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Folly Farm

Ann Williams

Fig. 1 View of house from the southeast

Folly Farm in Sulhamstead, Berkshire was the birthplace of the 'International Kidney' potato, known more popularly today as the Jersey Royal. Robert 'Potato Fenn' Fenn, who lived at Folly Farm in the late 19th century, was a breeder of these dietary staples, and was awarded the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour for his work improving potato varieties.

The story could have ended there, but nowadays Folly Farm is better known for its association with architect Edwin Lutyens and plantswoman Gertrude Jekyll: in fact it is considered one of their most important collaborations.

The original farmhouse dates back to 1650, but it is the two extensions built in the early 20th century, and their adjoining garden rooms, that draw visitors today. Lutyens was first

commissioned by owner Harry Herbert Cochrane in 1906, and built the William and Mary style extension at right angles to the farmhouse. Two garden rooms were created at this time: Barn Courtyard and the Original Entrance Courtyard. Lutyens designed the hard landscaping, including herringbone brick paths and arched walls, while Jekyll provided not only the planting plans, but also the actual plants from her nursery at Munstead Wood. A rhododendron walk was also created at this time, running adjacent to the eastern property boundary.

In 1911 the ownership of Folly Farm changed hands, and Zachary Merton called in Lutyens again to add an even larger extension (in 1912), in the Surrey Arts-and-Crafts style. The ground slopes from east to west here,

but changes of level have been cleverly disguised by keeping the roofline of the two extensions level with each other, and the tops of the yew hedges between each garden room at the same height. The Dutch Canal, Flower Parterre and Sunken Pool Garden, all to the south of the two extensions, were conceived and created at this time, with Jekyll's involvement once again. Merton died in 1915, and in 1916 his widow offered the use of Folly Farm to the Lutyens family for the summer. It was the only one of his houses that Lutyens stayed in, and even Gertrude Jekyll was persuaded to leave Munstead Wood to visit (fig. 1).

Fast forward to the present day, and the results obtained through the commitment and vision of the current owners. When they came to Folly Farm in 2007,

much of the garden had been laid to lawn for ease of maintenance. The Lutyens hard landscaping was still in place but required restoration. The philosophy of this restoration was to re-make the paths, steps and walls as though they had been lovingly looked after for 100 years. In total around 50 percent of the original landscaping materials were lifted and re-laid. Water features were cleaned, and pumps installed in place of the original gravity-fed system.

Serious thought was given to being completely faithful to the original Jekyll planting plans, but the owners were keen to invigorate and breathe new life into the planting, while linking the inward-looking garden with the wider landscape. Dan Pearson was commissioned to 'open up' the garden and

lead it into the 21st century, adding a further layer to its history, while at the same time respecting what had gone before. With the Arts-and-Crafts philosophy of Lutyens and Jekyll in mind, local craftspeople and a limited palette of natural, locally sourced materials were used in the design. Folly Farm today is a garden respectful of its past but not held back by it.

Being Grade I listed, the hard landscaping remains unaltered, this structure providing a link to the past and anchoring the garden to the house. Yew hedges provide unity through plant form; and beds of sarcococca, with their calming evergreen presence, provide moments of reflection between livelier garden scenes and an unforgettable fragrance when flowering en masse.

The 20 acres of wider estate previously encompassed flat, featureless pastureland. A large pond has now been created in a naturally damp low spot, and the excavated spoil used to create a series of mounded bunds planted up with native shrubs. These provide a useful wildlife habitat as well as a windbreak against the strong south-westerly winds. The pond itself has a boat house and boardwalk, with reeds and marsh marigolds planted around the margins. Surrounding wildflower meadows (fig. 2), accessed via mown grass paths, immerse visitors in a rich sensory experience of colour, with the buzz of insects in high summer. A watercourse, created along a formerly uninspiring ditch, provides a natural break between the wider landscape and the formal garden.

