

When Ursula Cholmeley started to tackle the 'lost' gardens 11 years ago, the buildings had trees growing out of them and the site was covered with undergrowth. Since then she has developed a particular passion for meadows, and an expert knowledge of sweet peas and annuals which fill this area, the 'Pickery' (cut-flower garden).

# Lost and found

For decades, historic Easton Walled Gardens near Grantham in Lincolnshire lay derelict and all but forgotten. Then, late in 2001, the fortunes of the site changed, thanks to the enthusiasm of its owner-gardener >>

Author: Bunny Guinness, landscape architect and regular panellist on BBC Radio 4 *Gardeners' Question Time*. Photography: Neil Hepworth

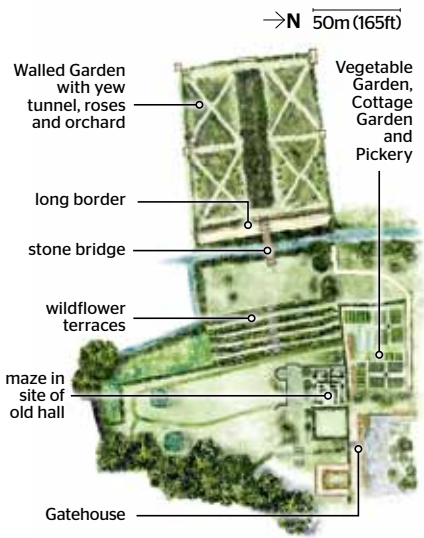


Gardens that live on, after the house around which they developed has been lost, often have an air of sadness and faded glory about them simply as a result of being incomplete. Not so Easton Walled Gardens near Grantham in Lincolnshire. True, the mansion, which stood atop lawned terraces above gardens dating back to at least 1592, is long gone (see box, below), but the gardens that remain feel lived-in, dynamic, relaxed and, importantly, much enjoyed. The whole ethos today is the antithesis of the usual grand garden, from its 'keep on the grass' policy to pumpkin-rolling competitions at half term. And there is plenty to see. The garden straddles a shallow valley with the River Witham at the bottom; the site of the house is on one side, the main old Walled Garden on the other. On entering the garden, past the striking old Gatehouse and stable block, you can climb a wooden viewing platform to gain a bird's-eye view over the whole extraordinary site. Remnants of another era, including the elaborate bridge over the river, the old walls and terraces, mingle with more recent features such as the Pickery (picking garden for cut flowers) and Rose Garden, all set within fine views out to the surrounding countryside.

**Driving force**  
The atmosphere is generated by Ursula, owner-gardener and wife of Sir Frederick Cholmeley, in whose family the estate has been for more than 400 years. Although she completed the RHS General Certificate course in 1998, the year her husband inherited the estate, at that time Ursula had no thought to rescue the garden. But three years later, on turning 30, she decided something must be done. Since then a particular passion for meadows has blossomed, as has her keen knowledge of sweet peas and annuals that now fill the Pickery. Reviving historic landscapes of this type can consume vast sums of money, but by slowly reclaiming it and carrying out structural work such as repairing the old walls during off seasons, and by concentrating on annuals, meadow flowers

## Easton Walled Gardens

Easton, Grantham, Lincolnshire  
NG33 5AP; 01476 530063;  
www.eastonwalledgardens.co.uk  
**Size:** around 4.9ha (12 acres).  
**Soil type:** stony alkaline soil.  
**Summary:** garden with historic elements amid relaxed planting and smaller themed gardens.  
**Age:** dates from at least 1592; significant additions in 1800s; ongoing reworking since 2001.  
**Key seasons of interest:** Feb for snowdrops; Jun–Oct for Pickery and perennial plantings.  
**Open:** 4 Mar–28 Oct, Weds–Fri, Sun and Bank Hols, 11am–4pm; Suns only in Nov. Feb openings for snowdrop displays.  
❖ Sweet Pea Week 1–8 July (see website for details).



NICOLE HEDDARPOUR

and vegetables, Ursula and her team of four gardeners has been able to make a big impact in a short period of time. One of the first and best established areas the visitor sees is the Pickery, filled with annuals, roses (50 cultivars) and, notably, sweet peas. Annuals were the ideal choice partly because they are grown in ground that was filled with weed seed after years of neglect, which otherwise would have created ongoing maintenance problems with more permanent planting. Annuals also have fairly immediate impact. The eclectic nature of the garden today gives it wide appeal; a mix of cornflowers and *Ammi majus*, a cow parsley-like annual, is a favourite. Also popular are *Gilia tricolor* (bird's eye) with lilac and violet upward-facing flowers and *Nemophila menziesii* 'Penny Black', its dark purple blooms edged in white. The Easton



Ursula Cholmeley (above) has a particular interest in sweet peas (*Lathyrus odoratus*) and many selections can be seen growing in summer, forming impressive displays in the Pickery, including:



❶ *Lathyrus odoratus* 'Mollie Rilstone', a strongly scented Spencer selection with large, cream buds edged in pale pink.  
❷ *L. odoratus* 'Marbled Purple' (now usually sold as 'The Major'), an old Grandiflora with



wonderfully scented flowers of mauve splashed richly with deeper purple.  
❸ *L. odoratus* 'Promise', a fine, scented modern Spencer sweet pea with large, well-shaped, two-tone flowers.



gardeners collect seed from as many annuals as possible; some kinds stay true and so can be grown from collected seed from year to year – others they have to buy in.

