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Hengrave Hall, Suffolk

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AOL Keyword: Country Life

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Periodicals postage is paid at Avenel, NJ, and additional mailing offices. Send USA address changes to COUNTRY LIFE, Mercury International, 365 Blair Road, Avenel, NJ 07001.

BACK NUMBERS Subject to availability, issues published from January 2000 are £6 a copy (£8 in the EU, £10 overseas): 020-8503 0588; fax: 020-8519 3695.

Annual subscription rates (51 issues, prices include postage and packing): UK £160; Europe €330; USA \$400 (direct entry) or \$450 (economy mail); North America \$450; Rest of World £315.

If you have difficulty in obtaining COUNTRY LIFE from your newsagent, please contact us on: 020-7633 3333

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INDEX: Half-Yearly indices, listing all articles and authors, are available at £35 each, and the Cumulative Index, listing all articles on country houses and gardens since 1897, at £40 each (including postage and packing) from PAULA FAHEY, COUNTRY LIFE Picture Library, King's Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London SE1 9LS. Cheques should be made payable to IPC Media Ltd. If two Half-Yearly indices from a single year, and the Cumulative Index, are required, the total price will be £80.

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PAINTERLY SCENES IN SUFFOLK

The moated grounds of Bedfield Hall
inspire its artistic owners, finds
LESLIE GEDDES-BROWN



HE delightful gardens which surround 16th-century Bedfield Hall in Suffolk are more than a pleasure (although they certainly are that); they are a working tool for the owner, artist Timothy Easton. In June and July, when the light is intense, Mr Easton works outside in the garden on at least four canvases at a time, changing one canvas for another throughout the day. 'Each picture can be added to over several sessions at the same time of day. By the end of 10 days, perhaps eight or nine paintings will be well established or finished.' Then he puts a metaphorical damp towel over his head and has a rest.

Over the past 24 years, Mr Easton and his wife, Christine, have turned two acres of land and water (the moat accounts for about half an acre and the area within it an acre) from a derelict farmyard of corrugated iron and nettles into a garden which, unusually, combines strong, carefully-designed bones with extraordinarily diverse and colourful plantings. The moat, with its own island, is bridged in five places, including the wide drive entrance, so that you can walk around the whole site, moving from the platform within the moat to the wild nuttery and wood and an area where geese are kept (Fig 6).

The visitor is led along paths of crushed granite over the bridges of varied design. One is called the Nanki Poo Bridge for its Chinese look, and another is set several steps higher than the land (Figs 2 and 3) so that the colourful planting along the moat banks can be appreciated from above. In another moatside walk, plain lawns lead through a series of cunningly topiaried yews (inspired by those at Levens Hall in Cumbria); they diminish in size, as does the width of the pathway, to create the perfect false perspective.

Not only is this clever, it is necessary, as this is the way the Eastons coped with an irregular rectangle which has, at its heart, a very formal vegetable, herb and flower garden enclosed within high yew hedges (Fig 4). By narrowing the irregular topiary walk, the formal garden can be regular in shape. It is here that Mr Easton does most of his painting. 'The great benefit of living and painting in one place is that this allows me to take advantage of unusual lighting or misty conditions at the start

1—(Previous pages) Contrasting colours at midsummer provide artistic inspiration with hemerocallis, double-flowered poppies, purple orache and foxgloves

or end of a day, when I can see something familiar with diffused vision. The old copper, filled with new plants each year, has become a favourite focal point in my paintings. I grow poppies, irises and other self-sown flowers among the herbs.'

An outside lavatory has been given a pyramid roof held up by square oak pillars, the whole surmounted with a gilded pineapple—a homage, perhaps, to a 17th-century owner who seems to have built a banqueting house to take in fine views of the garden during summer picnics.

However, the garden is designed with firm rules in mind. 'The structure we put in is informed by things we both liked about historic gardens,' says Mrs Easton. Among these are Great Dixter, Christopher Lloyd's pioneering planting being an inspiration, and Levens Hall for its topiary.

*'Signs to avert
witchcraft have also
been used to create designs
in the garden'*

Curiously, although one of the bridges is shrouded in wisteria and the planting throughout is reminiscent of Monet's garden paintings, neither has been to his famous garden at Giverny. The connection is either accidental or, more likely, that artist-gardeners think alike (Gertrude Jekyll also comes to mind). 'I do not choose a planting scheme with a view to what will make a good painting. I do take advantage of happy accidents and try to improve areas that may make a prospect more paintable the following year,' says Mr Easton.

