

Vibrant green shuttlecock ferns (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) and skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton americanus*) emerge from wet ground in The Dell.



Golden orange tulips (*Tulipa* 'Generaal de Wet') sweep through a border in the Front Garden, among contrasting lime green *Euphorbia polychroma* and dark red *Heuchera* 'Licorice'.



**In brief**

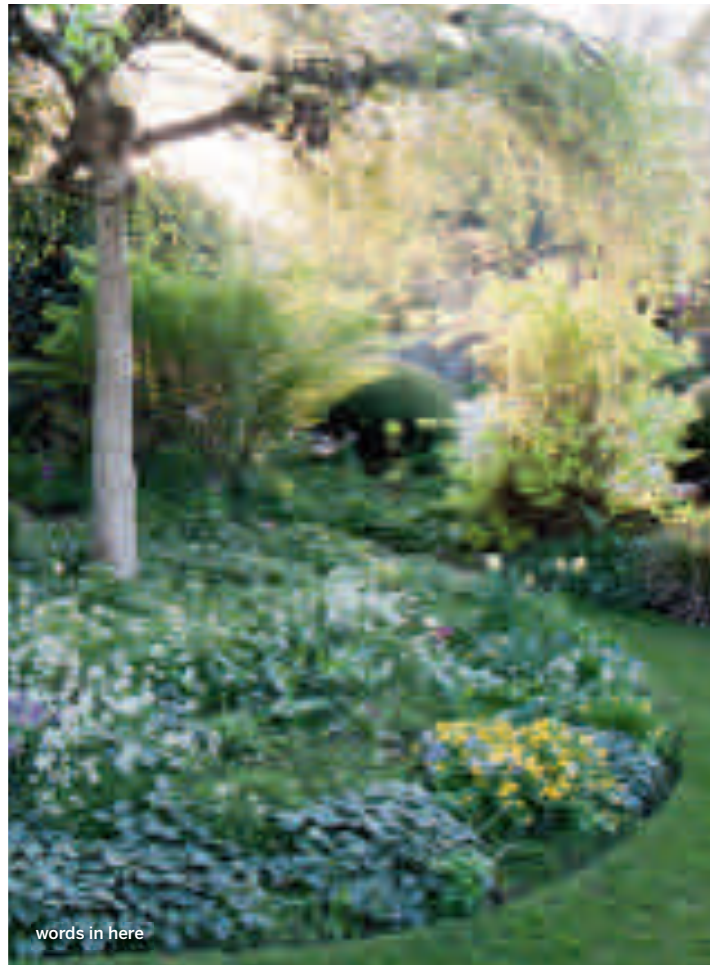
NAME York Gate.  
 WHAT Garden to a former farmhouse, owned by charity and open to public.  
 WHERE Adel, near Leeds, Yorkshire.  
 SIZE One acre.  
 SOIL Greensand and loam.  
 CONDITIONS Rainy summers and cold winters.  
 SPECIAL FEATURES A series of garden rooms including herb garden, woodlands, kitchen garden and terraces.

# Robin's nest

The late Robin Spencer use to plan his garden while relaxing in the orchard with a bottle of champagne. The result is a sparkling blend of bold structure with vibrant planting

WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS CAROLE DRAKE

A pathway bordered in black, grass-like *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens' divides Sybil's Garden from the Canal Garden.



words in here



Aromatic plants such as sages, mints, hyssop, flax, fennel, sweet cicely and calamint grow between clipped box in the Herb Garden.  
LEFT A white froth of spreading rock cress (*Arabis procurrens*) blooms among metallic leaves of *Cyclamen hederifolium*, beneath a weeping silver birch (*Betula pendula* 'Youngii') in the Old Orchard.



Yorkshire garden

Yellow bells of *Fritillaria imperialis* frame the view towards Sybil's Garden. The beech hedge shows how sharply the plot slopes downward.

