Glorious
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WHENEVER she returned home to Clarence House after celebrating Easter at Windsor Castle, the Queen Mother asked her chauffeur to drive along a particular street in West London.

It was an unremarkable suburban thoroughfare — except for the cherry trees which line it on both sides.

Every spring, in Staveley Road, they burst forth with canopies of vibrant purple-pink blossoms so captivating that her daughter, the Queen, continues the tradition, delighting in an annual spectacle seen throughout the British Isles.

Blooming in parks and gardens, and along city streets, and showering the ground with the tiny petals which tell us that winter is finally at an end, cherry blossom has become an unmissable part of spring.

But that has not always been the case — for this glorious seasonal highlight owes its place in our national life to one man, little-known English horticulturalist Collingwood Ingram.

Nicknamed 'Cherry' for the obsession which came to define him, he wrote the hugely successful book Ornamental Cherries, first published in 1948. Before then, the growing of such trees had been a somewhat niche interest. But his colourful descriptions of the many varieties nurtured in his own garden were engagingly infectious, as reflected in one review by writer and garden designer Vita Sackville-West.

by Naoko Abe

'If readers of Ingram's book are not inspired to write off immediately to their nurserymen with an autumn order, then they must indeed be dumb cold fish,' she wrote.

In the following decade, tens of thousands of cherries were planted across the country, bringing a touch of colour and Asian exoticism that has endured long beyond the austerity of post-war Britain.

Check the map of any British town or village and there's almost always a 'Cherry' or 'Cherry Tree' avenue, close, road or street, mostly named during or after the Fifties and each containing at least a few hastily planted trees to justify its name.

Without 'Cherry' Ingram, our landscape would be all the duller. But even this was not his greatest achievement, for his enthusiastic persistence enabled him to pull off the botanical equivalent of taking coals to Newcastle — reintroducing cherry blossoms to Japan, the country regarded by many as their spiritual home.

The first trees to flower in the spring in Japan, cherries had been important to the nation's population for more than 2,000 years, indicating to farmers that it was time to sow their rice.

Welcomed by millions of people at *hanami* ('flower-viewing), the cherry-blossom parties which are still an annual rite of spring in Japan, they were long seen as a sign of new life and new beginnings.

But, from the mid-19th century, this much-loved national emblem became associated with death, as a result of efforts to indoctrinate the people of an increasingly militaristic Japan.

THEY were told that, just as cherry blossoms had a short but glorious life, and swift, predictable death, so those who embodied the true Japanese spirit should be willing to die for the Emperor.

And no cherry tree was better suited to reinforcing this propaganda than the Somei-yoshino.

This beautiful tree was both cheap and quick to cultivate — growing to full size in five years — but, most crucially, it was a cloned variety. Consequently, all the Somei-yoshino trees cloaking the nation in their pink mantle bloomed and then lost their petals within the same eight days. This was a dramatic reminder that millions of Japanese citizens could at any time be called upon to sacrifice their lives for the emperor.

Both the navy and the army incorporated cherry blossoms into their insignia and, whenever Japan had something to celebrate, this single variety alone was planted.

By the late-1880s, more than 30 per cent of all cherry trees in Tokyo were Somei-yoshino and millions more were grown across the country after a great military victory against Russia in 1905.

Other varieties were neglected or simply disappeared, but few people cared and fewer still did anything about it until the horrors of World War I helped convert Cherry Ingram to their cause.

AN EDWARDIAN gentleman of leisure whose grandfather had founded the popular London Illustrated News, he was born in 1880 and grew up in Westgate-on-Sea on the north Kent coast. There, his family's wealth freed him to indulge the ornithological studies that were his passion for much of the first half of his life.

That all changed when war came and he served in France as a captain in the Royal Flying Corps. He escaped trauma or serious psychological trauma but, like millions of British soldiers, struggled to adjust back to civilian living. Even ornithology suddenly seemed 'a somewhat tired and exhausted science' with little new to discover.

This malaise coincided with his departure from Westgate-on-Sea. By then, he and his wife Florence needed a new home to accommodate them and their four children, along with maids and a nanny.

So, in 1919, they moved to The Grange, a large mock-Tudor house next to the church and village green in Benenden, Kent. The setting could hardly have been more English but, in the overgrown garden, Ingram found two unlikely interlopers — Japanese cherry trees, a variety known as Hokusai.

Although they weren't blossoming when he moved in, their sturdy branches and dark-green leaves reminded him of his honeymoon in Japan in 1907. It had left him smitten with a land where 'plants grew in ravishing luxuriance' and the people were 'the most artistic race in the world.'

