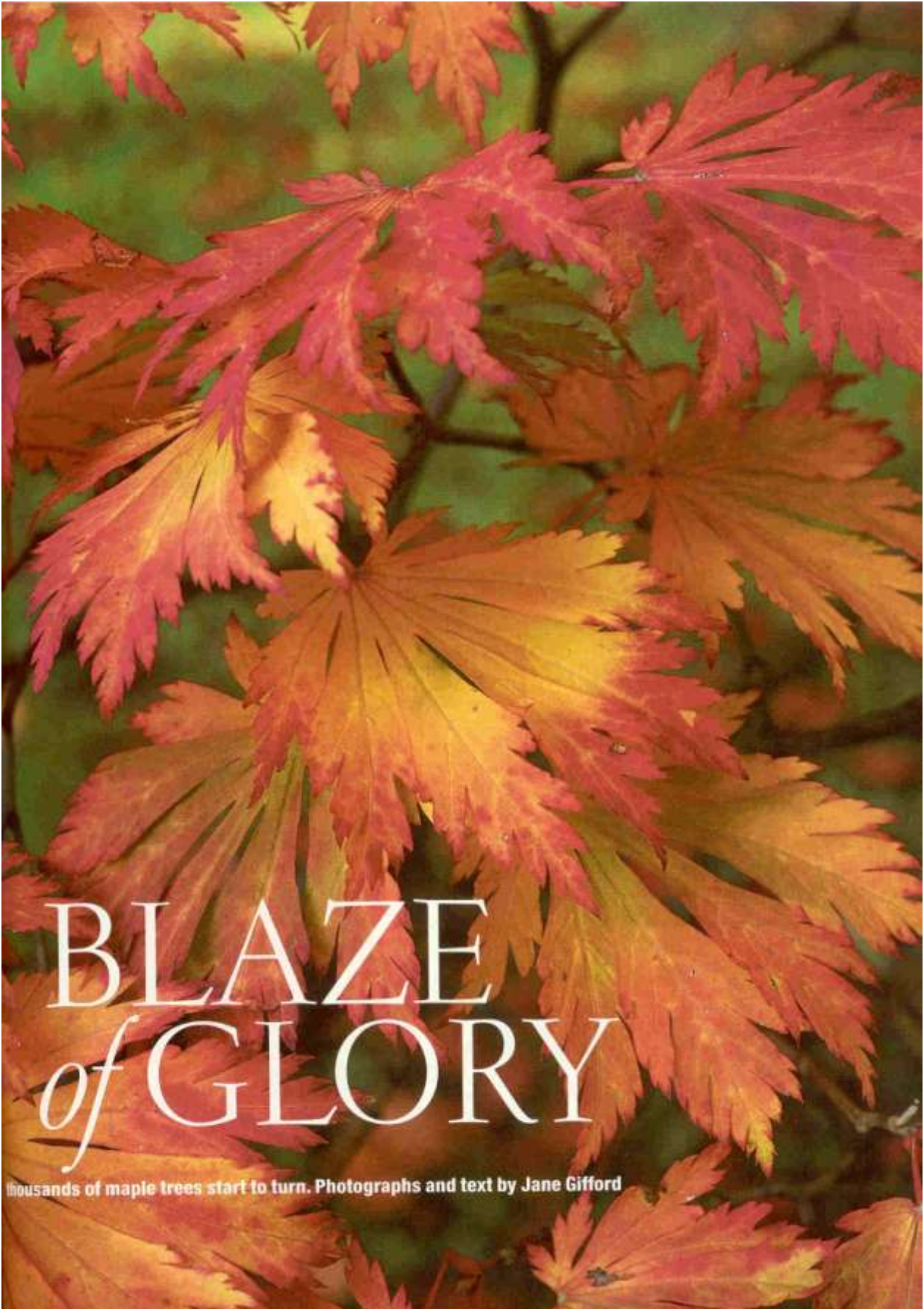


This page The intense hues of *Acer palmatum* 'Osakazuki' and (right) *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium' last well into November

Every autumn, Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire bursts into rich ruby reds, pinks and golds as



BLAZE *of* GLORY

thousands of maple trees start to turn. Photographs and text by Jane Gifford

With 17 miles of way-marked paths to explore, you cannot reasonably see all of Westonbirt in a day. This is a major part of its charm.

Each visit shows you something new as you get to know the place

On a dull day, with winter closing in fast, an unexpected shaft of sunlight can lift your spirits for a moment – and when it passes through the autumn canopy of Westonbirt Arboretum, the sun brings an added shot of dazzling colour to your system. Robert Stayner Holford understood this feeling. He started collecting trees at Westonbirt House, Gloucestershire, in the early 1850s. He loved trees noted for their autumn colour, particularly Japanese maples, and by setting the maples against a background of evergreen conifers, Holford made their autumn colours even bolder.

