

For the love of Arts & Crafts

A Cotswold garden that proves corporate needn't mean dull.

WORDS AND PICTURES BY MANDY BRADSHAW

I'VE seen hundreds of gardens over the years so it takes a lot to surprise me, but The Manor at Little Compton did just that. The approach through huge wrought iron gates and then along a neat but uninspiring avenue of hawthorn towards the old house seemed to fit with the fact that this was a business headquarters. I was expecting something pleasant – this is a vetted National Gardens Scheme garden – but nothing exciting. Turning a corner, the view changed and so did my expectations. This, I thought, was going to be a great garden after all.

Watching the surprise on my face was head gardener Richard Sutton. It's a reaction he sees often and one that the gardening team strive to maintain by deliberately keeping the initial approach low key.

"It is a great surprise," he says. "You come up a quite simple and quite open parkland area and then get the dramatic effect of turning and looking through the rest of the garden."

What you see is a long vista through garden rooms with tempting glimpses of flower-filled borders. It is, I realise, a great example of an Arts and Crafts garden.

The house has a history that reaches back long before the 1920s when the garden was designed. Mentioned in the Domesday Book, there are still parts of the building, now the headquarters of Reed Business School, that date back to medieval times. The rest of the old manor house was remodeled after a fire and now sports an eclectic mix of styles, including Arts and Crafts and Jacobean.

It was once the home of William Juxon, chaplain to Charles 1 and later the Archbishop of Canterbury. He was a great hunter and The Manor still boasts a deer park, reputed to be the smallest in England at around an acre-and-a-half. In the past, it reached right up to the house but now runs alongside the main site, giving yet another dimension to this varied garden.

Richard, who has been at Little Compton for nearly two years, is gradually working his way around the different areas with his three-strong team, revamping and rejuvenating the planting.

It's this variety that makes the garden surprising and unusual for what is essentially a corporate space. Enclosed areas of colour-



Above: Roses and lavender are a classic combination in the Flower Garden

Left: Touches of red light up the Japanese-style rock garden

Right: *Geum* 'Mrs J Bradshaw'



THE MANOR, LITTLE COMPTON

is open for the National Garden Scheme on Sundays, June 4 and August 20, from 2-5pm. Admission is £5.50, free entry to children.

themed borders give way to cool green spaces and formality is counterbalanced by wild flower meadows and woodland.

None of this, as I discovered, is obvious from first impressions. The area in front of the house, known as the Front Courtyard, is gradually being changed from a shrub-heavy area to something with more of a theme.

Already a large laurel, fatsia and clump of bamboo have been removed and plants introduced that reinforce the purple colour of existing drifts of *Ligularia dentata* 'Desdemona'.

"I've never been a huge fan of it but it does really well here," says Richard, who worked at Hidcote Manor Garden before moving to Little Compton.

Certainly, the plum undersides of the leaves and its architectural shape contrast well with the Cotswold stone wall that marks the transition from the initial approach and the start of the garden proper.

Among those plants that have been

moved elsewhere are four out of a group of five *Rosa* 'Lady of Shalott'. The garden, observes Richard, does have a lot of some things; other much repeated plants are alliums and *Rosa* 'Hyde Hall' that crops up all over the four-acres.

As well as fronting one entrance to the house, the courtyard forms one end of a long vista that runs like a spine through the garden.

Step between beautifully constructed walls – a legacy of the Arts and Crafts style – and you enter the flower-filled section that made me gasp with surprise.

Known as the four squares for obvious reasons, it shows exuberance in the style of planting yet restraint in the plant choices. Standard white wisteria drip down above a predominantly green carpet of ferns, *Alchemilla mollis* and hostas, which is rescued from the risk of blandness by clumps of *Heuchera* 'Cappuccino' and spikes of *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation' rising out of the froth like exclamation marks. Once these ▶



Clipped box ensures there's interest all year round

have finished, the display will be carried on with *Nicotiana langsdorffii* while earlier in the year, white tulips are the focal point.

Clipped yew on two sides is the perfect green foil and flower borders on the other two boundaries are kept simple with white roses, clematis, hydrangeas, delphiniums and perennial sweet peas.

As an antidote to this flower-heavy space, the next garden room, 'The Tea Garden', is a simple mix of trees and grass. A large St Lucie Cherry, *Prunus mahaleb*, dominates – it's a national champion due to its girth – and two yews on one side have broken out of their original topiary shape to form shaggy trees that add to the shade.

