

ALDHAM HOUSE, CHESTERTON: THE GARDEN IN 2006

(Members will recall that Mr Charles Malyon's article about the history of this Garden in Chesterton appeared in our last Newsletter, his wife now writes in detail about the plants which grow in their garden)

Recent archaeological digs within 100m of Aldham House have revealed just what sort of land we have to cultivate – sand and gravel. In summer the ground soon becomes dry, the lawn loses colour and some plants die. We are left with the plants and shrubs which survive dry conditions.

Serious gardening began on retirement, 1992. The garden had had an initial plan but had developed by accident or impulse rather than by design. The plants which survived neglect were cranesbill, comfrey, campanulas, honesty, bergenias, vinca, foxgloves, hollyhocks, honeysuckle and cow-parsley. The first requirement was for organic material to improve the structure of the soil and its ability to retain water. We made compost heaps at the far end of the garden using mainly grass cuttings and autumn leaves – our own and nextdoors'. There are still three compost heaps to manage and a bin near the kitchen for vegetable peelings.

It isn't possible to grow our own vegetables – too many trees and not enough light. So the garden has retained its original purpose as pleasure grounds, and the presence of trees has decided its informal style of shrubs and perennials which can cope with periodic water shortage. The small ponds were added to support and encourage wild life.: dragonflies, frogs, hedgehogs and birds. Robins, wrens, chaffinches, blue-tits, house sparrows, dunnocks, blackbirds and starlings nest each year in and around the garden. Regular visitors are crows (especially in walnut season), a pair of collar doves, greenfinches, great-tits, longtailed tits, coal tits, thrushes and a pair of pigeons. We have also seen jays, tree creepers, spotted flycatchers, green woodpeckers, lesser and greater spotted woodpeckers, a gold crest and grey wagtail. Food is provided for them. We have also watched wood mice climb the sage bush to reach the peanut container.

The oldest tree, estimated to be over 150 years old, is the oak. It is the main focus of the garden, supporting many insects and birds. Ten years ago tawny owls used to sit amongst its branches. Cambanks' aged walnut in the hedge might be the same age as the oak. Its trunk and branches are partly hollow, providing shelter for squirrels (once a black squirrel was seen frequently here). A beautiful tree, its overhanging branches provide walnuts for all.

Is the yew tree over 100 years old? It had to be cut back because it took so much light from the kitchen where we spend much of the day. In time the tree 'greened up' again and is now bushy enough to attract nesting birds. The smaller yew, an accidental planting, was clipped back to allow passage along side path and, when it recovered, it was trimmed again into its present three-tiered form – a first effort at topiary. The yew bushes which form the boundary hedge were transplanted seedlings from the large yew tree. The 40 year old bourbon roses already growing here

benefited from feeding and additional compost and have coped well with the competing hedge. On this boundary and overhanging the garden, are three 'accidental' ailanthus trees and on the other boundary a mature ash tree, growing so near to the oak that it must be another accidental planting. An odd shape, its heavier branches were cut back to prevent possible damage to the factory roof next door. In leaf, it obscures the factory buildings. Two philadelphus 'trees', together with the ash, oak, robinia and ailanthus, form part of the 'squirrel run'.

The long beds and grass paths on each side of this triangular garden might have been planned a century ago. The shapes were kept and the planting improved. Aconites, taken 'green' from a friend's garden, snowdrops and Spanish bluebells were planted below the oak. From the Botanic Gardens we copied the idea to plant autumn and spring cyclamen. Beyond the canopy there are tulips – 'Queen of the Night' and 'Spring Green', which grow amongst cranesbill, heuchera, forget-me-nots, *leucojum vernum* and honesty. *Garrya elliptica* and a black leaved elder were planted here to give height. In the shade of the factory wall beneath the silver birch grow Lenten roses, brunnera, pulmonaria, wood lilies and small varieties of vinca. The other long bed was already planted with orange day-lilies which put out bright green leaves in early spring and around these we planted oriental hellebores. They seem to be happy companions. At the sunnier end of the bed are white paeonies, acanthus, and delphiniums, all needing regular attention.- staking, feeding and watering. The paeony came from Charles's father's garden – he remembers it 70 years ago. The border is edged with golden marjoram. In mid to late summer white Japanese anemones and white phlox add interest. In the sunniest places we have used sages and grey leaved plants – anthemis, santolina, and cuttings from a curry plant.

