

A tale of two gardens

Gill Heavens

This is a tale of two gardens. Two gardens not a stone's throw away from each other, close enough to hear the bamboo exploding on the other's bonfire.

The gardens are situated in the small coastal village of Lee on the north Devon coast. Both are open to the public with the NGS, and the combination of their close proximity and their remoteness from the rest of the country makes them the perfect tandem visit for Yellow Bookers. While they have many similarities, it is the differences that make them both interesting and complementary.

The Gate House is owned by Heather and Denny Booker, whose partnership demonstrates demarcation at its best. Heather is the gardener and Denny the woodworker, engineer and innovator. I think it would be safe to say, without fear of a libel case, that Heather is a plantaholic and she has no desire for the cure; her energy and enthusiasm are unwavering. Denny is insatiably inventive – if you have a problem he will be in his workshop solving it before you have finished your sentence. Their



© Heather Booker

Fig. 1. The Gate House garden is principally level, with long winding paths running either side of the streams.



Fig. 2 Cliffe was cut out of a steep field and is mainly terraced, with steep paths and flights of steps to carry you up and around the garden.

garden nestles in the bosom of the village, down a narrow lane, in a wooded valley, which enables it to be both secluded and at the same time at the heart of things.

Cliffe garden is owned by Gwyn and Linda Humphreys, who moved to Cliffe in 2005. They were initially seduced, understandably, by the phenomenal coastal views to the north rather than the extensive garden to the south. The Humphreys are not gardeners but garden lovers, and employ one full-time and one part-time gardener to manage the grounds. This doesn't mean they don't get their hands dirty. They both help out, and in this high-maintenance garden everyone's input is both necessary and appreciated.

The layout at Cliffe is unusual in that a road bisecting it acts as a natural division between the private and public domain. The bottom or house garden runs directly to the cliff edge and the lawn here has been nurtured by Gwyn allowing the Humphreys to play croquet in one of the most scenic locations where it's ever been played. The upper garden consists of mixed borders and woodland, a vegetable garden with potting shed, and the original greenhouse.

One of the most obvious differences in these gardens is the terrain. The Gate House garden is principally level, with long winding paths running either side of the streams, weaving around the site seductively (fig. 1). This allows for a gentle meander, slowing down the visitor, enforcing a more intense deliberate viewing; this is essential as there is so much to see.



Fig. 3 The sea is backdrop to Cliffe's herbaceous borders.

Cliffe, however, was cut out of a steep field in the 1920s, a monumental task, and is mainly terraced (fig. 2). Steep paths zigzag into the woods and flights of steps carry you up and around the garden. The different levels afford alternative views of most areas of the garden: some borders can be seen from above, below and at eye level. There are eight benches situated around the garden, ensuring there are plenty of resting stations for the less energetic, and providing an ideal place for contemplation.

Water is an important factor in both gardens, but in very different ways. At Cliffe the presence of the sea is dominant. This natural backdrop has been used in planting schemes to show off plants to best effect, especially on the lawn beds where diaphanous cosmos, statice and bronze fennel allow the viewer glimpses

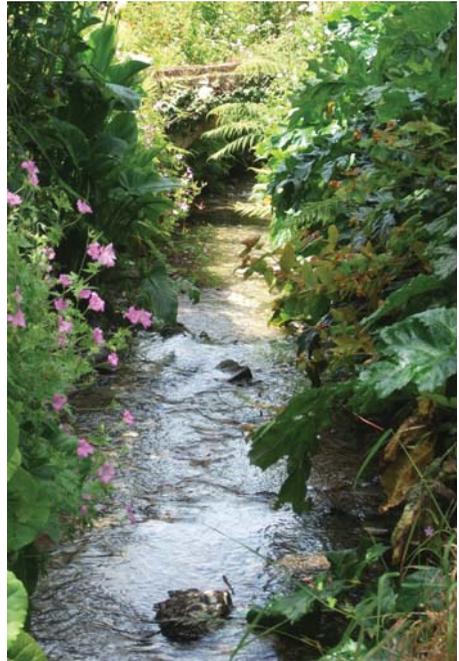


Fig. 4 One of The Gate House streams.

