

## HESTERCOMBE

*Marion Jay*

One of the most famous garden design partnerships is that of Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll. Lutyens' classical discipline and unerring sense of proportion, combined with Jekyll's painterly approach to planting, resulted in an enduring and recognisable style which even today embodies our concept of the English Garden. Hestercombe Gardens, near Taunton in Somerset, is one of the finest examples of their collaboration, a garden of breathtakingly romantic open vistas balanced with intimate, stonework enclaves, perfect for quiet contemplation.

The Hestercombe Estate has medieval origins, and was owned by the same family - the Warres - for almost 500 years. The house itself was extensively remodelled during the Georgian and Victorian periods, and is currently home to a restaurant, a second-hand bookshop and an art gallery.

In 1750, Hestercombe was inherited by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde, an accomplished amateur artist, who laid out the large landscape garden as it appears today. When Elizabeth Warre, the last of the line, died in 1872, Hestercombe was purchased by 1st Viscount Portman, and in 1903 his grandson, the Hon Edward Portman, commissioned Edwin Lutyens to create an additional new formal garden, the 'Great Plat', with planting by Gertrude Jekyll. In 1944, the estate was sold to the Crown Estate, but the house and formal garden were bought by Somerset Council in 1978, which then transferred the freehold to the Hestercombe Gardens Trust, who manage the gardens today.

Bill and I visited the gardens on a warm Sunday in early July. An un-assuming pathway ran from the visitors' entrance to a wide flight of steps lined with large pots of hydrangeas and agapanthus, leading down to the front of the house. To the south, steps took us down to a Victorian parterre garden, with a central fountain and formal, low-level planting in blues and silvers, including violet *Verbena rigida*, blue ageratum and glaucous echeveria, punctuated by the bright silver, spiny rosettes of *Puya coerulea*. We were drawn to the stone balustrade running the length of the terrace, and rewarded with a magnificent view over the huge, sunken, formal garden beneath: the Great Plat. A show-stopping sight.



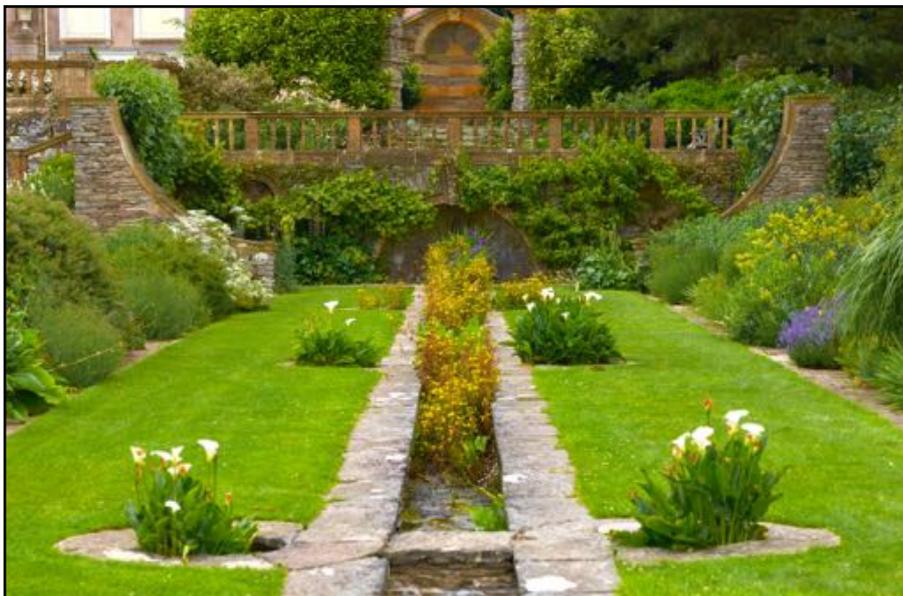
**The Great Plat**



**Rosemary, santolina and lavender growing on the wall of the Great Plat**

Arranged within a diagonal axis of grass and stonework paths, four large, symmetrical, triangular beds were given height by clumps of luminously blue delphiniums and creamy *Lilium regale*. Broad bands of bergenia edging brought a solidity to the design. Straight rills, colonised by yellow mimulus and deep blue irises, ran east and west of the Great Plat, leading to a wide, stone-pillared pergola clad in wisteria, vines, and white and pink climbing roses, which marked the southernmost edge of the formal garden. Beyond, the glorious Somerset countryside spread out towards the Blackdown Hills in the distance. We stood a long time taking it all in.

