacon of St Paul's, Ellacombe's edition of this was published by the Camden Society in 1874. In 1875 he read a paper on Bitton church to the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society. Six years later the first volume of *The History of the Parish of Bitton* was privately printed in Exeter. The second volume, which included a flora prepared by his son, appeared in 1883.²² He also researched the history of Clyst St George and a paper he read to the Exeter Diocesan Architectural Society on that subject in 1862 was also published.

His wider antiquarian interests were reflected in the societies of which he was an active member. He was elected to fellowship of the Society of Antiquaries in March 1827. Three decades later he was the local secretary for Devon.²³ In June 1835 he joined the Oxford University Genealogical and Heraldic Society, which had been formed the previous February, and in 1838 he became a member of the newly-founded Camden Society.²⁴ By 1846 he was the Gloucestershire secretary for the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain, which had been established two years before.²⁵

Ellacombe had a particular interest in ecclesiastical architecture and antiquities. In the church at Bitton he displayed what Joseph Leech described as an 'old curiosity shop' of his antiquarian collection with a card inviting 'any Camdenian, Antiquarian, or member of an Architectural Society' visiting the church to call at the vicarage. When work on the churchyard at Bitton in 1829 uncovered two medieval monuments below the soil, he sent notes on the find to the Society of Antiquaries. The following year he sent the *Gentleman's Magazine* an account of the chapel at Oldland, which was swept away by the work on the new church, accompanied by a view of the chapel from the south-west.²⁶ This interest in ancient church architecture did not prevent him

20. J.P. Muirhead, *The Origin and Progress of the Mechanical Inventions of James Watt*, II (1854), 341–3. The original letter from Watt is preserved in Houghton Library, Harvard University, Autograph File, W, 1585–1978.

21. The Meyrick visitors' book is preserved in the archive of the Wallace Collection, Manchester Square, London, which acquired much of the arms and armour in 1871.

22. Ellacombe, *Hist. of Bitton*, I, preface; I. Gray, *Antiquaries of Gloucestershire and Somerset* (1981), 101–2; *The Herald and Genealogist* 4 (1867), 193–212, 311–20.

23. The Society of Antiquaries of London, 23 Apr. 1847, list of Fellows; K. Hudson, *A Social History of Archaeology* (1981), 43.

24. *Report of the Proceedings of the Oxford University Genealogical and Heraldic Society up to June 16, 1835*, 7.

25. *The Archaeological Journal* 2 (1846), list of members.

26. 'The Church-goer's Rural Rides: or Calls at Country Churches', *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 12 Apr. 1845; *Archaeologia* 22 (1829), 437–8; *Gentleman's Magazine* 23.2 (1830), 393.

destroying Anglo-Saxon elements in the architecture of Bitton during the course of his work on the church.

Ellacombe took both a practical and an antiquarian interest in church bell-ringing and was possibly the first scholarly campanologist. His *Practical Remarks on Belfries and Ringers* (1849) drew on his experience of reforming bell-ringing at Bitton, where he introduced an ingenious apparatus of chiming hammers, to enable one person to chime all the bells in a steeple. This was a practical response to the notorious drunkenness of 19th-century campanologists. His later restoration of the tower at Clyst St George included the installation of a peal of six bells, where previously there had been only three. He published accounts of the church bells in Devon, Somerset and Gloucestershire. Mozley records that to ascertain the size, tone, quality, date and legend of the Devon bells, Ellacombe ‘went about suitably apparelled and with proper tools and materials, running up every tower’ in the county. For his accounts of the Somerset and Gloucestershire bells he resorted to circulating a lithographed questionnaire, which resulted in less accurate and authoritative surveys.²⁷ By publishing the rules that he introduced for the bell-ringers at Bitton, Ellacombe hoped to discourage the excessive and over-enthusiastic bell-ringing practices that had damaged many of the church towers he surveyed. Following his death in August 1885, campanologists across the country rang muffled peals in his honour.²⁸

Horticulture and the development of the Bitton vicarage garden

Among the written tributes to Ellacombe after his death was an obituary by the Irish horticulturalist and doyen of wild gardening William Robinson in his journal *The Garden*. Ellacombe had been a regular contributor to the journal, and two years previously Robinson had dedicated its 23rd volume to him. The obituary described Ellacombe as the patriarch of the hardy gardening fraternity, of which Robinson was also an enthusiastic adherent. In an earlier description of the garden at Bitton, following a visit in the spring of 1873, Robinson had described its collection of plants as one of the most interesting in Britain.²⁹ The foundations of the collection were laid by Ellacombe, although it was subsequently developed and made well-known by his son.

