

The French connection

*Cadenham Manor,
Wiltshire*

Charles Quest-Ritson visits a rare masterpiece of the 1950s that was laid out in the formal French style and is thriving in the hands of its creator's granddaughter

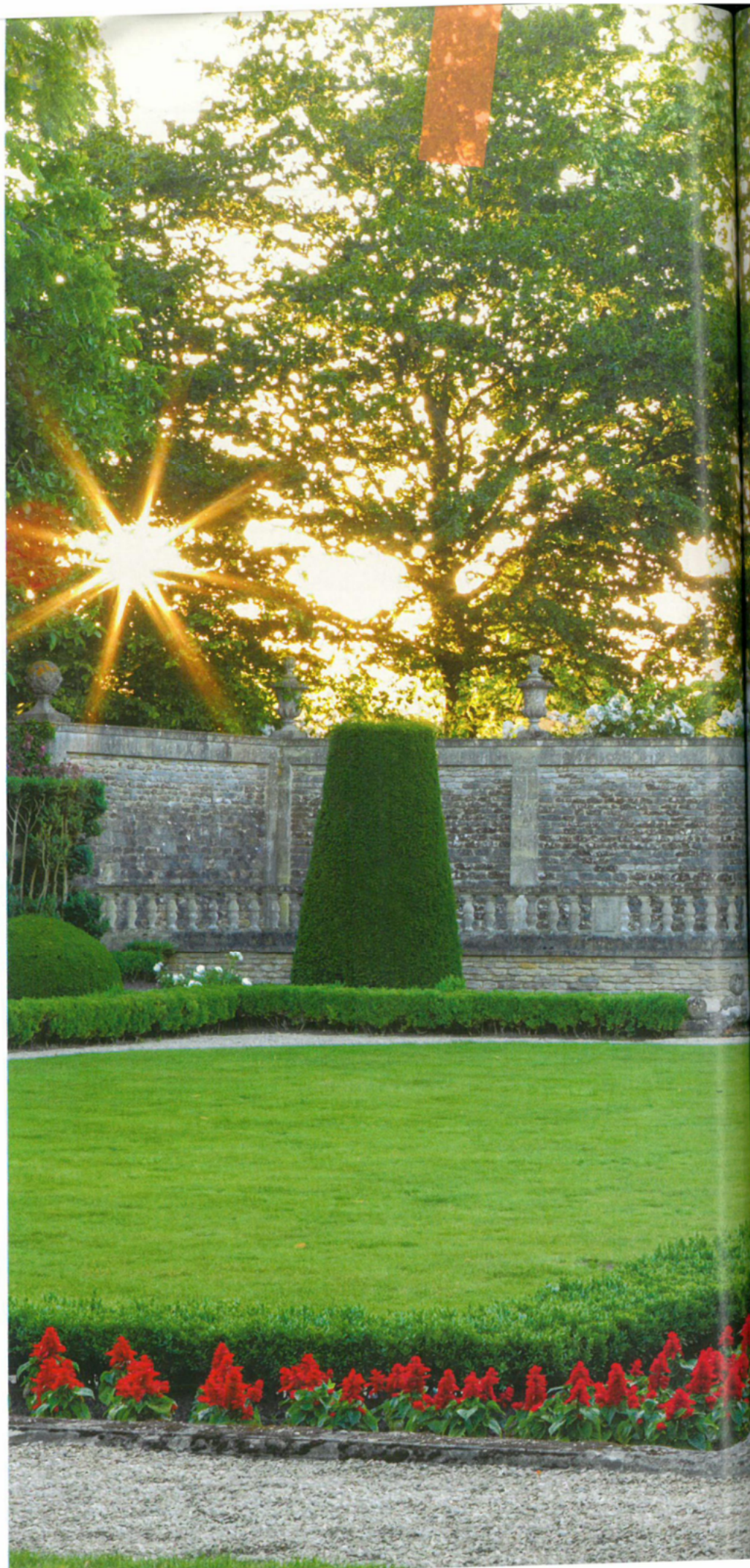
Photographs by
Britt Willoughby Dyer

ANYONE who inherits a substantial house or garden needs to work out how to manage it, not only from day to day, but also in the longer term. This was the challenge that faced Victoria Nye and her husband, Martin, in 2000, when she inherited Cadenham Manor in Wiltshire from her grandmother.

