

The profoundly influential Mrs Fish

East Lambrook Manor, East Lambrook, Somerset

George Plumptre reviews the legacy of the writer-gardener whose *laissez-faire* cottage-gardening style continues to instruct and inspire

Photographs by Marianne Majerus

MARGERY FISH, who created the garden at East Lambrook Manor, was an exact contemporary of Vita Sackville-West—both were born in 1892 and yet these two most influential gardening women could not have been more different. From the tip of her aquiline nose to the toe of her long, laced-up boots, Vita was unashamedly aristocratic. Margery, by contrast, always looks in photographs like everyone's favourite granny or nanny, wearing a printed summer dress, her hair in a bun, with a trug over her arm.



Above: Margery Fish with trug in hand, photographed by the great plants-woman Valerie Finnis. Right: Ordered chaos: geraniums, silene, stachys and magenta *Gladiolus byzantinus* invigorate the summer garden

‘Margery Fish championed the simple, deeply English, cottage-garden style’

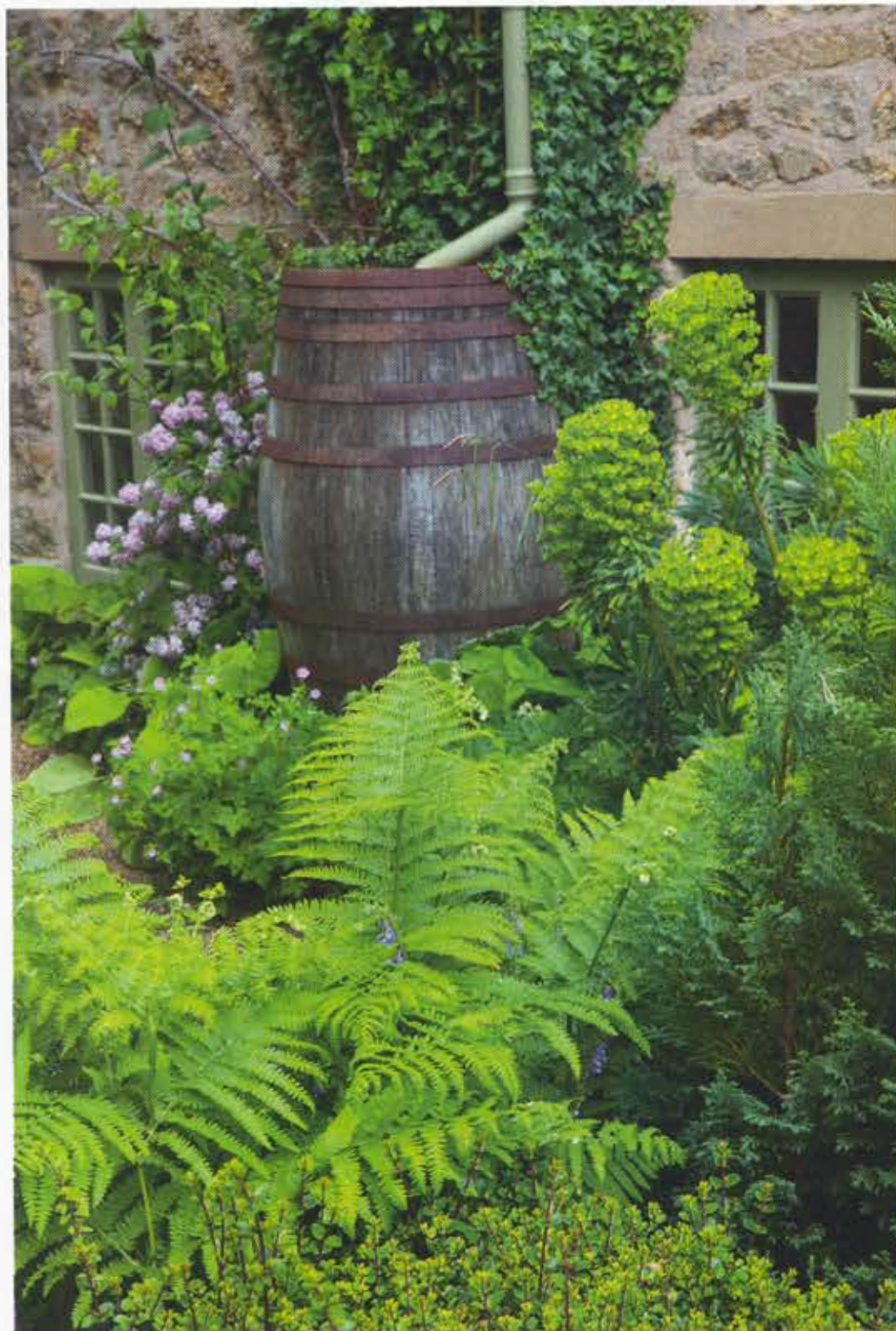
Her audience loved her because, like them, she set about creating a garden as a complete beginner and because she championed the simple, deeply English, cottage-garden style. What the two women had in common was the ability to convey their ideas and descriptions of their gardens in brilliantly accessible style—both in articles and books.

Margery died in 1969, just over 30 years after she and her husband, Walter, had bought East Lambrook Manor. During that time—together for the first 10 years, until Walter's death in 1947, and then on her own—she transformed what she originally described as a 'battered old house that needed to be gutted to be livable and a wilderness instead

of a garden' into something about which Patrick Taylor has written: 'For anyone seeking to understand what is meant by a cottage garden East Lambrook Manor is an excellent starting point.'

Since her death, the challenge for successive owners of East Lambrook has been to preserve her legacy at the same time as overseeing the garden's practical evolution. At times, this has been an unenviable balancing act, closely observed by devotees and fans of the garden's creator. The current owners are Mike and Gail Werkmeister, who have developed the garden with care and enthusiasm since 2008, assisted by head gardener Mark Stainer, who has been there for much





longer and is celebrating 40 years at East Lambrook in 2015.