One of the most intractable questions for a garden historian to answer is what plants ordinary people in the past actually grew. The catalogues of plants from botanic gardens and lists of those supplied to aristocratic households inform us what was grown in great gardens, while nursery catalogues and newspaper advertisements tell us what the trade hoped to supply, but not whether that was what people actually bought. The records of Ellacombe’s collection at Bitton, however, are unusual in that they relate to a middle-class gardener, albeit one who was a dedicated and determined plantsman. These records include two lists, one of around 750 trees and shrubs that were growing in his 1½-acre garden in December 1830 and another of around 2,000 herbaceous plants, orchids, ferns and aquatics made the following year. These were published in *The Garden* half a century later. The earlier list included almost 250 varieties of rose – large, single-flowering shrub roses, not the neat hybrid teas of the modern rose garden.³⁰ This was a garden full of plants, the outdoor equivalent of the late Victorian drawing-room stuffed with furniture and knick-

27. British Library, Add. MSS 33202–6; Mozley, *Reminiscences*, 76; H.T. Ellacombe, *The Church Bells of Devon: with a list of those in Cornwall* (1872); H.T. Ellacombe, *The Church Bells of Somerset* (1875); H.T. Ellacombe, *The Church Bells of Gloucestershire* (1881).

28. See, for example, the reports in the *Cornishman* and the *Manchester Courier & Lancashire Advertiser* for 13 Aug. 1885.

29. *The Garden*, 8 Aug. 1885; 7 July 1883; 26 Apr. 1873.

30. *Ibid.* 31 July 1880; 24 Dec. 1881.

knacks. Yet there was also enough lawn to accommodate the Sunday school children and their sports. The lists of plants are supplemented by a collection of letters received by Ellacombe from a range of nurseries, botanic gardens and horticulturalists between 1827 and 1840. These were deposited at Kew by Henry Nicholson Ellacombe after his father's death and allow us to see how a Gloucestershire curate was able to develop such an extensive collection.³¹

It is clear from the correspondence at Kew that by 1827 Ellacombe already had a significant collection of unusual plants. His interest in gardening developed in his youth. In 1875 he described his experience as extending over 60 years and recalled that even as a child he had his collection of plants.³² Alphington on the outskirts of Exeter was an excellent place for the nurture of a future horticulturalist. The mild climate of the south-west was favourable to the new plants from the Americas and the South African Cape, which began to arrive in England in the late 18th century. This encouraged local gentlemen to develop collections of exotic plants and the packet boat captains landing at Falmouth in Cornwall knew there was a ready market for imported seeds and plants. Within a mile of the rectory was William Luccombe's nursery, which was celebrated for supplying camellias, heaths and other imported exotics.³³ Less than 5 miles away was Haldon House, bought around 1770 by Charlotte Ellacombe's great uncle Sir Robert Palk, who had removed the formal garden and replaced it with a fashionable landscape garden planted with thousands of new trees. Some ten miles away was Killerton, where the native trees raised by John Veitch for Sir Thomas Acland's park led to the development of a commercial nursery. In the next generation the Veitch nursery became famous for the introduction and promotion of exotic species and, even after the premises were moved closer to Exeter in the 1830s, its close relationship to the Aclands and Killerton was reflected in the development of the parkland.³⁴

In his approach to gardening Ellacombe adopted a practical, methodical and thorough approach that reflected his training as an engineer. He was interested in individual plants rather than the design of the garden as a whole, and he wanted plants that would thrive in his garden without molly-coddling. Like the majority of gardeners, he could not afford to shelter tender plants in a stovehouse during the winter. This was an era when hundreds of new plants were flooding into England each year from collectors all over the world, and Ellacombe was particularly interested in discovering which of these plants would prove hardy in Gloucestershire. Some he was able to obtain from local nurseries in Bristol, where Australian plants could be obtained from John Miller and William Maule specialized in American bog plants. Ellacombe also bought plants from a number of nurseries in and around London and imported bulbs directly from Dutch specialists.³⁵ Further afield, the Bartram Botanic Garden in Philadelphia operated a commercial nursery, which exported boxes of plants to English enthusiasts. Ellacombe purchased a box of 38 American plants from them for \$12 in 1833.³⁶

Keen plantmen could also extend their collections by exchange. In 1825 William Jackson Hooker, professor of botany at Glasgow, advocated this in the preface to a printed catalogue of plants in the Glasgow botanic garden:

By means of it Botanists and Horticulturists may have the opportunity, as they see a list of what we possess, of ascertaining what we still want, and will be able likewise to form some idea of what it may

31. Royal Botanic Gardens Kew Library, Henry Thomas Ellacombe Correspondence [hereafter Kew Corresp.].

32. *The Garden* 8 (1875), 499.