'We bounce ideas off one another,' adds Mrs Easton. 'We started with a cottage garden, but a friend helped us develop our taste in plants. He was a plantsman for Notcutts nursery and is on an RHS panel. We go for a strong belt of colours and good contrast (Fig 1) and, we hope, continual planting. We also tried to emphasise that the site is very quiet, set in rural landscapes. We take vistas into other people's land.' So the adjoining part-Norman church is carefully mirrored in the still waters of the moat, which had, in the past, been deliberately widened at this point to flatter and aggrandise the hall. Currently, too, the moat is being brought further into the planting scheme: 'We are planting at water level so that people can see the gardens from our boat'. Mr Easton now rows around the garden to find further views to paint.

As you might expect from their work (Mr Easton is an architectural historian when he is not painting), the garden is full of historic references. The planting around the main door, Gothicised together with the windows in the 19th century, has been >



2—Room with a view: the 19th-century Gothic windows frame one of the five bridges over the moat, beyond box balls



3—Several varieties of water lilies grow in the moat and beyond them planting includes Astilbes and *Hemerocallis Golden Chimes*



4—The formal garden includes *Hosta Francee* and marguerites in pots and a striking *Onopordum acanthium* on the far left



5—Enclosed by beautifully trimmed box hedging, the kitchen garden crops are protected with glass bell jars

devised from a mid-19th-century painting of the front, and is full of grey-leaved plants to cope with the south sun and resulting drought. Elegant box balls and a gilded sundial lead to the door and are pure Easton. In winter, each is enclosed by a neat wooden rectangle, painted (like the bridges and other outdoor features), in grey umber. They create a micro-climate around each bush and protect it from dogs and cats. Other box plants are more daringly topiarised: 'We did it for our daughter's wedding in 2001, so they are cut in shapes such as wedding cakes and bells'. Plastered patterns on the ceilings of the hall and signs to avert witchcraft carved into its wooden beams have also been used to create designs in the garden.

Mrs Easton has strong views about how the garden should fit the character of both the surrounding countryside and the house, which is charming, but unpretentious. Equally, she hates anything non-functional to be brought in: 'The bell jars (Fig 5), owned by Timothy's grandmother, are functional, like the rhubarb pots. And, although I like to see figurative sculpture in gardens, I do not want them in *my* garden. They are fine at Stowe, but not here'. One compromise is a weirdly shaped stone like a horse's head, a survival of a Jurassic glacier which pushed hundreds of stones into the area—the 'stone garden' is a collection of other fossil-bearing stones found on the site.

Over the 24 years since they bought Bedfield and tackled the stinging nettles, the Eastons say their tastes have changed. 'The number of old-fashioned roses is getting fewer,' says Mr Easton. 'The colours we use now are much more advanced, and you do develop your taste for texture, shape and colour.' One favourite plant of his (not echoed by Mrs Easton) is bamboo. Dozens of

'Mrs Easton has strong views about how the garden should fit the character of the surrounding countryside and the house'



6—Goose steps: a gander makes his way home, seen beyond *Hereacleum lehmannianum*, a type of hogweed

different varieties are planted around the moat.

Timothy and Christine Easton are justly proud of what they have created from dereliction and enjoy showing visitors round. Bedfield's gardens are not only familiar because of many of us have been inspired by them—anyone who has visited one of Mr Easton's exhibitions will be already familiar with Bedfield, both in high summer and under snow.

Bedfield Hall is open under the Invitation to View scheme. For a brochure of the 39 houses and gardens in East Anglia which are open, and to book a visit to Bedfield, telephone 01284 827087 or see www.invitationtoview.co.uk

Timothy Easton's next exhibition is at the Chappel Galleries, Essex, from June 24 to July 16. He also holds exhibitions at Bedfield in late summer. Contact timothyeaston@fast-mail.net for details.

Photographs: Marianne Majerus.

GARDENING WITH GEES

There are some 23 geese resident at Bedfield Hall, and they regularly appear in Timothy Easton's paintings—he especially likes the white-on-white effect of geese in the snow. But, as well as using them as models in the garden, they are fine lawnmowers. They are also excellent guard geese because they are aggressive enough to frighten people, and, when visitors (or intruders) appear, geese make a lot of noise. For this reason, they were used in Roman times as burglar alarms. The damage they can do in a garden—trampling and general mess—is controlled by the moat and the fact they are penned in the orchard. The eggs, says Mrs Easton, make wonderful cakes and custard, but, as they are roughly three times the size of a hen's egg, you need to be pretty hungry to have a boiled goose egg and soldiers for breakfast. The geese are never eaten, being family friends. Bedfield is also home to a flock of hens that lay an egg every day, even in winter, so breakfast is catered for. A further advantage of a moat is that there are absolutely no rabbits inside it.