

Awash with good ideas

*Shute House, Donhead
St Mary, Wiltshire*

Charles Quest-Ritson immerses himself in the active and passive moods of water while exploring one of Geoffrey Jellicoe's most admired creations

Photographs by
Marianne Majerus

FORMERLY the rectory for Donhead St Mary, Shute House is rather rambling, but sits on the crest of a hill with beautiful views south. Part of it was once a hostelry for pilgrims to Shaftesbury, but the latest and prettiest part of it dates back to the early-Georgian era.

Michael Tree (1921–99) and his wife, Lady Anne, bought it in 1968 and called on Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900–96) to help them lay out the garden. Jellicoe had just retired after a long and very distinguished career as a landscape architect (he was knighted in 1979), so he was able to work at Shute free from the pressures of running a practice, but his lifetime's experience fed into the design and nurture of the garden.

Jellicoe was an old friend of the Trees. He had worked at Ditchley Park for Tree's mother, the decorator Nancy Lancaster, and for the Trees themselves at their former house, the ➤

Tree for the Trees: a huge pine frames the far-reaching southerly view





Palladian Mereworth Castle in Kent. Tree had an artist's eye and worked well with Jellicoe. Lady Anne left much of the design process to the chaps: she was a plantswoman, for whom the purpose of gardening was the pleasure of growing plants.

Born Lady Anne Cavendish, she had grown up at Chatsworth, where landscaping and horticulture (and much else besides) are practised at the highest level of excellence. She was a hands-on gardener who just wanted to get on with the planting, but she did agree with her husband that 'we must have an overall plan, correctly scaled and architectural'.

In the event, Jellicoe's involvement went beyond drawing up a master-plan, because he returned regularly to make additions and alterations right up until 1995, by which time

Above: Clipped-hedge niches house busts, which replace earlier ones of the Classical poets. Below: A neo-Classical depiction of Leda and the Swan illuminates the deep shade of a shrubbery. Facing page: Inspired by Persian gardens: Jellicoe's three small pools, each with a bubble fountain at the centre

‘Shute House, Jellicoe said, was “a laboratory for ideas”

the Trees had sold up and the present owners were in residence.

The site, the landscape and the garden that Jellicoe made for the Trees inspired and delighted them. Lady Anne explained: 'Geoffrey and my husband worked on the plan together. I asked for specific ideas to be included, and it was agreed that the planting was to be mine. Mr Jellicoe is a joy to work with and a great expert on garden creation. Failure does not exist in his mind, only solutions; his imagination is fertile and subtle. My husband has thoroughness and imagination.'

Jellicoe echoed this: 'They would propose an idea, I would look at the reality of it.' Shute, he said, was 'a laboratory for ideas'.