What Margery demonstrated over time in her garden at East Lambrook was a remarkable feel for plants and how they could be used and combined. This was because she was interested in every aspect of her plants: their history and origins, qualities of foliage as well as flowers, shape and habit and, perhaps most important, how different plants should be positioned so as to thrive and how they could be associated. The long list of outstanding plants that bear either her name or East Lambrook/

Above: The walls of the manor make a dignified backdrop for a composition of euphorbias and ferns.
Facing page: The path lined with paired *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* Fletcheri; Margery called them her 'pudding trees'

Lambrook is testament to the skill and knowledge that she acquired.

This added to the impact on visitors to East Lambrook. Having first read about the garden, they could then visit and witness at first hand the very personal nature of Margery's creation. They could admire a particular plant or group about which she had enthused or enjoy some of the garden's best-known features, such as the Silver Garden, with its hot, dry conditions and mixture of foliage; the path lined by *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* Fletcheri across the terrace garden, which she

'We made mistakes'

Margery Fish spent the first part of her working life in the offices of Associated Newspapers, mainly at the *Daily Mail* where she was secretary to successive editors, at the same time as contributing articles to various publications, notably *The Field*. The last of her editors was a widower, Walter Fish, whom she married in 1933, four years before they decided to leave London because of the impending threat of war.

There is no doubt that the reputation of East Lambrook's garden and its creator was initially based on her descriptions of its creation in the first of her eight gardening books, *We Made a Garden*, published in 1956. This was confirmed by John Sales when he wrote: 'In the development of gardening in the second half of the twentieth century no garden has had a greater effect and no garden writer has had a more profound influence.'

The book's stroke of genius was to describe the creation of a garden in a way that was consciously intended to encourage other beginner gardeners to follow suit in their own gardens; not to be discouraged or overwhelmed, but to learn from her advice and the descriptions of her experiences. Reading the gentle, practical prose, they would appreciate that all gardeners start their journey as ignorant beginners and all make mistakes along the way—indeed, one chapter of *We Made a Garden* is entitled 'We Made Mistakes'.

affectionately referred to as 'my pudding trees'; or the Ditch, a typically prosaic name for one of her triumphs, in which snowdrops and a medley of early spring bulbs are followed by damp-loving specialists.

Today, all the adjacent areas of the garden and the names that Margery gave them are preserved and this gives an immediate sense of continuity. The garden still encircles the house, which exemplifies Somerset vernacular, and, although there are views out, they are not a great feature and this intensifies the sense that house and garden are an ebullient self-contained capsule.

Margery often wrote about how much both she and her husband felt that a garden should have good structure or 'bones', but at East Lambrook, ➤





it has always been understated and largely concealed by the plants. Paths and steps are narrow and uneven and, at times in midsummer, you still force your way through the layers of growth.

Margery's garden seemed to get to the heart of what people imagined to be a cottage garden because she arranged her plants in areas and patterns that didn't overtly look like traditional beds or borders. Plant colonies of great abundance, where self-seeding was unrestrained, grew up to best enhance the different areas of garden and this sense of a fine balance between a free-for-all and restraint is perpetuated at East Lambrook today. The two acres of garden are overflowing with plants and the progression from one area to another is both simple and informal; there are no vistas to beckon you on—rather, you turn a corner, curious to discover what lies beyond.

Of course, the plants have changed—they've had to through the eight decades since she began. The pudding trees were replanted in 2000 and, on the lawn in front of the house, a variegated sycamore that has

Another path, leading to the manor house door; the house is built of beautiful ochre-coloured 'hamstone' (Ham Hill limestone), quarried for centuries in this part of Somerset. Margery's gift, demonstrated in her first book, *We Made a Garden* (1956), was to describe the creation of her garden in a way that encouraged other beginner gardeners to follow suit

always been a feature is showing distinct signs of frailty. But there are still plenty of Margery Fish signatures: snowdrops, hellebores, astrantias and hardy geraniums.

When I visited in early summer, I particularly enjoyed the scattered rich magenta *Gladiolus byzantinus* and a billow of perennial wallflower *Erysimum* Wenlock Beauty, along with the two named artemisias—Lambrook Mist and Lambrook Silver—in the Silver Garden, plus wonderful *Libertia grandiflora* in generous clumps and contrastingly delicate *Polemonium* Lambrook Mauve close to airy *Gillenia trifoliata* and herbaceous *Clematis recta*.

In the rare places that there have been conscious changes, Margery's heritage is recalled and so, when the area alongside the Ditch was redone and replanted in 2005, it was named the Wooded Helleborus Garden. Water has never flowed again in the Ditch after the Fishes' original widening caused the stream to puzzlingly disappear. Margery wrote that friends assured her that, one day, the stream would reappear, but it never seemed to worry her.

One of the great lessons for her readers was to accept how things change in your garden at the same time as trying to keep ahead of them. The following passage exemplifies her eminently practical approach: 'In the end I planted Asiatic primulas in what should have been the damp bed of our river. It seemed a pity to waste a position so admirably suited to their taste, so I dug out the heavy clay and filled the channel with a good mixture of leaf mould, sand and compost and here the Bartleys, the Postfords and the Millars and their foreign relations enjoy life, with their feet in the deep damp earth and their heads in the sun.'

She wrote about her plants as if they were people, favourite friends or relations—that was at the heart of her garden's appeal and it is greatly to their credit that, today, her successors have retained that quality.

George Plumptre is Chief Executive of the National Gardens Scheme (NGS). The garden of East Lambrook Manor is open regularly—for full details, visit www.eastlambrook.co.uk. The openings include certain days in support of the NGS