While we are used to gardens being open for charity (every weekend loads of them fling open their gates and getting out the home-made cakes to tempt in visiting gardeners), it is more unusual to find a garden actually owned by a charity. York Gate, near Leeds, is owned and run by the horticultural charity Perennial, which provides help and support to professional gardeners who find themselves in straitened circumstances.

The garden was begun by Fred and Sybil Spencer when they bought the house in the 1950s. After Fred's death in 1963, his only son, Robin, took over responsibility for the development of the garden. Under Robin, York Gate became one of the finest small gardens in the country.

Sadly Robin died in 1982, aged only 47, and the reins were passed back to his mother, Sybil. She left the whole caboodle to the charity when she died in 1994.

Today York Gate is principally cared for by head gardener David Beardall, who has been there for ten years. "In a previous life I was a teacher," he explains "but I was always

completely obsessed with horticulture." Eventually he left to follow his passion and, after a spell mowing grass around Pontefract, he worked for the National Trust at Beningborough Hall before ending up here.

David is unusual among head gardeners in that he has a team of 16 dedicated under-gardeners. "We have different teams of volunteers, three days a week, who help out, doing everything from de-silting the pond to selling tea to visitors. Without them we would be completely stuck."

#### A perfect fit

The late Robin Spencer was untrained in garden design but obviously had a remarkable eye for perspective and scale. The garden is an excellent exercise in spatial design: it is like a beautifully packed suitcase in which every element interlocks perfectly with its neighbours. Into a space of only an acre, Robin packed elements as diverse as allées, a pinetum, an orchard, a herb garden, a couple of buildings and both formal and informal water without it seeming overcrowded.

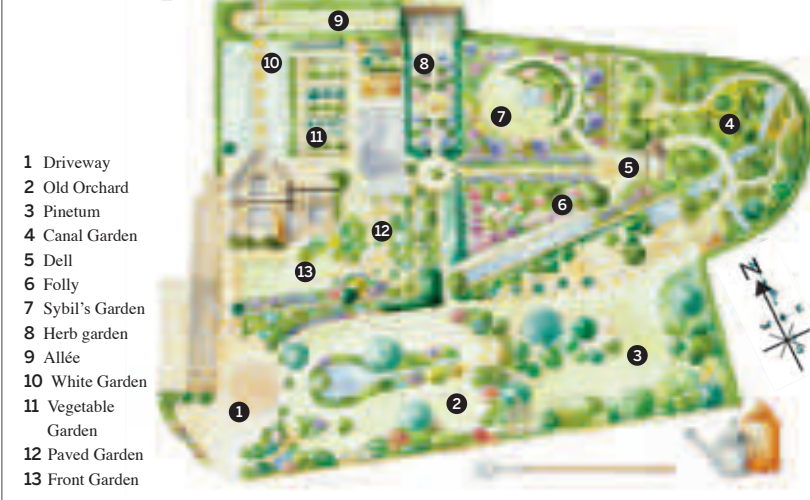
The garden is based around a series of rooms, each with a distinct character. For example, the Old Orchard (where Robin used to retreat with a bottle of champagne, to consider the next stage of the garden) is based around a teardrop-shaped pond adorned with a gloriously oversized Victorian iron Jardiniere. From there you go through to the Pinetum, whose most distinctive feature is an espaliered cedar pressed against the boundary wall. "We had to fell three big trees in here," remembers David. "As a result there is now light and I was able to plant 15 new, small trees instead." The trees are in a bed mulched with large pebbles in a way that we have now all seen before but, in the late 1970s, was original and unusual.

Next is the Dell, which looks lovely in spring, with trees and bulbs grouped around cascading water and a winding path that leads back towards the house and the more formal parts of the garden. The first of these is Sybil's Garden: this used to be a second vegetable garden but was redesigned in 2005 by Alistair Baldwin. This is a clever circular garden with a swooping hedge >



Large box balls edge the drive and frame the view towards the Old Orchard and a pond planted with moisture-loving groundcover plants.