The area to the side and along the length of the house was cleared and re-gravelled, and Indian paving slabs were added around the kitchen door. With this improvement we tried to make the long rose bed near the house more formal with lavender bushes and thrift. An old wisteria creeps along the rear wall of the house and, sheltered beneath it, a summer scented jasmine. Fresh support wires were added so that the old Albertine rose could spread. The bay bush in the square oak planter provides shelter and privacy. A ceanothus was planted next to the French window and an evergreen clematis by the kitchen door. Lilies –of –the-Valley thrive in this damp shaded corner. The climbing rose, planted on the wall separating the garden from the factory, has been overtaken by a pink jasmine. The original slate roof of the factory storeroom abutting the boundary wall had been taken down and replaced with corrugated sheets but our shed provides a reminder of how it once was.

The herb bed, established near the kitchen, contained rosemary, sage, thyme, mint, chives, rue and lemon balm. Lemon balm had spread to all parts of the garden and took some effort to remove. In the herb bed it was replaced with a variegated version which adds bright colour during Spring. Next to the herbs, surviving in dry conditions, are hostas.

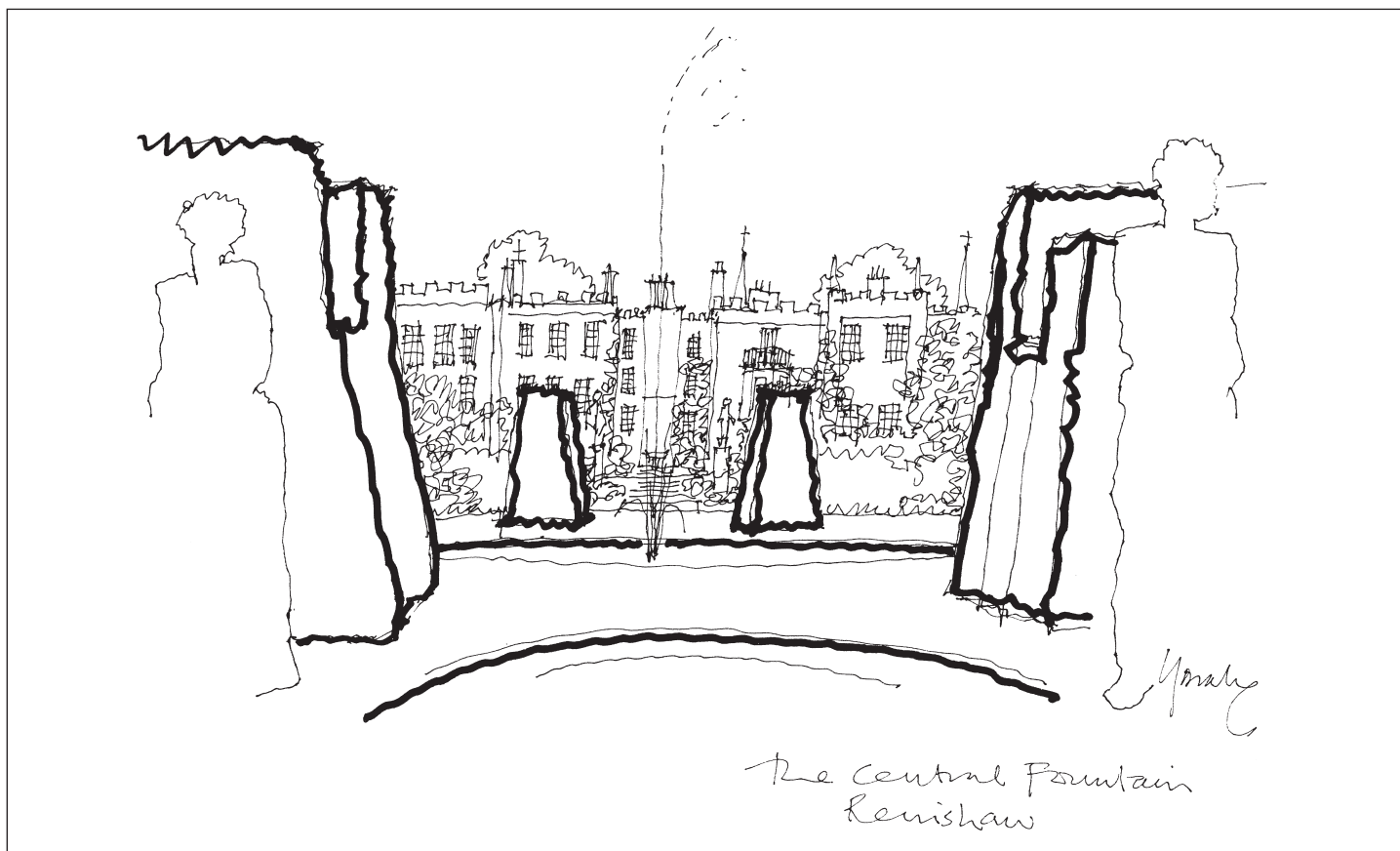
RENISHAW HALL GARDENS

The garden must be considered not as a thing by itself but as a gallery of foregrounds designed to set off the soft hues of the distance, it is nature which should call the tune, and the melody is to be found in the prospect of blue hill or shimmering lake' – Sir George Sitwell

Nothing prepares you for the revelation of Renishaw. On arrival from the north the Hall itself is imposing but there is no indication whatsoever of anything resembling a garden.