Fig. 5 *Rodgersia*.Fig. 6 *Dicksonia antarctica*.

means the extent of her inventory. Mature shrubs and trees, including *Dicksonia antarctica* (fig. 6), *Taxodium distichum*, *Cornus* ‘Porlock’ and *Drimys winteri* create an exceptional upper storey, underplanted with a rich assortment of herbaceous perennials and grasses. Enormous pots carry magnificent *Sparrmannia africana* and *Brugmansia chlorantha*, between them providing extraordinary flowers throughout most of the year. A sunny corner is dominated by three large bananas, which have fruited for the last few years, even after, or perhaps because of, the recent harsh winters. They are kept company by the equally exotic leaves of *Melianthus major* and large clumps of elegant *Canna iridiflora*.

Cliffe has an eclectic and diverse plant collection (fig. 7). Plants range in size from the tiny *Phyla nodiflora* on the strip bed to the enormous *Pinus radiata* that dominates the woodland seating area. Colours range from the almost black *Zantedeschia* hybrid

past the plants to the sea beyond (fig. 3). This is the only water feature in the garden, but what a water feature! Conversely, at The Gate House two streams run parallel through the garden, one of which becomes a large pool. The stream margins are bestrewn with lush planting including rodgersias, astilbes and iris (fig. 4). This planting conceals what may lie only a few metres ahead, invoking the sense of exploration. There are, of course, disadvantages to living in close proximity to a fast-running stream and Denny has constructed an adjustable barrage to protect the house from flooding, should such an event look imminent.

Heather grows an extensive collection of over a hundred rodgersias (fig. 5), and has bred many herself. They are arranged in a naturalistic manner around the garden and look perfectly at home in this woodland environment and are particularly spectacular in June when in full flower. They are by no



Fig. 7 Summer jumble at Cliffe.

to the pure white of *Potentilla fruticosa* ‘Abbotswood’. Colour is an important factor in the garden, and as Linda enjoys the pastel colours and the head gardener loves the vibrant shades (front cover) there is a hue for everyone. A forty-year-old rose bed of delicious *Rosa* Fragrant Cloud sits side by side with recently constructed exotic borders full of hedychiums, cannas and salvias. The Mediterranean bed, dominated by a *Eucalyptus pauciflora* subsp. *niphophila*, is packed with drought-loving plants such as *Agapanthus* ‘Windlebrooke’, *Cistus populifolius* and a large *Agave americana* (fig. 8). Other areas include a fuchsia bed, herbaceous borders and the shady cherry-tree bed, which leaves few plants without a suitable home.

Over the years many plants have been swapped and shared between the two gardens. It has proved a good



Fig. 8 *Agave americana* in the Mediterranean bed.

way to ensure the survival of tender plants, as often one garden will have survivors when the other has losses. It is also what gardeners do. Any repetition of plants does not mean a similarity of planting. Just as when children leave home and develop their individual personalities, plants grow in different ways in the varying conditions, becoming taller, or stouter, or their flower colour varying in different soils and planting positions. At Cliffe one gazes through the flower spikes of *Stipa gigantea* to the expanse of sea and sky (fig. 9), at The Gate House it is towards spikes of blue delphiniums (fig. 10). Indeed the use of contrary plant associations can produce a totally different picture. At the Gate House *Miscanthus sinensis* ‘Silberfeder’ is planted on an island bed amongst other grasses and herbaceous perennials, attractive not only when in full growth and flower but throughout the winter, adding structure to the garden. At Cliffe it is grown adjacent to *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* ‘Guincho Purple’ which is equally effective, enhancing both specimens by contrasting the dark

leaves of the purple elder and the ‘silver feathers’ of the miscanthus.

There is minimal hard landscaping at the Gate House; most notable are the beautiful brick-built footbridges which cross the stream, constructed by the multi-talented Denny. For the more observant, a short set of steps leading up to the small lawn area are made from what the Bookers believe to be apprentice-piece gravestones, which add an unexpected dark humour to the garden.

