



Yours for **THE DAY**

Despite its grandeur, classical statuary and William Kent landscaping, there is a quiet intimacy to Rousham that makes the visitor believe it is theirs alone, especially in the quiet still of an icy winter's morning

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A series of seven stone arches form the Praeneste Terrace at William Kent-designed Rousham near Bicester.



over, at the ridiculously young age of 21, the place was in a pretty poor state. The walled garden was full of Christmas trees and nobody, apart from experts and academics, really knew what lay behind the gates. Charles runs the place unaided – “I have never had a manager or a secretary,” he says – while his wife Angela has racked up 46 years as a house guide and gardener. Between the two of them, helped enormously by the “brilliant” head gardener Ann Starling and her team, they have transformed the gardens into an international place of pilgrimage not only for fans of 18th-century landscape but also for walkers, locals and picnickers just wanting to eat a quiet cheese-and-pickle sandwich in idyllic circumstances. Some of them also use the grounds

for assignations and illicit liaisons – but then there are lots of romantic views and secluded corners, so what do you expect?

You approach the house through a parkland that is populated by ancient trees and remarkably handsome Longhorn cattle and are delivered to a handsome honey-stoned stable yard. The first sight that will greet you here is not the garden laid out in all its splendour, but a very chatty flock of Belgian Barbu d’Uccle bantams whose ancestors were brought back from Switzerland 80 years ago in Charles’s mother’s spongebag.

Wander round the side of the house and you emerge on a broad flat lawn: there are no flower borders, just grass, a statue of a lion mauling a

Before we start I feel that I should come clean: I love Rousham, it is about ten minutes from my house and I try to visit a few times every year. I acknowledge its imperfections (sometimes I wish that I could take a chainsaw on my walks around the gardens!) but still love the atmosphere, the views and the general ramshackle romanticism of the place. It has no shop, no café and, until very recently, the only way to get an entry ticket was by putting coins into a re-purposed parking machine. Yet underneath this charmingly shambolic beginning lies a world-class garden.

Anybody who has studied garden design will know about Rousham: it is held up as an exemplary

example of a classic 18th-century landscape. The background is well documented, beginning with General James Dormer whose lively career included being wounded at the Battle of Blenheim, captured at Brihuega (in Spain) and a spell as Governor of Kingston-upon-Hull. He retired to Rousham in the 1730s and had the excellent idea of employing the great William Kent to redesign the gardens.

Kent created a garden full of meaning and steeped in the Classics. You can admire the view from an alcove in the Praeneste Terrace (a series of pedimented arches based on a ruined Roman temple in Palestrina). Watch the water pour through the Vale of Venus. Admire statues of Apollo and the Dying Gladiator and follow the snaking stone-edged

rill as it rambles down the hill via a swimming pond that must have made for an extremely bracing dip.

Not everything here is ancient: there is a charming memorial plaque to a much-loved dog (“In front of this stone lie the remains of Ringwood, an otter-hound of extraordinary sagacity”) and, apparently, a fair bit of Masonic symbolism. Both Kent and Dormer were Freemasons and there are reminders of this in some of the tiles and an open stone coffin hidden among the trees. This may also explain why the head gardener, John Macclary, managed to rack up the astonishing sum of £60 a year in tips for allowing people entry to the garden!

All in all, a pretty amazing place, but it was not always thus: when Charles Cottrell-Dormer took





horse (a striking but rather uncomfortable image) and a magnificent view. Far beneath you runs the River Cherwell and across the valley is an arched construction intended to catch the eye. From here there is no fixed route around the gardens: it is intended as a voyage of discovery where each visitor has a slightly different experience – apparently there are over a thousand ways to explore the garden.

Throughout the garden are scattered beautifully placed buildings and figures: you disappear into heavily wooded walks to emerge, blinking, into the light of another vista and another perfect statue. The planting is all very simple – laurels, yews and trees – and it is this simplicity that makes everything seem even more dramatic. This is gardening as theatre on a grand scale.

Nothing much changes at Rousham and that is exactly how Charles and Angela like it. As Angela puts it: “We wouldn’t dream of trying to change things – Kent was not an idiot! Everything matters here: every tree and every plant.” The biggest change has been the purchase of the meadow on the other side of the river. “One day we saw a For Sale sign, which was the first we had heard of it.” What followed was a frantic corralling of resources so that the field could be bought. Two hermaphroditic bronzes, a gold watch and an “Elizabethan navigational thingy from the Ashmolean” were sold and a slice of meadow saved for Rousham. A few things have been lost over the centuries and the woodland behind the eyecatcher on the hill is getting a bit shaggy. All this is detail: the important thing



Top Ancient espaliered apples and pears line an avenue, their branches picked out by the frost. **Above** More espaliered fruit is trained along the walls of the pigeon house, behind intricate, box-edged beds.

is that the atmosphere remains. It is a garden with which almost everybody falls in love – except, of course, those who don’t really get the point: those who are more concerned about tea rooms and toilets than the spirit of the place.

Famously, children under 15 are not allowed in: although exceptions are often made. This is not because the Cottrell-Dormers are even slightly misopedic but because they understand that small children react noisily to wide open spaces and wooded glades and that this might disturb the



nymphs or interrupt the peace of other visitors. Away from the magnificence of the landscape there are other gardens. The formal lawn is edged with a mountainous yew hedge as vertiginous and cragged as Beachy Head. Behind it lies the walled garden, which bulges with fruit and vegetables in season. There are wide borders, hidden ponds and a very impressive collection of dahlias. A parterre surrounds the old pigeon house – a beautiful building that was constructed to provide an easy food source for the house. Pigeons laid eggs in the rows of brick nesting boxes and a rotating ladder made it easy for foraging scullions to gather the young birds (squabs) for the pot.

Rousham manages to be many things: it is the Cottrell-Dormer’s private garden, a public garden, a garden of extraordinary importance but, at the same time, it’s a place people feel belongs to them alone. As it says on their website “Bring a picnic, wear comfortable shoes and it is yours for the day”. In these days of upheaval and a world that seems to spin faster every day, it is comforting to know that, whenever you choose to visit, be it in the height of the season or, as here, a freezing winter morning, Rousham will be a comfort and a thrill. It is best to leave the final words to Charles: “I do what I can and don’t worry about the things I cannot.” ■

Rousham House & Garden, Rousham, Bicester OX25 4QX. See rousham.org for visitor information.



Top In the productive kitchen garden, chard and leeks withstand the cold conditions. **Above** The upper cascade with its statue of Venus in the garden’s so-called Vale of Venus. **Left** A blue gate leads out of the walled garden.