The present garden is in fact confined to the south of the house and is essentially the creation of Sir George Sitwell (1860-1943), fourth baronet, the father of Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. Sir George was a serious student of garden history and design, who in the 1890s visited some 200 Italian Renaissance gardens during a period of convalescence, and wrote an important essay, *On the Making of Gardens* (1909). This work was a pioneering advocacy of the Italian villa garden and, with the turn-of-the-century publications of Edith

from the car park into a large area of grass above and to the west of the house, the 'top lawn', planted with various trees and shrubs. Our guide, the very capable Head Gardener, David Kesteven, explained that there had never been a public entrance to the garden, which was designed to be seen and accessed from the rear of the house. Our attention was first drawn to a number of outstanding trees and entailed a brief lesson in plant taxonomy. There were three specimens in close proximity, all of great antiquity in terms of evolution: *Liriodendron tulipifera*, the tulip tree, was an angiosperm of the *Magnoliaceae*; *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* was a conifer, albeit deciduous, belonging to the *Taxodiaceae*; and *Ginkgo biloba*, the so-called 'fossil-tree', was the most remarkable of all as it belonged not just to a mono-specific genus and family, the *Ginkgoaceae*, but to an entire order of its own, the *Ginkgoales*, which evolved 100 million years before flowering plants. There was also a handkerchief tree, *Davidia*



Wharton and Inigo Triggs, led to the revival of formalism in England.

There were at least two earlier gardens on this site. The first George Sitwell of Renishaw built his manor house in 1625 and a formal garden in the contemporary style was laid out to the south, as a 1766 estate map shows. But this was all swept away when the fashion for the landscape garden came to Derbyshire at the end of the C18. According to Sir George '... the instigator of this barbarous work may have been the rector Mr Alderson ... [who] ... unfortunately survived until 1818'. All that remains of the earlier formal garden is a lime avenue on the west side, said to have been planted in 1680 on the advice of John Evelyn, the diarist.

Our tour began almost incidentally as we found our way

involutrata, and the 'Waterloo Oak', planted in 1815 in commemoration of the battle, of prodigious size – nearly 200 feet high – possibly indicating hybrid origin.

As we descended to the east the full scale and ambition of Sir George's garden gradually revealed itself. He was blessed with a near-perfect site for his exposition of the Italianate style: the ground falls gradually to the south for about 150m and then more abruptly into the parkland below: the view over the countryside beyond is extensive. Sir George believed that it was the purpose of the garden to integrate the house in the natural landscape whilst remaining distinct from nature itself.

The garden is the exact width of the Hall, and consists of a series of three descending parallel terraces of varying

A visit to the gardens of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge on 20 July 2006

The Head gardener, Trevor Rees, works the garden with three full time and one part time gardeners. They are also responsible for the gardens of twenty outlying hostels. The College has no Garden Committee and Trevor, who has worked in the garden for nineteen years, is

the route of Mill Lane, Pembroke Street and then across the Lion Yard site (at the time of writing archaeological excavations of the King's Ditch are delaying the construction of the Grand Arcade), through Sidney Sussex to Park Street joining the River Cam some 150 yards west of Jesus Lock. This