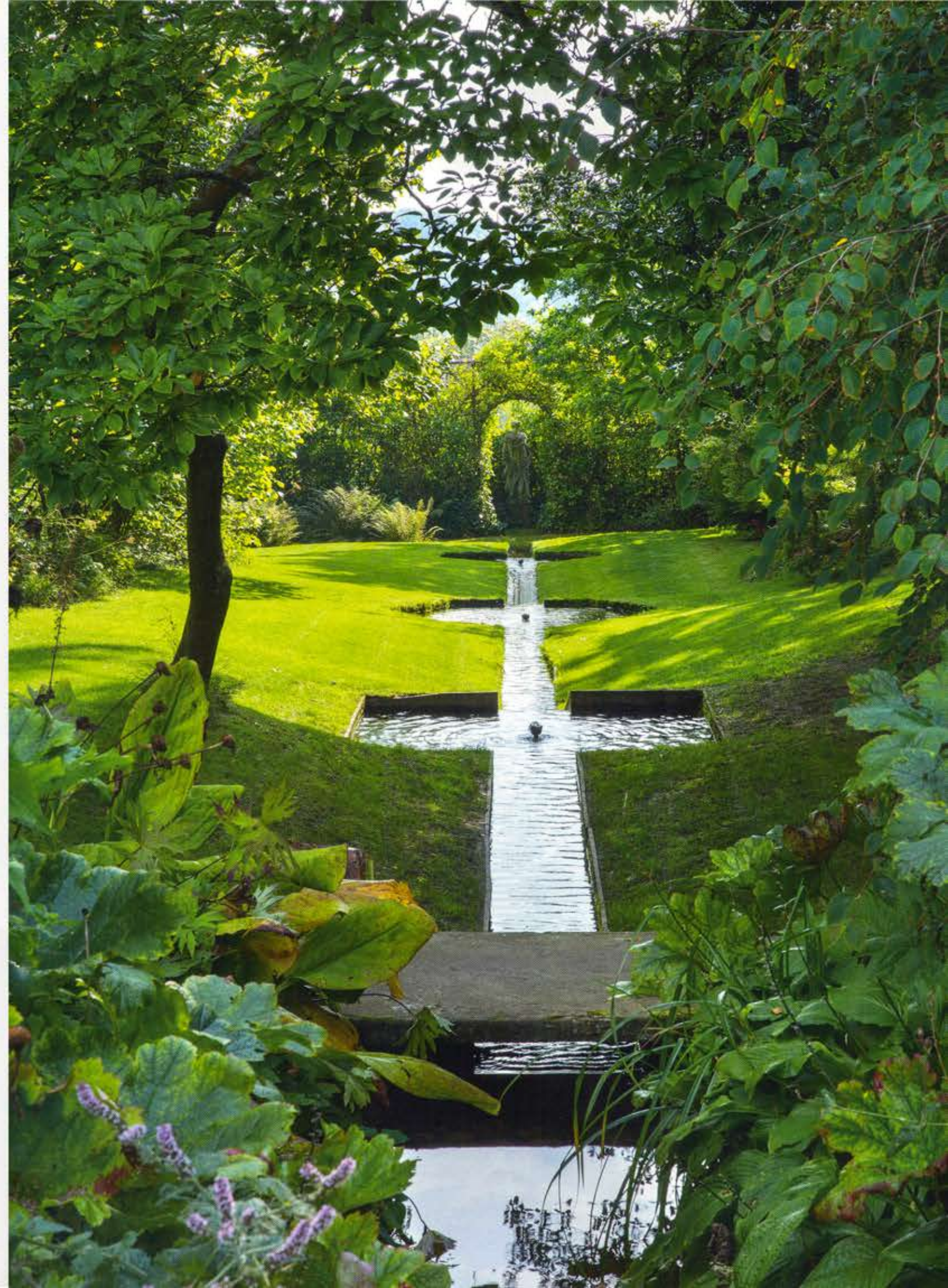
Jellicoe advised that the existing gardens, on greensand, were not in bad shape, although perhaps rather over-run by the spread of bamboos and rhododendrons. But they had one unique feature: a spring in the garden that is the source of the River Nadder. The flow of water, constantly surging out of the ground, into a reservoir and then out down the hillside, fascinated

