

The Victorian Kitchen Garden

PART TWO: CHILTON REVISITED

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Clever photography in *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* hides two secrets. The first is splendid: Chilton, the country estate used for the BBC's classic 1987 experiment, which recreated a traditional walled garden under the benevolent eye of retired head gardener Harry Dodson, actually boasts *two* walled gardens, one butting against the other. The second, well, let's park that one for now . . .

In many ways the story of the Chilton estate, near Hungerford, is a familiar one. Starting life as a sixteenth-century Wiltshire hunting lodge it enjoyed various owners and was remodelled twice, once by Sir John Soane. It even shifted county by edging a few feet east into Berkshire when the current Palladian-style mansion, designed by William Pilkington, was built in 1800. *The Gardener* magazine wasn't wild about the new house, describing it in 1834 as 'a cube in the modern manner with rather modest earthworks round it'. The gardener's house, on the other hand 'has a much finer aspect'.

No expense was spared in the double walled garden, with hot-houses, pineapple lights, cold frames and show-houses, all heated by a state-of-the art boiler, much admired by *The Gardener*. The Victorian age was not, however, a happy time for the house, constantly bought, sold and remodelled until one particularly free-spending owner died after a massive building spree, leaving large debts.

'My great granny was American,' says Sarah Scrope, current owner of Chilton. 'Her father was the American ambassador in the run-up to the First World War.' In 1908 the ambassador's daughter married John Ward, younger son of the Earl of Dudley. Chilton was her parents' wedding present. The couple also purchased an estate in Scotland, to which Harry Dodson would later send trays of beautifully-packed fruit and veg, and a house in Monte Carlo. 'He used to send white peaches – from here to Monte Carlo – can you believe it?'

Sir John Ward died in 1938. War was looming. Lady Ward handed over the estate to American soldiers, lived in London and worked for the war effort. Afterwards, back at Chilton, things would never quite be the same. She did, however, acquire a new head gardener.

‘Mr Dodson started here in 1947. He talked very fondly of my great granny,’ says Sarah. ‘He spoke of her walking through the shrubbery. She had a whistle; when Mr Dodson heard the whistle he knew that was the moment to go back to the walled garden . . .’

‘. . . and put his jacket on,’ adds Sarah’s husband, Adrian.

Chilton’s walled garden, however, reflected a general post-war decline across Britain’s country estates. Dodson was in charge of less than half the workforce the gardens had enjoyed in the 1930s. Mechanisation, cheap imports, fewer mouths to feed and the gradual breakdown of the rural way of life were taking their toll. Lady Ward died in the early 1960s and while Chilton avoided the fate of many a country house, razed to smithereens in that decade, the frosty wind of change was blowing and the rising price of oil wasn’t going to heat those greenhouses. To all this was added a family tragedy.

‘My granny sadly died in a car accident,’ says Sarah. ‘When she died the interest from the main house faded. My grandfather, who had been injured in the crash, didn’t have the big house parties or the other things that were much more part of life before then. His interest and pride in the walled garden never waned but gone were the days when it was affordable or justifiable to have a whacking great three-acre walled garden supplying two houses. Whenever he had a houseful we would all wander down there and Mr Dodson would give a lovely conducted tour, looking smart in his suit and tie.’

Harry Dodson was, by now, nearing retirement. ‘Sarah’s father gave him a lifetime tenancy of the walled gardens, the orchard, the potting sheds and the gardener’s cottage,’ says Adrian Scrope. ‘The understanding was that he continue to supply flowers, fruit and veg to the main house.’

Alone, Dodson worked as much of the garden as he could manage. The rest slowly mouldered into slumber. Wooden greenhouses rotted, iron work rusted, brickwork flaked.

‘The BBC really rather rescued it,’ remembers Sarah. ‘It was tremendously exciting; we were all absolutely cock-a-hoop. They smartened it up and gave it great purpose again.’

And now we come to that second secret hidden by those television cameras. The ‘purpose’ was real enough, but sadly the ‘smartening-up’ was superficial; ‘tidging up’, as Sarah describes it. Most of the series was filmed in Chilton’s smaller, west walled garden where there was still a full range of buildings. Beautifully ‘restored’ in the series they received, in reality, a lick of paint and a promise. ‘If you looked analytically at the footage you’d probably see quite a lot of it wasn’t stable,’ says Adrian. ‘Mr Dodson only worked in the greenhouse on non-windy days. It literally waved in the wind.’

