The Victorian Kitchen Garden

PART THREE: HARRY'S LEGACY

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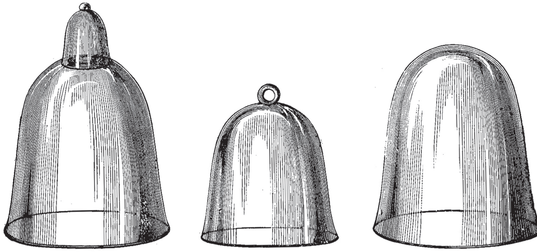

A quiet ceremony in June 2017 saw the ashes of the late Harry Dodson interred at the Blackmoor Estate, Hampshire. The event attracted little press coverage. Thirty years after *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* aired, the television series that had made Harry's name had become as obscure as the garden it celebrated. What had *not* been lost, however, was a modest mania the softly-spoken master-gardener and his tranquil revolution had begun way back in 1987; the multi-million-pound heritage gardening industry I believe *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* engendered.

The idea hadn't, of course, come out of a bubble. For some time 'lost gardens' had been slowly regenerating. Painshill Landscape Garden in Surrey, for example, with its extraordinary, overgrown temples, lakes and crystal grotto, had enjoyed its first new gasps of fresh air in the late 1960s. Deep in the Cotswolds the rococo garden at Painswick was emerging from the dust of its own rubble, while a joyful Victorian jumble of architectural salvage, once the eccentric Plantation Garden, was beginning to awake from slumber in a disused Norwich quarry. These delightful horticultural treasure troves, however, were all 'big gardens' – grand, exotic, formal, pleasure-grounds for the leisured classes. No one was interested in the humble kitchen garden. Supermarkets supplied Britain's ever-growing cities with picture-perfect veg flown in from around the

world; who wanted to be reminded of toil? The real thing – and real hunger – were just too recent.

Many of the people now visiting country estates for pleasure however would have been in service themselves just a couple of generations before. They had seen glimpses of their ancestors' world in the long-running and extremely popular *Upstairs Downstairs* drama in the 1970s. They were ready for the real thing but this was long before reality television and experimental archaeologists testing out History for the camera. Ground-breaking series such as *The 1900 House* were still ten years away.

A leap of imagination on the part of associate producer Jennifer Davies challenged received prejudice about 'downstairs'. The gods were on her side. Luck arranged for her to meet old-school enthusiasts like horticulturist and historian Peter Thoday. Fate hooked her up with a BBC commissioning team prepared to take a punt. Serendipity ensured *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* hit screens at the perfect moment.

The series had an instant effect – and not just on gardeners. I was in the throes of callow youth myself; history-agnostic, gardening-atheist. Over thirteen weeks *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* changed my life. In a grubby world of UB40s, student demos, strikes and Trident, this was something different. Once a week my mouth watered to taste a cardoon, my fingers itched to pull a hot-bed carrot. My soul ached for the long-gone sepia days being recreated as a lost, walled paradise emerged from the weeds of neglect.

I wasn't alone. Ratings hit the roof. A second series, *The Victorian Kitchen*, was commissioned, swiftly followed by *The Victorian Flower Garden* and *The Wartime Kitchen and Garden*. A gentle earthquake had rumbled. It was time for a mild tsunami.

Across the nation estates began to look afresh at the scrofulous, tumbledown wildernesses within their own walled gardens. Could that slightly embarrassing jungle behind four brick walls and unpretty outbuildings actually have a new use – as a visitor attraction? It's hardly surprising vegetable plots had been left to moulder; repairs on two- and three-hundred year-old country piles were expensive enough without factoring in workaday areas no longer needed.

Slowly, tentatively, however, kitchen gardens began to emerge from the undergrowth.

Husband and wife team Jim Buckland and Sarah Wain have been Gardens Manager and Gardens Supervisor at West Dean Gardens in West Sussex for the past twenty-seven years. They had just returned from living in Australia when *VKG* first aired.

'We loved it,' says Jim Buckland. 'We always quote the series as being our seminal influence. People don't understand how important the series was in putting the kitchen garden back on the map. We thought '*that*'s what we want to do'. When we came to West Dean *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* was writ large.'