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Fig. 2 Wildflower meadow with mown path

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Fig. 3 Watercourse with *Iris x intermedia* 'Gerald Darby'

Here Dan has used what he calls ‘garden escapees’ such as *Iris x robusta* ‘Gerald Darby’ to bridge the gap between the wild and the formal (fig. 3).

A new garden room has been created in an area historically referred to as ‘the weak chin of the garden’. Previously a flat expanse of lawn, the Wind Garden (fig. 4) is a series of brick-edged square beds planted with red- and black-stemmed cornus, with *Eurybia divaricata* and *Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Kokuryu’; *Stipa lessingiana*; a mix of three different cultivars of *Panicum virgatum*; *Acaena microphylla* ‘Kupferteppich’, and *Stipa barbata*. The grasses reference the surrounding meadows, and the bricks mirror those of the house and paths. In the spring, spikes of blue *Camassia leichtlinii* subsp. *suksdorfii* emerge through these grass beds.

There are several nods to Jekyll within the garden, using some of her go-to plants. In the Flower Parterre, the four squares are edged with *Bergenia* ‘Overture’ at their inner corners (fig. 5). Miscanthus, asters and lavender contribute to her familiar colour palette of blue, lilac and silver, though modern cultivars and varieties are used here instead (figs 6 & 7).



Fig. 4 Wind Garden

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Fig. 5 *Bergenia* ‘Overture’



Fig. 6 Flower Parterre looking southwest

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Fig. 7 Flower Parterre looking south

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Fig. 8 Original Entrance Courtyard



Fig. 9 Planting in the Original Entrance Courtyard

Fig. 10 *Fuchsia magellanica* var. *gracilis* 'Purple Mountain'Fig. 12 *Symphyotrichum* 'Combe Fishacre'

Fig. 11 Barn Courtyard showing the original 1650 farmhouse

Each garden room was given its own philosophy in the new design, and these are used to guide our gardening. Some plants tend to become 'thuggish', and crowd out their neighbours; others fail to perform well enough to warrant inclusion in the borders over time. Rather than become slaves to the plans, we rein back the thugs and consider new substitutes that may work more successfully than do those weaker performers; all the while remaining true to the concept and feel of the garden.

The Original Entrance Courtyard was conceived as the entrance to the house from Sulhamstead Hill back in the early 1900s. Nowadays this road is far too busy for it to be a safe entrance point, but the courtyard remains relevant. Its colours mirror those that Lutyens used in his design for the adjoining entrance hall in the 1906 extension: green to reflect the floor, black to mirror the walls, and red to reference the venetian-red woodwork on the balcony (figs 8 & 9). The red flowers of wall-trained *Fuchsia magellanica* var. *gracilis* 'Purple Mountain' appear to drip from the walls throughout summer into autumn (fig. 10).

An archway through the wall leads to Barn Courtyard, an area around the old farmhouse and barn, reminiscent of a cottage garden, but with a modern twist (fig. 11).

Here, roses and irises grow side by side with indigofera and zantedeschia. We are in the process of tweaking the planting towards a style reminiscent of Beatrix Potter; asters, hollyhocks and peonies have been introduced. *Symphytotrichum* 'Coombe Fishacre' is a new introduction to this garden room. I originally purchased one for my own garden, and it was a sure-fire recommendation for inclusion at Folly Farm. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it is in fact one that Gertrude Jekyll herself had been very pleased with, so it seems fitting that it should be gracing the borders in this cottage-garden styled space (fig. 12).