The garden at Cadenham is unique—an extensive masterpiece laid out in the 1950s in the French style and planted with the roses and herbaceous plants popularised by Graham Stuart Thomas. Almost no one in England was making big gardens in those difficult post-Second World War years when groundcover was all the rage—and certainly none designed in emulation of the gardens of the *châteaux* of the Loire.

Mrs Nye has known Cadenham all her life. She understood from the start that its formal French gardens were important and called for sympathetic conservation. She also realised that managing a 1950s garden required her to establish principles and methods adapted to 21st-century realities. She and her ➤

The formal garden of clipped box and yew, inspired by those of the *châteaux* of the Loire, is unique among English gardens of the 1950s. Red and yellow begonias have been replaced by scarlet salvias







Facing page: An armillary sphere forms the centrepiece of the inspired white garden, seen here from beneath a venerable grey-leaved pear *Pyrus salicifolia* Pendula. *Above:* Elizabeth Blackwell, who began to develop the gardens in 1953, had a good eye for elegant colour combinations, such as soft greys and whites, which her granddaughter, Victoria Nye, has increased and intensified

husband were young, keen and energetic, but aware that they had much to learn, not least about plants. They tackled this in two ways.

First, they asked expert friends for guidance. The unanimous advice was not to change the structure, but to play with the plantings. Next, they worked in the garden themselves, to understand its qualities and its needs. They were lucky to inherit part-time help from the late Paul Hill-Spedding, too, a great plantsman who had known the estate for years, and George Timmins, who still works there.

Cadenham was originally one of several Wiltshire estates owned by members of the Hungerford family. Sir George Hungerford built the present (Grade II-listed) house of local stone with traditional stone roof tiles in the 1690s, but it passed through many hands before it was bought in 1945 by Mrs Nye's grandmother Elizabeth Blackwell, a young war widow. She had been forced to find a new house when Oxhey, the 1,000-acre Blackwell estate in Hertfordshire, was compulsorily purchased to re-house bombed-out East Enders from London. She plumped for Cadenham and concentrated upon putting the house into good repair and running the farm that came with it.

At that point, there was no garden to speak of—only a farmhouse garden that the sales particulars described as 'simple and inexpensive to maintain'. Mrs Blackwell's formidable energies were initially directed

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towards breeding Aberdeen Angus and, later, champion Large White pigs.

Mrs Blackwell began to develop the garden in about 1953. She was gifted with extremely good taste and demanded high standards in everything she undertook. Restoring the house had brought her into contact with purveyors of architectural reclamation and, through them, she met an architectural draughtsman called Leslie Eden, who drew out her plans for the development of her garden; those plans were then handed to local builders to work upon. Mrs Blackwell had a clear vision of what she wanted and personally supervised each phase.

The land at Cadenham is completely flat, with heavy, alkaline, clay soil. Mrs Blackwell's first foray into gardening focused on the eastern side of the house, which had been its principal façade until the Wilts & Berks Canal was built some 70 yards away in the early 1800s. Here, Mrs Blackwell laid out an

extensive rectangular formal lawn, set in gravel and bounded by clipped box and yews.

The garden was enclosed by balustrades, lead vases, Doric pilasters with stone urns as finials and a shell-shaped basin. She filled the margins with scarlet and yellow tuberous begonias; by the 1990s, 2,500 tubers were planted out every year in May and lifted in October to spend the winter resting under glass. The geometry was immensely effective and immediately recalled the extravagant bedding schemes of grand French houses.

Along the south side of the house, Mrs Blackwell planned a formal box parterre and set her daughter the task of sketching out a suitable design. The simple broderies and clipped shapes that 16-year-old Jane, now in her eighties, drew out are set in gravel (originally in grass) and sunk below the level of the balustraded terrace. They remain a perfect expression of French late-Renaissance taste. Mrs Blackwell's work at Cadenham—the French designs and extensive layout—is the more remarkable for its development at a time when others were giving up on annual bedding and substituting groundcover.

Next to Jane's parterre was a stretch of the old moat that had surrounded the site of the original house. Mrs Blackwell tanked it, set it in stone and planted it with waterlilies, with wisteria draped along the balustrade. The focal point of this view across the sunken moat is a pool, with a fountain, more balustrading, ➤

lead urns and a statue of Venus bathing; together, they close the prospect perfectly.

