

The best of British gardens



Andrew Baskott goes exploring an eighteenth-century garden in Hampshire, and discovers how it has become a celebration of flora and music



A garden to sing about

Lieutenant General Henry Hawley was not a well-liked man; indeed few had a good word to say about him. He had earned a fearsome reputation for his brutality shown during the 1745 Rebellion, especially at Culloden, and gained the nickname, 'Hangman Hawley'.

However, despite his notoriety, one redeeming feature of his life was the building of West Green House. Built around 1720, this elegantly proportioned manor house in the typical early 18th century style of red brick and tile roof, stands tucked away amongst the green folds of north

Hampshire near the village of Hartley Wintney, not far from Hook.

Hawley's descendants were to live at West Green until 1898, when the Playfair family became the new owners. Dr Playfair was the Royal physician, and he commissioned renowned Scottish architect, Robert Weir-Schultz to remodel the north front of the house and transform the gardens. The Playfair family didn't stay long, and for

Above, the house from the walled garden, and top left, the Alice Garden

much of the twentieth century West Green was the home of Evelyn, Dowager Duchess of Wellington and her younger cousin, Yvonne Fitzroy. The house was actually bought for Evelyn by Sir Victor Sassoon, and it was Sir Victor who left West Green to the National Trust in 1957. With Yvonne's

death in 1971, it finally became a Trust property.

West Green's very first tenant was Lord Alistair McAlpine. With each new arrival the gardens had undergone some element of change and, in keeping with his family's construction heritage, Lord McAlpine embarked on a mini-building spree. With designs by architect Quinlan Terry, he set about filling the garden with an eclectic mix of garden follies and neo-classical ornaments. One impressive piece is the Nymphaeum fountain, forming part of an Italianate garden entered through an earlier Victorian moon gate, which also frames the garden's steps and rill.

As treasurer to the Conservative party, Lord McAlpine was a prominent figure within political circles. Unfortunately this prominence made him a terrorist target. In 1990, his tenancy at West Green House was nearly at an end when the IRA detonated a bomb in the forecourt. Fortunately

Below, inside the Walled Garden, and right, the Moon Gate

nobody was hurt, but damage to the house was so extensive, that the National Trust seriously considered demolishing it.

In the end, the Trust decided it would repair the fabric of the Grade II-listed house, but seek someone else willing to tackle the interior and restore the gardens. And so, in 1993, it was Marylyn Abbott who purchased the 99-year lease, and took on the challenge of West Green House.

Marylyn's journey to Hampshire had begun on the far side of the world in Australia. Having already created one of Australia's most visited gardens at Kennerton Green in Mittagong, New South Wales, she had headed to England in search of a new garden in a kinder climate.

What she really wanted was "somewhere old and in need of a bit of love" and, perhaps most importantly, a



garden in which to grow a "proper herbaceous border". Her search had ended at West Green House, and it would certainly need all the love it could get. After almost 300 years, the garden had slipped into a state of neglect and become lost beneath a tangle of brambles and ivy. The lake now resembled a marshy swamp and The Mews remained a bomb site from the damage sustained in the IRA attack. Marylyn quickly realised it wasn't just a lot of love the garden would need, but money too!

Marylyn had a passion for music and, having worked for the Sydney Opera House, opera too. With 10 acres

Visiting West Green House

West Green House, Thackham's Lane, near Hartley Wintney, Hook, Hampshire RG27 8JB.

Admission fee. NT members free. Open: Wednesday through Sunday (including Bank Holidays) until Sunday 30th October 2016. Telephone 01252 844611; www.westgreenhouse.co.uk

to play with, she could see that the gardens of West Green House presented an opportunity where both her passions could be indulged.

Using Weir-Schultz's design framework as a starting point, restoration of the garden began. Most of the follies

by Quinlan Terry were rebuilt, and it took four years of soil improvement before anything could be planted.

Planting in the walled garden was one of the early projects. Here they planted box hedging, only to see all 75,000 plants succumbing to box blight. The whole area was replanted, this time with standard box plants they had grown from cuttings, which seemed immune to blight.

During all this hard work and frustration, Marylyn was still running her garden in Mittagong – albeit through a lot of late night phone calls. However this nocturnal garden management came to an end in 2007, when the gardens at Kennerton Green were sold.

It wasn't long before the sound of music reverberated throughout the garden. To the west of the house is an enclosed terraced lawn and it was here, with its theatrical setting and natural acoustics, that the first concert was held. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it had an antipodean flavour led by the Australian Chamber Orchestra.

Since then the Theatre Lawn, as it's now called, has seen the addition of a stylish glass-sided auditorium and



hosts various opera and classical music performances during the summer. West Green House even boasts its own orchestra.

Eventually The Mews area was restored and so too the lake. No longer resembling a marshy swamp, the Lake Field has become the idyllic setting for torch-lit picnics before musical performances, with the island and its decorative wrought-iron pavilion linked by a gently arched wooden bridge, as the lake's centrepiece.

Traditional style still flourishes at West Green House such as the Alice Garden's chessboard parterre, or the Walled Garden with its gravel paths



Perfect for picnics, Lakefield, *above*, with the interlocking pools of the Paradise Gardens, *top left*, and Nymphaeum, *below*

edged with box and topiary spheres. The herbaceous borders are planted with old-fashioned roses, and there is a potager too, where fruit, flowers and vegetables grow in harmony. While more contemporary designs can be found in the Paradise Garden, with its fountains and interlocking pools and the Dragon Garden, with two brightly painted Chinese dragons and oriental-style pagodas providing interest.

West Green House has seen changes almost as dramatic as some of the operas it stages and become a garden very much worth singing about. ■

Next month: battling the harsh Northumbrian elements to create a magical garden from scratch – Herterton House.

Walled gardens of the 1700s

Wallington House, Wallington, Northumberland, NE61 4AR. The walled garden was once the kitchen garden and nestles deep within East wood.

Rode Hall, Scholar Green, Cheshire. ST7 3QP. Has an early 1700s 2 acre walled Kitchen garden, plus park and formal gardens designed by Humphrey Repton.

Lydiard Park Walled Garden, Lydiard Tregroze, Wiltshire, SN5 3PA. A restored garden from 1740, and now in the care of Swindon Borough Council.

Geilston Gardens, Cardross, Dumbartonshire, G82 5HD. The walled garden dates from 1797 and has its original potting shed and a 100 foot Wellingtonia.

Helmsley Walled Garden, Helmsley, North Yorkshire, YO62 5AH. A 5 acre walled garden dating from 1759 sits beside the ruins of Helmsley Castle.

