

**T**HE first and most important thing Simon Dorrell and I did when we came to Bryan's Ground in 1993 was to photograph just about every inch of the 80-year-old Arts-and-Crafts house and garden, providing us today with important images of how it then looked.

In the 20-odd years since, the gardening world has changed considerably, not least with an influx of new plants that has broadened our palette. Of course, it's not only our garden that has changed; we have, as well. New ideas and interests are continually being developed, old ones fine-tuned and new aspirations identified. And we are older—I was still in my forties when we came here, Simon in his early thirties.

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Nor is the garden our only strand of activity. Simon is a painter with a one-man show every year and is also a garden designer; I run the quarterly periodical *Hortus* and annually lead anything up to eight overseas garden tours. It comes as no surprise, perhaps, that we adopted Shakespeare's line (“In delay there lies no plenty”) as our motivating motto, carved now in slate above the Kitchen Garden gate.

Although we might have slowed down physically, we have nonetheless remained ambitious in our horticultural pursuits and faithful to our personal beliefs. We have come to know our garden like an old suit of clothes, extending and altering it in the way a tailor might slacken waistbands or move buttons to accommodate new configurations.

We better understand the garden's soil and microclimates, we know its foibles and have learnt, I hope, how best to exploit its diverse characteristics. Moreover, we have more than doubled its size, now happily burdening ourselves with eight acres under cultivation. ➤

The serpentine canal replaces the drive to the house through an apple orchard, underplanted with *Iris sibirica* Papillon, at their peak in late May

## A mirror on the past and future

*Bryan's Ground, Stapleton, Herefordshire*  
After two decades spent transforming the gardens around his Arts-and-Crafts house, David Wheeler plans for the future

Photographs by Marianne Majerus





**6** If planted as intended, the half-acre Kitchen Garden could feed our town throughout the year **9**

Bryan's Ground takes its name from the field upon which it was built—land sold by nearby Kinsham Court in 1908 to sisters Mary and Elizabeth Durning Holt (nieces of Beatrice Potter, wife of Sidney Webb, an early member of the Fabian Society), who commissioned Hereford architects Groome & Betington to design for them 'a simple country house' with a pair of staff cottages beyond the walled Kitchen Garden. As construction was coming to an end in 1913, a large greenhouse was erected and the bones of a three-acre formal garden were laid out.

That Fabian connection brought the likes of George Bernard Shaw and David Lloyd George to Bryan's Ground in the early days, as old photographs in the National Portrait Gallery testify. We are the sixth set of owners.

Our initial approach was to restore or replace the best of what had been lost or had deteriorated and to build and plan anew in the Edwardian

**Top left: The cricket-wicket-length Dutch Canal, flanked by columnar *Pyrus calleryana* Chanticleer. Left: The three-storey dovecote provides contrasting vistas in three directions**



Arts-and-Crafts tradition with a contemporary twist. A grid of shallow indentations made vivid by a light dusting of snow on our first night revealed evidence of a long-gone orchard flanking the main drive. It helped explain the empty spaces of lawn and threw us into apple-planting mode, with the purchase of 30 different varieties that included our personal favourites, varieties with a local Herefordshire or Edwardian provenance or ones known to have been grown here previously from the existence of old labels, discovered in the Apple Store.

They have flourished and each tree now stands in its own 8ft-square bed of *Iris sibirica* Papillon, divisions of a few plants brought from our previous garden and which now fill the approach to the house with a sea of pale-blue flowers in late May.

The original lawn-tennis court, hard against the west side of the house,

had already disappeared before our ownership, but had left in its wake another expanse of turf deemed unsatisfactory, causing Simon to partition it with yew hedges to give two of the downstairs rooms their own private gardens. Yew grows quickly here and the 12in youngsters that we put in soon reached their chunky, specified 6ft height.

These 'rooms' have seen several different planting schemes, changes dictated mainly by increased shade cast by small trees that have since grown to maturity. One of them was initially decked with blue- and terracotta-coloured perennials (to carry the drawing room's interior theme outside), but is now transforming into an avenue of alternating amelanchier (for spring blossom and autumn foliage) and elaeagnus (for midsummer fragrance) in narrow beds of gravel punctuated with clipped spheres of *Ilex crenata*.