33. J. Harvey, *Early Nurserymen* (1974), 72.

34. S. Shephard, *Seeds of Fortune: A Gardening Dynasty* (2003).

35. Harvey, *Early Nurserymen*, 102; Kew Corresp. ff. 90, 169–74, 193; Hill, *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe*, 161.

36. Kew Corresp. f. 46.

be in our power to offer in return: for, where we possess duplicates, we have ever held it to be amongst our greatest pleasures to distribute to those who take an interest in the same pursuits with ourselves.³⁷

By the following year Ellacombe was compiling catalogues of his plants and sending them out along with lists of plants and seeds he hoped to obtain by exchange. This is the origin of the lists, which were later printed in *The Garden*. Some of these plants were well-established in gardens and available from local nurserymen (60% of his trees and shrubs appeared in the 1826 catalogue of John Miller's Bristol nursery).³⁸ Others represent the products of his successful exchange of plants with other collectors.

Of the major botanic gardens approached by Ellacombe, both Oxford and Kew had been neglected for some years. William Baxter, the long-serving gardener at Oxford, sadly reported that they had few of the hardy plants Ellacombe sought, and that his collection of various genera was better than their own. In November 1827 Baxter's selection of the plants he would like from Ellacombe's list was almost three times the number of plants he was sending to Bitton. Similarly, a consignment of plants for Bitton sent from Kew included a list of more than twice as many that they would like in return, although Ellacombe appears to have achieved a more equal exchange with William Anderson, curator of Chelsea Physic garden.

In addition to the long-established botanic gardens, there were also new foundations often funded by subscription. In 1826 a piece in *The Gardener's Magazine* described the botanic garden at Bury St Edmunds, founded six years before, noting that its curator was allowed to dispose of superfluous plants to subscribers only, and that a lower rate of subscription was available for those living more than 10 miles from the garden. Ellacombe promptly paid his guinea and began another fruitful exchange. He also contributed plants from his collection to the Birmingham botanical garden, which opened in 1832.³⁹ Contacts with botanic gardens also brought indirect access to plant hunters. In 1831 Thomas Drummond set out to explore America with support from the Glasgow botanic garden, partly funded by enthusiasts like Ellacombe, who subscribed 10 guineas in return for seeds. Communication between Bitton and Glasgow was facilitated by the steam packet service that operated from Bristol via Liverpool. Steamboats also sailed from Bristol to Dublin, enabling Ellacombe to exchange plants with the gardens established by the Royal Dublin Society at Glasnevin and Trinity College at Ballsbridge. In his search for plants, Ellacombe did not limit his correspondence to the British Isles, having by 1831 established contact with botanic gardens in Paris and Berlin. Three years later he was exchanging letters with the director of the imperial garden in St Petersburg.

In 1829 a horticultural society was established in Bristol with the nurseryman John Miller as its first secretary. Ellacombe became an active member, entering his plants into their regular competitions and providing baskets of flowers to decorate the hall.⁴⁰ Bath gained its own horticultural society two years later, and regular shows were held in Sydney Gardens. In 1833 separate discussions about establishing botanic gardens were on-going in Bristol and Bath. It was suggested that a single garden situated between the two might be a practical solution to finding sufficient subscribers to proceed. The location suggested was Bitton:

where there is an extremely rich soil of warm dry alluvial gravel, a favourable southern aspect, a warm climate, and the important advantage that a gentleman resides there who already possesses on the spot

37. W.J. Hooker, *A Catalogue of Plants contained in The Royal Botanic Garden of Glasgow* (1825), preface.

38. *A Catalogue of Forest Trees, Evergreen and Flowering Shrubs, Fruit Trees, Herbaceous, Green-House, and Hot-House Plants, cultivated and sold by John Miller, Nurseryman, Seedsman and Florist* (1826).

39. *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 27 Oct. 1834.

40. *Hampshire Chronicle*, 27 May 1833; *Bristol Mercury*, 19 Apr. 1834.

as rich and numerous a collection of plants as, perhaps, any individual can boast of, whose zeal and activity in horticultural and botanical pursuits are indefatigable, who has an extensive correspondence with foreign botanists, and who probably could be induced, upon adequate terms, to impart not only his numerous plants, but his invaluable aid and superintendence as the curator of the intended garden.⁴¹

From this it is clear that the extent of Ellacombe's horticultural activity was well-known locally. The idea of establishing the proposed garden at Bitton was never likely to obtain majority support in either city and was quietly dropped. Instead, sufficient subscribers were obtained in Bristol by combining horticulture with animals to form the zoological gardens, while in Bath a short-lived botanic garden was established in Victoria park.