Gradually, Holford turned wind-blasted, open pasture around Westonbirt into peaceful woodland, creating ideal sheltered conditions for growing more tender exotic species of trees and shrubs as his collection grew. Instead of grandiose landscaping, Holford relied on the trees and shrubs themselves for atmosphere, variety and amenity. The arboretum is intersected by wide rides, where Holford and his friends could gallop towards open views of the surrounding countryside, while intimate winding footpaths meander for miles through the peaceful trees, luring you from formal avenues of tall specimen trees to secluded glades.

The Holfords prided themselves on being the first to acquire the many new plants pouring into England from around the world. But their spirit of one-upmanship was accompanied by a real appreciation of trees and most of Holford's early planting has survived into maturity. Many trees are now not only the oldest of their kind in Britain, but also the largest.

From about 1875, Robert's son, Sir George Holford, took over the collection. George also loved maples and continued to plant them everywhere. By the early 1900s, Sir George and Lady Holford's autumn "colour parties" had become a key society event on the horticultural calendar. His nephew, the 4th Earl of Morley,

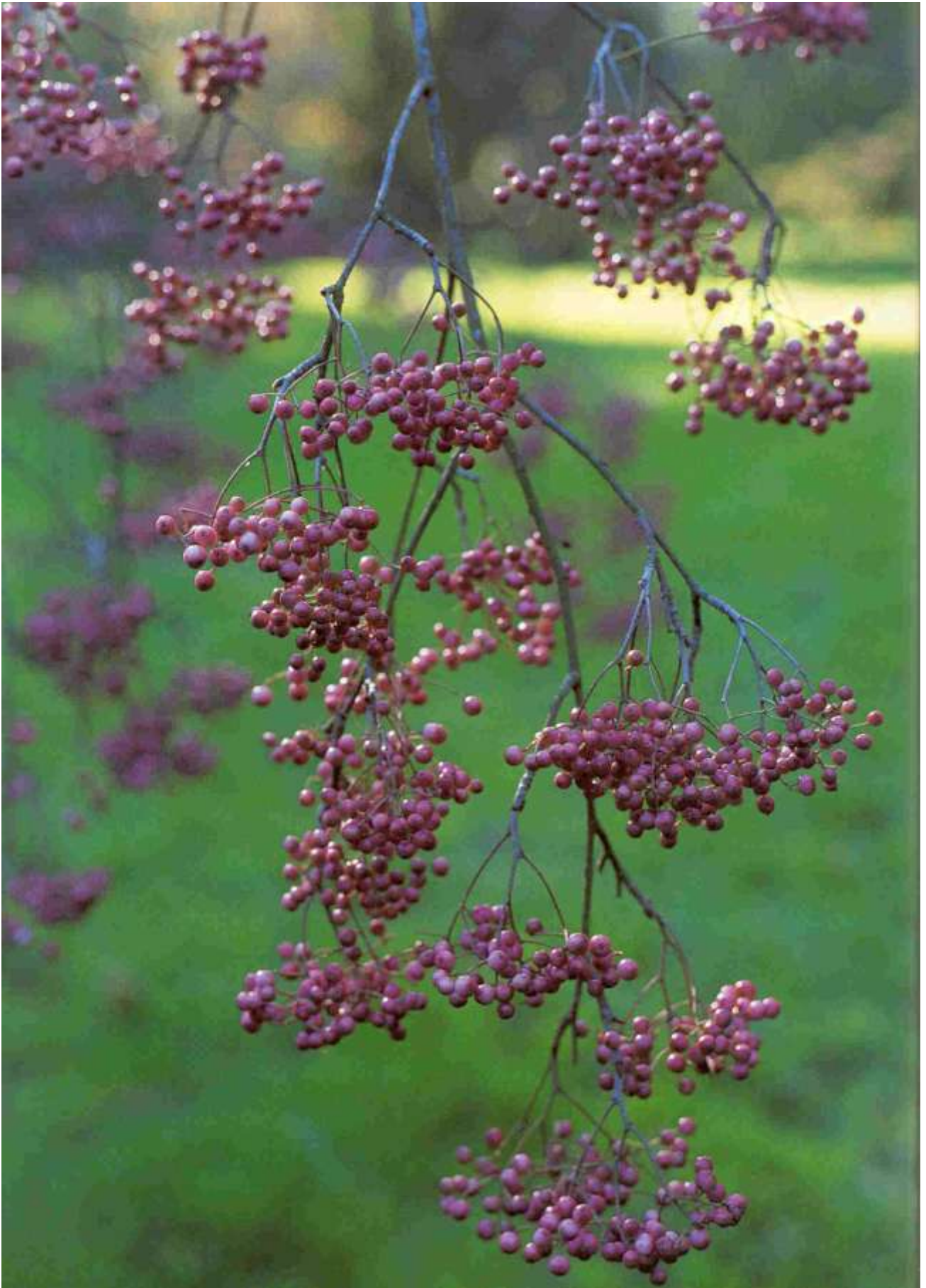


Main picture *Sorbus vilmorini* **Above** *Acer maximowiczianum* (Nikko maple) and yellow *A. platanoides* (Norway maple)

eventually took over the arboretum, and with the help of his curator W.J. Mitchell and the Kew botanist A.B. Jackson, established Westonbirt as one of the most prominent tree collections in Europe.

