

Over the Garden Wall – Part 2

In the second of two features, Worcestershire Group speaker secretary **Mick Dunstan** completes the profiles of ten of the county Hardy Plant Society members who volunteered for a major photography project, and introduces his own garden.

Mick visited each garden at least four times between March and November 2014; he took nearly 8,000 photographs and recorded 10 video interviews. The first five volunteers were featured in the last issue of *The Hardy Plant*. Here are the rest!



Mick and Joan Dunstan

The Dunstans have had a garden in Worcestershire since moving there in 1998. At just under an acre, the garden had fallen into disarray as the previous occupants, serious plant people, had grown older. "The back garden slopes from top to bottom and side to side, which is great if you've got one leg shorter than the other!" said Mick.

"We immediately realised there was a lot to do – and the first thing was taking down a dozen 50ft Leylandii, awful things, that blocked our view of the Malverns. Then, shortly afterwards, we won £87,310 on the lottery – five balls and the bonus ball. That meant we could

spend a fair amount on sorting out the garden. A friend with a design qualification advised us – we decided to stay more formal near the house and more natural further away – and we're pleased with the results."

Mick has since taken two RHS courses. He's added a greenhouse, and is now building raised vegetable beds. "My big problem in the last 12 months has been a huge increase in the number of rabbits. Last year they ate nearly everything in sight, which is quite depressing. I've just had a rabbit-proof fence put up around the garden. Thank goodness for the lottery!"

Mick always has lots of pots around the front door – an idea he copied after visiting Great

Dixter. He admits to being an impulse plant buyer. "I am beginning to rein that in, but every year there are new plants. Our HPS group visited Gresgarth and I was knocked out by the *Camassia leichtlinii* 'Semiplena' planting in the long grass there, so I have them here now."

One of the most memorable gardens he and Joan have visited is Le Petit Bordeaux, just south of Le Mans in France. "It was truly beautiful and inspiring, an oasis of perfect peace and beauty." And in England? "It has to be Jackson's Wold in North Yorkshire. It's just jaw-dropping. If you've not been yet, get yourself there soon. You won't regret it."



Win and David Botterill

When Win and David moved into their present house near Shipston on Stour in 1992, the undeveloped garden was covered in masses of stones and pebbles.

David would come home from work each evening and not stop until he had picked up 300 stones. Months later, the big mounds he'd formed went into the creation of several flower beds at their new, two-acre plot.

They think they've had twelve gardens in total, starting in Kingswinford, then via Manchester and Cheshire to Sheffield and Monmouth.

Win said "This space here and the atmosphere of the garden mean a lot to me. I couldn't live without a garden – the thought of it terrifies me. I can really enjoy what we've done and are doing and, more importantly, what

God and nature does in it. I try to blend in with that, all the more so as I've grown older. This is not an intensive-care garden. Things have to stand on their own two feet and if I give them the wrong treatment, that's it.

"We don't really have anything we'd call a lawn – it's just grass to us. We never use weedkiller, mosskiller or fertiliser on the grass. David just mows it. Mowing the whole garden takes a couple of hours."

They inherited six old apple trees and decided to keep them. Now, twenty years later, over half the site is an orchard. They opted to plant traditional apple trees on different root stocks and now have 38 varieties – as well as pears, damsons, plums, quince, medlars, and a nut walk that's coppiced remorselessly every year.

David said, "I tend

to buy apple trees that haven't often been seen in 50 years – Herefordshire Beefing, Grenadier, Sops in Wine, Pitmaston Pineapple, Dunkerton Late Sweet and Lady's Finger of Hereford, for example. I think I'm attracted as much by the name as the apple." The cider apples make up to 100 gallons of cider each year.

Hedging, ditching, mowing and strimming are the limits of David's activities at what he calls the garden end of the plot, where Win's efforts reign supreme. She has a particular affection for old roses – at one stage she had 120. She also has masses of snowdrops and epimediums. She's keen on biennials too – likes them seeding – and she sows parsley as ground cover in places around the garden. "I am letting more and more things go to seed."



