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lupins, foxgloves and delphiniums

In brief

NAME Ruckley Grange
WHAT Large Edwardian house built in the Elizabethan style. Formal gardens, woodland and water.
WHERE Wxxxxxxxxx
SIZE 10 acres
SOIL Light, Sandy and Acidic
CONDITIONS Very cold. Reached -25°C in their first winter in the house.
SPECIAL FEATURES A mixture of restoration and an evolving garden based on a strong original layout of hard landscaping.
GARDEN PLAN See page xx



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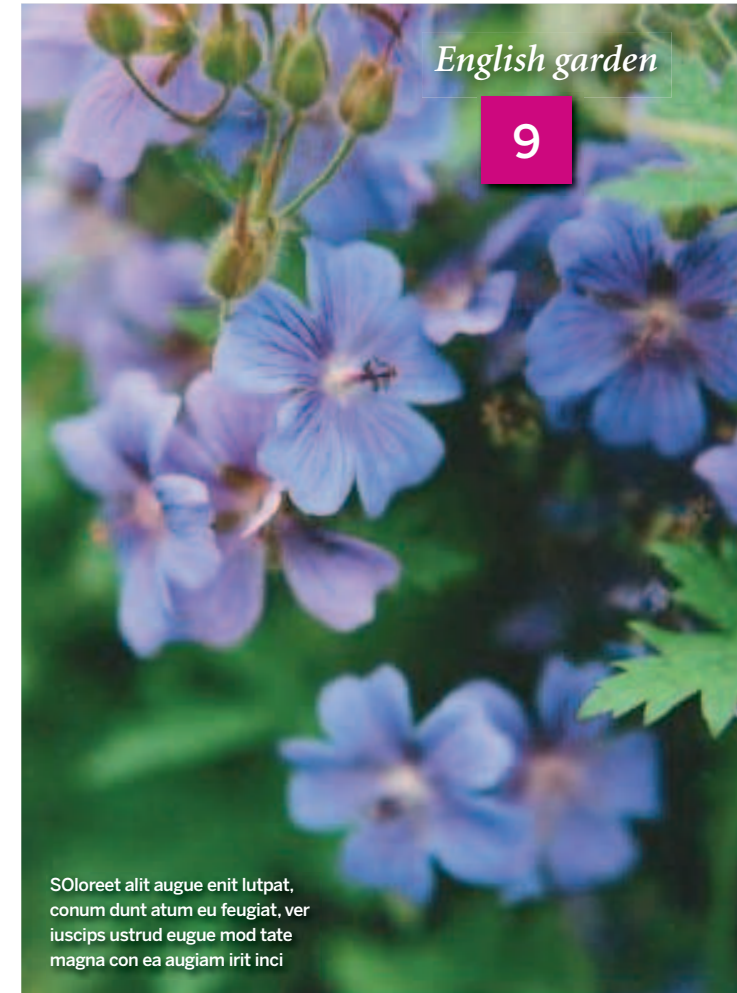
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WORDS JAMES ALEXANDER-SINCLAIR PHOTOGRAPHS CRAIG FORDHAM



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This place has wonderful bones but absolutely no garden. These are not, I hasten to add, my words but those of renowned nurseryman John Ravenscroft when he first saw the grounds at Ruckley Grange 30-odd years ago. He was being shown round by the proud new owners, Keith and Margaret Ashbourne, in the hope that he might have an encouraging word or two at the beginning of what has turned out to be a major project.

He was right, of course, and those bones are still visible today. The house was rebuilt in an Elizabethan style in 1904 by the brewing family, the Reid Walkers, the gardens were laid out at much the same time but by whom and in what style, nobody knows. There are only a couple of surviving photographs and they are not a great deal of help. What there is, however, is a magnificent lily pond with elegant summerhouse, a firm grid of paths lined up perfectly symmetrically with the house and a long raised balustrade separating what must once have

been formal gardens from the surrounding woodlands and wilder gardens.

Margaret Ashbourne has been involved with growing things for many years – at one point she grew 70 acres of flowers for drying – although now restricts her activities to the gardens at Ruckley. This fits around running, with her daughter, a busy factory on the estate assembling artful arrangements of artificial flowers. “When we arrived at Ruckley there was very little planting except for some rose beds. We asked David Austin (the renowned rosarian and near neighbour) to have

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a look and he immediately told us to rip them all out.” This they did, and gradually the planting around the house has emerged. It is by no means conventionally planned and is a combination of two very different tastes. “Keith likes things to be very neat and neatly edged: I prefer it a bit more chaotic.” It seems that Margaret gets her way much of the time and the planting gives an air of delightfully eccentric abundance.

