

MARGERY FISH: A GARDENING GREAT

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The final garden we visited on the HPS Worcestershire Group's 2017 West Country garden tour was East Lambrook Manor in Somerset, former home of Margery Fish. This country has produced many gardening legends, their names synonymous with the style of garden which they made popular. The name of Margery Fish will always be associated with the English country garden and, in particular, the cottage garden style.

Like many of us, Margery Fish (née Townsend) developed an interest in gardening quite late in life. Born in London in 1892, she entered Fleet Street after attending secretarial college. There she worked for the next twenty-two years, most of which were spent employed by Associated Newspapers as secretary to a succession of editors at the Daily Mail, the last of whom, Walter Fish, she married in 1933, three years before his retirement. For her work on a government mission to America in 1917, accompanying owner Lord Northcliffe, she was awarded an MBE.



Margery Fish pruning a tree peony in her garden at East Lambrook Manor

The purchase of East Lambrook Manor, and relocation there from London in 1937, was prompted by the worsening situation in Europe and the threat of war. The couple's new home was a small 15th century manor house on a two-acre site and it was there, although a complete newcomer to gardening, that Margery was to create what subsequently became a world-famous garden. She also became a prolific writer and the story of the creation of the garden was recorded in her 1956 book *We Built a Garden*.

Margery and Walter did not see eye to eye on the subject of gardening; in fact, it would seem that theirs was not an easy marriage. His concept of a garden involved straight paths, manicured lawns and plenty of bedding plants. Hers was built on informality, with cottage-garden flowers and self-seeding native plants. She also wanted all-year interest, from snowdrops to asters, whereas he was looking for a blaze of summer glory.

Walter died in 1947, leaving Margery free to pursue her ideas unhindered. She developed and managed the garden almost single-handed, working long hours and carrying out many of the hard landscaping works herself. The gardens began opening for charity in the late 1950s, drawing visitors from round the world and gaining many plaudits. She became a noted plantswoman and numerous plant varieties bear the name 'Lambrook': *Polemonium* 'Lambrook Mauve'; *Artemisia* 'Lambrook Silver', and *Euphorbia* 'Lambrook Gold' may be familiar. In 1963, Margery was awarded the Veitch Memorial Medal from the RHS.

Although the property passed through a number of hands after Margery's death in 1969 and the garden itself almost faded into obscurity, it has been sensitively restored by a series of owners, not least the present owners, Mike and Gail Werkmeister, who bought the property in 2008. Evolutionary changes inevitably have taken place. Some were born of

necessity; the ditch, for example, which had previously carried water, dried up due to a local housing development, and the moisture-loving plants there had to be replaced with more suitable ones. An outbreak of honey fungus, too, led to the loss of all the large trees in the woodland garden and threatened the valuable collection of snowdrops and hellebores. In many areas, the shrubs and trees had outgrown their allotted spaces and Margery's 'jungle effect' was beginning to take over in the borders; as in any garden the 'natural' look is remarkably labour-intensive.



© Ray Beer

East Lambrook Manor today

Despite all this, the garden has largely retained its character and remained true to its creator's philosophy. Margery Fish's legacy survives, not just in her garden but in her writings, too, which include a series of books appearing between 1956 and 1970, many of which have been translated. It is through all these achievements that her place in gardening history will be preserved.

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