



## *The best of British gardens*

Andrew Baskott charts the design styles of British gardens, with a visit this month to Cottesbrooke Hall in Northamptonshire

# An ever-changing masterpiece

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Nestling in a pastoral landscape in rural Northamptonshire is the small yet well-spread-out estate village of Cottesbrooke. At its heart is Cottesbrooke Hall, an elegant Queen Anne period house dating from 1702, with just a hint of mystery about its past.

The identity of the designer of the landscaped parkland with its avenues, lakes and vistas, has been lost in the annals of time. So too have any designs for the gardens, for no dusty plans have been found tucked away in a long-forgotten drawer.

And then there's the mystery of *Mansfield Park*. Is Cottesbrooke Hall the setting for Jane Austen's third novel? There seems to be some very plausible evidence supporting the

idea, with similarities in setting and layout, but sadly no conclusive proof — a minor detail that fails to dash the hopes of visiting Austen fans that they might just be walking in the literary footsteps of their heroine.

One certainty, however, is that Cottesbrooke Hall and its gardens are a true delight. Built almost entirely of warm, rose-red brick and complemented by finely carved Ketton stone Corinthian pilasters and detailing, the house forms an idyllic backdrop to the gardens, which have been a century in the making.

With no blueprints of the original design to call upon, it has been a case of the gardens constantly evolving, with changing fashions and ideas from

**Previous pages:** the Dutch Garden with bright 'China Pink tulips and clipped yew topiary. Cottesbrooke Hall in the background.

**Below,** the reflective pool and contemporary planting between the Dog Gate border and entrance to the Terrace Garden (pictured on facing page).



some of the country's leading garden designers of the day.

In 1911, the Brassey family commissioned Scottish designer Robert Weir Schultz to bring a little Arts and Crafts style to Cottesbrooke. But it was the arrival of the Macdonald-Buchanans in 1937, that heralded a real change for the gardens. Lady Catherine Macdonald-Buchanan, the grandmother of the present owner, Alistair Macdonald-Buchanan, was to begin the tradition of employing various designers, rather than having one overall designer; a tradition that's still very much followed today.

Almost immediately, Lady Catherine set about the first of her sympathetic changes to the gardens, by employing Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe to redesign the forecourt at the south-front of the house. Jellicoe's design was a formal garden with paths, statuary and some impressive pieces of topiary. His garden still survives, although Alistair and head gardener, Philip Statner, have between them modernised some of the planting, giving it a contemporary lift, while retaining the essence of the original design.

Postwar changes were a little more dramatic. This time Schultz's large Edwardian rose garden was to be completely transformed, with the project placed in the hands of another distinguished designer, Dame Sylvia Crowe. The roses were all removed and the surrounding pergola dismantled; although a small remnant of it remains in the adjacent Pine Court garden. Dame



Sylvia's legacy survives in the form of the Pool Garden, with its circular pool overlooked by a stylish shelter.

Set in the park, away from the main gardens to the north-west of the house, is the Wild Garden. It's not truly wild, but was what Catherine called the area as she worked on the next part of her vision, and the name stuck. Here there's a hint of the Orient, with rhododendrons, azaleas and some fine Japanese maples providing

shape and colour, particularly in spring. Surprisingly, you'll also find something very English, in the form of the thatched Wendy House, as you enter this 'wild' glade.

A shallow stream runs the length of the Wild Garden and is crossed by the gently arched Japanese Bridge, its wooden framework entwined with fragrant wisteria. Overlooking the stream and bridge is the Chinese House, erected in 2000 to mark the millennium. It was also in 2000 that Cottesbrooke was awarded the coveted Historic Houses Association/Christie's Award for Best Garden.

Winning, however, certainly didn't signal the end for change. In recent years, Alistair has enlisted three top designers to help him revitalise parts of the garden: award-winning designer Arne Maynard; designer, broadcaster and writer James Alexander-Sinclair; and local designer Angela (Angel) Collins; each bringing with them their own distinctive touches.

In Statue Walk are four historic stone statues by renowned eighteenth-century sculptor Peter Scheemakers. These venerable sculptures, brought from Stowe gardens in 1937, sit comfortably alongside borders replanted by Arne Maynard. Arne's work continues along the Dog Gate borders with blocks of beech topiary adding to the design. The Dog Gate, with two dog statues sitting atop brick pillars, marks the main entrance to the Pool Garden.

Just beyond here is another, smaller, gateway set in a high brick wall, which

takes you into the Terrace Border; your view on entering is framed by the foliage of a weeping beech. At almost two hundred feet long, these deep double borders have been packed with an array of colourful herbaceous plants by James Alexander-Sinclair, with the house rising at the end of the long path, forming the perfect backdrop.

Steps down from the Terrace lead into the Dutch Garden, a small courtyard where the original box hedge parterre had succumbed to blight. The garden has now been transformed by Angela Collins, with a mixture of formal clipped yew and lush herbaceous planting contained in four symmetrical beds centred around the original stylish sundial.

The house itself has changed little in three centuries, unlike the gardens, and is open for visitors to enjoy the fine furniture, porcelain and period detail. It also houses the superb Woolavington Collection of equine /sporting pictures, one of the world's most extensive collections.

Nothing stands still at Cottesbrooke, and so change will continue. By harnessing his own inspiration together with the skills of leading designers, Alistair Macdonald-Buchanan will ensure the gardens remain an ever-changing masterpiece. ■

*Cottesbrooke Hall NN6 8PF.  
Admission fee. Hall and gardens open  
July/Aug/Sept, Thu 2-5.30pm and  
Bank Holiday Monday.  
www.cottesbrooke.co.uk*