**Irish yews and evergreen box topiary alongside head-high obelisks of native deciduous hawthorn now embellish the original Sunk Garden, seen from the south-facing loggia with its fragrant curtain of wisteria outside the author's study**

My collection of fussy old French roses, planted in another area of the former tennis court, failed miserably. They have now been replaced by a wholly satisfying, minimalist repetition of *Rosa Roseraie de l'Hay*.

We have planted much new evergreen and deciduous topiary (yew, box, phillyrea, holly, Portugal laurel, cupressus, hawthorn), adding them to statuesque pieces that were fashioned before our time, from hedges now 100 years old. And, as our schemes have changed, we have successfully (in late autumn) transplanted redundant pieces of yew topiary to other parts of the garden.

We are both transfixed by water, relishing its sound, its movement and its light-reflecting qualities, not to mention the flora and fauna it supports. We have so far built seven new pools, including a 120ft-long, formal serpentine canal that replaces the main





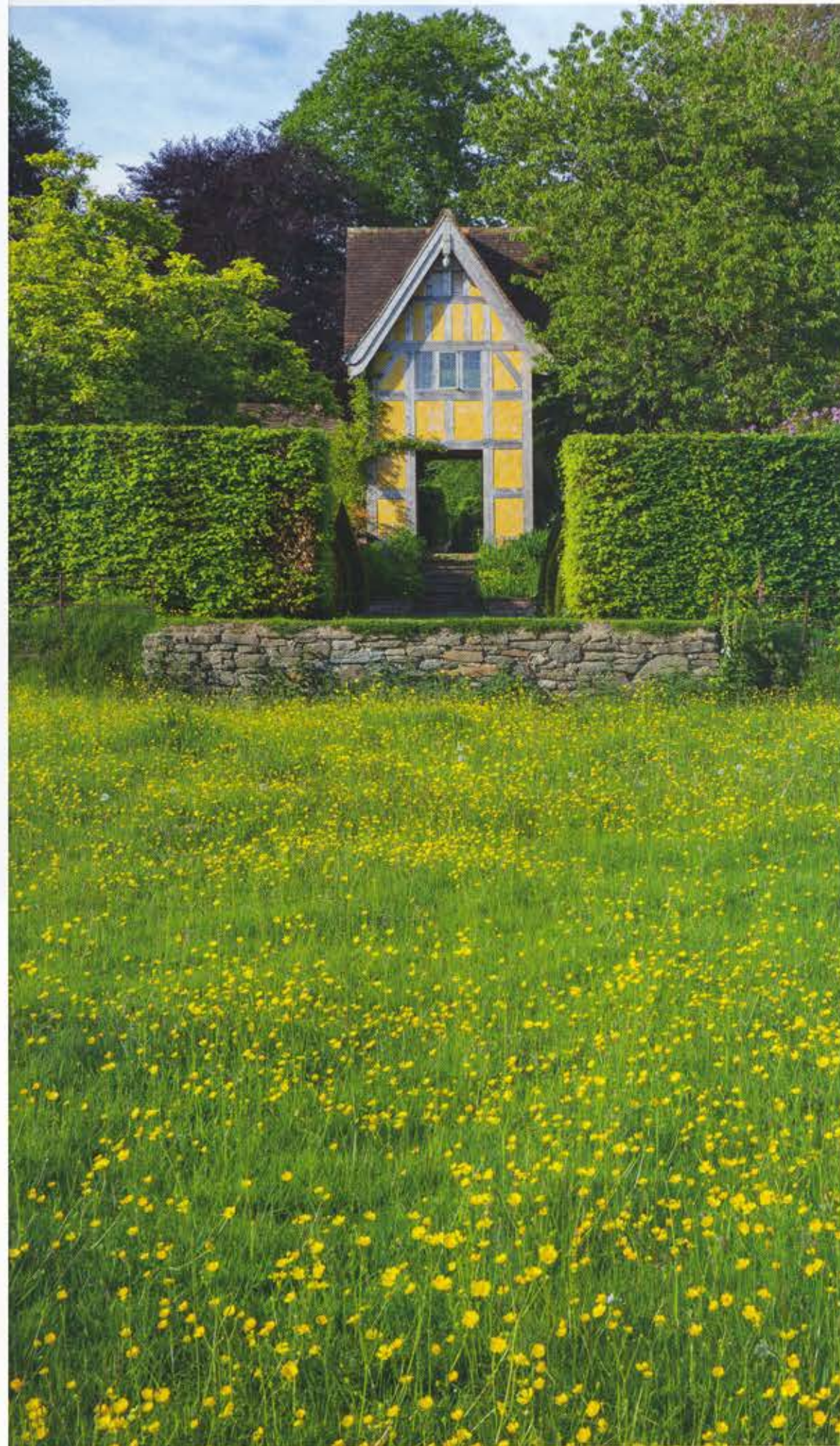
Above: A shelterbelt of mature trees protects the Sunk Garden, with its venerable *Magnolia liliiflora* Nigra and sprays of *Elaeagnus Quicksilver*. Below: A 'high tide' of May-flowering blue Siberian irises follows a March-flowering 'low tide' of blue *Anemone blanda*. Facing page: The dovecote poised above the meadow, where the River Lugg marks the border between England and Wales