Mrs Blackwell planted a line of pleached limes and a 7ft-high hedge of yew, nearly 100 yards long, to screen the canal and give structure to the Long Walk, which leads to a folly with Ionic columns reminiscent of a white Classical temple. The yew is cut with buttresses at regular intervals, which turns it into an architectural feature. On the other side of the Long Walk is a series of six small garden rooms enclosed by more yew hedging, some given to the cultivation of fruit, vegetables and cut flowers for the house and others planted ornamentally.

Mrs Blackwell continued to expand the garden and introduce new features until she died in 2000. The neo-Classical orangery with five bays topped by stone pineapples dates to the 1970s. It looks over a formal garden with a fountain at the centre, ribbons of Hidcote lavender growing in gravel and large plants of *Carpenteria californica* sheltering against its walls. Her last project was a Baroque pool with two charming lead *putti* trying their luck as infant fishermen, completed by her executors after she died.

Part of the disused Wilts & Berks Canal, built in the early 1800s, backed by the 7ft-high, 100ft-long buttressed yew hedge

This, then, is what the Nyes inherited—an expansive and unusual garden of considerable historic and artistic merit. They were determined that Cadenham should continue to be a family house—the large croquet lawn, with its inspiring views across water to a fountain, has been well used.

‘Grandly Gallic, it remains a French enclave in harmony with the English countryside’

They learned the plantings could be updated and enriched, if they respected the spirit of the place—in effect, doing as Mrs Blackwell would have done if she were alive. The principal exception to this rule is the kitchen garden, where the requirements of a young family demanded more land. The areas where fruit, vegetables and cut flowers are grown organically are one of the most beautiful and inspiring parts of the whole garden today.

Like all experienced gardeners, the Nyes have had to learn to solve unexpected problems. A mature garden will soon becomes

over-mature. Plants die, trees need limbing up, honey fungus strikes. The massed ranks of scarlet begonias remained an impressive feature of the formal plantings, until the entire stock was lost to a bad frost. After a re-think, they experimented with mixed annuals, but, last year, Mary Keen advised them to go back to bold colours with thousands of scarlet salvias (*Salvia splendens*). This proved a great success—the colour is an exact match for the old begonias and the planting will be repeated this year. Recalling its origins, the garden is still known as the Begonia Garden.

Roses are planted throughout the garden, but, in high summer, they dominate the long South Border: Complicata, Fantin Latour, Mme Plantier and many others, chosen from the old-fashioned beauties made popular in the 1950s and 1960s by Graham Stuart Thomas. Mrs Blackwell had imbibed his ideas for companion planting in the Jekyll style—she also admired Mrs Muir’s garden at Kiftsgate—and she experimented, too, with colour schemes. Within the six compartments that run off the Long Walk, she planted one devoted to pink and mauve roses and phlox and another—very pretty—to grey and white, with an astrolabe at its centre.

The Nyes themselves have emerged as confident and knowledgeable plantsmen. ➤



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Over the past 20 years, they have improved the soil and intensified the ornamental plantings, giving them a lushness and exuberance that enhances the layout. Roses are now combined with classic companions, such as salvias, dianthus, gauras and *Crambe cordifolia*.

There was a lot to learn from an informal garden that Mrs Blackwell had developed in a stretch of the disused canal, bringing in lorry-loads of acid soil in which to grow ferns, trilliums and grasses. Here, too, are shrubs such as pollarded willows and dogwoods, underplanted with moisture-lovers. The Nyes added others, too (*Cornus alba* Wintersun is spectacular throughout the winter), thickened the plantings of ferns,

hostas and irises, and added drifts of candelabra primulas, all now naturalised.

Best of all is the transformation of the old peony garden, which leads off the grey-and-white garden and runs down to the garden's edge, where a gate opens into a meadow. This border has recently been more thickly planted with peonies, preceded by irises and followed by penstemons and *Campanula persicifolia* in both its blue and white forms. It is hedged on either side by apple and pear trees neatly trained as espaliers, which increases the dynamism and draws the eye down to the bright white gate and across the meadow to a distant view of the hills that lead to the Marlborough Downs.

Mrs Blackwell tanked a section of the medieval moat to create a stone-lined pool for waterlilies with a fountain and statue of Venus. Her ideas were drawn up by architectural draughtsman Leslie Eden and executed by local builders

The connection between the garden and its wider setting could not be more firmly stated. Grandly Gallic, often introspective, Cadenham remains a little French enclave, completely in harmony with the beauty of the English countryside that surrounds it. 🐾 *Cadenham Manor, Wiltshire, is open for the National Garden Scheme and for groups* (www.ngs.org.uk; www.cadenham.com)