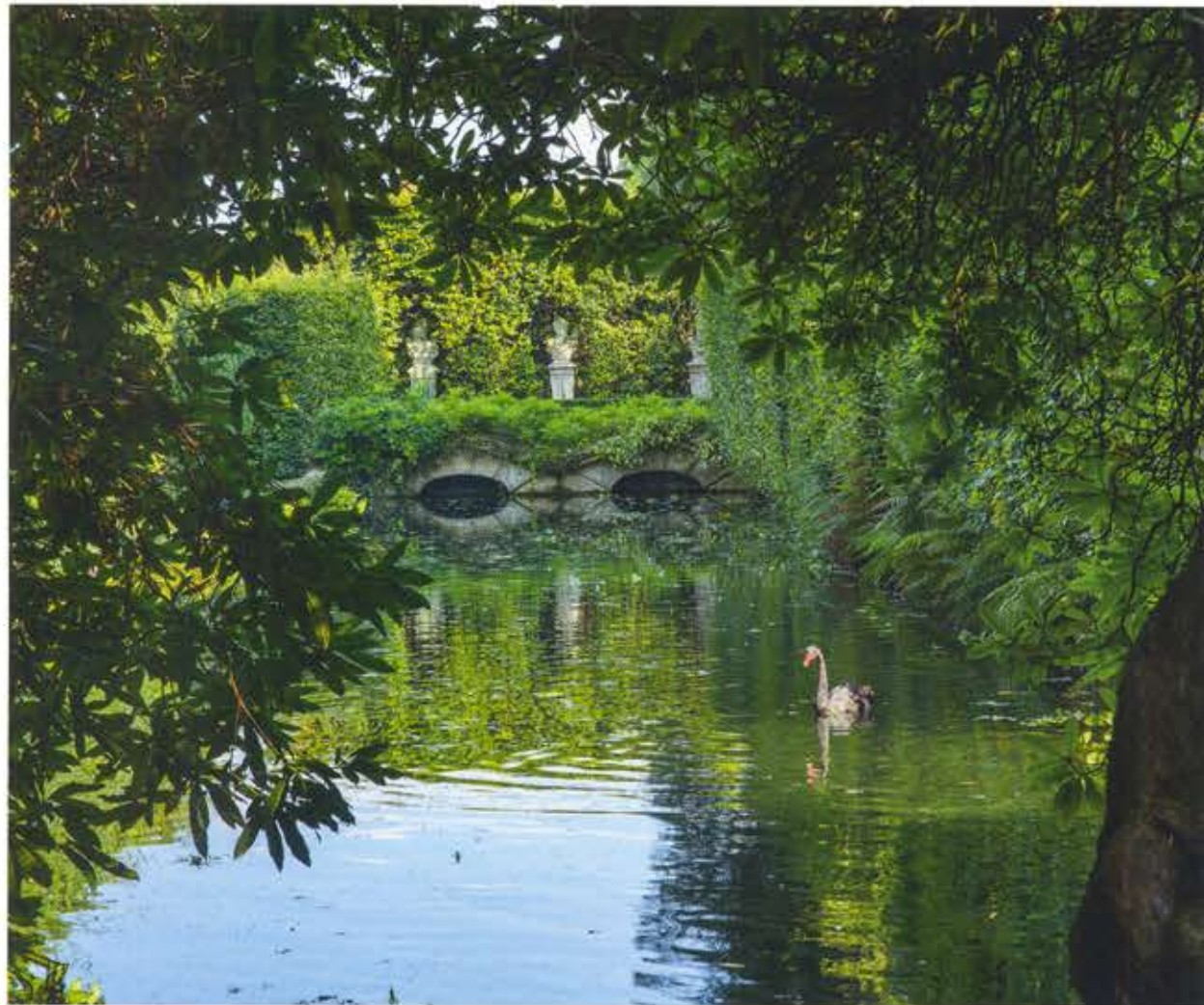
and inspired him. It gave Shute its *genius loci* and connected it, intellectually and physically, to the valley below.

The unique feature of Shute is the formal rill that Jellicoe designed to feed off the reservoir. It races straight down the hillside, crashing over V-shaped strips of copper that are intended to produce a musical chord together—bass, tenor, alto and treble—as the flow of water makes them vibrate. Three huge rectangular flagstones act as bridges over the stream; light reflects off the surface of the water both above and below those stone bridges.

The bridges are followed by three small formal pools, inspired by Persian gardens and each with a spout where water bursts out, under the effect of gravity, to create 'bubble fountains' in the centre, before passing round a statue of Flora, framed by an ivied arch, and out into the countryside. The rill is a wonderfully strong and satisfying feature, a masterpiece that delights and dominates the garden's design, whatever the weather and whatever the season.