## Garden plan



“Every bit is cleverly designed, with the components neatly slotted together so that progress around the garden is both seamless and delightful”

▷ that uses the slope to best advantage. Perennial is not in the business of slavish preservation and this is the most obvious example of the garden being allowed to change and develop without losing its unique feeling.

Running through the middle of the garden is a path: a diamond pattern of granite setts in gravel leading the eye to the round window of the tiny potting shed (see page 55). This is a path whose simple symmetry I have seen imitated in many other gardens, large and small. It is flanked by black *Ophiopogon planiscapus* ‘Nigrescens’ and beds stuffed with yellow crown imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*) and, later, towering spires of *Delphinium*.

At the top of the path is a crossroads: to the left are six tall sails of beautifully clipped yew. To the right is another much photographed feature: the herb garden. A jostling crowd of topiary shapes leads to a fine loggia. It is a quiet and peaceful place: enclosed but not claustrophobic. From there a beech allée leads to a barley-sugar twisted sundial: this is one of the most remarkable bits of perspective in the whole garden. A focal point that seems enormous seems to visibly shrink as you approach: this is cleverly

accentuated by the simple expedient of sawing a few inches off the legs of a bench.

The most obvious adjective to describe this garden is *neat*, in every sense of the word. It is precise, well proportioned, dapper and well maintained. Every part is cleverly designed, with the components neatly slotted together so that progress around the garden is both seamless and delightful. □

### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS York Gate, Back Church Lane, Adel, Leeds LS16 8DW. TEL 0113 267 8240.  
WEBSITE [www.yorkgate.org.uk](http://www.yorkgate.org.uk)  
OPEN 1 April to 30 September, Thursdays and Sundays, 2pm to 5pm. Also bank holidays on 9 April, 7 May, 4-5 June, 27 August, all 11am to 5pm, and some evenings – see website for details.

### ABOUT PERENNIAL

Perennial is a national charity for those who work or have worked in horticulture (and their partners or spouses) when they face adversity or need. Perennial helps by providing money and services. It also assists people in getting help from government departments and other organisations. For more information, call 0845 230 1839 or go to [www.perennial.org.uk](http://www.perennial.org.uk)

## 9 spring stars from York Gate

Head gardener David Beardall names eight of his favourites for March and April

### 1 *Trillium grandiflorum*

“Everybody always asks what this is,” says David of the American wake-robin, whose white flowers often fade to pink. Height (H) 40cm, spread (S) 30cm.

### 2 *Caltha palustris* ‘Flore Pleno’

The marsh marigold is an aquatic perennial that thrives in shallow water or bog conditions, bearing fully double flowers in spring. H/S 25cm.

### 3 *Helleborus x hybridus*

The many hellebores in the garden happily cross-fertilise, and seedlings crop up in all sorts of colours. “We are hoping to find a cultivar of our own that we can name after York Gate,” says David. H/S up to 45cm.

### 4 *Matteuccia struthiopteris*

“All the plants we sell are grown here,” says David. “The shuttlecock fern is popular with visitors; we divide them by using a bulb planter.” H 1.7m, S 1m.

5 David Beardall cherishes this time of year. “Spring is about renewal and freshness, noticing the lengthening days and trying not to miss anything as the plants wake up.”

### 6 *Brunnera macrophylla*

“Forget-me-not flowers above neat mounds of foliage.” H 25cm, S 60cm.

### 7 *Anemone nemorosa* ‘Robinsoniana’

This pale lavender-blue wood anemone is happy in nooks and crannies at York Gate, where it flowers from spring to early summer. H 8-15cm, S 30cm or more.

### 8 *Uvularia grandiflora*

“This flower from the Dell Garden is quite unusual, and always admired by visitors.” It thrives in partial or full shade and goes dormant in summer after flowering in spring. H 75cm, S 30cm.

### 9 *Glaucidium palmatum* var. *leucanthemum*

The white-flowered Japanese wood poppy thrives in the moist, acid soil of the Dell, blooming in spring and early summer. H 40cm, S 55cm.