**Scented sweet peas**  
They grow more than 50 sweet pea cultivars in the gardens; about 20 Spencer sweet peas and 10 Grandifloras are reliable regulars, along with several new ones they trial each year. The Spencers are twice the work of the Grandifloras, needing more pinching and careful training and provide less scent, but have larger, showier flowers. The sweet pea seed (often saved from the previous season) is sown in root trainers in two batches; one in October/November, the other in March, just as they are planting out the autumn-sown ones. They train the

Easton Walled Gardens today (below) has many remnants of the 19th-century layout, including an old stone bridge over the River Witham. To the right are the original terraces, now planted with wild flowers, while to the left, behind a recent, richly planted long border, is the main Walled Garden and huge, gnarled yew tunnel.

Grandifloras up circles of pig netting (1.2m/4ft high, 50cm/20in wide) and don't pinch them out; they let the plants just scramble up and explode over the top. The Spencers, however, climb up a permanent timber and wire framework and are pinched out until they reach the top of the wires. The team collects sweet pea seed as it ripens, but at the end of the season they place pods in brown paper bags to hang for a week or two in a glasshouse to make sure they dry thoroughly, before storing the seed in sealed plastic containers in drawers, to guard from hungry mice. The Vegetable and Cottage Gardens have also been developed by Ursula. The Cottage Garden is burgeoning with a wide mix of herbaceous perennials, bulbs, roses and honeysuckles all spilling from a confined space beside an old outbuilding and adjacent to glasshouses full of >>

## House and garden

The Easton estate has been in the Cholmeley family since 1592. House and gardens were altered in the 19th century (below) when terraces, yew walkways and towers were added; photographs in 1901 show a productive walled garden and the area by the river planted with bedding. After requisition in the Second World War, Easton Hall suffered heavily and the house was finally demolished in 1951. The Gatehouse only survived because the bulldozer broke down. The gardens were soon abandoned; when Ursula and her mother began clearing the undergrowth-covered site by hand in 2001, the old walls and terraces were crumbling.



WITH THANKS TO THE CHOLMELEY ESTATE







vegetables that respond well to extra summer heat. Next door the Vegetable Garden features raised beds made from green oak sleepers. These provide a mass of produce including asparagus, broad beans and lettuce which are used to supply the tearoom.

### Crossing the river

Across a fine old stone bridge over the River Witham lies the main Walled Garden. Here you can admire deep mixed borders on one side and the view up to the dramatic terraces, once surmounted by Easton Hall, on the other. These terraces have their steep banks clothed with wild flowers. They are formed, Ursula and her garden team discovered (while pulling out the roots of the colonising trees with a 24-ton excavator), from stony brash, and the

**An increasing range of snowdrops carpet banks by the River Witham (above) early in the year, extending Easton Walled Garden's season of interest.**

resulting poor substrate is the ideal place for many wild flowers. These have been established from plug plants, together with seeding in balding areas.

The wildflower terraces are at their most beautiful in early summer and are constantly evolving under Ursula's close attention. They are effective partly because they appear to flow into the surrounding valley which is a fabulous 'natural' landscape. The 'wild' planting of the terraces also contrasts perfectly with the adjacent, fine architectural stonework of the steps and bridge.

The old sloping walled kitchen garden, complete with its slightly eccentric stone towers set into the old walls, is bisected by what would once have been a tightly clipped avenue of yew. This, over the decades of neglect, became



a vastly overgrown, rather sinister dark tunnel of wonderfully spooky gnarled old trees. On either side of this impressive feature, the informally styled Rose Garden fills the lower part of the slopes with various selections of David Austin's English roses planted amid long grass, together with a collection of unusual lilacs (*Syringa*) supplied by Suffolk-based Colin Chapman, holder of a National Plant Collection of lilacs. These, once mature, will spread the season of interest, following from snowdrops and other early bulbs, into summer. A new orchard has also been planted within the Walled Garden above the roses. Local selections were chosen, and include various old cultivars of apple, such as 'Barnack Beauty', 'Lord Burghley' and 'Allington Pippin'.

### Extended interest

As Ursula continues to develop the site, it is apparent these are becoming gardens with interest for many months. In February the valley is carpeted with 3,000sq m (¾ acre) of snowdrops (*Galanthus*), aconites (*Eranthis*), hellebores (*Helleborus*) and selections of winter- and early spring-flowering *Iris reticulata*. In the shady Spring Garden, aconites have spread naturally but are helped on their way by the collection of seed when just ripe and distributing them to new areas, although they are reluctant to go beyond the edge of the trees' canopies.

The snowdrops make a tremendous display and include both single and double-flowered selections – most have been inherited, slowly increasing over the years but the collection is now gradually being extended with choice named cultivars. Most excitingly, Ursula and her team have recently discovered a new snowdrop with yellow markings on it, which is tentatively to be named *Galanthus* 'Easton Promise'.

Not far from the Spring Garden is the site's latest development, a new feature to be called the White Space Garden. It is a homage to architect and owner of the Garden of Cosmic Speculation in Dumfries and Galloway, Charles Jencks, but is

not 'aggressively modern'. It is yet to be completed but includes a 'gazing pool' and will have white 'sparkly' planting. It joins another fairly recent addition, a turf maze in the shape of a wheat sheaf (taken from the Cholmeley family crest), situated atop the terraces within the footprint of the original hall.

Easton Walled Gardens have a definite energy about them. Although they were forgotten and neglected in the past, Ursula is making up for lost time and is creating a series of far more relevant gardens in the beautiful remains that her family inherited. ●

**At Easton Walled Gardens, formal features are softened by relaxed planting, such as in the Cottage Garden (above left), wild flowers on slopes of the old terraces (above right) or the summer planting in the long border (below).**

**More from the RHS** Easton Walled Gardens is an RHS Partner Garden offering free access to members during April and May; see *RHS Members' Handbook 2012*, p94.



**Snowdrops and aconites in spring (above left). The Pickery and Gatehouse in summer (above middle). Ursula on the terraces in autumn (above right).**