Exploration revealed the intricacy of Lutyens' design. An inviting path to one side led to a secluded niche complete with lion's head fountain supplying a small circular pool where whirligig beetles dervished, enclosed by exquisite stonework walls topped with bronze putti. As I descended into the Great Plat, I turned to find the south-facing wall billowing with rosemary and santolina growing in the stonework. A Lutyens-style bench overlooking the garden was nestled amongst drifts of metallic *Eryngium giganteum*, the blue pompons of *Echinops ritro* 'Veitch's Blue' and aromatic clouds of lavender and nepeta. Everywhere, *Erigeron karvinskianus* had self-seeded amongst the paving, softening the edges and contributing to the nebulous effect. The terrace was resonant with the sound of bees.



**One of two rills running east and west of the Great Plat, colonised by mimulus**

Wandering the paths of the sunken Great Plat, I noticed how still the air was there. It is a warm and sheltered environment for plants and I found self-seeded nicotiana thriving as they never did in my garden in Hertfordshire. Primrose-hued spires of tall candelabra verbascums adorned the edges, and viper's bugloss provided flashes of brilliant blue against the more modest charms of newly-budding herbaceous clematis. The ghostly pale mauve daisies of *Berkheya purpurea* stood out, so curiously out of place wherever they grow. Walking the length of the pergola at the rear of the Great Plat, I was charmed by the 'clair-voyee' feature at either end; an opening in the wall affording a glimpse of Friesian cows grazing in the field next door.



**The steps to the Dutch Garden**



**The Dutch Garden**

To the east of the Great Plat we walked through the remnants of what must have once been an arboretum, with mature specimens of *Ginkgo biloba*, *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea', *Liquidambar styraciflua* and a magnificent tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), which was still partially in flower. At the top sat the unfurnished, Lutyens-designed orangery, in front of which was a raised terrace border ideal for silvery, sun-loving eryngiums, giant thistle *Onopordum acanthium*, and lacy *Ammi majus*. The shape of the orangery windows was echoed in the outline of the lawned area in front of it, which was a neat detail. Wide stone steps, partially colonised by the dainty little fern *Asplenium trichomanes*, led from the orangery to the raised platform of the Dutch Garden. Based on a formal, cruciform design, the Dutch Garden was a haven for Mediterranean plants. Beds edged with *Stachys lanata* held rich blue lavender, aromatic nepeta, bubblegum-scented heliotrope and small-flowered roses which contrasted with sharp yuccas. Softening the walls, substantial specimens of *Fuchsia magellanica*, golden-orange *Buddleia globosa* and climbing *Solanum jasminoides* 'Album' provided a strong backdrop.

Beyond the formal gardens at Hestercombe lie the extensive landscape gardens laid out by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde in the 1700s. Until the 1990s, this area of the garden lay forgotten and overgrown, engulfed by trees. It took the vision of one man, Philip White, to restore the garden to its current status as one of the most important gardens of its period in the country.

White organised an exhibition of Bampfylde's paintings to raise awareness of the garden's original classical design, and even remortgaged his house in order to generate the funds required to dredge the ponds and fell unwanted trees. The result of his devotion is an atmospheric Arcadian landscape boasting tall trees and stunning viewpoints. In 2013, White was awarded the MBE for 'services to historic garden restoration'.

Bampfylde's restored landscape garden is punctuated by feature buildings; the Mausoleum, the Temple Arbour and even a Witch's House. Two large ponds, well-stocked with rudd, lead up to The Cascade, then it's a climb to the Gothic Alcove and a sequence of ponds at the top. Banks of long grass, sorrel and bracken flank the pathways in this semi-wild yet picturesque landscape.

Visitors are well catered for at Hestercombe. There is a restaurant in the main house, and a good cafe near the entrance, ideal for lunch or afternoon tea, with provision for vegetarian and 'free-from' customers. There is also a shop, including a small but very decent nursery, supplied, according to the assistant, by a number of local growers.

Hestercombe is an undeniably romantic garden. It oozes charm, and despite the fact that we visited in July with good weather, it was not crowded in the least and there were plenty of places to find solitude. One downside is the cost of entry, which may seem steep at £11.50 per person, but there is a lot to see for your money and, as Hestercombe is an independent charity, all proceeds from the visitors go directly towards the continued maintenance and restoration of the estate. Their ecological credentials are impressive, too; the estate has been adopted as a maternity roost by lesser horseshoe bats, who visit every summer. The roosts are so important that they have European protected status, and Hestercombe is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a Special Area for Conservation. If you're planning a break in the West Country, why not spend an afternoon in this exceptional place?

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