The terraces at Cliffe are retained by stunning dry stone walling, both functional and beautiful and, as such, would certainly have been approved

of by William Morris. They do, however, house hoards of snails and become covered in weed at the blink of an eye, so it is just as well Linda enjoys keeping them clear. Remarkably, blue tits, and a host of different insects and invertebrates, manage to set up home within the walls.

Both gardens suffer from lack of sunlight in winter and frosts persist; but the worst



Fig. 9 Grasses at Cliffe.



Fig. 10 And grasses at The Gate House.

of winter's weapons differ from location to location. The Gate House's valley forms a natural frost pocket and its sheltered position encourages cold air to linger in the valley. In winter it can appear a rimy wonderland which, although beautiful, has an underlying edge of the cruel snow queen about it.

Cliffe suffers from biting northerly winds, cruelly desiccating new growth in the spring, and it can sometimes provide the final nail in the coffin of plants that have struggled through the winter. The winds are particularly damaging at a vulnerable time of the year. Last spring, an *Azara serrata* toppled on to the almost flowering *Fritillaria imperialis*, tricky enough to grow here without a shrub falling on your head just as you were about to peak. The azara was hoisted back into position and luckily continues to thrive and produce masses of fragrant yellow flowers. The same cannot be said for the fritillaries. The protective planting along the roadside takes the wind up and over the lower public space, but in a garden with such a panorama there is always a compromise to be made between creating a shelter belt and retaining the view. Winter temperatures in the two gardens can differ by as much as 4 degrees, and in the summer months, too, Cliffe can be several degrees cooler.

Both gardens are cultivated organically. The Bookers' garden has been run on organic principles for 30 years, but Cliffe only for the last few. Heather makes all her own potting compost, helped by an ingenious riddler made by, yes, you've guessed it, Denny. An important element of The Gate House is the vegetable garden hedged by *Iochroma cyanea*; there are also fruit trees and a *Crinodendron hookerianum*. It has had trailer loads of seaweed, compost and horse manure added over the years, and has soil that most gardeners would lust after, including Cliffe's. However, when Heather contracted white rot on her onions, Cliffe were all too happy to donate a corner of their vegetable garden, situated on a 30° slope, for her garlic plants.

The soil at Cliffe is not so enriched, but this is 'work in progress', with many composting areas constructed in the last few years. Although the garden runs right down to the cliff edge, the main entrance is close to the top of the steep hill out of the village. This makes access a problem, but during recent building works at the house the builders were persuaded to use their dumper truck to bring up several full loads of seaweed, deposited at the gate. (If Gwyn had an appropriate parking space a dumper truck would be on his Christmas List.) So there was much work transporting the booty around the garden and there were some interesting finds amongst the kelp: along with the ubiquitous plastic fragments was a pair of knickers!

A major difference between the two gardens is the *genius loci*. To attempt to explain the spirit of a place can be a minefield and is by definition best experienced; however, needs must. Cliffe is open, airy and exposed, looking outward towards the fabulous 'borrowed landscape' of the Bristol Channel and on a clear day the Welsh coast. This gives you a feeling of freedom and liberation. The cooling breeze on a summer's day is enough to melt away, if only temporarily, troubles and woes. The Gate House is more inward looking, has more of a woodland ambience, calm and secure. The soothing sound of water accentuates the tranquil atmosphere.

Whereas gardeners at Cliffe have to be part mountain goat, webbed feet are a useful asset at The Gate House. Even the weeds are different: while The Gate House struggles with ground elder and *Houttuynia cordata*, Cliffe has Black Bryony and Enchanter's Nightshade to deal with.

Contrasting these gardens is not to judge one better than the other. Even if you had the inclination, it would not be comparing like for like. They are not in competition, quite the contrary; they support and encourage one another in what quite frankly can be both a thankless task and the best job in the world, sometimes on the same day. 🍷

Gill Heavens and **Heather Booker** are great friends, sharing the ups and downs of gardening. Their patches are a stone's throw apart, but of course it's as well for those of us who have greenhouses not to throw stones. And as Cliffe's Head Gardener, Gill has to look after its ageing greenhouse.