Then in the following spring, the Hokusai became smothered in silky pink blossoms with a carpet of wispy, weightless petals beneath them. Viewing the blossoms on the largest tree, which was 25ft high with branches spreading 42ft, Ingram wrote that it 'would be difficult to conceive a more striking floral display' and this kindled in him a new interest.

Then still virgin territory in Britain, research into Japanese cherries was a perfect match for a man seeking a new life in the aftermath of so much death and destruction and so he set about collecting as many types of cherry tree for his garden as he could find with a view to becoming a globally recognised authority on the subject.

By 1925, barely six years after he had moved to Benenden, 70 cherry varieties were growing at The Grange. Eventually, there would be 120 in total, obtained from the network of cherry friends he developed around the world.

They included experts in Japan, a country which appeared the Holy Grail for cherry-lovers — until Ingram returned there in 1926 and discovered that although the Japanese people were still devoted to cherry blossoms, only a handful showed interest in any other than the Somei-yoshino. Everywhere, he saw uncared-for trees.

Some varieties appeared to have vanished altogether, as he discovered when he visited Seisaku Funatsu, an elderly man he described as 'the fountain-head of cherry lore', at his home outside Tokyo. Greeting Ingram in a kimono and clogs which, together with his flowing white beard and long fingernails gave him an aura of Confucian sagacity, Funatsu showed him a scroll on which his grandfather had painted a particularly prized variety of cherry tree 130 years previously.

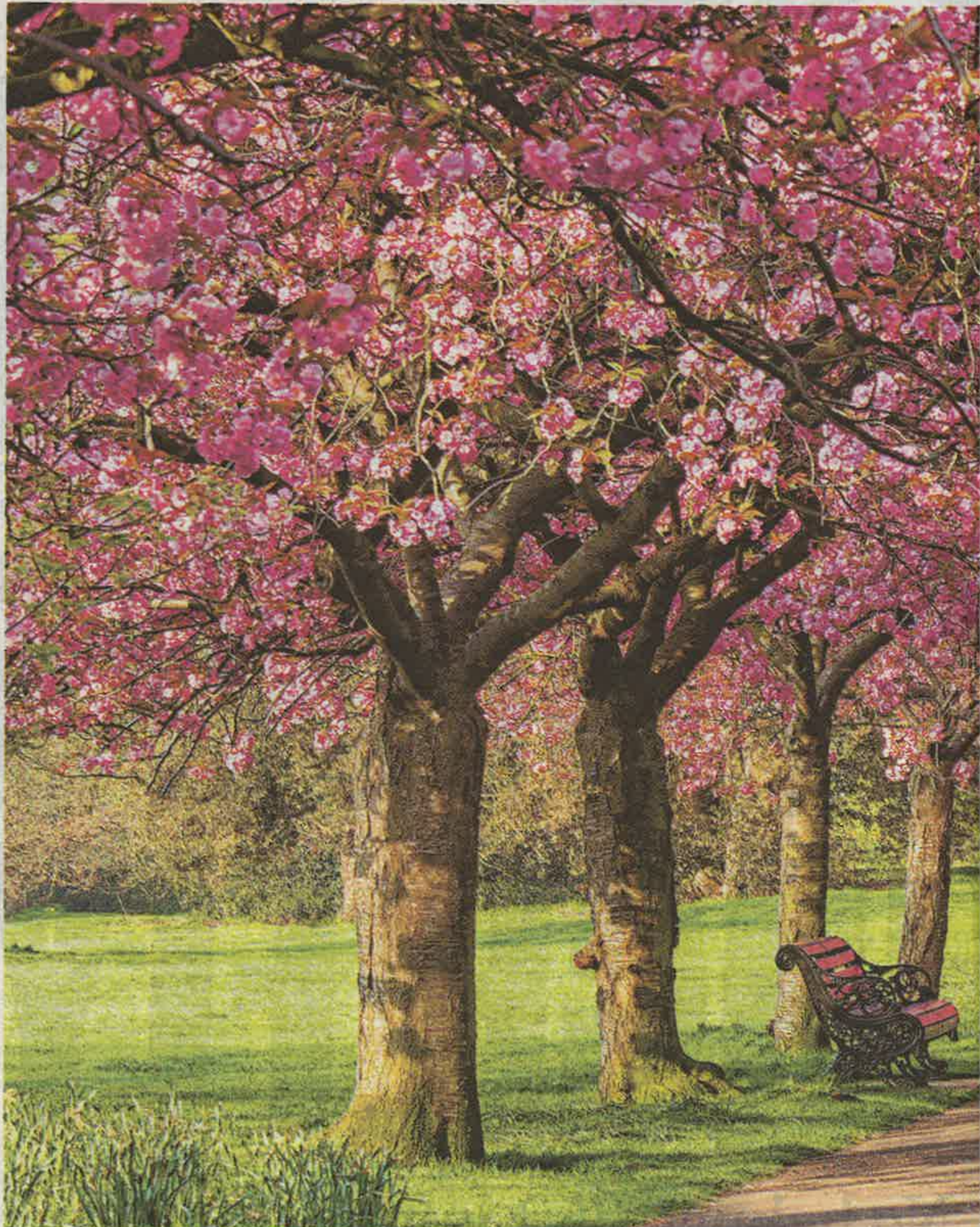
Known as the Taihaku, it had always been much lauded for its large white flowers and stately appearance, but in recent years Funatsu had searched for it in vain. 'It seems to be extinct,' he sadly told Ingram, at which his visitor gasped.

