



The best of British gardens

Andrew Baskott reveals the story of Lincolnshire's 'lost' Tudor garden and its 21st-century revival.

A dream of Nirvana revived

Sitting amongst the gently rolling countryside of south Lincolnshire, just off the A1 between Stamford and Grantham, there is a garden that former US president Franklin D Roosevelt described as “a dream of Nirvana ... almost too good to be true”. In 1905, Roosevelt and his new bride, Eleanor, were spending part of their honeymoon at Easton Hall, the

ancestral home of the Cholmeley family. Within fifty years, this 'Nirvana' would be a shadow of its former glory, and an impenetrable wilderness within a century.

By the time of Roosevelt's visit, the gardens of Easton Hall were already over 300 years old, for the Manor of Easton had been purchased by Sir Henry Cholmeley, in 1592. He built his house overlooking the River Witham, and created an impressive twelve-acre garden encompassing the shallow river valley.

The family still has the estate's original conveyance, and lists meadows, orchards and gardens. The garden's original Tudor boundaries still exist, and the walls of the old kitchen garden most probably date from this period too.

Sir Henry Cholmeley had purposely built the hall on the top of the valley slope, providing an elevated view of his new Tudor garden. From the house, terraces led down to the river, and on the opposite bank was the walled kitchen garden. Viewed from the house, the garden would have been an impressive sight.

Easton Hall's first incarnation is believed to have survived until the early nineteenth century. In 1805, Sir Montague Cholmeley made some major changes to the house, with alterations and rebuilding. Much of his

Left, beside the Long Border and Palladian bridge over the River Witham, the terraces are now cultivated as a wildflower meadow.



work was then replaced by Victorian additions, including the gatehouse designed by architect Anthony Salvin.

The nineteenth century saw changes to the gardens too, with yew hedges planted in the kitchen garden and terraces extended. A pleasure garden was also created between the house and river, in a display of Victorian exuberance. By the end of the First World War, during which the hall had been used as a convalescent hospital, Easton's golden era was drawing to a close, and a gradual decline began.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the hall's downward spiral continued. Easton Hall was requisitioned by the Army, and for four years

Below, the White Space Garden designed by Ursula Cholmeley with its subtle references to the universe and our place in it.



Visitor Information

Easton Walled Gardens, Easton, Grantham, Lincolnshire. NG33 5AP. Admission fee. Open until 30th October, Wednesday–Friday, plus Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays 11am–4pm; Sweet Pea Week, 3rd to 10th July.

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it was home to units of the Royal Artillery, and later the 2nd Battalion the Parachute Regiment prior to taking part in the airborne landings at Arnhem in 1944.

They left behind considerable damage to the house, much of it caused by weapons being fired indoors. Many of the house's remaining contents had suffered too, including family records.



Above, flowers to aid pollination are grown in the vegetable garden whose produce is used in the tearoom.

While outside, greenhouses had been a target for hand grenades. Sadly, Easton Hall was never to be lived in again and, in 1951, it was demolished; closing a chapter on almost 360 years of Cholmeley family history.

Eventually the gardens became lost to Mother Nature, although the walls of the Tudor kitchen garden survived relatively intact. So too did the stableyard and gatehouse — the latter owing its survival to the bulldozer demolishing the hall breaking down.

Having married into the family in 1993, Ursula Cholmeley became increasingly fascinated with the 'lost' gardens. By 2000, and now with two young children, she was seriously contemplating restoring them. It wouldn't be easy. Besides young children, there were other practicalities too: "I had no budget, no gear and definitely no

idea." Undeterred, Ursula set about a passionate crusade to bring the gardens of Easton back to life.

And so in the winter of 2001, exactly fifty years after the gardens had been abandoned, Ursula embarked upon her revival of Easton with the aid of workers from the estate farm. Over those intervening decades an almost impenetrable jungle had enveloped large parts of the garden. Brambles and nettles had flourished, while self-sown trees had grown with wild abandon, some standing twenty feet high on the terraces. All had to be cleared.

By the summer of 2002, the garden resembled a battlefield, scarred with tree stumps and deep muddied tractor

ruts. That winter, the stumps and stubborn elder were all dug out, creating even more mess. One of the more delicate tasks was the removal of trees growing in the stonework of the garden's connecting bridge over the Witham.

Slowly, but surely, a new garden began to emerge from the wilderness. Recreating what had gone before had never been part of Ursula's plan.

Below, looking across the rose meadow to Easton Hall's surviving buildings, and opposite, the Salvin-designed gatehouse beyond the Velvet Border, a small garden created to inspire visitors.

Instead she wanted to harness the garden's historic framework while creating a garden that reflected the twenty-first century — informality interwoven with the formal.

This informality has enabled different wildlife habitats to be created within the garden. The terraces, once pristine Victorian lawns, have become a tiered wildflower meadow; while the Cedar meadow is planted with over 20,000 spring bulbs.

Ursula's love of meadows has continued within the three-acre walled kitchen garden. An unusual twist is that roses flower amongst the long dried grasses during high summer. A



Elizabeth period gardens worth visiting

Trerice Manor House & garden, nr Newquay, Cornwall TR8 4PG. A little-changed Elizabethan manor house and gardens with rare and unusual plants.

Wollerton Old Hall Garden, Wollerton, Market Drayton, Shrops TF9 3AE. A stunning four-acre garden set around a sixteenth-century house.

Greys Court, Rotherfield Greys, nr Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 4PG. Large fortified sixteenth-century manor house with a number of themed gardens including rose and walled.

Plas-yn-Rhiw Gardens, Rhiw, Gwynedd LL53 8AB. Sixteenth-century manor house set in an organic garden at the foot of Mynydd Rhiw mountain.

Montacutte House & Gardens, Montacutte, Somerset TA15 6XP. Elizabethan manor house set in beautiful gardens and parkland; house featured in BBC drama *Wolf Hall*.

fruit orchard has also been planted here, building on the area's apple-growing tradition. With this new habitat, the number of returning swallows has increased each year.

Several smaller gardens, designed to inspire visitors and attract insects too, have been created around the surviving buildings and gatehouse. The cottage garden is brimming with herbaceous perennials, and is typical of a nineteenth-century small garden.

Next door is the cutflower garden — or pickery as it's known. This already colourful garden excels itself each summer, when Easton's signature flower, the sweet pea, puts on a stunning display. An annual celebration of this most quintessential of English cottage garden flowers takes place in

July during Sweet Pea Week, with over eighty varieties in full bloom to delight the senses.

The revival of Easton's gardens is not yet complete; another twenty years, it's thought, before all is done. But, thanks to the sheer dedication, energy and inspiration brought by Ursula and husband Fred (the fourteenth generation of Cholmeleys), the lost gardens of Easton are lost no more.

A new Nirvana has been born. ■

Next month: xxxxxxxxxxxx