On either side of the rill are flowerbeds devoted to water-loving plants. Here, too, are wisteria arches, backed by beech hedges to enclose the view and carry the eye down the watercourse towards the statue of Flora below. Lady Anne chose the plants not for their flowers, but for the distinctive shape and luxuriance of their leaves—gunneras, ligularias, hostas, lysichitons and *Aruncus dioicus*.





Above: The long, rectangular reservoir also serves as a reflecting pool. **Right:** The 'music' of water was achieved with V-shaped strips of copper

Tucked in behind one of hedges, Jellicoe created six square, spacious, box-edged beds, two for fruit and vegetables and four for flowers. He also supplemented the existing rhododendrons by creating a walk lined with camellias.

But, in addition to the rill, Jellicoe made much more use of the water. The reservoir was converted into a long rectangular Italianate canal—it might now be called a reflecting pool—with clumps of arum lilies in pots plunged along one of its sides. One end was furnished with low arches that call to mind William Kent's Praeneste at Rousham and, above it, clipped box provided the setting for busts of the Classical poets Ovid, Virgil and Lucretius. The canal is formal and reflective, whereas the rill is an essay in movement.

The present owners, John and Suzy Lewis, came to Shute in 1994. It's not easy to inherit a famous garden—it creates obligations—and the Lewises



One of a kind

Jellicoe called the spring 'water in action', as opposed to the 'contemplative water' of still lakes and ponds. Students of Jellicoe's oeuvre tell us that there is more to it than that because the Classical canal, enclosed by hedges, has a long arm that opens out to frame a romantic landscape, a pictorial composition with a foreground, a middle distance and a far distance. And the water runs down the hillside and out into the wider landscape, to which it acts as a link. Thus is achieved, they say, the unity of garden and landscape that is so special at Shute. Be that as it may, there is no gainsaying the intensely strong and individual character of the garden as a whole. No other garden resembles it.



Seasonal floral incidents occur in a series of box-hedged enclosures. Although it isn't easy to inherit a famous garden, the present owners have remained true to its spirit and enhanced the plantings with care and taste

admit that they bought the property mainly for the house. But the garden was also in luck, because Mr Lewis is an art collector (and was, for many years, chairman of the trustees of the Wallace Collection) of great sensibility and Mrs Lewis is the daughter of the incomparable Esther Merton, whose Jekyll-style garden at Burghfield in Berkshire was immensely celebrated in the 1970s and 1980s.

Jellicoe continued to advise on the garden at Shute and much of the Trees' work remains unchanged, but there have also been alterations that are undoubted improvements. Best of all is the new entrance drive, which enables visitors to arrive in front of the most lovely part of the rambling house—the classical early-Georgian façade—as first seen, framed by sumptuous yew hedges. The gravelled courtyard is set off by white-flowering plants, include the Noisette rose Madame

‘The rill delights and dominates, whatever the weather and whatever the season’

Alfred Carrière, which came as a rooted cutting from Mrs Merton.

The drive looks down across a series of tumbling weirs, added to feed new pools, ponds and lakes where black swans nest. This new approach helps to put the house more firmly in its park-like setting and links it to the more distant landscape—the valley below and the hills beyond—as the Jellicoe scholars foresaw (see box, facing page).

Within the garden itself, Mrs Lewis has refined the colour plantings,

added a white border, extended the camellia walk towards the spring and created a splendid new bog garden. The statues, sculptures and installations brought by the Lewises are of the highest quality—varied in design, but beautifully chosen with an eye for position and appropriateness.

Outstanding is a cast of a Roman bench made by Ken Bolan of Talisman, placed above the Classical canal. Reg Budd, an artist in woodwork from nearby Tarrant Gunville, made two outsize Gothic-style seats to command the view down the rill. They brood over the water garden from its topmost point, rustic thrones for the King and Queen of a pack of playing cards.

Gardens change hands and many are lost, but we can all be thankful that, since the present owners moved here, Shute has been conserved, developed and improved. 🐾