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Queen's Beasts

I recently visited Hall Place in Bexley, Kent, a Tudor mansion with ornamental gardens situated on the River Cray. There are flower and rose gardens, fruit orchard, a large long greenhouse with a fishpond and banana trees inside, lawns and parkland, all tied together by the shallow and clear flowing river running through it. I am looking forward to illustrating and describing more of this for your interest at a later date, but for now I would like to introduce you to my favourite and unique part of the gardens. Here is the row of yew topiary animals which were planted in 1953 to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's coronation, which makes them exactly the same age as myself. I first noticed these on an earlier visit some years ago when we were walking around the interior of the house and happened to glance through one of the small windows. I was sure it was a row of giant green teddy bears, all smiling and looking soft and cuddly, just like teddies ought to be. Although I was enjoying seeing the exhibits inside, I was somewhat impatient to go outside and check them out, and of course to capture them all on camera.

The clipped yew bushes are in the shape of the ten heraldic stone figures of the Queen's Beasts that were in the Abbey Annexe at Westminster Abbey at the coronation ceremony, depicting the Queen's genealogy and history. Some are real animals and some are mythical and here they are in order from left to right: Lion of England, Golden Griffin of Edward III, Falcon of the Plantagenets, Black Bull of Clarence, White Lion of Mortimer, Silver Yale of Beaufort, White Greyhound of Richmond, Red Dragon of Wales, Unicorn of Scotland, White Horse of Hanover. The mythical yale was a horned goat-like creature and the griffin was a mixture of lion and eagle. The unicorn was originally more like a rhinoceros or mountain bull but came to be represented in the form of an oryx or goat, and later on a horse. My favourite is the falcon, as it has lots of detail in the

wings and feathers, successfully achieved by the skill of the gardeners responsible for the annual clipping, and the slit for the beak has ended up resembling a big satisfied grin. The falcon stands for swiftness of purpose, which is very apt for the shorthand writer.

In royal imagery used for decoration and heraldry, beasts were used to represent qualities of the monarchy and the emphasis was on power, strength, victory over enemies, rulership, dominion, authority and complete all-pervading control of their realm. This may be so, but our very friendly topiary team of ten look to me as if they have all taken a day off from ruling and reigning, and instead have lined themselves up to welcome visitors who are sitting and playing on the grass or walking round the rose garden. The beasts no longer need to be brutal and ferocious like their line drawing portraits on the plaques in front of each one, which show the fiercely regal creatures from which they are derived. On the contrary, their mouths are all smiling, as indeed they should, living in such beautiful surroundings, and they positively invite one to smile back.

The gardens are surrounded on two sides by busy roads and the background roar of cars and trucks whizzing past is unavoidable at the far end of the park, but with a well maintained and extensive garden to admire, and a sparkling river with ducks and geese, one's mind filters it out after a short while. When everyone has gone home, the traffic has died down, all is quiet and calm, and the sun is setting, I think that perhaps the ten beasts then start to amuse themselves, walking around the gardens, lounging about under the park trees, paddling in the stream, and discussing the day's happenings. I am sure they particularly enjoy the children's games of hide and seek amongst the other topiary nearby, originally chess pieces which have now grown into geometric blobs and cubes, with plenty of hiding places between them. I am unlikely to get a photo or movie footage of the beasts on their perambulations, but you can be sure that if I do, you will be the first to know about it. (726 words)