

Gardens of Buckinghamshire 14-17 July 2024

In reality, the gardens covered four counties - Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire & Oxfordshire - and covered a wide range of British garden design styles spanning classic 17th century landscape to modern day Chelsea gold winners gardens. For architecture lovers, there was plenty to enjoy with houses from Tudor to 1960s, together with the opportunity to wander around the medieval market town of Buckingham as our hotel was situated in the centre. Apart from Stowe, all the houses we visited remain family homes.

And lots of 'Wow' moments - including for our Tour Manager Colin Crosbie (ex Wisley Head Curator) who rated one of the gardens (read on!) as one of his absolute favourites. Several of the gardens have won awards, including HHA Garden of the Year Award for Chenies Manor and The Manor House Bledlow.

Here is a short description of each garden in the order we visited, together with my personal WOWs.

Turn End

The garden was created as an integral part of a 1960's house (later listed at Grade II) by the architect Peter Aldington, who still lives there. In 2017 Turn End's garden was also registered at Grade II. This acknowledges the garden's interlinked informal spaces and garden rooms with naturalised planting around existing trees, all interwoven with the house. There is a house courtyard, small woodland area, and a curved glade leading to a series of garden rooms - sunken or raised, sunny or shaded, formal or informal planting.

WOW Created in conjunction with the house the whole garden highlights how architecture and landscape design can be an indivisible whole. Turn End is the only post war listed project where the house and garden were created by the same person.



Ascott

The 30 acre garden surrounds the house owned by the Rothschild family. An unusual mix of the formal and the natural - it was originally laid out by Harry Veitch, with replanting in the 1980s by garden design Arabella Lenox, who designed a new approach to the house, new herbaceous borders and the serpentine walk leading to a replanted lily pond. More topiary has been added in recent years and a notable contemporary addition in 2006 was the Lynn Garden with its circles, swerves and curves.

There is some impressive topiary and mature specimen trees set in rolling lawns which give way to wonderful views across the Chiltern Hills. In the formal Dutch garden, with colourful bedding, there is a fabulous Venus fountain with the sculpture designed by American Thomas Waldo Story.

Many of us made time to see the rooms open in Ascott House with its collection of fine paintings, oriental porcelain and French furniture.

WOW Particularly memorable is Ascott's vast topiary sundial. A huge yew topiary, its Roman numerals is framed by a fitting motto 'light and shade by turn but love always'.



Bledlow Manor Gardens

The Queen Anne Manor House has been owned by the Carrington family since 18th century. The garden came into existence in 1967 as the brainchild of the 6th Lord & Lady Carrington who commissioned the landscape architect Robert Adams to create the garden. After the 7th Lord Carrington inherited the garden he commissioned the plantsman Sean Walter in 2019 to lead an extensive replanting throughout the gardens.

The current garden cover 12 acres with different terrains and styles. There are a number individual paved gardens and parterres divided by yew hedges. The walled kitchen garden is crisscrossed with vegs, fruit, herbs and flowers. The Lyde Garden is a water garden and steps guided us up and down through a leafy wilderness. The River Lyde rises here and is a tributary of the Thames. Originally watercress beds, it is now planted with ferns, gunneras and hostas.

WOW A 2.5 acre sculpture garden consisting of mown lawns sweeping around borders with a huge variety of shrubs and around each corner striking contemporary sculptures, that the Carringtons started collecting in the 1990's. The picture shows Fallen Angel by Peter Randall-Page.

WOW (2) Lord Carrington lead the group around the garden for an extensive and personal guide- in the rockery area we were asked to avoid treading on the edelweiss (showing white flowers) as his wife would not be happy!



Chenies Manor

One of the finest Tudor houses, built in 1460 by Sir John Cheyne, it is the original home of the Earls of Bedford, and visited by Henry VIII & Elizabeth I. We had the opportunity to visit the Grade I listed building.

It is surrounded by 5 acres of garden laid out in a formal style, planted to enhance the Manor House. At the entrance, the redbrick of the house forms an L around two sides and here the square lawn is also bordered on one side by a wall beyond which stands the parish church. A very picturesque scene. The borders are a textbook of leaf shapes and textures - phormium, eunymous, corpus and melianthus.

The main garden consist of several rooms beyond which is a larger expanse of lawn and clipped pyramids. Everywhere you turn are vistas and flowery borders. The rose lawn borders are in a pink/purple theme - heliotrope, verbena bonariensis, cosmos and frothy annuals such as nicotiana and cleome.

The sunken garden comprises a rectangle within a rectangle. Fern, euphorbia and hosta provide an understated backdrop for what will no doubt be the stars of the show - dozens of dahlias in warm shades just starting to appear.

