



## *The best of British gardens*

Andrew Baskott charts the ever-changing design styles of British gardens, with a visit this month to the seventeenth-century Dutch water garden at Westbury Court

# Gloucestershire's Dutch jewel



But for the intervention of two local Councils, a rare piece of British garden history would have been lost forever beneath the foundations of a housing estate.

Situated in the small village of Westbury-on-Severn, sandwiched between the busy A48 and the River Severn, is Westbury Court, an extremely rare survivor of a Dutch-style water garden, dating from 1696.

Richard Colchester inherited the Tudor estate of Westbury Court in 1642, and it remained in the Colchester family for more than 300 years. From the mid-1700s, however, it began to gradually fall into decline.



After a brief renaissance in the early 1900s, decline set in once again and Westbury Court was finally sold to a developer in 1960. But all was not lost.

Westbury's last-minute saviours were Gloucestershire County Council and Gloucester Rural District Council when, due to public pressure, they purchased the site in 1964. By now the garden was in an extremely sorry state, with the canals heavily silted, undergrowth taking over and demolition work already started. One third of the site was set aside for building an elderly people's home, with the remainder handed over to the National Trust in 1967.

Back in 1696, however, the gardens existed only on paper, as Richard's grandson, Maynard Colchester I, set about realising his plans for a water garden. With William of Orange on the throne, all things Dutch were highly fashionable in Britain — especially gardens.

Two years earlier, Maynard had married Jane Clarke, the daughter of a wealthy London merchant, and with her dowry of £6,000 he was able to fund his new garden. He began by digging the Long Canal. At almost 450 feet long, it was filled in December

**Previous pages:** Neptune among the lily pads of the T-Canal flanked by yew hedges and topiary **Left:** the Tall Pavilion with upper viewing room and loggia beneath stands at the south end of the Long Canal. **Facing page:** Johannes Kip's 1712 engraving of the house and gardens.



1699, but not completed until 1704.

To feed the new canal, Westbury Brook was diverted to the east. On the brook's old course almost 220,000 bricks were laid by Thomas Wintle, who was paid £38 11s 8d (about £120,000 today).

Typically Dutch in style, the Tall Pavilion was started in 1702 at the south end of the Long Canal, to act as a focal point not just for the canal, but the whole garden. It had an upper viewing room with loggia beneath.

With the garden's basic framework of walls and water in place, planting could begin. Maynard was to first order 500 yew and holly bushes in 1698, with another 1,000 yew and

1,000 hollies ordered the following year. Over the next five years a further 2,500 yews would arrive, as gradually the garden took shape. He also purchased hundreds of bulbs such as tulips and crocuses, as well as fruit trees, shrubs and vegetables, including 2,000 asparagus plants.

Sadly, Maynard didn't enjoy his new garden for long, for he died aged just fifty, in 1715. His successor at Westbury Court was his twelve-year-old nephew, also called Maynard.

There is no mention of a second canal in earlier records, and so it seems likely that the T-Canal was created by Maynard Colchester II. It runs parallel to the Long Canal, and in the middle



The walled garden and summerhouse. The flowerbeds are edged with wooden boards in seventeenth-century style.

of the canal's T is a stone statue of Neptune standing astride a dolphin.

Maynard II was also responsible for the Baroque-style summerhouse built against the east wall, and the small Walled Garden. Built of brick, the single-storey gazebo overlooks the T-Canal and into the Walled Garden.

The long stretch of ground between the two canals was where Maynard II planted his Vegetable Garden; while the canals themselves were stocked with fish. With the earlier planted fruit trees and a newly created rabbit warren, the gardens were highly productive.

In 1743, Maynard II demolished the old Tudor house, and built in its place a new Palladian-style home. However, upon his death in 1756, his wife and son moved across the Severn to the

Wilderness, the other family home, at Mitcheldean, marking the beginning of Westbury's decline.

The National Trust inherited a garden that had become cloaked in weeds after decades of neglect. The Palladian house had been demolished in 1805, while a later Victorian house had been cleared by the developer. The trust was, however, persuaded to undertake the very first scholarly garden restoration in Britain; setting the benchmark for future restorations.

Thankfully, Maynard Colchester I had kept meticulous records about the garden up until 1708, detailing not only the work undertaken and items purchased, but also shows among his staff in June 1701 a "weeder woman".

With finances secured, and advice

sought from Dutch and British garden experts, the trust began restoration. Its aim, for the next six years, was to accurately restore the gardens to their seventeenth-century splendour, and so Maynard's detailed accounts would be invaluable, as would the bird's-eye view engraving of the gardens, circa 1705-10, by Dutch engraver Johannes Kip.

The trust started by clearing the undergrowth and dredging tons of mud from the canals. Next, the Tall Pavilion was dismantled and reconstructed to its original design, and the long west wall rebuilt. With the garden framework reinstated, replanting began.

As in Kip's engraving, the vegetable beds have been recreated between parallel lines of box spires, and only planted with fruit and vegetables introduced before 1700, including rhubarb and artichokes.

More than a hundred old varieties of herbaceous perennials, medicinal plants and bulbs fill the rectangular beds in the Walled Garden, and are edged with wooden boards in seventeenth-century style. A small Dutch-

style parterre has also been re-created, and small evergreen trees planted in a *quincunx* (a five-tree square pattern).

By 1712 there were more than twenty water gardens in Gloucestershire alone; today Westbury Court is the only restored formal Dutch water garden in Britain. What this garden jewel lacks in acres is more than made up for in its importance within British garden design history.

October sees an added reason to visit Westbury Court, when Apple Day is celebrated and many ancient fruit varieties from the garden, such as Lemon Pippin and Catshead, can be tasted and bought. ■

*The Best of British Gardens series returns next year.*

*Westbury Court, Glos GL14 1PD; open March to October various days (Wed-Sun during Oct); Apple Day, 10th & 11th October; admission fee, NT members free; 01452 760461; westburycourt@nationaltrust.org.uk; www.nationaltrust.org.uk/westburycourt*

### Other gardens with Dutch influences

**Dyrham Park**, nr Bath SN14 8ER; once an elaborate Dutch water garden, much was lost in the early 1800s, but the West Garden is now being recreated.

**Levens Hall**, nr Kendal LA8 0PD; topiary garden is very Dutch in style and was planted between 1694-7; it contains over 100 pieces, some are 300 years old.

**Melbourne Hall**, nr Derby DE73 1EN; garden has remnants of Dutch influence, including water features and pieces of Dutch sculpture by Nost.

**Ashdown House**, nr Lambourne, Berks RG17 8RE; hunting lodge built in the Dutch style by the Earl of Craven for the Queen of Bohemia in the 1660s, to escape the plague in London.