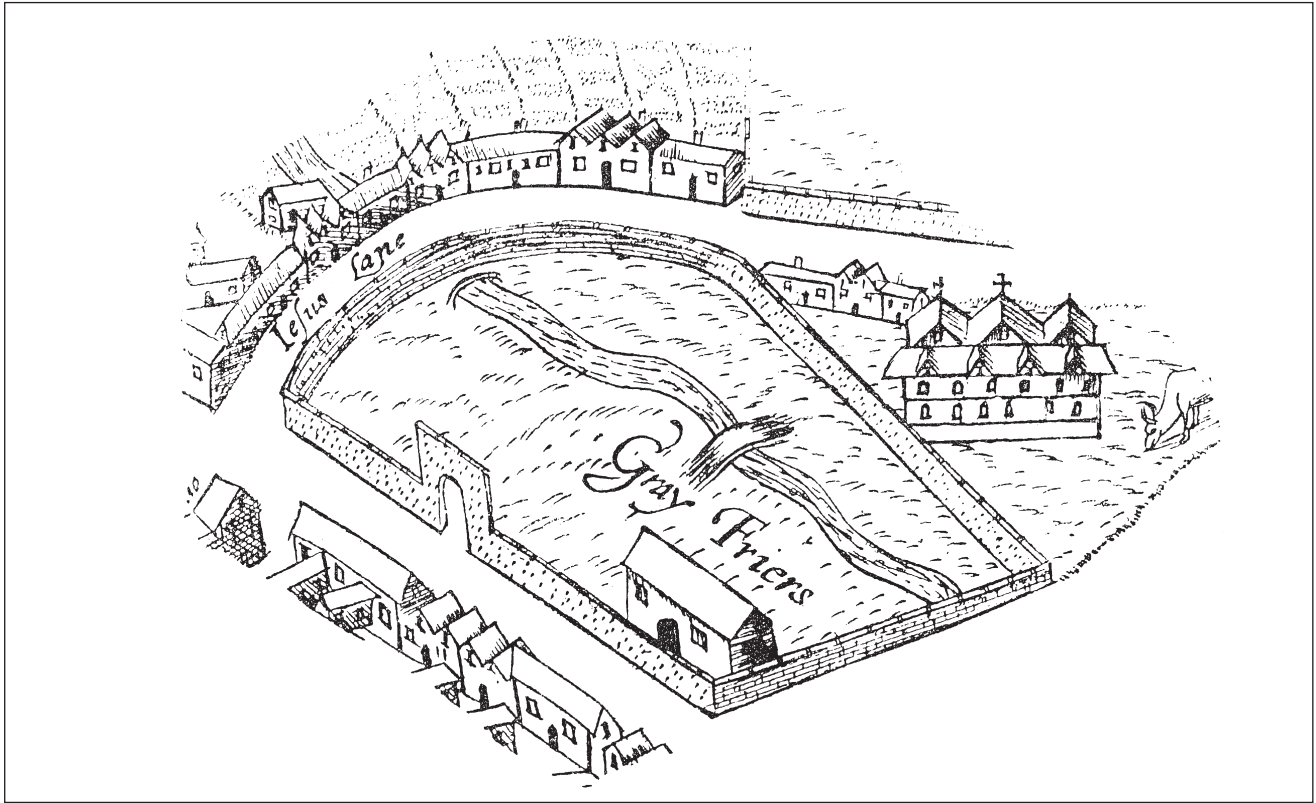


Fig. 1: The site of the Franciscan friary in 1574, before Sidney Sussex was built (Alison Taylor, 'Cambridge – The Hidden History').

answerable to the College Bursar but is given a free hand with planning and design. On occasion, the Fellowship has ideas for planting which are conveyed through the Bursar.

The site

Sidney Sussex College stands on the eastern edge of the historic town of Cambridge with some of its land straddling the King's Ditch, which together with the River Cam formed the historic boundaries. Since 1279 this site of six acres has remained complete on the east side of Sidney Street, formerly Conduit Street. It is bounded by walls between Jesus Lane to the north, Malcolm Street to the east and King Street and Sussex Street to the south. The main area of building is along the western boundary in Sidney Street with large gardens behind. Only in the 20th century has there been building on the southern boundary facing King Street and Sussex Street.

So part of the site was outside the mediaeval town. Both owners, the Franciscan Friars and the Fellows of the College built on the town side, leaving the land beyond the Ditch as orchard. At the end of the 16th century there were still many gardens and orchards in the town within the boundary of the Ditch. From the 10th century townspeople had constructed a ditch stretching from the Mill Pool, following

ditch was restored and strengthened in the reign of Henry III in the mid-13th century but it was an open gutter and became very 'noisome'. The 1388 Statute of Cambridge refers to "carting of corruption into ditches and rivers".

The site is composed of light, sandy alluvial soil, which drains rapidly and fails to hold nutrients.

The owners

In the 13th century Cambridge was prosperous and there was great pressure for building space. Scholars arriving in 1209 needed hostels in which to live as did the Franciscan Friars who arrived in 1224. The friars showed a friendliness to the scholars, were eager to profit from their learning and unlike monks did not withdraw behind walls. At this time intellectual life was stimulated by the need to understand and defend orthodox theology and it profited from the arrival of preaching friars in place of traditional monasticism. The Friars, begging or mendicant orders, came to towns; in origin they were the poor bringing the Christian message to the poor and they had to live where they could. In 1224 Cambridge burgesses had leased from the King the stone house of Benjamin the Jew in Butter Row adjoining the Guildhall and the market (on the site of the new Guildhall). They allowed the Franciscans a share of the house, which was

also used as a gaol, and in 1238 the friars acquired the whole house.