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The main formal view from the house is from the South Terrace alongside which magnolias spill out to obstruct paths and blocks of lavender lap against the stonework. Facing this are eight L-shaped beds filled with a mixture of plants, from roses to great stands of delphiniums and sprawling geraniums. “There is no strict colour scheme: I reckon that, as flowers are multi-coloured, then the borders should be as well. In spring there are tulips and erythroniums, and hyacinths as well.” ▷



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▷ This feeling of quirky abandon runs through the garden: there are banks of dahlias against the balustrade, hostas by the path (oddly there are no slugs in the garden), lavender everywhere and all the time the ancient yew topiary and formal paths look on benevolently. The focal point for this part of the garden is a spectacular lead statue of a boy entwined with a dolphin, which sits in a long stone pond that was once used for swimming.

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Away from the house there are other gardens: a grass tennis court has been turned into a wildflower meadow and there is a fine walled garden (although the greenhouses have long since disappeared). This now houses an eclectic collection of peacocks, guinea fowl and at least one swan.

Further away, to the west side, across wide expanses of steeply rolling lawns, there is a delightful system of streams, lakes and both formal and informal ponds. In particular a lovely stone-edged elliptical

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swimming pond fed by a gushing (though probably darn cold) stone rill.

All of these waterworks have been restored by the Ashbournes: the complex system of sluices and drains is Keith's department. "We dredged all the lakes and got rid of many tonnes of mud and sludge in order to reveal the original shapes." The surrounding undergrowth has been cleared – "in places the bracken used to be growing over the top of the shrubs" – and the place is dotted with new shrubs and trees. As this is good acidic soil there is an abundance of rhododendrons and thriving magnolias all along the banks of the lakes. Margaret

has planted strong colours so they are visible from the distant house.

All the best gardens are a labour of love: a magic connection between people and places. Rather than following the conventional route of restoring an historic garden, Keith and Margaret have embarked on things purely from instinct and investigation. They had little choice as there is no masterplan from which to work, so where a wall ends abruptly they have guessed where it should go. Mysteries such as the big mound in the garden whose purpose was unfathomable have been solved (in this case by its careful removal to reveal an unexplainable archway). This has resulted in not so much a recreation of a garden as a reinvention based around the happy combination of the strong bones that John Ravenscroft noticed, and Margaret Ashbourne's joyful determination to plant whatever she pleases. This is a refreshing and individual take on garden restoration. □

BBC James Alexander-Sinclair is a garden designer and broadcaster who co-hosted the recent television coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show 2011.



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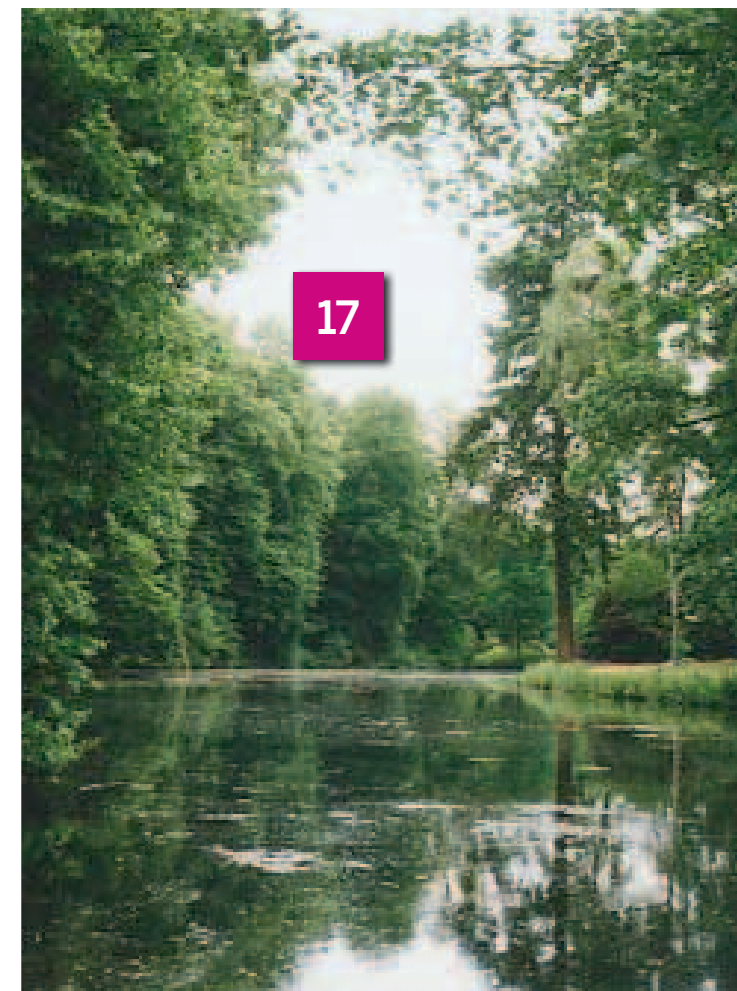
English garden

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foxglove



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