'This cherry is growing in my garden in Kent!' he exclaimed, to which a clearly incredulous Funatsu made no reply, simply smiling and bowing deeply.

'Piqued by his obvious doubt, I resolved, there and then, to convince him,' Ingram wrote. And so began his determined crusade to return the blossom to Japan.

His Taihaku had been grown from twigs given him by a friend who, in turn, had imported scions (young shoots for grafting) from Japan more than 25 years previously. In the garden at The Grange, they had grown with spectacular effect, producing a tree of what he described as 'remarkable beauty'.

But getting the Taihaku back to Japan proved difficult and frustrating. Only scions taken during the Taihaku's winter dormancy had any hope of being grafted. In



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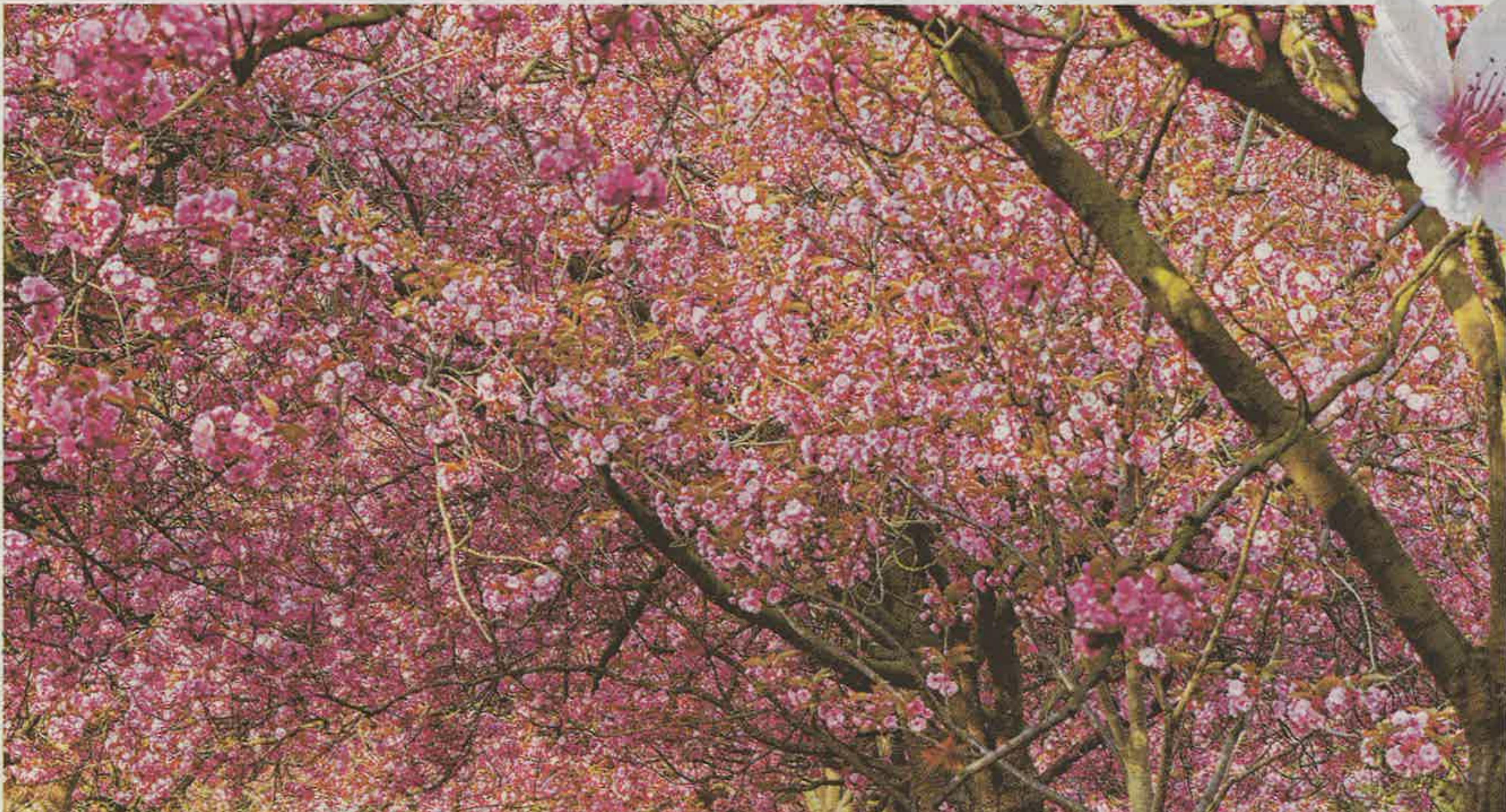