As they became popular and increased in membership they were able to obtain a better site, as described above, and to build an 'aisled hall' or preaching church. The Black Death, 1349 caused both a decline on Cambridge's population and a decay of properties. Aided probably by a

Great Court, but no longer flows on to Sidney Sussex College. Today marker stones show its route beneath Bulstrode Gardens, Wilberforce Road, Grange Road, St John's playing field and Wilderness on under Bin Brook to the fountain. A condition for laying the pipe was that water was to be available for townspeople, who used a tap by Trinity's Main Gate as recently as 1939.

Fig. 2: The college from the west, c.1688. (David Loggan, Cantabrigia Illustrata [Cambridge (1690)])

public subscription, for the mendicant orders were supposed to subsist on alms and to own no estates beyond their conventual buildings, the Franciscans acquired the 'Sidney' site c.1267. JRH Moorman 'Greyfriars in Cambridge' wrote "The land appears to have been already built on, but all the existing tenements were destroyed in order that the Friars might build their convent there". By 1350 they had built a church on the present Cloister Court with an adjacent cemetery and cloister. This church was large enough to hold University ceremonies and the Friars had made an impact on the mediaeval development of the university.

The Franciscans also made an important contribution to the town bringing the first supply of fresh water. From a spring in a field called Bradrushe (now situated at Conduit Head Road near the University Observatory) the Friars brought water initially in elm pipes. Today there is still a stone vault at the conduit head where water is collected in a tank and strained before piping. From the 1840's the pipes have been made of Derbyshire lead and since 1327 water has flowed to Trinity Street. It still feeds the fountain in Trinity's

The site was within the parish of All Saints and when the Franciscan Friars' were dissolved in 1538 Henry VIII gave the land and its buildings to his college of Trinity. The stone from the friars church was dismantled and used for Trinity Chapel. In 1576 the Town Corporation planned to buy the site for a hospital for the poor, but it was eventually sold to the executors of the Dowager Countess of Sussex. CW Scott-Giles 'History of Sidney Sussex College refers to "In effect a well-stocked builder's yard"; church, stables, dovecotes had been dismantled but fishponds and orchards remained (*see fig 1*). One building survived until 1776 and when "pulled entirely down" they found "a quantity of small bones of fowl, rabbits and other animals with spoons etc". Perhaps it had been the kitchen. The only Franciscan survival today is a portion of mediaeval wall separating the College from Malcolm Street in the north east corner of the site, adjacent to the re-sited gate of 1762.

The will of Lady Frances Sidney, Dowager Countess of Sussex, in 1594 contained the terms and funds for the foundation of the last 16th century, Elizabethan college of

the University. Earlier in Elizabeth's reign Sir Walter Mildmay had acquired the site of the Dominican Friars to found Emmanuel College and then in 1596 the site of the Franciscans was obtained for Sidney Sussex. Both colleges were of puritan foundation aiming to further the education of godly pastors and good preachers. This new college changed the topography of the town very little, although changing its architectural character. On the extreme east of the town in 1592 there were only a dozen or so houses in Jesus Lane outside the Ditch.

Built of red brick under the influence of Ralph Syraons, the College was rather like a large Elizabethan country house. In the early 19th century the Master and Fellows

sufficient water in this sandy alluvial soil and to deal with the problem of honey fungus. Below many of the trees a profusion of spring bulbs are planted, replaced regularly because the population of squirrels is considerable and damaging. Most of the trees are Victorian in age and there is nesting for greater spotted and green woodpeckers; a tawny owl nested in a weeping ash until five years ago but it has been ousted by squirrels. The gardens were first landscaped in the 18th century and a huge weeping chestnut has been a recent casualty.

Passing from Hall Court towards the wall along Jesus Lane is Cloister Court designed by Pearson in the 1890's. In the southern corner excavations have revealed the friars'