It's the perfect buffer between the 'Four Squares' and the next area, 'The Palette', which offers blocks of single colours between yew buttresses.

It starts calmly with white and geraniums, convolvulus, and leucanthemum, moving on to yellow hemerocallis, rudbeckia and *Alchemilla mollis*. Blue

sees lupins, ceratostigma and aconites, then there is orange, red – with my near namesake *Geum* 'Mrs J Bradshaw' – before the display finishes with pink.

Slotted in alongside two paths that cut through this long border are plantings of first green and then silver.

Richard agrees that some of the colours are more challenging than others – green in particular – but it's a task he has relished.

Opposite there's a long, mixed shrub border with choisya, philadelphus and viburnum among its components.

Move into the swimming pool garden and the heat is turned up with a hot and tropical style. *Ligularia*, *hemerocallis*, *crocsmia*, *lysimachia*, bananas and the scarlet *Rosa* 'Dublin Bay' put on a fiery show with weeping silver pears adding height and pineapple broom draped over the gateway.

The jury's out on the next area. Known as The Circles thanks to round beds of lavender and standard roses, it's a part of the garden that seems to have lost its way and is high

on Richard's list of things to be tackled. One idea is to introduce more vertical planting, such as verbasiums, to reinforce the upright shape of junipers that flank the path.

This long, central vista now ends with a newly planted golden metasequoia, which echoes the yellow of the pineapple broom.

The tree is part of a small arboretum made up of 21 trees given to Sir Alec Reed to mark the 21st anniversary his firm. Some of the original trees have had to be replaced over the years but the number in this space never varies. Others include weeping beech, catalpa and sorbus.

Another larger arboretum has been developed on the outer boundary of the garden with a wide range of species represented: acers, liquidambar, parrotia, davidia, pyrus and cut leaf alder.

There's also woodland outside the main garden that Sir Alec allows villagers to use. Planted about 10 years ago with a mix of native trees, it has wide mown paths allowing different routes through.

A more recent addition is a wild flower meadow that acts as a buffer between the anniversary arboretum and the main collection of specimen trees. Now in its third year, it sports buttercups, red clover, ox-eye daisies and burnet around mown paths. A second 'wild' area nearer the house has a different ethos with perennials, including *Verbena bonariensis*, camassias, *Allium unifolium*, ox-eye daisies and scarlet poppies planted in long grass.

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That would have been enough for many gardens but there is still more to explore. While it is possible to just follow the main path, in every 'garden room' there is the temptation to turn off into other spaces.

These include two rock gardens with very different styles. One is being revamped with areas cleared of more thuggish plants and new things introduced. It's being done slowly as Richard is cautious about how much extra maintenance the four-strong

garden team can manage.

"We're doing it bit by bit," he says. "We're getting it looking better but without creating something we can't sustain."

Already, it's a peaceful spot with dainty alpines nestling among the rocks and ferns colonising shady areas.

The other rock garden has been given a Japanese flavour, accessed via a red, humped bridge and planted with azaleas and acers.

"It's not pure Japanese," explains Richard. "It's about the feel of it."

It's the cow that dominates Sir Alec's private garden. Made by Helen Owen and called 'Oranges and Lemons', it's yellow with orange spots and is part of artwork that includes a dog and figure of Joe, one of the former gardeners; another former head gardener, Brian, now 'clips' topiary alongside the deer park.

Mixed borders thrive in this walled garden and a parterre near the house is planted partly in pinks and creams, partly in reds and yellows.

"The temptation is to do them all the same but they can look a bit 'beige'," says Richard.

Meanwhile, a raised bed sees a simple planting of kniphofia, nepeta and alliums, showing how effective a restricted plant palette can be.

There's no such restraint in the Flower Garden where the aim is to have as much colour as possible. Iris, rudbeckia, roses, lavender, masses of geraniums and penstemon are just some of the summer performers set against clipped box and yew, while wisteria is draped along a wall and tumbles from the roof of the summerhouse.

As with any new head gardener, Richard is instigating changes but most of these are refinements rather than revolution: dividing and replanting is strengthening planting schemes; retraining climbing roses has produced more flowers per plant.

They are small changes, but in keeping with the attention to detail that characterises the Arts and Crafts style. This is definitely a garden to watch. ♦



Artwork is found throughout the garden