

MARLHILL COPSE

THE STORY OF MARLHILL COPSE

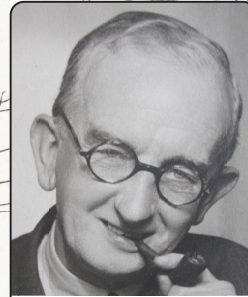
Marlhill Copse possesses historic significance and value and is classified as Ancient Semi-Natural Woodland and a registered Park and Garden. It is one of the few areas of land remaining locally that once formed part of the Manor of Townhill, and later Townhill Park Estate, which has not been affected by development in recent years.

A Saxon canal is believed to have passed through the woodland along the path of the current stream. A feature known as the 'new river' is identified in the Saxon charter of 1045 for South Stoneham.

It is likely that Marlhill Copse derives its name from 'marl', a term used for earth dug out of the ground as a fertiliser, explaining the existence of pits in the area. The hill was known as 'Malhul' or Marlhill as early as 1333.

Ownership of the copse changed hands a number of times - arguably the most significant changes occurred when the Copse was transformed into a woodland garden as a part of the Townhill Park Estate from 1897- 1948.

Today the Copse has a valuable range of habitats within the site including wet and ancient woodland and a diverse collection of exotic trees and shrubs. However the area is in need of sensitive management to protect both its ecological and amenity value.



Architect Leonard Rome Guthrie designed Townhill Park House and Gardens, creating a carriage drive along the top of the copse. He planned a woodland garden in Marlhill Copse, also known as Swan Copse, filled with exotic plants from the Himalayas, such as rhododendrons, azaleas, magnolias, camellias, giant lily, maples, bamboo and skunk cabbage.



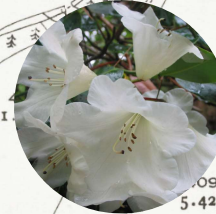
Fred Rose, Head Gardener of the Townhill Park Estate, worked in conjunction with Lord Stuart Swaythling to develop many prize-winning rhododendron hybrids from the 1920s to 1940s. With the outbreak of World War II he sent his best hybrid rhododendron seeds for safe keeping to Halfdan Lem, a Norwegian American, in Seattle who subsequently formed the American Rhododendron Society. Cultivars of Townhill hybrid rhododendrons are to be found worldwide.



Skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*)



Dwarf bamboo (*Pleioblastus* sp.)



Rhododendron 'Mary Swaythling'



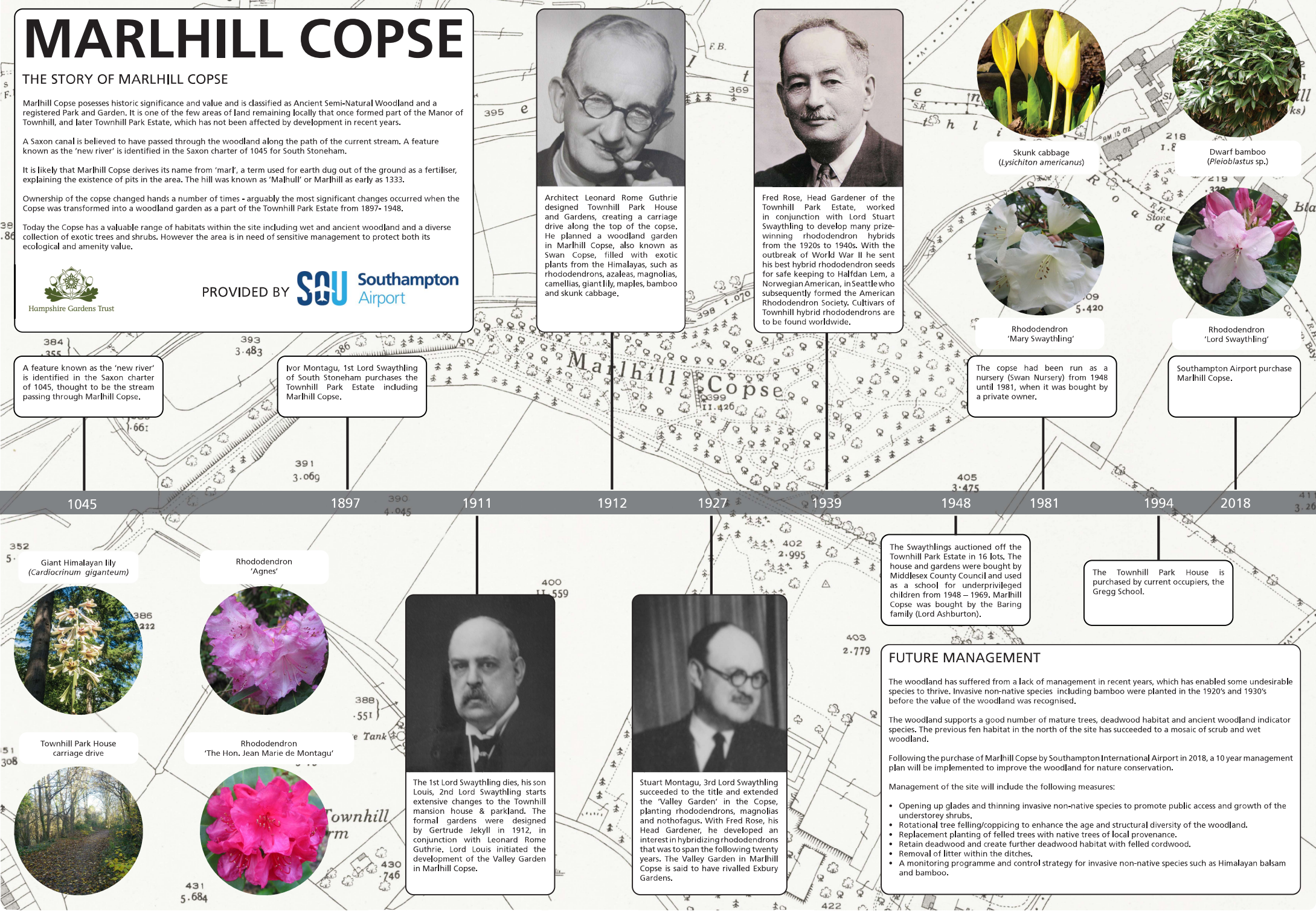
Rhododendron 'Lord Swaythling'