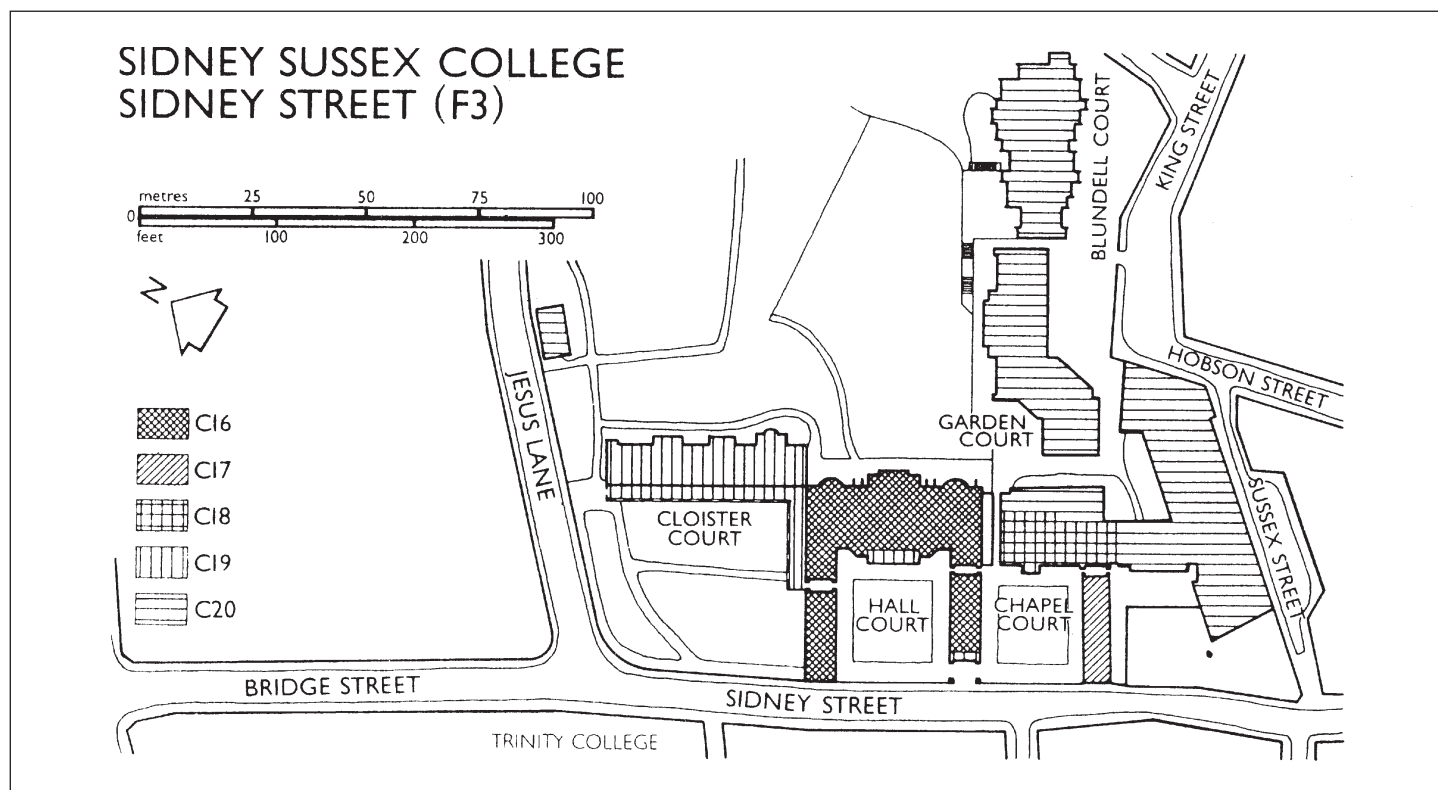


Fig. 3: (Tim Rawle, 'Cambridge Architecture')

employed the architect, Sir Jeffry Wyattville, who was responsible for neo Elizabethan-Gothic modifications and the present appearance of the Hall Court.

The gardens

Entering the College through the main gate in Sidney Street, Chapel Court is to the right of the Porter's Lodge. It is well provided with bedding plants, but few of the older climbing roses have survived and they have been replaced by Boston ivy (Virginia creeper). A major feature for townspeople is the wistaria, over 100 years old which covers the wall facing both Chapel and Hall Courts and provides a splendid display each spring. It has benefited noticeably from reduced pollution following the partial pedestrianization of Sidney Street. Hall Court has a variety of shrubs and there are a lemon scented magnolia grandiflora (Exmouth) and a ceanothus (autumnal blue). Behind a yew hedge hiding cycle racks is the point of entry of the Friars' pipe, no longer bringing water.

A feature of Sidney's gardens is an excellent collection of labelled trees, particularly many varieties of chestnut and planes. Trevor Rees has a continuous battle to ensure

cemetery. The shrubs here are kept to a reduced height to reveal different architectural features. There is an old black mulberry (*morus nigra*) and a young white mulberry. Here is a croquet lawn and Loggan's print of 1688 shows a bowling green along the wall of Jesus Lane (see fig 2 above). The gardeners grow large numbers of bedding plants and pot plants for the parlour and for the Master's Lodge in a green house by the wall. In this area is a large crab apple (*malus tschonoskii*), which is a pyramid of flowing red in the autumn, a pink chestnut, a beech and a copper beech. Progressing further, traces of the King's Ditch are clearly visible.