Judith and Colin Doughty

The Doughtys' garden, in the centre of Cheltenham, is one of the smallest in this project – a small front space and a slightly larger, sheltered back garden with walls on all sides.

Curving path

When they moved in, almost 40 years ago, the house had a bare back garden with a path straight down the middle. They developed the garden within that plan before, in 1994, installing a curving path that brings more plants closer as you walked along its length. Colin says that, in a way, the curved path is the story of the garden.

The garden is full of sumptuous plants with a few exotics – a *Trachycarpus fortunei* and a thriving 'Brown Turkey' fig that needs regular pruning. Two small balconies at the front of the house are draped with wisteria.

A garden room on the ground floor extends the range of plants

to include streptocarpus, clivias, abutilons, succulents, strelizias and other tender perennials.

One of their stand-out plants is a breath-taking flowering dogwood, *Cornus kousa*, which was inspired by the three years they spent living on the eastern seaboard of America. Judith explained "They grow like weeds there but we said we had to have one. In a way that's a bit like our whole approach to gardening. There are some things that we'll say we have to have."

They found the cornus, by chance, in a local garden centre at a time when they were still quite unusual. They also have a smaller *Cornus florida* with pink bracts.

The garden work is split – with Colin taking on the heavier work including the July pruning of the vigorous fig tree. Colin said "I don't think our taste in plants has radically changed, it's just that we know an awful lot more than we used to. And, of

course, there are now far more plants available as well."

Hidcote moment

"We went to Hidcote very early on, after we bought the house, and we just couldn't get over it" said Judith. "I know people sometimes say 'Oh, Hidcote...' but for us it was kind of a revelation. Our parents had all gardened but nothing at all like the way they gardened at Hidcote. In a way, that set us off.

"For me, the grouping of plants is the important thing. *Persicaria microcephala* 'Red Dragon' is one of my favourites because it does such a lot for us in that small space. It is a splendid plant to link things together. But if we had a big garden, I might not think that.

"The end of the world, I think, would be if little daffodils no longer existed. I don't want fancy ones. As long as they're here, it's like 'Maybe we'll be all right'..."



Tricia and Richard King

The Kings' garden is the newest of the whole project – they had moved in only about 15 months before this photo project started.

They are widely travelled, now retired: during their 50+ year marriage they have had 20 gardens on six different continents (the only one missing was Antarctica)!

One of those gardens was just 6ft by 4ft, salty quicksand in Abu Dhabi, while another was 20 acres with 1½ acres of serious garden. While living in Iraq, they grew zinnias to a height of 7ft.

The main reason for all that travel was Richard's career as a pilot – and he still flies occasionally. Richard, who is now the membership secretary of the Worcestershire Group, admits that they've gardened in some peculiar places. The list includes Bahrain, Italy and Winchester, Horsham and several places in Worcestershire.

In the early 90s Tricia was national administrator for the Society and she's now on the local Plant Heritage committee. They were members of the HPS Hampshire and Western Counties Groups before joining Worcestershire.

Making a fresh start

When they bought the house the garden was a mess. Richard said "It was just a field essentially. Our predecessor did not garden. We like starting from scratch, and this is the third in a row where we have done that."

The remodelling of the front and back gardens has seen a major transformation in a very short time. The garden now includes a small pond and a large vegetable and fruit area. The soil has been improved with the help of tons of compost from the local council recycling centre down the road.

The couple – who have a

keen interest in history, music and travel – see themselves as plonkers and movers: they plonk plants in and, if it turns out wrong, they move them. Tricia said "We're enthusiastic but not that knowledgeable. We are not plantsmen but we try to garden wherever we live.

"For me," she adds, "gardening is something of a cross between religion and meditation. I'm not religious but I do find, more and more, that I like my hands in the soil. This probably all sounds a bit wacky, I confess, but it's pretty harmless wacky and it makes me happy.

"I tend to wake up early, go out and have a look round, deadhead, and see how things are doing. We've done the eight hours a day stuff at times, but in the summer a couple of hours a day is pretty standard. And, of course, we have our slug patrol some evenings and deport them to the field at the back."



