

Creating a sense of unity

Mindrum Gardens, Mindrum, Northumberland

George Plumptre finds that what was good for military strategy
in days of yore is good for gardening now, among the Cheviot Hills
in England's northernmost corner

Photographs by Marianne Majerus





Preceding pages: Mirror, mirror: waterlilies and bog plants in profusion on the natural pond. Clockwise from bottom left: Abundant plantings almost conceal the greenhouse; foxgloves and moon daisies near the house; and the smooth Cheviot Hills loom up beyond the rose garden



NORTHUMBERLAND'S Cheviot Hills are a place of idyllically soft countryside, where England and Scotland fold into each other in a manner that belies centuries of adversarial border skirmishes and occasional battles. It is also remote, imbued with a sense that the flowing, open landscape is pre-eminent. This immediately provides the background and sets the tone for gardens in the area, such as Mindrum, which has been created in the past 100 years.

It may be remote, but its potential for human occupation was appreciated long ago. Two centuries before Hadrian's Wall was built, there was a large Roman travelling camp on the site of Mindrum and it's one of the few places

in England where you look south into Scotland. One crucial factor that encouraged occupation was the discovery (by the Romans) that the Mindrum site is a large gravel island with the river on one side and an area of treacherous swamp on the other.

The recent discovery of a Roman map confirmed remarkable similarity in the layout of fields to today's Mindrum farm map, despite the gap of nearly 2,000 years. What was good for military strategy then is good for gardening today.

For centuries, Mindrum belonged to the estate of the Tankerville family, based at Chillingham Castle, until, in 1919, it was sold to Charles Chartres, a hydro-engineer who had recently returned from India. A picture of 1878

shows that in the late 19th century, the house was square and the garden extended only to the present top lawn. Chartres and his wife changed all that, adding the elegant bays to the house and extending the garden into the sloping ground down towards the river.

Chartres put his professional training to good use and build a hydro-system on the river that powered the house and estate. His wife had expansive tastes for her garden and, in 1935, she bought a rock-garden display at Chelsea Flower Show and rebuilt it on the slope at Mindrum where it remains today—after an interesting history.

In the constrained postwar years, Chartres decided that his wife's rock garden was an extravagance, so he covered it in soil and

planted trees on it. In 1955, he sold the estate to Pery Fairfax, who soon after began to excavate and restore the rock garden, complete with its channels of water and pools. In 1965, he married his wife, Ginny, and although the bones of the garden were there when they arrived, the planting that you see today is theirs.

Steady evolution has produced a garden that has retained an undisturbed harmony with the countryside into which it merges, but also reveals the hand of a discerning and adventurous plantswoman. Recently, Mindrum has been taken on by the couple's son and daughter-in-law, Tom and Miki.

You might not expect to find the *recherché* shrub *Carpentaria californica* this far north, but tucked against the wall of the house, it's clearly flourishing. It is a hallmark of the planting at Mindrum that well-chosen staples of an English country-house garden—such

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as an ebullient mixture of old-fashioned roses and perennials—are spiced up with more exotic surprises. And these are not all in the planting; the set of four French 17th-century statues representing characters from children's stories that came from Pery Fairfax's mother could grace a French Baroque garden.

These statues are along one side of the upper terrace's main lawn and, from here, there is Mindrum's quintessential view, down to the

Bowmont Water and mill race, which form the garden's boundary with a wildflower meadow on the island in between, and beyond to the undulating fields and hillside that recede gently into the distance.

The sense of unity between garden and neighbouring landscape continues if you follow the path along the bank shaded by the now tall Scots pines that protect one boundary. Along the way, you discover a succession of treats: an impressively large parrotia; a group of shuttlecock ferns hiding shyly beside the small Mindrum Burn, which flows down into Bowmont Water; or my favourite discovery, a huge clump of *Rubus* Olympic Double with rich wine-red flowers in spring.

The prospects out of the garden to the Cheviot countryside that appear soothingly as you progress round the garden are matched by those towards and away from the house



across the bowl-like area that has Mrs Chartres's rock garden (now transformed by Mrs Fairfax's planting) spreading down one side. On the naturally damp site, lush foliage combines with a well-chosen palette of flower colour to present a combination whose skill is disguised by its soothing naturalness.

Towards the bottom, there are royal fern *Osmunda regalis*, a white-flowered marsh marigold in spring followed by primrose-yellow *Primula florindae* in summer and gorgeous *Iris sibirica* Perry's Blue, proudly chosen and planted by Mindrum's eponymous owner. Higher up are luxuriant clumps of different hostas, with taller acanthus and Solomon's seal. Contrastingly small-scale is *Viola labradorica* merging with lily-of-the-valley.

At the top of the rock garden, a clipped yew hedge forms a screen to conceal the rose garden above. Mrs Fairfax inherited a typically neat interwar pattern of Hybrid Tea shrubs; today, it's a very different kind of rose garden that, in high summer, overflows with some of Mindrum's most evocative combinations. A host of shrub roses includes Hybrid Musks such as Felicia and Perdita and other stately old-fashioned varieties such as Tour de Malakoff, Leverkusen and Raubritter.

They are complemented by a well-chosen mixture of perennials, including thalictrums, hardy geraniums, foxgloves, white sweet rocket and delphiniums as well as the softening touch of foliage, whether low domes of artemesia



or the arching sprays of *Elaeagnus angustifolia*. The overall effect demonstrates triumphantly that traditional combinations of plants that are going to thrive without too much attention are often best.

And yet you're constantly coming across more unusual treats, such as *Syringa reflexa*, which *The Hillier Manual of Trees and Shrubs* describes as 'A shrub of considerable quality... one of the best species'—praise indeed for a member of such a large family as the

Above: Scarlet *Tropaeolum speciosum* garlands a yew hedge. **Left:** Iron mighty: a clematis arch straddles the pebble path

lilacs—or the scrambling climber *Tropaeolum speciosum*, which covers the yew hedge with great splashes of scarlet in late-summer.

As you return from the intimacy of the garden's enclosed spaces to the expansive lawns in front of the house, the garden's balance and flow are clearly evident. Mindrum is a place of subtle variety, from the terrace walk along the south-facing retaining wall, to the gravel terrace, the wildflower meadow along the river, the pond at the bottom of the rock garden or the bowl-like lawn to one side with *Acer cappadocicum* var. *sinicum* in the centre.

Looking across this lawn, past a pair of slender white-stemmed birches that frame the view to the hills beyond, you appreciate that this is a gentle, restful garden because it has evolved a deep-rooted relationship with its surroundings. That relationship is orchestrated by the changing seasons and the succession of highlights—horticultural and visual—that these bring.

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The garden of Mindrum is open by appointment in the summer and in aid of the NGS charities and Hospice Care Northumberland on Sunday, June 21, 2pm–5pm. For full details, visit www.mindrumestate.com