WOW Here the architecture of the house was the main focal point for the garden design. It provided a perfect backdrop for tucking in pots - be it terracotta pots of ferns in shady corners or filling in a courtyard with a collection of clipped box.



Broughton Grange

Broughton Grange overlooks a beautiful Oxfordshire valley and is set in 400 acres, with parkland parking that owes its origins to the Victorian era. Purchased by the present owners in 1992, the garden's development accelerated in 2001 when leading landscape artist, Tom Stuart Smith, was commissioned to transform a six acre south facing field into a walled garden.

The walled garden consists of three terraces contrasting the structure of topiary with luxuriant herbaceous planting whilst framing a beautiful rural backdrop. Open on two sides - two sizeable beech tunnels on the west and the open countryside on the south. On the top terrace there is a small vegetable and fruit growing area with central fruit cages surrounded by espalier apples. The main planting has a strong Mediterranean prairie feel - low grasses and pencil yews. Spires of pale yellow Phloxes accompanied by Salvia Nemorosa and purple Allium sphaerocephalon dominated the area.

A formal stone water tank makes up the centre of the middle terraces and here the design together with the colour palette of mauves and greens show strong parallels with Tom Stuart Smith's Paradise

Garden at RHS Bridgewater (which the club visited last year). The lower terrace is made up of compartments with a 21st century twist on modern parterres.

Elsewhere, too much to describe in detail, there are a Yew Terrace, Spring Garden, Knot Garden, Parterre & Rose Garden, Long Borders, Fountain Garden and a Tree House; also woodland gardens (including a stumpery) and a water meadow. We didn't visit the arboretum, which at 80 acres is one of the largest such plantings in the UK - started in 2003.

WOW The Walled Garden and its relationship with the surrounding landscape. And, you probably guessed it, this garden is Colin Crosbie's favourite.



Stowe

Stowe has had enormous influence on garden design from the mid 17th century onwards, under a succession of distinguished designers. It was where 'Capability' Brown's career began and where he became known as a revered landscape architect. Still very much defined by the style of the 18th century - created as an earthly paradise, full of hidden meaning, picture perfect views, winding paths, lakeside walks and temples are immersed in over 250 acres of garden.

Stowe has more than twice as many listed garden buildings as any in England. Many garden buildings have been restored and thousands of shrubs and trees planted in recent years.

WOW I had never visited before and was delighted to see and walk this iconic landscape for myself.

Stowe House is a private school but a few of the rooms in the magnificent building are open at certain times and several of our group who opted out of the landscape walk went to the House.



The Barn, Serge Hill and the Plant Library

We visited Tom Stuart-Smith and his wife Sue's own garden at The Barn together with his sister's garden at Serge Hill (where he was brought up). We started in the sunken courtyard, which prefaces the barn (a 17th century timber framed building) and enclosed on three sides. It was revamped in 2007 using steel water tanks deployed in one of Tom's Chelsea Flower Show gardens.

The structure of the garden behind the barn is four semi-enclosed spaces that are full of plants and two that are empty green rooms. The planting design is, as Tom has described it, a 'gradient of naturalism' so you move further from the house from the slightly decorative (dahlias and penstemons) and odd climbing rose to a more meadowy planting where the colour range is blue, purple and yellow (seems to be his favourite). Grasses make up much of the planting scheme while another emphasis is on tall perennials - veronicastrums, cardoons and hollyhocks. Texture and form are of more importance than colour.

His own garden seems to be a place for experimentation. In 2011 he began an experimental 'exotic prairie' which pushed the theme of 'immersive continuum planting' of texture and form even further - here the rationale has been to simply disperse seed and see what happens.

Kate Stuart-Smith guided us around Sedge Hill. This Regency House is situated next to The Barn and set in beautiful parkland with a walled garden planted by Kate. Orderly rows of vegetables and disorderly self seeded annuals and perennials.

The Plant Library was planted in 20/21 in what was the orchard. It is a unique educational resource for anyone interested in plants and planting design. Set up on a grid system which holds more than 1500 different varieties of mainly herbaceous plants that can be walked through and studied from all angles. It is organised into communities of plants that suit different conditions, logically graded with drought tolerant plants from warmer climates at the top of the slope.



WOW The Plant Library - an exciting experiment. I would love one near me to see varieties and species alongside each other and observe the size, form and texture.

The Plant Specialist Nursery

And finally we visited what Colin described as 'the best perennial plant nursery he had ever visited'. High praise indeed. Note - there is no mail order available. We took home a lot of plants!

In all, an amazing tour.

Sophie