Wendy and Peter Martin

The Martins have only a back garden – their front door goes straight on to the pavement at their Pershore home.

Their garden is about 12m wide and 70m deep. When they moved in about eight years ago, the appeal of the house was that there wasn't really any garden at all – just a couple of lawns, a path up the middle and a few buddleia.

Wendy said "We didn't have any great master plan – it's just sort of evolved. We keep changing things even now. We keep saying "that's the last bit of hard landscaping" and then every year we seem to find something else to do.

"The first thing we did when we moved in was build compost bins. There was a huge amount of ivy growing right down the wall down on one side from a neighbour's garden and that had to go. So, we shredded it and it all went on the compost heap.

We're big composters.

"We've laid a new path, put in flower beds and so on but the last thing we've been working on has been getting rid of the slope up the garden. At one point, we had a ton of topsoil delivered. We had to barrow through from the street. It was quite a job!"

Half and half

The garden is now split almost in half – an ornamental area near the house and a vegetable plot complete with several raised beds is at the top – with a rill and a greenhouse separating them. Whenever you visit there are lots of plants in pots, large and small. Peter has an interest in pelargoniums, but his collection has now shrunk to fewer than 100 different ones. He's also in charge of propagation in the garden, forever taking cuttings. "I just like most plants," said Wendy. "I don't spend a lot of

time on colour. If I come home with something, it goes in – and sometimes it works! I do love day lilies, though, and have about 35 different ones now. At heart, I suppose I'm a cottage gardener."

Selling plants

The couple have been part of the town's open gardens weekend when up to 20 gardens can be viewed. Wendy also sells plants for charity and has given a sizeable donation to Oxfam. "I grow a lot of annuals as well as hardy perennials – zinnias and forget-me-nots and so on. We spend a lot of time most days in our garden – if the weather's nice we are usually outside." Wendy and Peter grow a wide range of fruit and vegetables – including a fine crop of asparagus. In 2014 they collected more than 70 spears from the asparagus bed, which they consider the perfect quantity to feed two people.



Vivienne and John McGhee

Vivienne was chairman of the Hardy Plant Society for four years until 2013, and John is our current national treasurer. Their garden near Evesham is just under half an acre and includes a fruit and vegetable area. It's their sixth garden, this one since 2002.

A completely new garden

The McGhees inherited a dozen 30ft-plus conifers which had invaded the drains, growing to within a metre of the back of the house. They came down, as did diseased apple and plum trees. Other trees were severely pruned.

Vivienne said "All that made room for a completely new garden. I couldn't decide what kind of garden I wanted – and we were recommended someone to help design it. In retrospect he may not have been the right person. He suggested putting in a pond and a rill, and developing a bed to the left of the garden.



"The concrete rill was well constructed, but it didn't take account of the expansion and contraction of the heavy clay so it kept cracking and leaking – and despite extensive remedial work it's been the bane of our lives for the last 10 years."

Favourite areas

Vivienne's favourite bits of the garden are the grass, the curve of the lawn and the rill, despite its shortcomings, because it attracts wildlife – including goldfinches and a resident grass snake. "I also like the fruit and veg we grow. I love feeding myself."

Like many a marriage, John's role in the garden is concerned with what he calls the heavy lifting. "No more, no less," he says. "I do some planting but that's largely left to Vivienne. My interest is to fill spaces, like that alongside the side of the house, for five months or so a year with hostas. I've a big array,

about 35 plants now. I like them because of the variegation – I'm a member of the Variegated Plants Group, which is fascinating"

Fond memories

Vivienne's time as chairman is full of fond memories. "The society is full of really friendly people, all around the country," she says. "I made so many friends. I think most members feel they belong to their local group, of course, and many don't have enough time for the national society. But what you get with the Hardy Plant Society is a network of people across the UK who have a commitment and an interest in hardy perennials. If you just want to join a gardening club, I'd suggest that that's what you do. The Society has far more to offer than that, and walking around a garden with people who know about plants is a way to learn that is far more valuable than sitting in any lecture." 🌿