

MANY of the most appealing English country-house gardens have an innate sense of continuity from one generation to the next, each leaving their mark for successors to build upon. This leads to a satisfying blend of integration and thoughtfully planned alteration. It is beguilingly illustrated at Cornwell Manor in north Oxfordshire, where elegant warm-coloured stone houses, looking out over the unspoilt landscapes of their surrounding estates, still abound.

Even so, there is something special about the ensemble at Cornwell. The house is embraced on all sides by its garden, which moulds itself with ingenuity into differently sized spaces on the undulating terrain. Immediately to one side are the cottages of the estate hamlet, clustered together like a group of small children beside their parent. On the other side, reached via a contemplative lime avenue walk, is the village church. As you follow the avenue, you can enjoy the view across the park where it drops away from the garden boundary to a series of lakes in the middle distance.

Much of this setting and framework has been unchanged for centuries, but Cornwell's garden, extending to nine acres, principally dates from the last years before the Second World War when, in 1937, the estate was purchased by Anthony Gillson and his wealthy American wife, Priscilla. Who better to breathe new life into the various elements of their rundown acquisition than the fashionable master of grand and ingenious alterations, Clough Williams-Ellis? His brief was broad: he rebuilt cottages in the hamlet, worked on the main house to which he added the ballroom and, in particular, he gave the garden key elements of its structure and character that it retains today.

Although the house includes parts of the earlier 16th- and 17th-century buildings, its main south-facing entrance façade dates from the 1750 rebuilding that gave the house its reputation; one recent book referred to it as 'one of the prettiest houses in England'. From the entrance forecourt, the ground drops away quite steeply before rising on the far side. It was the perfect challenge for Williams-Ellis's theatrical leanings.

From the stream that originally flowed down from the village through this part >

Clough Williams-Ellis's symmetrical design of the late 1930s still provides a theatrical setting for 'one of the prettiest houses in England'

Splendour through the mists of time

Cornwell Manor, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire

A garden made in the late 1930s for 'one of the prettiest houses in England' continues to be a place of enchantment and horticultural excellence, finds **George Plumptre**

Photographs by Andrew Lawson





of the garden and on into the park, he created a canalised formal water garden to form the centrepiece of a new vista leading down from the house.

From the generously broad forecourt, he built a broad flight of stone steps to lead down from a balustrade to a central sweep of grass punctuated with now impressive blocks of yew. From the water garden, which stretches at right angles across the lowest point, the view then stretches up on the far side to more flights of steps and a set of gates beside the passing road. Beyond this boundary, the view continues enticingly into the distance.

At a stroke, Williams-Ellis created something that combined architectural composition with bravura views both towards and away from the house. He excelled at garden buildings and waterworks and, at Cornwell, his other major contributions to the garden were the cascade, over which the stream flows from the canal garden down towards the lakes in the park, and the smart pavilion in the swimming-pool garden with tall Venetian windows.

After Anthony Gillson was killed on active service in Burma in 1944, his widow abandoned Cornwell and, in 1959, the estate was sold to Peter Ward and his new wife, Claire (née Baring). Ward lived at Cornwell for nearly 60 years until his death in 2008, since when his son, Alexander, has taken over, living in the house and managing the estate.

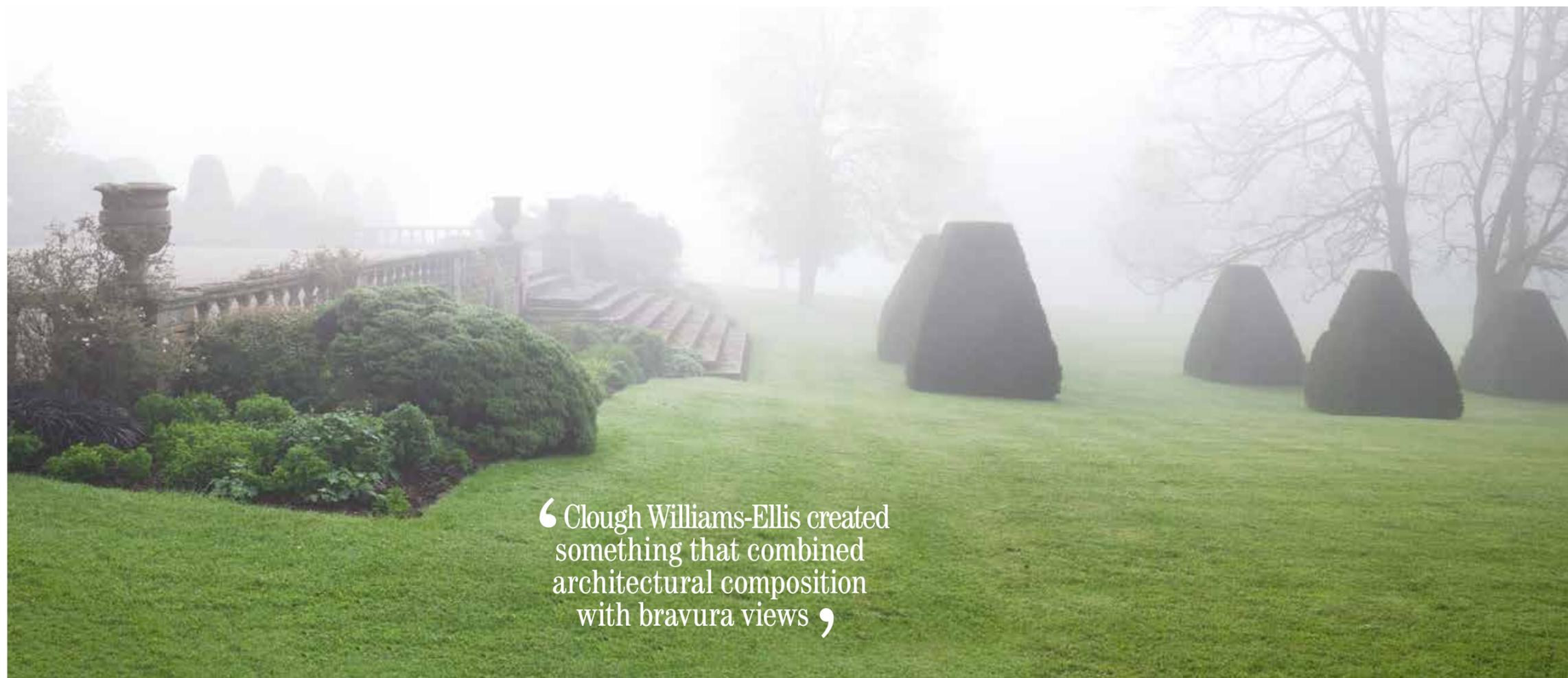
Alexander remembers that it was his great uncle, Simon Baring, a talented amateur gardener, who designed the three terraces on the east side of the house, which have stamped so much of the character on the Cornwell garden of today. The lowest terrace has a narrow lawn with domes of clipped yew and the main central terrace has a quartet of clipped Portuguese laurels, each surrounded by now bulging clipped box hedges enclosing generous squares, planted seasonally—tulips followed by peonies. They surround the terrace's centrepiece 'fiddler', a charming 18th-century lead figure of a youth playing the violin.

