

Private Gardens of London— A Victorian Garden

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Let me have something pretty to look at, and cheerful to walk in; let the outdoor apartment of my mansion, which we call "the garden", be always tasty, gay, and well furnished with seats and leafy alcoves, and ladies, -with fountains to serve as lustres, and their basins as mirrors, -with sun-dials instead of timepieces, -smooth carpet of verdant turf softer and more elastic than a Persian rug, and everywhere that you can contrive to place them, well-chosen combinations of the brightest colours.'

So says an imaginary employer to his gardener in E. S. Delamer's *The Flower Garden*, published in 1859. Whichever Victorian gardener it was who laid out the garden of this villa in Barnsbury Square might—within the limitations imposed by a modest plot—have been following his instructions to the letter. A seat is set under a leafy alcove; a patch of soft lawn is surrounded by undulating herbaceous borders; serpentine paths meander round an island bed and under a rose arch; and a pretty fountain spills into a lily pond. Moreover one corner shelters a little gazebo with hints of chinoiserie; beyond the lily pond stands a little rustic greenhouse; and there is even a tiny rock-work grotto, romantically shrouded in ivy. All the elements required of a successful Victorian gar-

den are to be found here; in fact, it lacks only a few crinolines and parasols, and perhaps the tap of croquet mallets.

Yet for years this garden lay untended; the present owner's grandmother bought the house in 1924, and as she grew older the garden fell into neglect. It was in 1964 that Mr and Mrs Gardner set about restoring it to its Victorian glory, a labour of love that was to last many years, and which Mrs Gardner was able to bring to fruition before she died early in 1989.

Preserved under the soil of Barnsbury lie the physical remains of millennia of London's history. Popular belief has it that Barnsbury Square was the site of a Roman camp during the revolt led by Boudicca, and even that this was the site of the British queen's last stand. Later tragedy and devastation are commemorated in a corner of the square, where there lies a plague pit, the mass burial place of countless plague victims who perished in the stifling summer of 1665, when London lost over a third of its population. By then a moated manor house stood on the site of Barnsbury Square, and the rural open spaces around had become a place of popular resort for city dwellers on holidays and for open-air political and religious gatherings. A spring called the White Conduit watered the fields, where dairy farms and market

gardens flourished. By the end of the 18th century two notable botanic gardens were established here, one, in Liverpool Road, belonging to Jacob Harvey, and the other to Dr William Pitcairn, President of the Royal College of Physicians.

From the 1820's, however, rural Barnsbury succumbed to the great building boom of the nineteenth century, and its fields were dug for clay to make the bricks for new houses (often the clay was dug on site, the resulting hole becoming the basement of the house subsequently built with the bricks made from it). Thomas Cubitt, later to become famous for his speculations in Bloomsbury and Belgravia, was the builder here, a 'liberal benefactor ... of unassuming demeanour ... who bore his great prosperity with becoming modesty.' He laid out a rather loose and very attractive composition of stucco streets, crescents and open-cornered squares, of which Barnsbury Square is one of the prettiest parts.

It is possible that the White Conduit still flows through the square, though underground now, for there is certainly a stream running under the Gardners' garden: one of the supports of the arbour stands permanently in water, which bubbles up if ever the pole is moved. Water is a feature here, as it was of every self-respecting Victorian garden. Water, and the control of it with the new engineering skills then developing, became a mania. When Tsar Nicholas visited Britain in 1844, for instance, the Duke of Devonshire decided to mark the occasion by erecting the Emperor Fountain on his great estate at Chatsworth. The engineer Joseph Paxton, designer and builder of the Crystal Palace, was engaged for the work, and was instructed to do all in his

power to outdo the spectacular *jeux d'eau* known to exist at the Russian imperial palaces. Paxton duly redirected a good number of the streams on the moors above the estates, constructed a couple of lakes and created sophisticated water systems in order to create the water pressure he required; using this, he was able to make the fountain spout to an astonishing 300 feet.

Such water schemes were the height of fashion, and were imitated on a humbler scale in the gardens of Victorian villas throughout the land. The fountain here is charming, made of mossy stone, it is supported by a small boy; its three jets spill down on to the leaves of iris and water lilies in the small rustic pond below, bathing with their spray the innumerable tiny frogs that bask on lily pads. Frogs are now much less plentiful than they used to be, for the ponds where they lay their spawn have steadily disappeared or become polluted. City ponds such as this are therefore a welcome haven. Here the languid hush of a hot summer's afternoon is punctuated by a chorus of throaty croaks; and in the evening the frogs provide quite a spectacle. At eight o'clock sharp, according to Mr Gardner, they form up and process as one to the lawn, where, as if on a given signal, they scatter into the herbaceous borders to forage for food. As their diet includes slugs, snails and greenfly, Mr Gardner regards them with a benevolent eye.