West Dean's walled garden was part garden centre, part derelict but Buckland and Wain wanted to take it back to its former glory 'as far as resources would allow'. *VKG* presenter Peter Thoday was a useful ally in their quest to persuade the trustees that revitalisation ('I don't like the word restoration') was a good idea.

The project was all encompassing and, by Buckland's own admission 'became *homage* to Harry Dodson'. Visitors flocked to see the new-style attraction that showed how kitchen gardens would have worked. 'People used to come round saying "my dad worked in a place like this",' he says.

At this point it's important to mention one other serious influence on 1980s gardening – the 'other' major reason why so many gardens burst into new life in the latter part of the decade.

The Great Storm of 1987 devastated a great swathe of countryside across southern England. Ancient trees were uprooted; great buildings razed. Rickety glasshouses didn't stand a chance. Very few estates were untouched, including the Chilton Estate, where *The Victorian Flower Garden* was about to shoot. A making-the-best-of-things moment in one episode sees Harry Dodson using fallen branches to support ground clematis but bigger trees had fallen there and some gardens had been ruined.

It was a time for reassessment. If gardens had to be re-built anyway, why not work with this reawakened public imagination?

Perhaps the biggest 'winner' from the perfect storm of televisual gold and – well, a real storm – was the now world-famous Lost Gar-

dens of Heligan in Cornwall. Tim Smit didn't see *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* first time round but watched it avidly when he and John Willis, a descendent of Heligan's early twentieth-century owners, discovered a strange, ruined garden after the storm had done its worst. Hard-core research into the garden's history was the result of many hours poring over original documents and books. *VKG* had a less tangible, but just as powerful effect. 'I think the mood of the programme influenced us,' he says. 'It inspired us to embark on a search for as wide a range of historic heritage variety vegetables as possible.'

An archaeologist by training, Smit was up to speed with excavation technique, but contacted *The Victorian Kitchen Garden's* co-presenter Peter Thoday for help with garden and vegetable history elements. 'Peter's extensive knowledge of garden structures and boilers was invaluable,' he says, 'as was his detailed knowledge of the type of fruit we could grow in Cornwall.' *VKG* may have even helped bring Heligan to our TV screens. 'I'm sure Channel 4 looked favourably on us because of the success of *Victorian Kitchen Garden* as it had created a track record and appetite,' says Smit.

The trail had been blazed. Now came the big-hitters.

'Walled kitchen gardens were the Cinderellas of the National Trust garden world,' admits Kate Nicoll, the Trust's Gardens Training Specialist. 'Being easy to lock up and shield from the public gaze, they became neglected storage areas, tree nurseries, caravan parks, Christmas-tree plantations and of course, car parks. A combination of public interest – created by the likes of Heligan and *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* series – and increased volunteer numbers meant such re-creations were possible.'

One of the first kitchen gardens to be renovated by the Trust, in 1995, Beningbrough Hall's one and a half-acre walled garden is home to fruit, vegetables, salads, herbs and once-common crops like liquorice, grapes and figs. Tatton Park, in Cheshire, goes one step further, growing only varieties available up to 1900. The walled garden at Knightshayes Court in Devon boasts a hundred and two varieties of heritage tomatoes alone. 'They appeal to children and adults alike with their neat rows of vegetables, colourful flower

borders and well-trained fruit trees,' continues Nicoll. 'Each season brings change: the magic of forced rhubarb and seakale, emerging seedlings and peach blossom on the warmest walls – bee hives adding to the industry and purposefulness of the awakening year.'

Renovations are still coming thick and fast: Blickling Hall in Norfolk is the latest addition to the potager family; Ickworth in Suffolk is sketching out a master plan and even the 'plantsman's garden' at Nymans is 'just beginning to peer over the derelict garden wall'.

Food grown on NT estates for visitors' admiration is served in NT restaurants and sold at NT farm shops. 'A garden that fails to harvest its produce risks the wrath of regular visitors,' says Nicoll. Traditional crafts, skills and techniques are taught in extensive programmes of adult workshops and fun-days for children. 'Meet the Gardener' might mean an actor's interpretation of the estate's Victorian Head Gardener or an in-depth talk from the current incumbent. Packets of heritage seeds are pressed into young hands in Plot-to-Plate events, encouraging everyone to 'plant heirloom'.

