The virtues of a calm approach

The Manor House, Ayot St Lawrence, Hertfordshire

Steven Desmond admires the gardens of an ancient property that have been gradually transformed over the years by successive owners and their designers

Photographs by Jerry Harpur

Right **The set-piece parterre leading from the house has been redesigned in recent years.** *Preceding pages* **One of the key vistas in the walled garden is bright in late spring with hundreds of pale yellow irises, joined by aquilegias, euphorbias, santolina and alliums in variety**

AYOT ST LAWRENCE is a little bit of Anglo-Saxon England at the end of a long and winding lane flanked by ancient coppice woodland. The village is famous for several treasures, including the earliest Greek Revival church in England, looking just like a parkland folly, and George Bernard Shaw's comfortable retreat, the aptly named Shaw's Corner. A little past the well-recommended pub is the quiet entrance to the drive of The Manor House, which winds away between the garden and a stretch of ancient-looking park.

The Manor House and its garden setting are an unexpected blend of ancient and modern. We enter through impressive new iron gates, the first of several at intervals through the grounds, created by local firm Arc Angel, of Bendish, Hertfordshire. The house, of polite proportions, is absorbingly hard to date from its entrance façade of neat brick under a tiled roof, surely the products of the ground on which it stands, with a slight lurch here and there suggesting great age. This front looks out across a set-piece parterre and beyond through a gate into the parkland we saw on our arrival. The bones of the parterre were laid down some years ago by no less a garden luminary than John Brookes for the then owner, Jacqueline Duncan, head of the Inchbald School of Design. Acknowledging the merit of this pedigree, the present owners have worked with the garden designer Julie Toll to insert a new design, including paths and planting, while leaving the hedge layout intact.

Mrs Toll is much more than a visiting adviser here, and has established a happy relationship with the enthusiastic owners and the head gardener, Matt Bartlett, generating a whole series of new gardens within the existing framework. On the opposite façade, unexpectedly William and Mary, the lawn undulates around a big oak, and rises gradually to a sinuous margin of shrubs. Under the shadow of an imposing black clapboard barn, three big island beds of the kind Alan Bloom promoted in past years are filled with a bumper range of herbaceous perennials and, at one end of each, a single big specimen shrub, including a favourite of mine, *Cornus mas*. Why is this not planted more frequently? It's a lovely film of yellow flowers in the spring, followed by attractive shiny fruits in late summer, which can be made into an excellent jelly. These two have the novel attraction of being pruned into Japanese-style tiers.

A brand new garden has sprung up on one side of the house, in which sinuous walks frame beds planted with multi-stemmed birches among herbaceous perennials and low shrubs, so that rudbeckias and lavenders mingle in a suggestion of an interesting hybrid between a northern European heath and a Mediterranean hillside. The use of birch in this fashion has been an understandable favourite since before the Second World War, when Christopher Tunnard used it as an elegant complement, scattered thinly through grassy meadows, to the clean horizontal lines of Modernist houses. It looks just as fresh here, and the owners can look forward to the yellow autumn colour followed by the beauty of the winter bark. Even the tiny leaves fail to bung up gutters, although some will warn of the infinite numbers of birch seedlings that are liable to turn up in all the places where they are least wanted. But that's gardening: a delicate balance of success and failure.

The entrance to the revived kitchen garden, comfortably close to the house in the pre-Georgian way, is marked by two dramatic features. Silvery gates are made in the form of espaliered pear trees, weaving and undulating as if they were held reluctantly against one of the garden ➢

> 'The Manor House and its garden are an unexpected blend of ancient and modern'

Facing page **Magnificent forged gates by local firm Arc Angel are inspired by espaliered pear trees, creating a fitting entrance to the walled kitchen garden**

walls. To either side of this elegant feature are two box topiary specimens that at first seem like short staircases—there is a momentary temptation to sit on them or even clamber up them—or are they, in fact, giant, old-fashioned cash registers?

The kitchen garden itself is framed in the expected tall and thin, pink-brick wall, which itself is a backdrop for a collection of ornamental shrubs on both sides. On the inside, a particular feature is a big collection of *Viburnum*. This is becoming something of a tense time for the viburnophile, given the remorseless advance of the dreaded viburnum-leaf beetle, but who can resist the infinite charms of this wonderful genus, which provides so many lovely species for our gardens? Long may they thrive. Another happy shrub here is *Bupleurum fruticosum*, with its handsomely glaucous, fingery leaves and perfectly complementary yellowish umbelliferous flowers. It does well wherever it lives, so why is it not more common in our gardens? It deserves to be better known.

Much of the kitchen garden is laid to lawn, with beds for the cultivation of vegetables, fruit and cut flowers cut out in a grid pattern. The focal point is a modern conservatory, viewed along an axis lined with trained apple trees, themselves neatly fronted with a low informal hedge of good old *Hebe rakaiensis*. The avenue of apples contains some favourites of mine, including the venerable but now seldom seen Ribston Pippin (the favourite dessert apple of Victorian England), now superseded by its famous offspring, Cox's Orange Pippin. Kidd's Orange Red, another Cox relation bred long ago in New Zealand, also features, and, in a good year (like this), is, for me, the finest-flavoured of dessert apples. Edward Bunyard would have known which wine would best accompany it on a late autumn evening.

Within the conservatory are big pots of the purple triumph of Brazil, *Tibouchina semidecandra*, and the endlessly subtle, pale-blue blooms of *Plumbago auriculata*. Plumbago is the ideal adornment for the cool conservatory, with its long flowering period and reasonable willingness to be trained into various shapes. It makes a magnificent container specimen if you have the room.

> 'The gradual overlay of pattern and planting is the chief source of its success'

In front of the conservatory, raised beds allow the cultivation of vegetables on one side and fruit on the other. The heavy soil of the district, replete with stones, is encouraged to yield fertility by the addition of plenty of organic matter from the nearby stables, whose by-product is composted in several enormous bays, steaming away like Cowper's 'stercoraceous heap' or Repton's 'pabulum of roses'.

The gradual overlay of pattern and planting in a garden like this is the chief source of its success. The approach has always been to respect the established framework, thoughtfully integrate new designs, and always to acknowledge that good cultivation is the key to success. The Manor House is in good hands, and coming along nicely.

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Brick-edged, raised beds provide easy access to crops in the kitchen garden, which are also sheltered by a stilt hedge of hornbeam