



Under the influence of art

Winter lays bare the bones and emphasises the magic of the gardens at the Manor House in Bedfordshire, where Kathy Brown helps nature to imitate art

Author: James Alexander-Sinclair, garden designer, broadcaster and RHS Council member. Photography: Clive Nichols

Sitting in judgement

In winter the French parterres are the most conventionally formal part of the Manor House garden. They are formed by straight lines of clipped hornbeam ('does much better on heavy clay than beech') and yew hedges with lines of rounded lavender (a recent replacement for box which succumbed to blight). In between are 12 topiary 'figures', representing the jury at the trial of 17th-century French finance minister Le Fouquet. At the end of the walk are four rose arbours based on those found at the Château de Villandry, a favourite garden of owners Kathy and Simon Brown.

Bedfordshire garden

Clutching the hands of their two small children 26 years ago, Kathy and Simon Brown left the leafy calm of North London for a rambling house in Bedfordshire. The wind blows cold in Stevington, which may be why there were so many Leyland cypress littering the garden when they arrived. Undaunted, they set to with a will and today there are expansive, ambitious gardens where once there were scrappy conifers, and avenues where once there were empty fields.

'I was running a business in London planting containers, so knew what I was getting myself into,' Kathys says, 'and both of us had been brought up in the country so had a good feel for plants'.

The site had originally been used as a 'hospitium' (early hostelry) for pilgrims who came to the healing well at Stevington to bathe their eyes. The building suffered during the Protestant Reformation, and was eventually demolished in the 19th century, a new manor house arising from the rubble. When the Browns arrived, the garden was much smaller and surrounded by fields into which they have slowly expanded.

Varied inspirations

A case of this gradual expansion is the lovely French-inspired formal garden close to the house. 'When we first came here a venerable donkey lived in that field – we could do nothing in that bit of the garden until she had passed on,' Kathy says. Now transformed, the area illustrates many of the things that have influenced the couple's lives. 'We have always loved French gardens and travel there frequently to look for inspiration. We really enjoy the formality of gardens such as that of the Château de Villandry and hoped to recreate some of it in this area.'

Actually the influence goes a bit deeper than that: there is also a nod here towards one of the most famous garden-related court cases of all time. In 1661 the French finance minister, Nicolas Fouquet, invited King Louis XIV to view the gardens

The Manor House

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Size: 1.8ha (4½ acres).

Soil: heavy clay.

Summary: Eclectic, varied and well planted.

Age of garden: 26 years.

Aspect: south-facing

Open: Tuesdays 1–5pm, May–Sept; and for the National Gardens Scheme 15 Feb 2015, 11am–4pm; groups welcome by appointment.



Kathy Brown

he had built at his country home, Vaux-le-Vicomte. However, the standard of decoration and the sheer glory of the gardens made the King raise a quizzical eyebrow as to from where the money had come. This little incident led to a famous trial where poor Fouquet ended up in prison, and the King appropriated his gardener, André Le Nôtre, who later designed the gardens at Versailles. This saga – appropriate as Simon is a judge – has been reenacted in *Taxus* (yew) and *Carpinus* (hornbeam).

But there is much more to the 1.8ha (4½ acres) of the Manor House than French-inspired formality. More than 18 themed areas or 'rooms' have been created in the 26 years the Browns have gardened here, including a Monet Garden inspired by his waterlily paintings; an Edible Flower Border marking Kathy's interest in cooking; and an avenue of olives with minimalist underplanting of Mediterranean sun-lovers. This is a garden that well repays the visitor's

time spent uncovering its details.

The influences are both many and varied. The Brown's children opened the couple's eyes to painting and sculpture, and some of the gardens are directly influenced by specific, usually abstract, artists as a result. An empty fish pond has been painted blue and, in summer, corrals pots overflowing with dahlias and gladioli, a representation of Russian Vassily Kandinsky's *Improvisation Gorge* canvas of 1914. In another area, a hedged enclosure has become one of abstract-impressionist US artist Mark Rothko's 'purple paintings', using purple-leaved beech, *Berberis* and *Physocarpus*. In two borders close to the house, a great crashing together of *Miscanthus* grasses echoes the famous Japanese woodblock print by Katsushika Hokusai, *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, produced in the 1830s.