In the Fellows' garden, beyond the Ditch, are herbaceous borders which were revived in 1987. They are bounded by old box and more recent yew hedges. All plants are discreetly staked in this dry soil and a spectacular feature was the *dictamnus fracxinella* (burning bush), which lived up to its name when a flame was applied. Here is a splendid Spanish chestnut, a strawberry tree and an *acer hirsutum* with its snake bark. On occasion a Fellows' tennis court is marked out in this north east corner whence Sir James Burrough's

(Master of Caius and amateur architect) College gateway, 1762 had been removed and rebuilt in 1831. At this time Wyatville had redesigned the main entrance. The gate is of stone ashlar with a continuous pedimental Roman Doric entablature. Adjacent to this on the Malcolm Street wall are traces of the Friars' mediaeval wall. A 1960's gingko flourishes near the gate.

Returning towards the main college are Blunder's Court, 1969, facing King's Street and Lyon's Garden Court, the first building to be built astride the King's Ditch, 1923-5. Unusually the Master's Garden is overlooked by this building at its southern end. The soil proved to be too light for a rose border which has been replaced by herbaceous plants in Trevor's preferred muted colours. As he remarked "an even distribution of purples and yellows gives a sense of rhythm". In this garden is the weeping ash, former home of the tawny owl, a superb yellow chestnut and a handkerchief tree. Penesetum and abutilon grow in tubs. Moving towards Sussex

Street and the new William Mong Building, 1998, is a culinary garden with the usual herbs and a pineapple sage. An ailing lavender hedge has been replaced successfully by rosemary, (fig 3).

Whereas the southern and western boundaries of the mediaeval town are still protected by the common lands of the fens and greens, its north eastern corner and the immediate suburbs have been well protected by two large gardens undisturbed except by conventual and college buildings for over 800 years. To the east of the Sidney site and outside the Ditch were the lands of the nunnery of St Radegund, today Jesus College and Grove, which, together with Sidney's garden, separated the town from its open fields. These 'green lungs' are of great benefit to the townspeople, of great interest to gardeners and of endless intrigue for historians. We are indebted to Trevor Recce for his interest and care.

Charles Malyon

Renishaw Hall

This is the third year that a tour operator has booked in their 'Sandringham Garden Group' to visit us at Island Hall. In our experience tour operators, like journalists, can be our worst nightmare, and I imagine the same is true for some of their poor unsuspecting customers!

Last year, full of smiles, I welcomed the somewhat cowed members of this augustly named group. As with any good guide, I like to give a resume of the morning's itinerary starting with "After you have had your coffee". However, "NO COFFEE THANK YOU" said the tour guide, 'yes please' bleated the thirsty group. So, for the next two hours, they had the full Island Hall 'treatment', taking in both house and garden.

Fast forward to this summer when Linda welcomed the 'Sandringham Garden Group'! No problem with coffee this time, but "I would prefer if we did not have such a long talk as we had last year"! I wonder what the dragon said to the guide at Sandringham House? Heaven forbid if she should go to Renishaw next year.

Our guide at Renishaw was a person after my own heart; she was determined that we should all "enjoy the Renishaw experience to the full".

It was on the steps of the elegant entrance on the north front of this 'Gothick' mansion that she welcomed us. We learnt that this was the original central block of the 1625 mansion, which the Sitwells had added to throughout the 17th & 18th centuries thus creating this 'fairy-tale gothic' façade, concealing the shallow depth of what appeared to be a very substantial mansion, so beautifully captured in Rex Whistler's vignette for the family's letter head. Prior to our being invited in, our guide could hardly contain her excitement when she revealed that we were to be greeted by none other than Sir Reresby Sitwell himself. As if on cue, the ebullient baronet appeared to welcome his 'guests'; he then excused himself with equal aplomb. The only thing missing was a puff of smoke!

It is probably the more recent history of the house and its family that makes Renishaw such a fascinating place to visit. During the last hundred and forty two years Renishaw has only had three owners. Sir George Sitwell was only four when he inherited the estate. He was the creator of the garden and father of the trio of eccentric aesthetes, Edith, Sir Osbert and Sir Sacheverell. Sir Osbert, who succeeded his father in 1943, 'abdicated' in favour of his elder nephew, Sir Reresby, 7th baronet, and the present guardian of Renishaw.

The squires of Renishaw, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were Whigs, quiet and scholarly country gentleman, who collected books and pictures, improved the farming and planting of the estate, amassed rents and royalties, and married heiresses, so the guide book tells us. It was the latter part of the 18th century, and during the 19th and the 20th centuries, that produced the larger than life characters we have come to expect of the Sitwells.

The Sitwell male line died with William Sitwell in the 1770s. It was the double named Sitwell Sitwell (1769 – 1811) 1st baronet, a great nephew of William, whose father Francis Hurt, later Sitwell, was the heir to the Sitwells' considerable

fortune. By the family's own admission, the three generations had lived hard, died young, and spent vast sums on enlarging the house that we see today. It was a period 'when English taste was at its best'.

