

An old master restored

Some gardens are like paintings, says George Plumptre of Lossenham Manor in Kent. It takes a sensitive renovation to peel back the layers of history and so reveal their original treasures

Photographs by
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SOME long-established gardens are akin to Old Masters, where layers of original detail and colour have been obscured by later over-painting. These original features can lie concealed and unknown for centuries, until revealed by careful restoration.

Lossenham Manor is such a garden, where extensive rejuvenation has been sensitively carried out by the Kent-based garden designer Marian Boswall for Tristram and Tavia Gethin. Mr and Mrs Gethin moved here from London in 1999, partly drawn by an ancient family connection: Tristram is descended from Dame Grace Gethin, who lived in the 17th century, and who, in turn, was descended from William Culpepper, who owned the house in the 16th century.

For the first two years, the Gethins did little to the garden, deciding to 'see what was here' before making any major changes. They made some pleasing discoveries, such as the naturalised cyclamen in the old orchard, and important improvements, including the iron railings along the moat, as well as adding limited planting, such as the now integral hornbeam hedge. It was not until 2014 that they decided to tackle the major problems that had become steadily more evident, ►

The landscape designer Marian Boswall married the various garden elements with the mainly 18th-century house, so they flow as one to enhance its handsome features







Above: The magnificent old magnolia with its spreading branches was kept as a feature in the lawn and has been underplanted with *Alchemilla mollis*. **Below:** The treehouse perches in a venerable fruit tree in the orchard, backed by a planting of Kentish hazels



however. Work included commissioning Mrs Boswall to address the state of the moat, which was full of silt and had collapsing walls; the regular flooding caused by the proximity of the broad valley of the Rother; the unevenness of the walled garden immediately to the east of the house; and the approach to the house and prospect of the main south-facing façade, where a gravel area was used for parking cars and had an expanse of uneven, sloping lawn beyond.

Working with impressive speed, Mrs Boswall completed all the major alterations within a year. Her work revealed the true quality of some of the garden's old features, which had been obscured by inappropriate and overgrown planting, by long-term decline and, in the case of the house's elegant entrance front, by the arrival of the motor car. The distinguished garden designer John Codrington, who worked during the post-war decades, always started any commission by insisting that cars should not intrude upon the relationship between a house and its garden.

At Lossenham, Mrs Boswall followed his dictum to dramatic effect, creating a new parking area west of the house and adding a newly levelled paved terrace so that one can now walk out of the front door, one broad, shallow steps to an immaculate croquet lawn (also levelled after being drained) and beyond the ha-ha to a panoramic view over the Rother Valley.

‘The moat was full of silt and had collapsing walls,’

The moat was drained and the walls repaired before it was refilled and its simple, impressive proportions could once again be admired. One of the landscape architect's most inspired achievements was the way she remodelled the walled garden and linked it with the moat that stretches along one of its sides. Originally, one stepped down

from the small paved terrace next to the house to the lawn and down again to the edge of the moat. Mrs Boswall realised that the whole enclosed area would be far more restful if the levels were aligned, so the whole main area was raised by some 8in and a new paved terrace laid so that there is unbroken progress from house to lawn.

The magnolia tree spreading over the lawn was retained as a feature, as was an old fig tree against the north wall next to an elegant old gateway; otherwise, all the planting in front of the walls was replaced. A strong link from walled garden to moat was provided by a new, sunny terrace next to the moat, with a rectangular parterre on gently sloping ground immediately above, where Mrs Boswall created a pattern of curving clipped box, alliums and roses around tall yew pillars. In summer, when the borders beneath the walls are overflowing with a luxuriant mixture of shrub roses, peonies and seasonally changing perennials, including *Salvia nemorosa*, *Gillenia trifoliata*



and *Astrantia* 'Star of Billion', the walled garden is an idyllic, sheltered haven.

Through the tall gateway on the north side of the walled garden, the old vegetable garden—also partly walled—has been redesigned, with a pattern of wood-edged beds for an impressive selection of fruit, vegetables and herbs. Yet although most of the kitchen garden was changed, it is significant that a stand of white-stemmed birch trees in the top corner was retained. The retention of some established features acts as a foil to the ambitious new additions and means that the garden as a whole has reassuring stability.

This is particularly evident in the more natural, informal areas of the old orchard and in the wildflower meadow that flows south and east from the moat towards the swimming pool and tennis court. The orchard contains a variety of venerable fruit trees, now with scattered spring bulbs beneath, and, on the far side, is bounded by a hedgerow filled with clusters of hazel of a kind that has divided the fields of Kentish farms for ➤



Top: Low yew domes on the bank, with a screen of pleached *Quercus ilex* against the brick wall. *Above:* An abundance of ox-eye daisies lines a flight of brick and stone steps

Lossenham Manor through the years

The manor house stands on the edge of the Kent/Sussex border village of Newenden, overlooking the valley of the River Rother. In 1242, the Carmelite Priory of Lossenham (the third to be established in England) was founded by Sir Thomas Aucher and was notable for a visit by Edward I—for whom one of the Aucher family was a Gentleman of the Bedchamber. The local church booklet comments: 'It is interesting to note that the earliest reference to cricket is contained in the wardrobe accounts of King Edward I when he stayed at Lossenham, and played there.'

By the time of Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries, Lossenham had become a home of the Culpepper family. The present house and surrounding gardens, although retaining traces of its former monastic inhabitants—notably the moat—date principally from the early 18th century, since when both have had regular alteration and expansion. The house's gabled top floor and easternmost window bay were added during the 19th century.



Inside the old vegetable garden, the froth of blooms in the rose arch contrasts with the formal gateposts. In the foreground, broad beans grow in the new wood-edged beds

centuries. In early summer, the wildflower meadow is a sea of ox-eye daisies, dotted with the reds and pinks of other perennial natives, from which you emerge into the enclosed swimming-pool area.

Today, the garden at Lossenham makes the most of its considerable assets. Mrs Boswall's skill has been to combine meticulous, often understated and yet transformational structural work with a glorious palette of fresh

new planting to enliven the old brick walls and mature trees. As a result, venerable features, such as the moat, the walled garden and the prospect of the house's main façade, have been rediscovered and reaffirmed and the whole place has been infused with that sense of lively variety—old and new, formal and natural, plants and architecture—that is the hallmark of the best English country gardens. 🐦

George Plumpton is chief executive of the NGS



Looking across the moat, which had to be completely cleared of silt and the brickwork of its retaining walls repaired, to the sunny new terrace. The walls of the moat are now home to a thriving colony of pink and white Mexican daisies, *Erigeron karvinskianus*