Probably most striking is, however, the Mondrian wall. 'My son was mad about sport, so we built him a wall against which he could kick footballs or bowl googlies,' says Kathy. When he grew older, they asked him to paint the wall and, rather than the more figurative painting they expected, he made a bright, primary-coloured re-creation of one of Dutchman Piet Mondrian's famous geometric compositions. Simon and Kathy adapted and created another garden facing the wall, based on another Mondrian painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, which also boasts coloured gravel and lights. Sculptures are also dotted through the borders, from metal dragonflies to glittering organic swirls of glass.

Winter enlivened

Although the gardens are open much of the year, winter is a quiet time and the garden is just for the Browns. There are bits of formality that hold glinting frost, washed-through skeletal grasses sashaying in the breeze, and a promise of snowdrops beneath the trees. The view from the house is of well-tended borders and the gleaming trunks of *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost' (power-washed in January to keep them white). On the perimeter of >>



Winter in the Manor House Garden

Clockwise from top left: Part of an avenue of *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii* 'Grayswood Ghost', the pale boles of which sparkle among snowdrops and the frosted stems of grasses and herbaceous plants.

Looking back at the house down the topiary walk edged with lavender and yew, across the pond with box balls.

The orange lanterns of *Physalis* rimed in frost and shimmering in the sunlight.

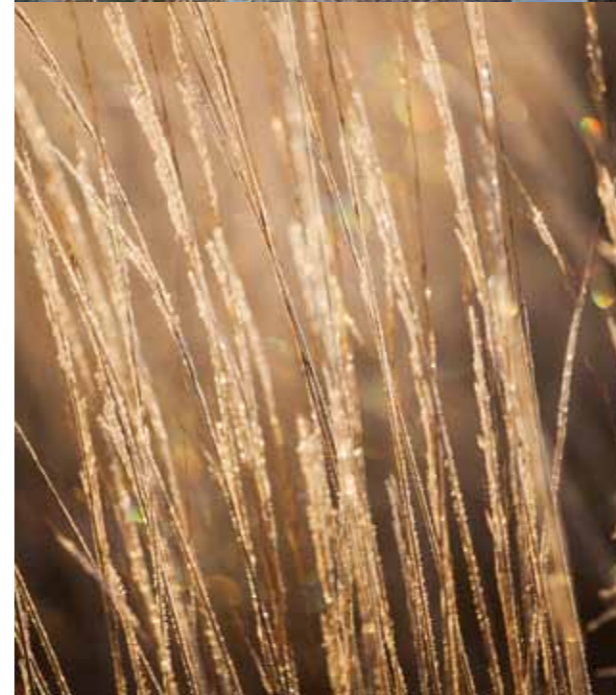
A dragonfly made from recycled metal hovers above the grass borders. Kathy has a number of small garden sculptures that she moves from border to border.

A summer-fattened, sentinel hare in bronze by Dennis Fairweather tops a post among the birches.

Part of the Winter Border, combining the oranges of *Cornus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire' with the pale, spiky canes of *Rubus cockburnianus*.

The Mondrian Wall and bleached flowerheads of *Miscanthus* and *Calamagrostis* that provide winter interest in the adjacent Mondrian Border.

Calamagrostis x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' and other grasses are everywhere in this garden. In summer they balance and applaud the more colourful herbaceous plantings, but in winter in particular they shine as stars in their own right.



Bedfordshire garden

the garden is a winter walk based on that of Anglesey Abbey, the National Trust garden not far away in Cambridgeshire. This takes in another representation of a painting, *Green Caves*, by better-known-as-a-sculptor Dame Barbara Hepworth.

This is a garden full of surprises and excitement, combining the essence of French formality with Expressionism, abstraction – and the National Trust: not a description you will find anywhere else. At the same time as presenting the vignettes, it is a garden that holds tight to a principle of strong plantsmanship. Kathy Brown is a phenomenally hard working gardener – she has no help apart from Simon – who still manages to entertain (and feed) large numbers of visitors to the garden from all over the world. It is a plot born in partnership, and driven by a mixture of energy, love – and a dash of obsession. In short, the epitome of an Englishwoman's garden. ●

► The view from the Manor House down the axis of the French parterres at dawn in winter, taking in the 'jurors' at Fouquet's 'trial'. The area was laid out in 1994–95, as were the formal borders just beyond the circular fountain.

▼ Kathy loves the play of light among her plants. Here, low winter sunlight sparkles on the bleached stems of *Calmagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' around the relatively recent, Mondrian-inspired Broadway Boogie Woogie garden. Surrounded by grasses, you can watch your breath steam and admire the organic, red-glass shapes that link to the nearby vivid Mondrian wall.