The concept of heirloom vegetables was unheard of in the 1980s. Viewers salivated with Peter Thoday and Harry Dodson over scores of pea varieties in Victorian brochures, neatly presented in 'divisions' according to type and cropping time, then sighed at the paltry nine varieties offered in 1980s catalogues. Jennifer Davies and Harry Dodson began a long, pre-Google search for 'exotics' including scorzonera, fennel, endive, chicory, sea kale and cardoons, all of which fetch up today in the most casual online search.

The Henry Doubleday Research Association (now Garden Organic), private collections and a very few specialists scraped together seeds of Martock beans (dating back to the twelfth century) Carlin peas (Tudor), Soldier beans, Ragged Jack (kale), Bloody Warrior (lettuce, said to be stained from the Civil War), Hero of Lockinge (melon), Edzell Blue potatoes ('they used to polish up beautiful', remembers Harry), Painted Lady runner beans and Golden Sunrise tomatoes. Peter Thoday's contribution to the experiment was an elderly packet of Ne Plus Ultra pea seeds left by his father.

The Heritage Seed Library (part of Garden Organic), enthusiasts, allotment societies and specialist growers kept – and keep – the old

varieties alive. 'These extraordinary people have preserved our heritage in the face of disinterest from big commercial growers,' says Tim Smit.

Those commercial growers have taken note. Now heritage gardening is fashionable hundreds of once-lost varieties are now easily available. Indeed, some heirloom veg have almost become old hat. French Breakfast radishes, trumpeted by Harry in the series as highly unusual, are so ubiquitous these days some people avoid them – and so turns Fortune's wheel.

It's not just the gardens and plants that have regenerated. In the 1980s every Victorian implement was original, sourced by telephone, letter or word of mouth. A thriving modern market in antique tools (formerly only statuary, urns and garden arches attracted much interest) is, today, supplemented by an entire industry supplying new, heritage-inspired garden tools. Cucumber straighteners, asparagus knives, grape-thinning scissors and rhubarb forcers are manufactured once more, alongside an entire meadow's worth of floral, pastel and polka-dot 'vintage' gardening kit. Victorian-style bell cloches are so common they come in plastic packs of three.

Would all this have happened without *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*? Probably. Nostalgia is cyclical – but everything needs a catalyst and, in my opinion, *VKG* was the spark that caused the revolution. Its delight in quiet, honest toil – however thick the rose-tinted specs – nudged a sweet spot in us all, a yearning for something pure and wholesome, honest and down to earth. It never existed, of course, but that's not what nostalgia is about.

Much happened in the twentieth century. Two world wars depleted both morale and staff; industrialisation sent workers into the city. Make Do and Mend brought artificial nitrates Victorian gardeners would have given their eye teeth for, only for a new generation, years later, to realise the downsides chemical assistance brings.

Then there is the trivia. 'You were supposed to whistle while you were picking in the strawberry bed so the boss knew you weren't eating them,' announces Harry, sinking his teeth into a perfect, red-ripe Royal Sovereign, (now available as runners from pretty much

any catalogue.) Jennifer Davies, making the series today, would simply not have access to that kind of minor but fascinating insight. The 1980s was posterity's last chance and I, for one, am glad it was taken.

Even the haunting, clarinet title music remains an inspiration. 'I used to whistle it when we first came here,' says Jim Buckland, 'asking myself "will we ever do this?" Even now, when I'm a bit fed up, I have a little whistle and it cheers me up.'

We only appreciate the old ways now because we don't have to follow them. When I moved into my Victorian terraced house one of the first things I did was reinstate the original fireplaces – but I didn't get rid of the central heating the previous owners had proudly installed in the 1970s. *I* enjoy the pleasure of an occasional fire. *They* were just glad to see the back of humping coal into the house every morning. Similarly I don't rely, every day of the year, on whatever I can harvest from my allotment. If I run out of something I nip to the shops. The romantic life portrayed in *The Victorian Kitchen Garden* was punishingly hard for the people who actually lived it. We hark back to Victorian splendour with sepia-sentimentality, but in these dark twenty-first-century days, is it such a bad thing to dream a little from time to time?

I leave the last word to Harry himself, looking back at the experiment in 1990. 'Sentimentality, nonsense, call it what you like, it's a joy,' he says to camera, pausing, then adding wistfully, 'and a certain amount of sadness.'

Illustrations of bell-glasses (cloches) on page 51
from *Cassell's Popular Gardening*, 1893.

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Concluded