



BARRON'S EXPERTISE

William Barron was born in Berwickshire in 1805. He was a gifted boy who excelled at school and his father, a Scot from Aberdeen, gave his son every encouragement. At thirteen William took first prize in mathematics in a class of ninety-four and as a reward his father allowed him to learn Latin! It turned out that he had a gift for languages and in later years mastered French and Greek, and also enough Hebrew to enable him to read his Bible in the original text.

No doubt he could have entered a variety of careers but at an early age William Barron became interested in gardening and this was soon his main study and ambition. At eighteen, after his apprenticeship at the Blackadder estate in Berwickshire, he went to the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. There he gained wide practical knowledge and was able to continue his studies, attending lectures in botany, chemistry, natural philosophy and mechanics. At twenty-two he left Scotland and for three years worked for the Duke of Northumberland at Syon House.

William Barron came to Elvaston in August 1830, employed by the 4th Earl of Harrington to make him a garden 'second to none'. Soon after his arrival in Derbyshire he viewed the task with misgiving. The land was flat and water-logged and apart from two avenues of trees planted by the 3rd Earl, at the suggestion of Capability Brown, had never been landscaped. There was an enclosed kitchen garden of two acres but no hothouses, and the Harrington's head gardener, retired after forty years, warned Barron that the high water levels prevented anything flourishing before June. He pointed out a large open drain crossing the grounds which, in his opinion, could not be lowered.

Later William Barron was to record the experience: *'I had made up my mind that after proving his statement to be correct, I should relinquish my charge, but on going over the whole with my spirit level, I found, that commencing a mile from the garden, I could lower the stream four feet seven inches, this I did at once, and cut drains in the Kitchen Garden six feet deep, and for days the water ran through the pipes into the brook with a black and fetid smell. Thus the foundation was laid for successful operations all over the grounds.'*

While this drainage was in progress there was time to plan how best to carry out the 4th Earl's wishes. Barron got on well with Lord Harrington whom he described as *'a nobleman, every inch of him. He never treated me like a servant, but more as a brother'*. Together the two men discussed and planned each stage of the garden. It was a partnership which lasted until the Earl's death twenty years later, but in those early years it gave

William Barron the chance to fulfil a long held ambition.

'From the commencement of my professional studies, I have been passionately fond of evergreens, and cherished the scheme of planting them largely, whenever an opportunity should be presented which would enable me to do so.'

And so William Barron began to design a winter garden, planting avenues of pines and conifers which would soon form shelter for more tender specimens and in time would grow to great height and splendour. At first the Earl thought of evergreens in terms of the familiar laurels, common yews and holly, but before long he found Barron's enthusiasm infectious and work gathered pace.

Unlike many of the nobility Lord Harrington was not a member of the Horticultural Society and found he was unable to buy at source and had to rely on stocks from public nurseries. This was unsatisfactory and so Barron began a programme of propagation, putting to use the many skills he had learned at Edinburgh and elsewhere. A tree nursery was established with the result that as each new area was designed it could be cultivated and planted immediately. Lord Harrington was always impatient to see his ideas take shape and with each new project was, according to Barron, *'like a child with a new toy'*. Work went on unceasingly as Barron supervised his staff of over eighty gardeners.

Once the initial clearing and planting of the avenues had been achieved Barron began work on a sixteen acre Pinetum, collecting and planting every available species. In time Elvaston became a showcase with rare and interesting trees that were to be found nowhere else in Britain. As the trees matured Lord Harrington began to see his winter garden taking shape with its year round variety of greens and yellows, grey, gold and silver.

The tree moving operations for which Barron was to become so famous began soon after his arrival at Elvaston. In November 1830 the Earl pointed out three Cedars of Lebanon ranging from twenty-eight to thirty-five feet in height and asked if they could be moved according to the methods given in Sir Henry Stewart's book on the subject. This method was achieved by digging a deep trench around the tree which was then filled with good rich soil. A new root system was allowed to grow in this soil and then two years later the tree was lifted and moved to its new site. Barron began the operation but not before explaining to Lord Harrington that Sir Henry Stewart moved deciduous trees during their dormant period and carried them horizontally. To transfer a large cedar



The yew, *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*, was propagated and named by Barron.

tree and keep it upright so as not to damage the branches was a very different matter.

In this project, too, the Earl's impatience took over and to Barron's amazement he asked for the trees to be moved to their new positions in February 1831, less than three months after the trenches were dug. Much later, in his book *The British Winter Garden*, Barron was to recall those early days at Elvaston.

'In pointing out to my noble employer the utter impossibility of accomplishing his object . . . and witnessing his disappointment . . . I told him that if he would risk his trees, and would support me in forming a system that would answer, I would risk my character, which was all that I could afford . . . and would attempt their removal in February . . . The thought occurred to me that if it were possible to remove a tree with a large mass of earth, something similar to that containing the roots, after Sir Henry Stewart's preparation, I should be stealing a march upon him, and be as forward at once as he would be in two years. I then set about conquering the mechanical difficulty . . .'

In this task Barron succeeded, boring tunnels under the trunk and inserting heavy wooden beams which supported the tree when it was levered up and hauled to its new site. To Lord Harrington's delight the three cedar trees were successfully transplanted in February 1831. They were the first of many. In November another cedar forty-three feet tall with branches forty-eight feet in diameter was moved from the front of the castle to the bottom of the Garden of the Fair Star. From then on Barron scoured the countryside for fine specimens, some of them yews hundreds of years old, which were brought distances of up to twenty miles to grace the gardens at Elvaston.

By the late 1840s Elvaston was transformed. The theme gardens to the south of the castle were well established, while to the north-east lay a large ornamental lake landscaped with islands and rockwork. Behind the eleven miles of yew and holly

hedges Elvaston Castle remained a secluded and unknown place. To the end of his life the 4th Earl of Harrington refused to allow visitors to share his exotic world. *'If the Queen comes, Barron'* he once said, *'show her round, but admit no one else.'*



William Barron, 1800–1891.

William Barron's method of transplanting mature trees.