The Spring Garden is influenced by Jekyll's Spring Garden at Munstead Wood. It is planted with drifts of spring-flowering herbaceous species rather than bulbs; including four different pulmonarias and sanicula, which provide a tapestry of early colour under a canopy of magnolia, *Cornus kousa* and *Halesia carolina* (fig. 13). Later in the year, *Eurybia divaricata* is a real performer here. We let the stems tumble at will, not corseted, and the visual effect has been likened to sea foam, or a delicate avalanche spilling down the gentle slope of the border (figs 14 & 15); it has a real impact on this scale, and brings the Spring Garden back into the limelight



Fig. 13 Spring perennials beneath magnolia



Fig. 14 Spring Garden with *Eurybia divaricata*



Fig. 15 *Eurybia divaricata* detail



Fig. 16 *Tulipa acuminata*

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Fig. 17 Hot colours,
Sunken Pool Garden



Fig. 18 Sunken Pool
Garden, east border

after its relatively quiet summer, which is when the other garden rooms take centre stage. A rich source of nectar to bees while flowering, the seedheads themselves have ornamental value until the inevitable cutback ensues. By this time

the stems are brittle and come away quickly.

If I had to choose my favourite garden room, it would be the Sunken Pool Garden. An enclosed space hidden from view, it is a real surprise, with curved steps descending from four corners, leading down to a central pool with an island at its centre. Originally a rose garden, it has been transformed into a lushly planted space that reaches its peak in late summer. Early interest is provided by choice species tulips including *T. acuminata* (fig. 16). Hemerocallis, helenium, kniphofia, stipa, molinia, allium, crocosmia, eryngium, tetrapanax and euphorbia provide hot colours and striking architectural foliage (fig. 17). The planting here is asymmetrical, designed to look like an exotic piece of fabric, with the hard landscaping fitting into it like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It is a feast for the senses: the citrus fragrance of *Magnolia* 'Nimbus' hits you as you enter (fig. 18). It left a lasting impression with me when I first saw it as a visitor in 2013, and I am privileged to have worked on its development since 2015.

The Walled Garden is a perfect acre enclosed by Lutyens' walls, and provides fruit, vegetables and cut flowers as well as being a place to entertain. There was no Lutyens design for

the layout of this garden, as it is thought he believed these 'back of house' areas were beneath him! However, this space is very much the heart of the estate today: productive and beautiful. The design uses a 'warp and weft' principle, to weave the past in with the present.

This garden is organised into four quadrants. Vegetables are grown using organic principles, in raised beds, in one of the quadrants; a David Austin rose collection (fig. 19), herb garden and drying room are in another; long beds of lavender *L. x intermedia* 'Grosso' are grown as a 'lavender field' in the third (fig. 20); and there are perennial vegetables including asparagus in the fourth. At the centre of the garden are a dipping pool and large grapevine pergola, with a table beneath, for entertaining. Hops and blackberries are grown up tall tripods of sweet chestnut, with seasonal planting at their feet. Three glasshouses are accessed through a door in the southeast corner. They comprise a hot display house, pelargonium house and propagation house; along with arguably one of the best potting sheds in the country (certainly, many garden visitors have expressed their intense envy upon seeing it!).

As with all gardens, we are at the mercy of the climate and underlying soil:

a hungry riverbed gravel with silty clay patches. During the summer of 2018 we endured long periods of hot dry weather, so much so that we had infestations of red spider mite outdoors. We have struggled with slugs eating the woolly leaves of *Salvia argentea* on the Dutch Façade, and the roots of an entire stretch of *Tiarella cordifolia* in the Spring Garden were consumed by vine weevil larvae, to the extent that the plants could be rolled up like a carpet. We use nematodes for both slugs and vine weevil, to help keep them under control during the warmer months. Sedum small ermine moth caterpillar has proved extremely problematic to our sedum plants in past years, in all parts of the garden. But now with greater understanding of its life cycle, and with the use of integrated pest management, the summer of 2019 showed little if any impact by this insect. We use natural organic tonics to keep the structurally important box plants in the Flower Parterre healthy, and to combat box blight. Box moth caterpillar has been found within 15 miles of us – too close for complacency – therefore vigilance is key. 🌱



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Fig. 19 Roses in Walled Garden



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Fig. 20 *L. x intermedia* 'Grosso' in Walled Garden

Ann Williams is employed as Senior Gardener at Folly Farm, where she has worked for five years. She is responsible for the Formal Garden, which satisfies her interests in garden history, design and plants.