However wobbly the stage set, the show was fantastic. ‘I remember this pineapple being grown,’ says Sarah. ‘It caused rejoicing along the valley. I have this charming picture of my grandfather holding it as if it was a new-born baby.’

The TV circus left Chilton in the early 1990s, by which point the garden – and its charming, modest ringmaster – were getting on.

‘Mr Dodson got older and older,’ says Adrian. ‘The series finished, he carried on supplying friends and family with vegetables. When we came here in 1997 with two very small children he wanted to supply us. I said to him, in all humility, ‘Mr Dodson, we’re not Colonel and Mrs Ward, you must send us a proper bill’. He looked at me with his beady eye and said ‘Yes I will’. I asked ‘How often are you going to send us a bill?’ He said ‘I am in the habit of sending them out quarterly’. I teased him and said ‘Oh, Mr Dodson, nobody does that any longer, you must send a bill at least once a month’. He just looked at me and said ‘I’ll let you know if I run short’. It was a sweet put-down, him at his most charming. He was an adorable man; though,’ Adrian adds wryly, ‘his driving got more and more erratic . . .’

‘Unbelievably beautiful boxes of fruit and veg would appear on a Friday,’ says Sarah, “along with houseplants, cyclamen, paperwhites, hyacinths. We would, very occasionally, get this laboriously handwritten bill for next to nothing. I don’t know what his basis of charging was.’

Even at this point, the Scropes, who had recently moved into the also-ailing main house, did not realise the true state into which the gardens had fallen. ‘We had other priorities at that point,’ admits Adrian.

Fiercely independent, Dodson never asked for help, despite the fact he could have used some. He retreated into the smaller, west garden, leaving the eastern side to wilderness. ‘It was difficult for us because he had a life tenancy and it was his area,’ remembers Adrian.

The family were able to tactfully help around the edges. ‘The yew hedging was twelve feet high; all the apple trees were leaning over,’ says Adrian. ‘One Christmas the estate team and I cleared the whole thing and reinstated the orchard.’

‘Mr Dodson was rather thrilled to see all those trees again,’ says Sarah. ‘The following spring the most amazing snowdrops came up; then daffs.’

‘He told me the mammoth growth that almost closed off the path was actually a nuttery, with filberts and hazels,’ adds Adrian. ‘He told me exactly what to do. We absolutely hammered them and they’ve come back beautifully. We coppice them, for bank restoration on the river.’

Harry Dodson died in 2005 at the age of eighty-five, ‘a sad end to an era.’ It was only then that the full condition of the garden became apparent. ‘The buildings were in a terrible state,’ says Adrian. ‘As Mr Dodson got older he wasn’t able to maintain them. I photographed them, as they were, so we’ve got a historical record.’

There was no saving them, though. Rotten to the core, their brickwork blown, they were not only beyond repair, but dangerous. The Scropes saved what they could, including twelve thousand bricks, later used for repairs, but had to look to the future.

Economics have ever been the lynchpin upon which a country estate works. It isn’t just there for show; it must pay its way. The challenge is to find that way, to make a nineteenth-century concept relevant in the twenty-first.

‘It was just after the crash,’ remembers Adrian, ‘a lot of people were leaving or being fired by the big companies and starting on

their own. We subconsciously tapped into people wanting little business units.’

They tackled first a small courtyard. Once a ‘model farm’, it would have showcased the best of the Victorian estate: the finest cow, the best pig, a well-groomed pony. ‘We brought it up to modern specifications, buried the services and restored the roofs.’ Hand-picked local businesses, from photographers to curtain makers now rent space in neat, beautifully-restored garden buildings. In 2013 Harry Dodson’s potting sheds began a similar transformation. Former mushroom houses, pot stores and tool rooms are blinking into modern daylight, though not without their nostalgic moments. ‘We found these big hampers with “Chilton” written on the side,’ says Adrian. ‘They used to go up on the early morning train to Belgrave Square two or three times a week. Unfortunately, by the time we took over you could literally stick your fingers through them.’