One of the main proponents of the Bath botanic garden was William Kent, with whom Ellacombe regularly exchanged plants. Kent was a member of the London Horticultural Society and had developed an extensive collection at Clapton, specializing in aquatic plants, before retiring to Bath. Ellacombe also grew a range of aquatic plants, presumably in containers as he did later at Clyst St George, as there appears to have been no pond at Bitton.⁴² William Kent became well-known as a collector through his provision of specimens for botanical illustrations and contributions to the gardening press. By 1832 Ellacombe was also writing letters to the gardening journals and his status as a plantsman was enhanced by the acknowledgement of his provision of plants for illustration in works such as Robert Sweet's *The British Flower Garden* and Benjamin Maund's *The Botanic Garden*.⁴³ The following year he was a subscriber to *Hortus woburnensis*, a catalogue of the plants grown at Woburn abbey. As he became known as a plantsman, the network of fellow enthusiasts with whom Ellacombe corresponded and exchanged plants stretched across England and into Scotland.

Ellacombe remained a keen gardener and plantsman after his move to Devon. Situated 4 miles south-east of Exeter, Clyst St George was in close proximity to the Veitch nursery at Exeter, which had begun to send its own collectors to acquire exotic new plants from around the world. However, although the climate in south Devon was benign, the soil in the rectory garden was wretched. Having left the majority of his plants for his son at Bitton, Ellacombe lacked the energy and enthusiasm as he entered his seventh decade to create a second monumental collection in his new garden.⁴⁴ Despite this, while his interests were less wide-ranging than before, he still had interesting plants of which seeds and cuttings were sent to his son at Bitton. He demonstrated his continuing interest in the new and exotic in 1863, when it came to the choice of a tree for the visiting archbishop of Canterbury to plant in the churchyard at Clyst St George. He chose a *Wellingtonia*, the first seeds of which had been brought back to England by the Veitch collector William Lobb just a decade before. Throughout the remainder of his life Ellacombe remained willing to share his experience, expertise and plants with others. He made various contributions to *The Garden*, describing himself as 'the old gardener'. He had always been keen on growing yuccas, having 11 varieties at Bitton in 1831 and in 1870 *Yucca Ellacombei* was named in his honour by the botanist John Gilbert Baker. Having built his collection through the generosity of others, Ellacombe was equally open-handed with the products of his own garden. In 1883 he published in *The Garden* a short note concerning *Lathyrus sibthorpei*, which he had received from William

41. J.C. Loudon, *The Gardener's Magazine* (1833), 463; *Bristol Mercury*, 29 June 1833.

42. *The Garden* 15 (1899), 68.

43. Robert Sweet (1783–1835) had strong links to Bristol, where his half-brothers had founded a nursery in partnership with John Miller and his father.

44. *The Garden* 8 (1875), 499–500.

Baxter of the Oxford botanic garden more than 50 years before and offered seeds freely to anyone who wrote to him for them.⁴⁵

Conclusion

At Bitton, Ellacombe's legacy was maintained and developed by his son, who remained there as vicar until his death in 1919. Henry Nicholson Ellacombe shared his father's High Church views and antiquarian interests. Like his father, he refashioned the parish church, later describing the historical context of their efforts:

In the last century, or at the end of the 18th, the churchwardens destroyed the rood screen, the old seats, and the old roof, and put up an elaborate Tuscan reredos, very ugly, as we should say, but costly and well worked. My father, in 1820, destroyed all their work as far as he could, and did some excellent work in the fashion of the day. Most of his work I destroyed, and received his thanks and approval for so doing. I have little doubt that my successors will undo much of my work; and the time may come when they will restore the Tuscan reredos. To such an event I look forward with a very light heart; if the work is done solely *in majorem Dei gloriam*, I wish them all success.⁴⁶

Henry Nicholson Ellacombe was among the first members of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society.⁴⁷ The garden at Bitton became a horticultural Mecca, particularly once descriptions of it appeared in his column for *The Guardian* and his subsequent books, and like his father he was known for his generosity with plants. It seems to be only the genes for engineering and bell-ringing were not passed on, causing Henry Thomas Ellacombe in his will to leave his models of a printing press and tower bells as well as his collection of handbells to the South Kensington museum (now the Victoria and Albert). The church at Bitton and those Ellacombe helped to build at Kingswood, Oldland and Hanham remain active places of Anglican worship. The vicarage still stands at Bitton, but was sold as a private house in 1951 and, apart from a few trees and shrubs, the ephemeral collection of plants has been lost.

45. *Ibid.* 23 (1883), 590.

46. Hill, *Henry Nicholson Ellacombe*, 289.

47. *Trans. BGAS* 2 (1877–8), 18.