The copse had been run as a nursery (Swan Nursery) from 1948 until 1981, when it was bought by a private owner.

Southampton Airport purchase Marlhill Copse.

A feature known as the 'new river' is identified in the Saxon charter of 1045, thought to be the stream passing through Marlhill Copse.

Ivor Montagu, 1st Lord Swaythling of South Stoneham purchases the Townhill Park Estate including Marlhill Copse.



Giant Himalayan lily (*Cardiocrinum giganteum*)



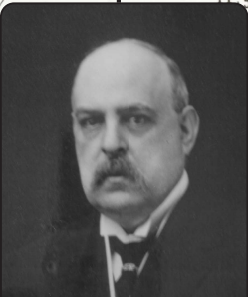
Rhododendron 'Agnes'



Townhill Park House carriage drive



Rhododendron 'The Hon. Jean Marie de Montagu'



The 1st Lord Swaythling dies, his son Louis, 2nd Lord Swaythling starts extensive changes to the Townhill mansion house & parkland. The formal gardens were designed by Gertrude Jekyll in 1912, in conjunction with Leonard Rome Guthrie. Lord Louis initiated the development of the Valley Garden in Marlhill Copse.



Stuart Montagu, 3rd Lord Swaythling succeeded to the title and extended the 'Valley Garden' in the Copse, planting rhododendrons, magnolias and nothofagus. With Fred Rose, his Head Gardener, he developed an interest in hybridizing rhododendrons that was to span the following twenty years. The Valley Garden in Marlhill Copse is said to have rivalled Exbury Gardens.

The Swaythlings auctioned off the Townhill Park Estate in 16 lots. The house and gardens were bought by Middlesex County Council and used as a school for underprivileged children from 1948 – 1969. Marlhill Copse was bought by the Baring family (Lord Ashburton).

The Townhill Park House is purchased by current occupiers, the Gregg School.

FUTURE MANAGEMENT

The woodland has suffered from a lack of management in recent years, which has enabled some undesirable species to thrive. Invasive non-native species including bamboo were planted in the 1920's and 1930's before the value of the woodland was recognised.

The woodland supports a good number of mature trees, deadwood habitat and ancient woodland indicator species. The previous fen habitat in the north of the site has succeeded to a mosaic of scrub and wet woodland.

Following the purchase of Marlhill Copse by Southampton International Airport in 2018, a 10 year management plan will be implemented to improve the woodland for nature conservation.

Management of the site will include the following measures:

- Opening up glades and thinning invasive non-native species to promote public access and growth of the understory shrubs.
- Rotational tree felling/coppicing to enhance the age and structural diversity of the woodland.
- Replacement planting of felled trees with native trees of local provenance.
- Retain deadwood and create further deadwood habitat with felled cordwood.
- Removal of litter within the ditches.
- A monitoring programme and control strategy for invasive non-native species such as Himalayan balsam and bamboo.



Hampshire Gardens Trust

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