drive through the orchard, a skating pool in the Kitchen Garden and a cricket-wicket-length Dutch Canal—not to mention a quarter-acre stream-fed 'natural' pool in the arboretum.

If planted as intended, the half-acre Kitchen Garden could feed our local town throughout the year, but, having satisfied our modest needs with a few raised beds for peas, beans and salad things next to the greenhouse, we have given over the walled area to decorative schemes. Beech hedges form the partitions, which conceal diverse designs embracing impromptu sculpture, follies and areas of quiet retreat.

The first of our follies was Simon's present to me for my 50th birthday—the so-called Sulking House, incorporating neo-Classical masonry fragments found in a salvage yard after the demolition of Lord Bute's Cardiff Docks in the early 1990s. Self-described as a 'thwarted architect', Simon has gone on to design and build a three-storey dovecote, a belvedere, the Fishing Temple, the Lych Gate and the brand new Lightbox, a strikingly simple east-facing viewing platform with a bench seat for watching sunrises over open farmland.



The arboretum known as Cricket Wood (a former donkey paddock that was mown each summer during the 1950s for a village cricket match), was begun on the afternoon of January 1, 2000, when I planted *Acer davidii* in the cold raked-over ashes of our millennium bonfire. Since that time, I have added more than 500 trees and shrubs, concentrating initially on autumn foliage and fruits with small collections of maple, sorbus, cherry and liquidambar.

‘As H. E. Bates so famously said: “The garden that is finished is dead”’

As the trees have grown, I've been able to indulge in a wide range of spring-flowering shrubs and installed avenues of scented viburnums and of fragrant, yellow-flowered deciduous *Rhododendron luteum*. And in an example of changing aspirations, I have begun to bring together numerous hydrangeas (about 100 different varieties so far). They seem to thrive in our slightly acidic (6.5pH) soil, which remains sufficiently moist for most of the year.

Although we look to the future with the irritation of small worries (will we have the energy, inclination and wherewithal to look after all that we have created?), we hope still to further enhance our few acres; after all, as H. E. Bates so famously said: ‘The garden that is finished is dead.’  
Bryan's Ground, Letchmoor Lane, Stapleton (near Presteigne), Herefordshire, is open in 2015 on Sunday and Monday afternoons between 2pm and 5pm from April 5 until August 10 (01544 260001; [www.bryansground.co.uk](http://www.bryansground.co.uk)). It is also one of the properties taking part in Gardens in the Wild, a two-day festival on June 20–21, celebrating horticulture in the Marches border country, supported by the Herefordshire Wildlife Trust. For more information, telephone 07974 269166 or visit [www.gardensinthewild.org](http://www.gardensinthewild.org). Alternatively, write to Gardens in the Wild, Castle House, Eardisley, Hereford, Herefordshire HR3 6NT