Spring is here! Blossom in London and (inset) 'Cherry' Ingram

They are a joyous sign of spring — avenues of cherry trees bursting into life. But as a new book tells, it's all thanks to one maverick who saved the most dazzling example for the world

any case, those he sent always arrived dead, dried out by the heat as the ship carrying them crossed the Equator, or rotten when he tried embedding them in oriental radishes to keep them moist.

Finally, after three winters, he found an ingenious solution: cutting potatoes in half and pressing the bottom end of the branches into the exposed surface. This provided just the right amount of water and nutrients for them to survive the trip.

By then, Seisaku Funatsu, the cherry specialist whose serendipitous scroll had prompted Taihaku's return, had died. But the cuttings were passed into the safe hands of Toemon Sano whose forebears had tended the gardens at the much-venerated Ninna-ji-Temple in Kyoto, a site frequently visited by the imperial family, for 500 years.

As well as a magnificent five-storey pagoda, Ninna-ji was known for its cherry trees, so Ingram had little doubt that Taihaku would fare well in the temple grounds if grafted successfully, as it was.

Within three years, Sano had produced a sapling robust enough to provide scions of its own and these went on to flourish not only at Ninna-ji, but at other sites around Japan. The Taihuku was finally home and safe, but not everyone cheered its return. Political power was then shifting ever further towards nationalism and the military, and Britain was seen as a potential enemy.

For some Japanese cherry aficionados, it was disgraceful even to think about receiving a cherry tree from an Englishman. And especially so given that, under Emperor Hirohito, the nation's emblematic flower had come to symbolise more than ever the Japanese fighting spirit and willingness to die in the imperial cause.

When war came and reached its desperate conclusion for the Japanese, pink cherry blossoms on white backgrounds were painted onto the fuselage of many kamikaze planes.

By then, a sign next to a cherry tree flourishing at the Hirano Shrine in Kyoto had already been removed because it mentioned Ingram's involvement in the tree's return to Japan. And his son's wife, Daphne, had witnessed first hand the brutality with which that country's forces treated their enemies.

A military nurse who was caught up in the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941, she had a close friend who was gang-raped by soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army. She herself was interned for three years in a camp where malnutrition was the norm and diseases such as diphtheria and beri beri were epidemic.

During her time there, 121 people died, including seven executed for possessing a radio, and Daphne came to detest the country which had raised men capable of such barbarity.

After the war, she and her father-in-law had a close bond and he gave her many flowers from his garden, but she never asked for any cuttings from his Japanese cherries. By silent agreement, they refused to discuss anything to do with Japan.

And while he never expressed his thoughts about the country which had taken away her freedom for more than three years, his love of its national flower seemed to dim following the publication of his Ornamental Cherries book.

LATER in life, he resumed his interest in the study of birds but, in 1980, to mark his 100th birthday and recognise his contributions to horticulture, a botanist from Kew Gardens made a list of the trees and plants in his garden, mapping the places in which each grew.

Across Britain, the cherries he had loved and saved from extinction were alive and well. At The Grange, those that survived included many of his favourites and, in the spring of 1981, which was to be his last, the bright-pink Hokusai, the tree which had ignited his interest in cherries so many years previously, was among the first to bloom. It was followed by Taihaku, the flower he had returned to its homeland.

Concluding the seasonal symphony that May, a late-blooming variety Imose took its turn in the limelight. Soon, its petals began falling silently in the wind outside Ingram's room. As they did so, the life of the man who had nurtured this and so many other blossoms came to its own peaceful end.

■ *ADAPTED by David Leafe from 'Cherry' Ingram: The Englishman Who Saved Japan's Blossoms by Naoko Abe. Published by Chatto & Windus at £18.99. © Naoke Abe 2019. To buy a copy for £15.19 (20 per cent discount), go to www.mailshop.co.uk/books or call 0844 571 0640, p&p free on orders over £15. Offer valid until March 30, 2019.*