Beside the pond is one of the garden's most remarkable features, the rock-work grotto, planted with ferns and ivy, of a type which was all the rage in Victorian gardens. Such decorative fancies echoed the taste for chinoiserie and the rococo which had flourished in the late eighteenth century; but to Victorian gardeners, obsessed as they were

with doing things in the proper way in order to create the right impression, mere decorativeness was not enough. Controversy raged over the proper style to be adopted, and as usual contemporary writers adopted a didactic tone. 'The Chinese,' wrote C. McIntosh in *The Flower Garden*, Published in 1838, 'who are partial to imitations of the grander features of nature in miniature ... have rough shapeless stones thrown together in heaps to represent rocks.' Imitations of mountain scenery in suburban gardens tended to be absurd, however: 'It is by no means unusual, in our own suburban gardens, to see similar fanciful and very incongruous, heaps of stones ... executed in the worst taste.' There then followed a few simple tips, no doubt intended to be encouraging: 'A dark cave, penetrating into the thickest part of the erection, is not very difficult to construct, and, when encircled with ivy, and inhabited by a pair of horned owls, which may be easily procured, it will form an interesting object.' Horned owls are sadly lacking, but otherwise this modest 'ferny grot' would surely have received Mr McIntosh's tight-lipped approval. It shelters an ingenious tiny waterfall, which flows into a large pipe laid under the crazy paving around the pool, and thence into the pond itself. Pressure for the fountain is nowadays supplied by an electric pump hidden in the old coach house beside the house.

Set into the crazy paving beyond is an island bed held in by tufa rocks and planted with Hybrid tea roses: 'Crimson Glory', 'Peace', 'Blue Moon', 'Elizabeth Arden', and others so old their names have been lost. Beside the rose bed there stands a little glasshouse, another development of the Victorian era which owed much to the huge

success of Paxton's Crystal Palace. Before the industrial processes which made possible the construction of this enormous glass and iron structure had been developed, glass was generally of poor quality. It was estimated that the 'green glass' used for horticultural purposes reflected as much as three-quarters of the light that fell on it; furthermore it could only be manufactured in small panes and it was subject to duty, and therefore very costly. As Mrs Beeton remarked in *Beeton's Book of Garden Management*, published in the 1870s, 'Glass structures of even the smallest kind would, a very few years ago, have been considered a piece of great extravagance for any but the affluent.' After the Great Exhibition, restrictions on glass manufacture were lifted and processes improved, so that now a range of glass was available to suit most pockets. Suburban villas could have their own versions of the magnificent glasshouses of the great estates, designed and built by the army of firms which sprang up to meet the need. Others undoubtedly selected designs that were as grandiose as they could afford, but this one has a simple, cottage-garden charm.

In these glasshouses Victorian gardeners were able to cultivate the new plants now reaching Britain's shores from far-flung corners of the Empire, often transported in the miniature sealed greenhouses invented in 1829 by a London doctor, Dr Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward, and known as Wardian cases. Many of these plants were half-hardy annuals, and they gave rise to the new style of gardening called 'bedding out'. Herbaceous perennials were banished in favour of these novel introductions, which gave a superior demonstration of the gardener's skills, and which also,

planted *en masse*, yielded the concentrated blocks of colour so beloved of bedding-out schemes. Petunias, clarkias, salpiglossis, salvias, schizanthus, alstroemerias and eschscholzias, among others, quickly became firm favourites for elaborate designs, which became known as 'mosaiculture'. As in virtually every other aspect of Victorian gardening, however, feeling ran high, and the bedding-out craze bred its own reaction in the person of William Robinson, who in his major works, *The English Flower Garden* (1883) and *The Wild Gardener* (1870), set out his views with characteristic forthrightness: 'The genius of cretinism itself could hardly delight in anything more tasteless or ignoble than the absurd daubs of colour that every summer flare in the neighbourhood of nearly every country-house in Western Europe.' It was estimated that for any averagely ambitious scheme as many as 7000 plants would be needed.

Robinson insisted that his more informal style of gardening was better suited to small gardens, and his ideas became extremely influential. Followers of his New Landscape School were to include Gertrude Jekyll and Alfred Austin, who summed up their feelings when he wrote, 'I have seen one clambering rose, one lingering hollyhock glorify a cottage home, arrest one's step, and prolong one's meditations, more than all the terraces of Chatsworth.' Clearly this was the school of gardening which most influenced Mrs Gardener as she re-stocked the herbaceous borders - though the hollyhocks of which there used to be so many simply disappeared one year, and have proved impossible to re-establish. Quantities of camellias, peonies and geraniums are here, while *Rosa* 'Paul's

Himalayan Musk' grows through a tall *Cotoneaster lacteus* and a pink rambler scrambles up a crab apple tree.

A clematis arch under a laburnum tree, with a cherry beyond, marks the transition from the top half of the garden to the lawn and borders. Under the trees are *Rosa* 'Buff Beauty' and a *Syringa meyeri* 'Palibin', a dainty cousin of the ordinary lilacs with leaves the size of an old penny and minute mauve-pink flowers, and nearby is a bush wisteria which flowers at the same time as the laburnum, with breath taking results. Much consternation was caused in 1987, when after the night of the hurricane the Gardeners awoke to find a huge sycamore from next door sprawled across this part of the garden. Fortunately the damage did not turn out to be as serious as they feared: the tree had ripped a large bough off the cherry tree as it fell, but then had been supported by its own branches and so had not completely flattened everything underneath.

Halfway down one of the borders are a seat and white wrought-iron table, in the shade of an arbour of clematis, jasmine, ivy and rose 'Cerise Bouquet'. In the opposite corner of the garden stands the gazebo, the perfect spot from which to enjoy the view back to the house. This garden is a commemoration not only of an era in garden design, but also of the considerable time and care devoted to its restoration by Mrs Gardener, who might have had in mind some words of Gertrude Jekyll: 'The purpose of a garden is to give happiness and repose of mind, which is more often enjoyed in the contemplation of the homely border... than in any of those great gardens where the flowers lose their identity, and with it their hold of the human heart.'



Fig. 2. The pool and fountain are fed by a tiny waterfall which is sheltered by an ivy-shrouded grotto. The water is piped under the path, and pressure is provided by a pump hidden in the old coach house.