Lord Morley died in 1951 without a successor to take care of the arboretum and it fell into a state of neglect until the Forestry Commission acquired it in 1956. The

Commission has continued to plant in the "Holford tradition" and today some 18,000 specimens flourish in 600 acres of woodland. With 17 miles of way-marked paths to explore, you cannot reasonably see all of Westonbirt in a day. This is a major part of its charm. Each visit shows you something new and as you get to know the place, you are always surprised as the →



The young bronze leaves of the elegant Katsura tree age through green to yellow. Some turn orange and red. Their fallen leaves smell like caramel when crushed beneath your feet

progress of the seasons transforms familiar scenes. *Acer palmatum* 'Osakazuki' can be relied upon for its uniform brilliant red autumn foliage and the leaves of *A. palmatum* 'Sango-kaku' will open orange-yellow in spring, mellowing to a softer yellow throughout autumn. *Acer japonicum* 'Vitifolium', the vine-leaved maple, prefers a multi-coloured approach to autumn and is a good indicator of the quality of autumn colour to be expected in any year. From September, a single tree will turn yellow in places; in other parts it might be crimson or ruby-red, pink or gold, while others remain stubbornly green until late in the season. The young bronze leaves of the elegant Katsura tree, *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*, age through green to yellow. Some turn orange and red. Their fallen leaves smell like caramel when crushed beneath your feet.

Hugh Angus has been curator at Westonbirt since 1987. Naming, labelling and cataloguing the planting history of all 18,000 trees in the collection has been a major task in itself. Whenever a tree is felled at Westonbirt, its rings are counted to discover its age. Few records have been found of the origins of many of the early plantings in the collection so the provenance of many plants has been hard to establish. "We may find three seemingly identical trees with three different names. We must then find the true name or give them a new one," Hugh explains.

"We live in hope that Holford's records will one day turn up. When a tree needs replacing today, we make sure this is done with material from plants of known origin, preferably from an old example of the plant to conserve the more ancient genetic information. For example, if replacing an English oak, we would use genetic material from oaks such as those at Windsor that are said to be more than 1,000 years old."

With so many potential parents at Westonbirt, Japanese maple seedlings pop up in all shapes and colours of leaf. They seldom come true to the parent type. Out of every 100 acer seedlings grown each year, only three will find a place in the arboretum as interesting examples of the maple's tremendous diversity. Only by taking cuttings



Main picture and top left Autumn canopy of the vine-leaved maple *Acer japonicum* 'Vitifolium'.

Below *Larix kaempferi* (Japanese larch).

Bottom *Acer palmatum* 'Dissectum'

and grafting can you ensure genetic type. Ten to 12,000 acer seedlings are raised this way each year by the Friends of Westonbirt Arboretum, a registered charity which supports the Forestry Commission in its work here. With 150 examples, the arboretum holds the National Collection of Japanese Maple Cultivars. Many are on sale in the Plant Centre. Some 150 species of acer have been discovered around the world and 75 of these can be found at Westonbirt.

The arboretum broke even for the first time in 1997/8 and Hugh Angus hopes that as surpluses accrue, he will be able to continue to build up the scientific base of the collection, adding new plants as they are discovered, conserving rare species and making Westonbirt a centre of excellence for visiting experts from around the world. "In 50 years, when anyone in the world thinks of acers, I want them to think of Westonbirt," Hugh declares.

Westonbirt Arboretum receives more than 3,000 calls each October asking when the autumn colour will be at its best. The second or third week could always be relied upon to be good, but for the past few years everything has been turning later. The colour now lasts well into November. "We have run many surveys to find out what brings visitors to Westonbirt," Hugh continues. "Peace and quiet always comes first. Trees usually come third. My other main aim is to see trees and shrubs share first place in our visitors' reasons for coming to the arboretum. Above all, I want people to love trees." 🐾

Westonbirt Arboretum, Tetbury, Gloucestershire GL8 8QS (01666-880220). Open daily, 10am to 8pm, or sunset, if earlier. Admission £3.50, concessions £2.50, children aged 5 to 15 years, £1.

Westonbirt Arboretum is one of the places we will be visiting on our exclusive reader event based around *Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons*. See page 148 for details.

