

# EXBURY GARDENS

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*Exbury Lake reminiscent of 'Near the Lake' by Renoir*

**R**esearch shows that spending time outdoors improves blood pressure, boosts mental health and can even reduce the risk of cancer. Exbury Gardens in the New Forest, UK immerses visitors in nature and lifts their spirits.

This national treasure is celebrating 100 years since the 200 acres of prime Hampshire land was purchased in 1919 by Lionel de Rothschild, of the famous Rothschild banking family, who set about creating a horticultural delight. Known for its azaleas and hydrangeas and its springtime display, overtime this parcel of land has been divided into specific areas to showcase the beauty of plants, flowers and trees.

No sooner have we arrived we discover that the steam engine departs from Exbury Central on the hour and we only have a few minutes to spare. "Let's go on the train," pleads Henry (3). How can you possibly refuse? We break into a brisk dash and get into the last remaining carriage.

The steam puffs, the whistle blows and we are off. The older passengers are reminded of the trains of their youth. A delightful trip shows us a small portion of the Exbury Estate. Various metal sculptures of a gecko, a centipede and others can be seen in the landscape. On the train everyone's mobile phones come out for photo and video taking but it is good to see that that is all they are used

for. As we pass the Dragonfly Halt it is a joy to see such a variety of these creatures hovering above the water.

When we stop at Exbury North the train is oiled and the guard alights to tell us a fascinating story about how the railway came about. We learn that Lionel de Rothschild had four children, including Mr Eddy and Mr Leopold. "The Rock garden, built in the 1930s, was at the time the largest rock garden in Europe," reveals the guard. "The rock was brought from Wales. In order to move it, some of which weighed several tonnes, the contractors built a small railway and a steam train moved the rocks around the garden.

"Mr Leopold had a fascination with steam trains. He decided that he'd like a steam railway in this garden. But he didn't think his father would appreciate this. So being a dutiful son he went to work at the family bank in London. When he retired he pursued his idea. So he decided to build a 2ft gauge railway. The planners opposed this and it was only after the sixth rejection that the project was allowed. Mr Leopold went on the Exmoor Steam Railway and, impressed, asked them if they could build one for Exbury." The rest is history.

Our last visit, a little over a year ago, when Henry was tiny, requiring a great deal of carrying, made for a difficult day. Thankfully, this time round he has grown up enormously, running and walking for the best part and thoroughly enjoying himself. All of which means that we do, too.