The upper terrace is again narrow lawn, here shaded by spreading silver weeping pears (*Pyrus salicifolia pendula*). Above it is the atmospheric spring garden in which scillas and chionodoxas spread in bright-blue carpets beneath the spreading canopy of a venerable beech tree. The gate to the church walk leads out from the spring garden.

The skill of the terraces' design lies in the way in which they lead one to another on the east side of the house, their axis at right angles to the arresting view out from the house, to the park that drops away to the lakes. The terraces also link into the deep mixed borders below the balustraded forecourt to create strong unity in the garden in front of the house's two main façades and between the house and sweeping areas of lawn.

One of the joys of the Cornwell garden, which complements the house's architectural evolution, is the way in which there are unexpected enclosures with treasures to be discovered. On the north side of the house is the courtyard garden, where some of the older vernacular building survives. There are Ballerina roses in beds and Williams-Ellis added an Italian wellhead and a cobbled circle that cleverly evoke the old stable-yard atmosphere.

You might expect to find an enormous *Hydrangea petiolaris* covering one wall, but more surprising is the similarly large specimen of its far rarer cousin, ➤



“Clough Williams-Ellis created something that combined architectural composition with bravura views”

Clockwise from top left: The manor house itself is also swathed in plants—in this view, the front elevation supports neatly tied-in Banksian roses, which produce copious tiny yellow flowers in spring; magnolias and cow parsley unfold together; and dawn on a misty spring morning, with the terrace and yew topiaries gradually revealing themselves



Alexander Ward's great uncle, Simon Baring, designed the terraces on the east side. This one has a quartet of clipped laurels, each surrounded by bulging, clipped box hedges, infilled with seasonal planting

6 Features from successive generations merge happily to create a warmly welcoming whole

Schizophragma integrifolium, introduced from China by Ernest Wilson in 1901. On the north-west side of the house is the ballroom garden, overlooked by Williams-Ellis's eponymous addition. Here, a myrtle is a surprising discovery in the north Cotswolds, where winters can be bitterly cold. From one side of the ballroom garden, a wooden doorway leads into the smaller, more secretive maids' garden, enclosed by yew hedges and containing a fine armillary sphere and a white mulberry tree.

Beyond the swimming-pool garden to the west of the house lies the stone-walled kitchen garden, which extends to more than an acre and still retains planting that recall its pre- and post-Second World War glory days. The rows of glasshouses that would originally have stood here have gone, but the large area is still planned around its main central path leading to a small Classical summer house against the west wall.

On this wall, there are ancient cordon-trained pear trees, including an enormous specimen of the Victorian favourite Pimpaston Duchess. Robert Hogg, who held the Wodehousian title

of Pomological Director at the RHS, wrote in his 1870s fruit manual, 'it is a very handsome pear of the finest quality... exceedingly rich with a sprightly vinous flavour and delicate perfume'. There are also rows of old apples and espalier pears and, parallel to the lower wall, a cherry walk lined with yew hedges.

Today, features in the garden from Cornwell's successive generations merge happily together to create a warmly welcoming whole. Against one wall of the kitchen garden is the grave of 'Flirt: a lovable spaniel', dated 1784. Williams-Ellis's inter-war panache is constantly evident, mainly in architecture, but also in the trees with which he decorated the canal garden: *Acer griseum*, Irish yews, weeping pears

and an impressive *Magnolia obovata* planted to one side of his cascade.

Claire Ward's feminine hand is perpetuated in the planting of the east terraces and the now magnificent Banksia rose that covers large sections of the house's main entrance façade along with the fine evergreen honeysuckle, *Lonicera henryi*. No doubt, Mr Ward and his generation will contribute similarly and add further strands to the garden's elegantly woven tapestry. *George Plumptre is Chief Executive of the NGS. His book 'The English Country House Garden' was voted 2014 Inspirational Book of the Year by the Garden Media Guild. For full details of Cornwell Manor and the garden, visit www.cornwellmanor.com*

A valley runs across the garden, reached by a sloping lawn on the house side, but sweeping uphill again on the other side via a series of steps and small lawns

