

THE JEWEL IN EASTCOTE'S CROWN

by Mary Pache

The walled garden is a feature familiar to everyone who visits stately homes. The Lost Gardens of Heligan maintain the tradition and practice of the days when a big house was self-sufficient. The walls are painted white to reflect the sun and the guide tells of ingenious devices such as hot beds that trick our climate into producing the exotic varieties that were not readily available in those days. It is more likely now that the walled garden is converted to something more attractive to modern visitors. Mottisfont Abbey in Hampshire has made a rose garden, Elton Hall, Cambridgeshire, has a garden centre with a restaurant, Brockwell Park in South London is a riot of flowers, and the walls are generously draped with wisteria. The demolished Eastcote House has a herb garden.

The restoration of this enclosed area from grass to herbs was brought about through the initiative of the Eastcote Conservation Panel and its then Chairman, Sheila Liberty, with the support of interested local residents. It is not visible from the site of the house, which indicates that it was originally for kitchen produce and as such was 'below stairs'. There is evidence of supports on the oldest section of the wall that might have been used to train fruit trees espalier-fashion, or even vines. However as herbs would have had an important place there for cooking and dealing with common ailments, Sheila chose herbs as appropriate for the maintenance of the historical strand. It was completed in the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, 1977. Parties of children have visited the garden. Sheila tells of the pleasure of talking to them and witnessing their tactile experience of the plants, and their appreciation of the scents.

There are four planted beds each with a plaque that records the names of the herbs. Mint, Sage, Marjoram, Thyme, Parsley, Fennel, Coriander, Basil, Tarragon and many others are still popular in our kitchens.

In addition to making food more palatable Culpeper gave herbs the reputation of healing an incredible number of ailments. He recommends Sage for lethargy, lowness of spirits, palsy, coughing, hoarseness, and when mixed with vinegar was good for the plague. Marjoram, he advises, when taken as a snuff purges the brain, is good for dropsy and comforts the stomach, sinews and other parts. Parsley helps children in discomfort with wind in the belly and is also useful to 'upgrown persons' with inflamed eyes, and 'to break the stone'.

Of the more unusual herbs in the garden Alecost was used to flavour and preserve ale. It is edible and earned the sobriquet 'Bible Leaf' as the Puritans kept some in their Bibles to sustain them during long sermons. It was also called Costmary in honour of the Blessed Virgin because it was said to ease the pains of childbirth.

Old Man is found in Culpeper under the name of Southemwood, also as Old Man's Tree, Boy's Love and Lad's Love. These last two reflect the belief that the herb contained the elixir of youth. A mixture of the ashes of the plant and salad oil was claimed as a hair-restorer for both scalp and chin. If that failed, the leaves could be used to draw out splinters, expel intestinal worms and stop the progress of gangrene. It seems to be the *Artemisia Vulgaris* of the *Hamlyn Guide*. Old Lady is another variety, *Artemisia Absinthium* or Bitter *Artemisia*, which was used to produce a strong alcoholic extract. It was forbidden by law to grow it in France because the over-consumption of Absinthe was a scourge on French society. The herbalist, Jean Palaiseul, records its pejorative nickname of Old Woman.

Pennyroyal, a member of the mint family, was described by Flora Thompson in *Larkrise to Candleford* as one of the herbs grown in the garden patches of the hamlet in the 1880s.

'...the women,' she writes, 'had a private use for the pennyroyal, though, judging from appearances, it was not very effective'. Interpret that as you will.

The wrought iron treillage and sundial in the centre of the garden were erected in 1988, also the gate with the initials JM in memory of Jean Mitchell who co-operated with Sheila and Colin Roome in organizing the rebirth of the garden. Some of the bricks in the enclosing walls were dated circa 17C by the Department of the Environment in 1974. In 1978 there was concern that the oldest part, constructed with the thin red bricks typical of Tudor times, was in need of restoration, particularly with re-pointing. This, and some re-building work, was carried out with dedication by Hillingdon Borough apprentices.

The nearby dovecote received attention in 1982-83. The first was built illegally by an early Hawtrey when only King's College, the Lord of the Manor, had that privilege. It is possible that he took the risk because the breeding of pigeons for their meat and eggs was vital for fresh food in a Tudor household during the winter. It seems that his daring was overlooked as the dovecote received a licence in 1601. The present building, a grander legitimate replacement, is dated circa 17C.

Another building contemporary with the garden and dovecote is known as the coach house, although the timbers at the rear indicate a different usage, possibly a hayloft. It was reconstructed in the 1930s and has been used by the local billiard club ever since. The whole area has a Grade II listing.

A stroll around this quiet enclave recently revealed that the garden needs more time and attention than is granted by contractors, and less of the unwelcome attention of vandals. The four herb beds are overgrown in places and bare in others. Three sides of the wall are concealed with lush climbing and overhanging growth but the exposed south wall is in need of re-pointing, and repair in places where the sections have split. The gnomon is missing from the central sundial, and the gate, which was absent on my first visit, is now in place but without the J of Jean Mitchell's initials.

However, on a peaceful Sunday morning with the sun enhancing the scents of the herbs, the benches left in place for once by night visitors, it was possible to agree with Sheila and the Eastcote Conservation Panel that this is 'the jewel in our crown' even if somewhat tarnished. I remembered local historian W.A.G. Kemp, who found it a 'most pleasant retreat' where 'one may dream of the past'.

References

Sheila Liberty's Archives

Culpeper - *Herbal*

Hamlyn - *Guide to Edible and Medicinal Plants*

W.A.G. Kemp - *History of Ruislip*

Flora Thompson - *Larkrise to Candleford*

RNELHS - *Highways and Byways*

Hillingdon Borough Libraries - *Village Trail, Eastcote*