Sir Sitwell was responsible for adding the elegant dining room and classical stable block in the 1790s. In 1803 the other end of the house was extended with the billiard room. This room was to be completely redesigned by Sir Edwin Lutyens in 1914. Gill Cremer was able to add to our guide's repertoire, by regaling us with a story about Lutyens. Apparently, each morning, while he working at Renishaw, he would enquire 'Is Lady Ida down yet?' As a designer, I can't hold a candle to Lutyens, but at least we share the same sense of humour!

In 1808, three years before his death, Sir Sitwell gave a grand ball in his newly completed ballroom in honour of the Prince Regent's visit to Renishaw. It was after this inaugural ball that the Prince conferred a baronetcy on his host.

Sir Sitwell's son, the first Sir George, was 'weak, kindly and of a social disposition', hardly the talents required to stave off financial disaster! The estate was running at a loss, his political aspirations ended in disaster, and his solicitor had stolen a fortune. As if this were not enough, his extended family bled him dry. So, following the sale of most of the contents of the house, for the sake of economy, he left Renishaw and passed a more frugal time travelling on the continent, finally settling in Bognor. Sir George died in 1853 and his son, Sir Sitwell Reresby Sitwell, 3rd baronet, fared little better, and was dead by the age of 41, 'worn down by fatigue, overwhelmed by worry for the future of his wife and infants'. The future did indeed look very bleak as the Renishaw estates remained burdened with large charges which could be paid only out of income.

Sir Reresby's widow was an Irish protestant, and it was by her clever management that Lady Sitwell saved the estate for her son, the second Sir George, the 4th baronet, who inherited when he was only two!

Having missed out on the financial rewards of the industrial revolution, the discovery of coal on the estate heralded a revival of the family's fortunes. Most of the contents of the house hail from this new era of prosperity, which may not have been on the same scale as that of his 18th century ancestors but, nevertheless, there was enough to let Sir George indulge himself in parsimony and personal extravagance in equal if unpredictable measures'

There is no doubt that during Sir George's 81 year 'reign' at Renishaw, the most successful of his projects was the garden. He was obsessed with the genealogy of his ancestors, and producing 'yet another book of indigestible content'. Despite being a life long hypochondriac, his purchase of the Castle of Montegufoni in Tuscany only added to his zeal when bringing back the many Italian treasures to re-furnish the empty Stuart, mid Georgian and Regency interiors.

Sir George and his beautiful wife, Lady Ida Denison, a daughter of the Earl of Londesbrough, were complete opposites, yet their long marriage produced the three gifted children whose names have grown to be synonymous with

Renishaw, Dame Edith, Sir Osbert and Sir Sacheverell. When I was at the John Singer Sargent exhibition at the Tate, a few years ago, I saw one of the great treasures of Renishaw, the conversation piece with Sir George, Lady Ida and the children, standing in front of the famous commode.

There in the Great Drawing Room I was now seeing this celebrated masterpiece *in situ*, hanging over the fabulous Adam commode from the workshop of Thomas Chippendale. For me, this was the highlight of our tour of the house.

Sir Osbert, 'the greatest living master of English prose' succeeded his father at Renishaw when Sir George retired to Italy. Dame Edith, the unloved daughter of Sir George, who collaborated with her elder brother on their various literary excursions, was part of the trio who 'discovered' William Walton. It is Sir Osbert whom we have to thank for the collection of John Piper works displayed in the house. The evocative Venetian scene in the Front Hall is particularly dramatic as it forms a mural over the black marble Regency chimneypiece.

Sir Sacheverell, the younger brother, took on the family's house, Weston, in Northamptonshire, and it is his son, Sir

Reresby Sitwell, who succeeded his uncle, Sir Osbert, when like his father before him Sir Osbert retired to Italy.

What made our tour of the house so fascinating was moving from room to room chronologically following the architectural development of this wonderful house. Era by era unfolded as we 'ooh'd and ah'd' our way around, following our charming guide, admiring Robin Hood's bow in the Smoke Room, where we caught a whiff of Sir Reresby's lunch – sausages, delicious!

We were amazed by the immense 17th century cabinet in the Dining Room, with its glass panels painted with classical scenes, and impressed by the magnificent William Kent frame of the 'Belisarius in Disgrace' by Salvator Rosa which dominates the Ballroom, also by having many family stories divulged to us!

We all then repaired to the stables for lunch, and the chance to refresh ourselves for the second part of the treat we had on John Drake's inspirational excursion.

Christopher Vane Percy

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