





Unravelling Jekyll's riddle

The Manor House, Upton Grey, Hampshire

Judith Tankard, author of a new COUNTRY LIFE book on Gertrude Jekyll's work, traces the remarkable story of the lost-and-found garden at Upton Grey

Photographs by Paul Barker

WHEN a young couple from London bought a derelict house in the tiny village of Upton Grey in Hampshire in 1983, they never suspected that one day they could boast of having one of England's premier restored Gertrude Jekyll gardens. Today, thousands of visitors flock from all over to the world to The Manor House to see the famous garden that was once buried in underbrush and a tangle of weeds, unknown even to the seller of the house or the people in the village. Shortly after buying the Grade II-listed Jacobean property, John and Rosamund Wallinger were astonished to learn from records at the Royal Institute of British Architects that the garden was thought to have been designed by Gertrude Jekyll. After further investigation, Mrs Wallinger located a complete set of garden plans in Jekyll's archives at the University of California at Berkeley and, from that moment on, the couple embarked on a mission to reawaken the slumbering garden.

Mrs Wallinger's initial idea was to do wholesale clearing of the land, and then replant the garden by simply following the Jekyll plans. Her enthusiasm dimmed somewhat when she ran into problems deciphering Jekyll's notoriously illegible script, which led to many mistakes, such as planting *Aruncus sylvester* instead of the more delicate *Anemone sylvestris*. For the first two years, she reckoned that, as a novice gardener, she worked 65 hours per week, mostly clearing weeds and building bonfires, at which she became an expert. After bulldozing the land, then replenishing the soil and rebuilding the crumbling drystone walls, as well as other essential preparations, she found her resources and energy dwindling. As word got out about their garden, however, her

Clusters of pink-and-white *Lilium regale* stand out against a background of grey-green wall plants in the rose parterre

circle of horticultural friends widened to include Graham Stuart Thomas, Richard Bisgrove, Penelope Hobhouse, and dozens of old-rose fanciers, all of whom helped her find many of the plants that Jekyll specified in her plans. After 15 years, she was able to look back over her accomplishments and write a remarkably candid book (*Gertrude Jekyll's Lost Garden*) about the process.

'They embarked on a mission to reawaken the slumbering garden'

The garden was designed in 1908 at the request of a Mr Best, a tenant of the country house that was actually owned by Charles Holme, a well-known textile merchant, art collector, and the founder and editor of *The Studio*. After Holme left William Morris's Red House in Bexleyheath in 1902, he began buying up most of the village of Upton Grey. Oddly, he lived at Upton Grey House, rather than The Manor House, which he let to his tenant. Holme hired Ernest Newton, an important Arts-and-Crafts architect, to transform the old Jacobean farmhouse into a comfortable Edwardian retreat, during which process the Jacobean house was all but swallowed up in the renovation.

Once the house was done, Jekyll started work on the garden. At this point, she was 65 years old and well-known for her gardening articles in *Country Life*, as well as for her collaborations with Sir Edwin Lutyens on Orchards, Marsh Court, Deanery Garden, and others. The design she proposed for Upton Grey, however, is more modest in scale than those that involved Lutyens, but it includes many of her typical features, such as flower parterres, rock-wall plantings, and cascades of climbing roses. In all, she drew up 15



plans between 1908 and 1909 for a formal garden and a two-acre naturalistic garden north-west of the house.

As was usually the case, the architect provided a set of plans for her use in designing the garden scheme. The site (which she never visited) was smaller, just under five acres, on sloping ground behind the house. One of the first things she did was to eliminate the grass banks behind the house that had previously been installed by Holme. Instead, she broke the ground into several descending terraces bounded by low dry-stone walls and enclosed by yew hedging. On the upper terrace, she designed a small pergola constructed of oak posts to be covered with roses, jasmine, and Virginia creeper. The pergola, which provides a simple connection between the house and garden, frames the view as one descends low, stone steps to the rose lawn parterre and, below that, a long bowling-green and a tennis lawn. Today the garden is surrounded by a nuttery and walled orchard, as well as Jekyll-style double herbaceous

borders beside the rose parterre. Opposite the front courtyard Jekyll designed an unusual wild garden that abuts the 12th-century village church.

The configuration of the rectangular rose lawn was similar to others she had designed elsewhere, such as those on the plat at Hestercombe. Its two central raised beds for floral display were found to be completely buried in the underbrush in 1983. Jekyll's original planting plans indicate clumps of cannas and lilies in pots, similar to those in the water garden at Munstead Wood. The four trapezoidal borders surrounding each stone bed are planted with roses, lilies, and peonies and edged with lambs' ears. For the drystone walls, Jekyll provided a luscious composition of her signature grey-themed wall plants, such as lavender, cerastium, iris, acanthus and santolina, and the upper borders were filled with brightly coloured daylilies, dianthus, iris, anemones, and poppies. At the height of summer, the two main herbaceous borders provide a spectacular display of

delphinium, poppies, hollyhocks, campanulas and other Jekyll favourites arranged in colour drifts from cool white, blues, and yellows to vivid oranges and fiery reds.

The wild garden at Upton Grey, one of the few extant examples from all of Jekyll's commissions, has been faithfully restored by the Wallingers. Today, shallow semi-circular grass steps lead from the forecourt up to the garden, where irregular mown paths meander from the entrance to a pond. All has been planted naturalistically, and in spring, the garden is carpeted with drifts of daffodils, many of which are Jekyll's original bulbs. When the Wallingers arrived, however, this area of the garden was completely overgrown and the pond had long since silted up. Once a natural spring-fed pond, it is now completely lined, and around the edges, there are yellow iris, meadow-sweet, tansy, and bergamot. Mrs Wallinger once said that the wild garden needed 25 years to mature, and, today, 25 years after being resurrected, it is in its full glory. It now attracts diverse wildlife, with dragon-



Facing page Jekyll-esque drifts of multicoloured flowers are a joy in high summer.
Above A pergola smothered in roses connects The Manor House to the lower gardens



The abundant double herbaceous borders, with a glimpse of the orchard beyond



Cool tones give way gracefully to warm ones, as in Jekyll's long border at Munstead Wood

flies, newts, frogs, grass snakes, birds, and fish all living together in harmony.

In their time at Upton Grey, the Wallingers have introduced some new features, so that the garden becomes a living museum, rather than a period piece frozen in time. Among the attractive additions is a willow arbour, installed in 1995, which harks back to one of Jekyll's many childhood interests. And, more recently, the original glasshouse in the kitchen garden has been refurbished. The garden at Upton Grey is surely everything that Jekyll treasured in a garden: a simple plan with borders filled with favourite flowers, a generous amount of green lawn, and an enchanting wild garden. 🐸

The Manor House, Upton Grey, Hampshire.

The garden is open by appointment

(01256 862827; gj1908@gertrudejekyllgarden.co.uk). Judith Tankard's 'Gertrude Jekyll and the Country House Garden' is available from Aurum Press at £30

