Celebrated author and social historian Adam Nicolson spoke on “The History of Sissinghurst”. He has published extensively, notably on the English gentry and their part in the development of English society; and on the making of the King James Bible.

Illustrating the talk to convey a “virtual experience of the beauty at Sissinghurst”, Mr Nicolson began by reviewing the broad span of the castle’s history. There had been a settlement on the site since Saxon times (“Saxon hurst “perhaps). There was a self-sufficient manor by the thirteenth century and extant buildings dating from medieval times were extensively altered in the sixteenth century. Sissinghurst has had a fascinating history. Edward III was the first of several royal visitors, who have included Queen Mary I and Elizabeth I, over the last 600–700 years, It became a prisoner of war camp in the eighteenth century; then was turned into a workhouse; and at one time was used to provide accommodation for labourers. But the story of Sissinghurst did not end there.

An early important phase of Sissinghurst’s history was when the estate was acquired – as part of a 15,000 acre land holding spreading across England from the Weald – in the 1530s by John Baker, secretary to Thomas Cromwell and notorious as “Butcher Baker” for a brutally rapacious approach and for the large number of heretics he condemned to be burned. Politically made of “the willow not the oak”, however, John Baker was later able to host Queen Mary as a visitor to Sissinghurst. On his death in 1560, his son Richard spent the vast fortune accumulated by his father on developing the buildings into a major country house with enormous courts, enabling Sissinghurst to host Queen Elizabeth I for

*The Courtyard of the Elizabethan house. All but the top right-hand corner (the South Cottage) was demolished c. 1800*
three days. Richard used the “onion structure” concept to integrate the house with the surrounding countryside by creating a park area which was designed so that, from the central tower, a panoramic view could be had of the whole course of a hunt.

Being Royalists and suspected of being Catholics, the Bakers did not prosper in the seventeenth century, a situation made worse by producing daughters not sons. So, by the eighteenth century, Sissinghurst was neglected and debt ridden. Against this background, the house (now for the first time called “Castle”) found itself being rented out to the Sick and Hurt Board who used it from 1757 to 1763 to accommodate 3,000 French prisoners captured in the Seven Years War. Sissinghurst was the Colditz of eighteenth-century England, full of violence and horror even by the standards of the time, as found by an inquiry into French complaints about random shootings and brutality. The buildings were largely wrecked due to their use as a prison, although enough was left at the end of the eighteenth century for Sissinghurst to be used as a poorhouse for Cranbrook Parish. Sissinghurst remained in a parlous state during the nineteenth century apart from the addition of a farmhouse for a gentleman farmer.

![A drawing made in 1760 when French prisoners-of-war were housed at the Castle](image)

In 1930 the castle and grounds were purchased by Adam Nicolson’s grandmother, author and beauty Vita Sackville West, who had been unable to inherit her childhood home of Knole, as it was entailed in the male line. She and her husband, diplomat and politician Sir Harold Nicolson, were colourful and socially unconventional characters in their own right, but as far as Sissinghurst was concerned, what was transformative in the partnership was Vita’s passion to restore the castle and add to the history of Sissinghurst by creating the now-famous gardens.

Combining extreme linearity with deliberate profusion of flowers, the classical with the romantic, the gardens, on which Vita had spent the family fortune, which had been receiving some 200,000 visitors a year in the 1970s, now has 5–6 million. Vita tried to recreate the “onion structure” by integrating the original manor with the surrounding countryside, in the “maîtresse de terroir” style which Vita and her family had considered so important.
When Vita purchased the estate in 1930, the estate agent’s details referred to the farmhouse and the buildings seen today, but summarised the rest of the buildings as “ruins in the grounds”. The restoration of the buildings and grounds in the profusely planted, terroir style preferred by Vita, became her passion – she was not the enthusiastic socialite many now suppose. She saw the tower as a glowing lantern of beauty and, integrated with it, the “tired ebullience” and profusion of the garden, as representing the integration of buildings and surrounding countryside that had been fundamental to Sissinghurst through the centuries. In Vita’s mind this work was the great artistic expression which had eluded her as a poet.

Although Vita had strongly hoped that the buildings, garden and estate could be kept in the family, all her funds had been spent on improvements so that, on her death in 1962, disposal to the National Trust – rather than to a private buyer – became the preferred option. Negotiations lasted five years as the Trust necessarily convinced itself that in Sissinghurst there was a legacy of enduring importance to the public. In the early National Trust period, Vita’s widower Sir Harold Nicolson would often sit in a hut popularly known as the Resident Donor’s “display cabinet” and talk to visitors, whose numbers steadily increased. Vita’s grandson Adam Nicolson has built on Vita’s work by endeavouring to restore traditional Wealden agriculture on the estate. In this context, Adam Nicolson then turned to the issues consequent on the National Trust saving and running Sissinghurst. The family wanted to be true to the values underlying Vita’s concept of integrating estate and house along the lines of the ring/onion structure as originally designed.
In developing the estate recently, the aims of the Nicolson family, rooted in Vita’s approach of profusion and, above all, engagement, had to some degree diverged from those necessarily pursued by the National Trust. Adam Nicolson and his wife, Sarah Raven, would prefer to use small-scale farm methods to provide visitors with estate-grown, top-quality produce, while at the same time recovering some of the original Sissinghurst landscape. But this project, started enthusiastically, proved neither easy nor financially viable in the modern world.

The Trust, for its part, had to consider making the most financially from the estate through cost-driven, mass-scale methods of modern agriculture and buying in from overseas; they also had to take modern visitor catering preferences into account. Car parking had, of course, also to be provided although necessarily this and the formal layout of the gardens adopted in recent years, were at odds with Vita’s concept for the estate. These strains were being constructively worked through by the family and the Trust following discussions during 2004–2009. From the estate farming already begun, a new profusion of insects had pleasingly arisen. Issues such as dependability of food supply and size of freezers were being addressed. Following recent developments at Sissinghurst, it is hoped a compromise range of local and bought-in foods would be seen there this summer.

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