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Buried treasure

Never before in its eventful history has Chenies Manor had an owner with the drive and passion to do justice to its gardens

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In brief

NAME Chenies Manor.

WHAT Manor house garden divided into different sections. Big on colour.

WHERE Top of a Hill in Buckinghamshire. Close to Amersham and Chesham.

SIZE 5.5 acres.

CLIMATE Pretty even for the UK, except for one frosty corner.

SOIL Silt over clay.

POINTS OF INTEREST Maze, kitchen gardens, plant fair, tulips and bedding.



here has been a manor in the Buckinghamshire village of Chenies since the days of the Domesday Book. Sited prominently on a hill above the River Chess, it has had various incarnations as the home of assorted worthies, including Edward I and a slew of Dukes of Bedford. The garden, however, is the work of one person and has been designed, built and nurtured by her since the 1950s.

Elizabeth Macleod-Matthews and her husband Alastair bought the manor 50 years ago. They took on a crumbling building, decked out in the most hideous linoleum and with dubious pipework, the sort of challenge only suited to the young and the driven. Having sorted out the house, Elizabeth set her sights on the five acres of garden. “I have always gardened,” she explains. “As a child I soon commandeered a greenhouse and then started growing sweet peas for showing. I used to make my boyfriends help with the watering.” The garden at Chenies in the 1950s consisted of a tumbledown sunken garden populated “mostly by gooseberries and some scabby apples,” a castellated laurel hedge that staggered diagonally across the front lawn and not much else. “Basically,” remembers Elizabeth, “it was a flattish lawn with a bit of a dip.” However, the soil was remarkable with about 18 inches of perfect topsoil on top of clay. This probably arose because the pond supplying a paper mill was regularly dredged and the silt spread on the garden.

The first step was to divide the area into a series of different gardens using hedges and heavy trelliswork fences. One of the remarkable things about this garden is that, because it has been cared for from its inception by the same person, every single tree, shrub and herbaceous plant was chosen and planted by Elizabeth. As you wander round she points out a yew hedge that was grown from berries and some big bits of topiary. “I planted the yew small and nurtured with big barrowloads of cow manure: my father’s accountant came to visit and announced that they would never survive so I had to prove him wrong!”

The original sunken garden has been restored and is the centrepiece to the justly famous tulip display that has been going for nearly 25 years with the help of Blom’s the bulb merchants. Once the tulips are over they are swiftly removed and replaced with bedding – all grown from seed in the greenhouse – and the colour continues through the summer and into the first frosts, when the whole process starts again.

Radiating from here is the white garden – dominated by four big yew birds and a steel sculpture by Peter Moorhouse, around whose feet scuttle assorted white herbaceous plants. There is also a physic garden with beds of herbs, a rose garden dominated by standard *Rosa* ‘Ballerina’ and a scorching red border against the south gable of the house. Because the Elizabethans were not that keen

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Top left Dxxxxxx.

Top right Txxxxxx.

Bottom left Exxxxx.

Bottom right Hxxxxxx.

Buckinghamshire garden





Dxxxxxx

Buckinghamshire garden



9 plants for Summer



▷ on direct sunlight this is a huge and windowless wall, which needs some hefty planting to keep it in check. Just across the ha-ha is a maze designed by Adrian Fisher in an unusual pattern of interlocking triangles – an icosahedron.

A little further afield the kitchen garden has formally alternating squares of lettuce and dahlias: an alarming prospect if you are a low-maintenance gardener. Elizabeth cheerfully admits that she “likes intensive gardening”. She is helped in this endeavour by WRAGS (Women Returners to Amenity Gardening Scheme) students on two days a week, as well as two chaps who have been coming every Saturday for the last 20 years.

It would be possible for the routine of the garden to become set in its ways, but

Elizabeth always has her eye on the next challenge. She has decided that this year will be the year of the bee. There will be displays, coffee mornings (or rather ‘Bee Teas’), lectures and pollinating plants will be given away to visitors. And after that? “I am looking for a National Collection to adopt: possibly ferns,” Elizabeth announces. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Chenies, Buckinghamshire, WD3 6ER

Open Wednesdays and Thursdays from April to November. The Chenies plant fair is on 21 July. **Tel** 01494 762888.

Website www.cheniesmanorhouse.co.uk
You can find more on the WRAGS scheme at www.wfga.org.uk

History of the manor

Chenies Manor is a melee of different buildings and extensions. There is a 13th-century undercroft from which various tunnels radiate under the garden (undiscovered until a large yew died because its roots were dangling, un nourished, in mid-air). Upon this the main house was built in the 16th century along with various wings and a banqueting house.

After the restoration the Dukes of Bedford moved from Chenies to the rather grander surroundings of Woburn Abbey, where they still reside, surrounded by lions and impertinent baboons. The house entered a period of directionless neglect – it was subdivided and in the 18th century bits were demolished. The Macleod-Matthews are the most consistent residents since the 17th century.

There must have been some sort of garden at some point in the history of Chenies but, in order for any garden to survive it must be gardened, and tenants don’t care as much as owners. As a result it was unloved and under-maintained for centuries before the 1950s and it needed a gardener with the drive and passion of Elizabeth to wrench it back on course.

1 *Rosa* ‘Ballerina’

Flowers enthusiastically. Grown here as standards leading to the yew walk. AGM*. RHS H4, USDA 5a-10b†.

2 *Argyranthemum* ‘xxxx’

Named after Sue, Elizabeth’s PA who grows loads of them each year for scattering throughout pots and borders. Tender but free-flowering.

3 *Rosa* ‘Penelope’

One of a ribbon of musk roses that stutter along one of the main borders. Scented, good hips and about 1.5m high. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 5a-10b.

4 *Eryngium giganteum*

Vigorous biennial that goes well with almost anything. Tends to spread itself about a bit. Spiny leaves. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 5a-8b.

5 *Nepeta* ‘Six Hills Giant’

Long-flowering cottage garden stalwart. Flutters around box topiary in main and kitchen gardens. RHS H4, USDA 3a-8b.

6 *Tanacetum parthenium*

The perfect example of one man’s weed being another’s blessing. A lively companion to most plants and perfect for filling gaps but you do need a firm hand! RHS H4, USDA 5a-9b.

7 *Salvia sclarea* var. *turkestanica*

A bit of an anomaly - this plant has rather fabulous flowers but smells rank. Still, well worth growing if you have the space. USDA 4a-10b.

8 *Astrantia maxima*

A perfect front of border plant. Lots of flowers over a long period of time, beloved by bees and a good companion for roses and other flowering shrubs. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

9 *Rosa gallica* ‘Versicolor’

Compact, prickly shrubs with dull green foliage and generally fragrant, single to double flowers in small clusters in mid-summer. AGM. RHS H4, USDA 4a-8b.

*Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.

†Hardiness ratings given where available.

Buckinghamshire garden

