

The best of British gardens



Andrew Baskott discovers how one couple created a twentieth-century garden amidst a decaying Tudor farmhouse in deepest Northumberland.

The making of a plantsman's paradise

“Well, have you ever considered the old place at Hartington?” asked the National Trust agent, responding to Frank Lawley’s enquiry one warm summer’s morning. An answer that would help shape the life of Frank and his wife Marjorie, for the next forty years. In 1964, they had moved into a small stone-built cottage on the Wallington House estate in Northumberland — the former home of socialist MP and “illogical Englishman”, Sir Charles Trevelyan and his wife Mary, and now owned by the National Trust. By the summer of 1975, the time was right to seek pastures new; preferably still on the Wallington estate — hence Frank’s enquiry. A new garden needed to be made.

Their first garden had left Frank and Marjorie totally unprepared for just how much this small plot of land would transform their lives. To their surprise, gardening was addictive and soon became an all-consuming pas-

Right, like an artist’s palette ...the heart of Herterton House is its flower garden where the Lawleys’ love of art – and especially the Impressionists – has influenced their use of colour

sion. In between lecturing part-time at Newcastle’s College of Art, Frank and Marjorie immersed themselves in a quest for knowledge about plants (both cultivated and wild) and gardens. They scoured Wallington’s grounds and woodland, local country lanes and gardens throughout Britain too, identifying plants and gaining inspiration; little realising this was their long apprenticeship in preparation for their next garden.



In 1966, as their gardening confidence grew, they began supplying plants to the newly established National Trust shop in Wallington’s courtyard. Their small nursery business was born. Four years later, they ended their academic careers and began a new life dedicated to plants and gardening.

A mention of their nursery by Frank’s uncle Maurice in his weekly ‘country’ column in the *Sunday Times*

led to orders for plants coming from far and wide. With the various extra plots of garden they had acquired over time fast filling up, the “old place” soon beckoned.

The “old place” was the decaying wreck of a longhouse, probably from Tudor times, in an acre of neglected ground in the tiny hamlet of Hartington, about three miles from Wallington. In its distant past, Hartington had once been called Herterton, and since

the “old place” had no known name, the Lawleys settled for naming it Herterton House.

At Wallington, the gardens had evolved rather than been designed. Herterton would be different, for the garden would be carefully crafted. It would also be opened to visitors. As Frank and Marjorie explored for the first time, they mentally divided the ground into five gardens: formal, herb, flower, fancy and nursery.

As news spread of their acquisition, they were visited by others who had been offered, but turned down, the “old place”. It transpired that the agent had been trying to get rid of it for at least ten years before Frank’s visit.

The garden was to be created from what had been the farmyard; an acre full of stones and detritus buried beneath decades of weeds. Dick, a

Below, the nursery garden, and right, the formal garden with its topiary a counterpoint to the natural landscape beyond

local man, informed them that for £1,000 he could de-stone the ground, plough it, rotovate it, spread whatever manure and soil they could get hold of, and level it. In six months they would have something to work with.

Hartington was exposed to the elements, unlike Wallington with its sheltering woodland, and so they would need to create their own windbreaks in the form of stone walls and hedges of yew and holly. In all, it took eight years and around 700 tonnes of stone to complete all the garden walls.

Frank and Marjorie, together with assorted help over the coming months, began the hard work of getting the garden into shape, ready for planting. Marjorie also spent many



Visitor Information

Herterton House, Hartington, Cambo, Northumberland NE61 4BN. Admission fee. Open 1st May to 30th September, 1.30-5.30pm; closed Tuesday & Thursday. Telephone 01670 774278.

Herterton House and a new country garden by Frank Lawley is published by Pimpernel Press.

hours producing highly-detailed drawings of the planting schemes for each part of their new garden.

The Lawleys wanted to create a twentieth-century garden that would also reflect the house’s Tudor origins. To do this they would use traditional old-English country garden plants such as sweet chamomile and honeysuckle, together with our four native evergreens:— holly, yew, box and ivy.

As a boy, ‘Capability’ Brown had attended Wallington’s estate village schoolroom at Cambo. Despite

Brown’s place in garden history, Frank sees his landscaped designs made at the expense of formality and flowers, akin to garden vandalism.

Herterton’s contribution to formality saw the formal garden, with its profusion of topiary, purposefully planted at the front of the house to act as a counterpoint to the natural landscape beyond the narrow lane.

Beside the old granary, with its three monastery-like arches, was the obvious setting for the medicinal herb garden. In 1986 it was renamed the physic garden following a visit by the BBC’s Gardeners’ World team, who likened it to the one at Chelsea. Its centrepiece is a weeping silver-leaved pear tree, that Frank clips twice a year.

Herterton’s heart is undoubtedly the flower garden. The house embraces it on two sides, while holly trees and yew hedging complete the rectangle. The Lawleys’ love of art,





Above, the fancy garden living up to its name for the embroidery-style patterns

particularly that of the Impressionists, has influenced their use of colour; indeed the garden has the resemblance of an artist's palette.

'Fancy' is an old term for embroidery, and so seemed an appropriate description for the box parterre, with its embroidery-style Tudor rose pattern. It's overlooked by a striking stone gazebo sitting atop a raised terrace, providing an elevated view of the 'fancy' garden.

Much like an artist blends his paints, the Lawleys have deftly blended artistry with gardening. The cleared old farmyard was their blank canvas, and with skilful planting used shape, colour and composition to make a piece of living art. The result is an exceptional garden.

Topiary gardens worth visiting

Drummond Castle Gardens, nr Crieff, Perthshire PH5 2AA. A formal French-style garden from the seventeenth century with ancient yew hedges, topiary and parterres.

Cliveden House and Gardens, Taplow, Maidenhead, Bucks SL1 8NS. Once the home of Nancy Aster, it has a parterre and an Italianate garden with topiary and statuary.

Plas Brondanw Garden, Llanfrothen, Gwynedd LL48 6SW. An Edwardian garden by Sir Clough William-Ellis (of Portmeirion fame), with extensive topiary and fine mountain views.

Abbey House Garden, Malmesbury, Wilts SN16 9AS. Once part of a Benedictine monastery, it has stunning formal gardens with topiary and riverside walks.

Bourton House Garden, Bourton-on-the-Hill, Glos GL56 9AE. A beautiful garden in the Cotswold hills, with unusual knot garden, parterre and a topiary walk.

Sadly, Frank and Marjorie's advancing years means the future of Herterton is uncertain. As a safeguard, Frank was encouraged to write his book *Herterton House and a new country garden*, creating a permanent record of their forty years of dedication.

Their great wish, however, is that the National Trust will take on Herterton and conserve it exactly as they have made it. ■

Next month: restoring a 400-year-old walled garden – Easton, Lincolnshire.