There are some pleasant surprises. One building that might reasonably have been expected to collapse is in excellent condition, having been recently restored. The apple store, star of autumn *VKG* episodes, is an extremely rare piece of horticultural history. Entirely thatched, roof and walls alike, it was lined with cork to keep it at a constant 40 °F. Slatted shelves preserved fruit for the dark months and beyond. Today they guard some of Harry Dodson’s prized tools and gadgets in the hope that one day a museum might be possible. Sarah and Adrian have donated all records pertaining to the history of the walled garden, including Harry Dodson’s papers and reports, to the Royal Horticultural Society, which are being conserved.

The big problem was the walled garden. On television, tidying-up and an imaginative cameraman had fooled us into thinking all would be happy ever after. In truth, the garden was fading even as the series was airing. For a while a tenant farmed it commercially as a market garden. What remained of the buildings, now mainly demolished, was ‘flapping plastic, bits of concrete and leaking water pipes’. Then even that came to an end.

‘Kind people would come along and say “I’ve had a brilliant idea for the walled gardens”,’ says Sarah. ‘They’d say “let’s have caravans

or Christmas trees or weddings” – but none of it stacked up.’

‘About five years ago a lovely lady knocked on the door. She said “I am a florist in Hungerford and we buy all our cut flowers from Holland. Is there any chance you’ve got anywhere we could grow them?”’ We almost threw the walled garden at her. She developed it and got about an acre under cultivation. We wanted to weep with joy because it was flowers; there was a horticultural purpose to it again.

Recently, ill health has prevented the florist from continuing. Happily, the gardener who looks after what Harry Dodson used to call ‘the pleasure grounds’ cannot bear to think of the walled garden once more returning to slumber and is continuing the project.

Chilton’s walled garden is slowly returning to life yet again. Espaliered apples and pears hang heavy with superb fruit. Neat rows of show-quality dahlias, sunflowers and other cutting varieties are as colourful as anything in the BBC’s follow up series *The Victorian Flower Garden*; a poly-tunnel provides a practical alternative to the acres of glass the site once boasted. A gigantic circular tank collects rainwater. A long, wrought-iron arched tunnel is cleared, ready for climbers. ‘The only remaining building is the fig house’, admits Adrian, a note of regret in his voice. ‘We’ve had to take all the glass out.’ The incumbent fig, released from the constraints of Harry’s pruning scissors, bursts joyfully through, relishing the soft Berkshire climate. Slowly, forays are being made into the part that remains uncultivated. Uncultivated, that is, not untidy – each neatly-mown section of grass patiently awaits its Cinderella transformation.

‘What’s wonderful is that there is a developing horticultural business here,’ says Adrian. ‘I very much doubt it’s ever going to earn the estate any money but it’s keeping the tradition going, it’s not costing us anything and it’s a pleasure to see.’

Now, here I have to make a confession. I didn’t get to see the famous west garden, revived for the television cameras, despite my being just yards away from it.

Mr Dodson’s bothy, often glimpsed in the series, was tumbling down around him. ‘He was of that generation that would never ask

for anything,' says Adrian. 'We didn't feel we had the right to go in because it was his for life. I went into the house one day, which I did very, very rarely, and he had a pair of pliers he was turning the kitchen tap on with.' The cottage was, after Harry's death, rebuilt and is now let to private tenants. 'We call it the Garden House and it has a one-acre walled garden,' says Sarah.

This, at last, then, is the walled garden of the television series, tantalisingly still-walled and beyond public gaze. 'It's tidy,' Sarah reassures me, 'the fruit trees are pinned against the wall and it's mostly grass.'

The fortunes of the original *Victorian Kitchen Garden* have waxed and waned, and now wax again. For Sarah Scrope especially, the series, its garden and, especially, its star hold a very personal claim on the heart. 'Everybody adored Mr Dodson,' she says. 'I must watch it again though I'd probably sob my way through it.'

'What chuffs us is that there are now lots of people here,' says Adrian. 'In the past, including farm workers and domestic staff, there were probably a hundred and fifty people on the estate. By the 1970s there were, maybe, twenty. We did a rough calculation and there are now about a hundred working within the boundaries.'

There are no plans to return the walled gardens at Leverton to their original, high-Victorian, high-maintenance glamour, but the gardens it inspired flourish the length of the country. My third and final article will look at the massive horticultural, historical – and touristic – legacy bequeathed by *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*.