

# Crafting wonder from wilderness

A neglected Arts and Crafts garden, set amid wild woods and meadows, has been carefully restored to its former glory

WORDS LIA LEENDERTZ PHOTOGRAPHS JASON INGRAM

## In brief

**NAME** Perrycroft.

**WHAT** An Arts and Crafts house built by Charles Voysey in 1895, with formal gardens close to the house, and woodland and wild gardens further out.

**WHERE** High up on the western side of the Malvern hills, Herefordshire.

**SIZE** Ten acres, about half of which is gardened, the rest being woodland.

**SOIL** Slightly acid, stony soil with clay seams.

**CONDITIONS** Cool, wet and windy.

**SPECIAL FEATURES** Restored original walled garden and wild gardens including summer and spring meadows.

W

hen garden furniture designer Gillian Archer couldn't find any benches that would suit her garden, she designed her own. Tall-backed, quirkily proportioned and craftsman-made of English oak, they sit handsomely, surveying miles of uninterrupted views across undulating Herefordshire countryside. It was a fitting move in a garden defined in part by the ethos of the house at its centre. Perrycroft was the first major commission of architect Charles Voysey (1857-1941), one of the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement, a movement that celebrated attention to detail and acclaimed the craftsman over the machine.

"In Arts and Crafts' architecture the little things are as important as the whole," says Gillian, and she points out the iron ventilation grilles inside the dining room – hand-worked silhouettes of naively painted birds and trees – and the beautifully ornate iron drain pipes outside. The house is large and low, and chock full of quirks, nooks and crannies: a circular window here, a tower there, all demonstrating a playfulness with proportion that gives the house what Gillian calls an *Alice-in-Wonderland* quality. It is strongly reminiscent of a less hyperactive Portmeirion – very much a contemporary – the Welsh village designed by Sir Clough Williams-Ellis in an Italianate style. This impression is strengthened by the mophead hydrangeas surrounding the courtyard next to the house. "They were an in-plant of the period," says Gillian, although Perrycroft's alkaline soil dictates hers are pink rather than Portmeirion's blue.

Gillian and her husband Mark bought the house 12 years ago from the Boys' Brigade, which had used the house, and the grounds, as its headquarters. "They had cut the grass but that was about it. Seedlings had grown into fully grown ash trees, there were thickets



THIS PICTURE Two yews (*Taxus baccata* 'Standishii') stand tall in front of the square garden.

LEFT Soft pinks and purples of *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude' and *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Hidcote' combine with the silver-grey of *Santolina chamaecyparissus* to give a dreamy feel to the square garden, while the climbing *Vitis coignetiae* helps unite house and garden.



THIS PICTURE The high garden's cool, wet conditions suit late-flowering perennials, such as *Acanthus spinosus* Spinosissimus Group, *Euphorbia schillingii*, *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Dixter', *Phlomis russeliana* and *Aster umbellatus*.

LEFT One of Gillian's benches sits at the far end of a row of box (*Buxus sempervirens*) topiary balls on the south terrace.

*"I plant plants that I like, but they have to be extremely tough in order to survive our conditions"*



▷ of brambles, all of the features that you would associate with neglected land." Slowly the couple set about restoring both the house and its gardens. This was clearing and hacking work, and included cutting back overgrown yew hedges that had turned into large trees. These are now fully tamed, huge and beautiful buttressed hedges, giving no hint of their previous tree-like lives.

#### Faithful to tradition

Arts and Craft-style gardens typically nestle about the house; the house is not set proudly apart beyond an expanse of lawn but is fully integrated into its surroundings. Gillian has kept to this tradition, with climbers such as *Vitis coignetiae* clambering the walls, and shrubs rubbing up alongside, enveloping the house. But the area that most closely chimes with the house is the walled garden. Here, plans existed and the original footprint was still intact. It is a formal area of parterres and box topiary, with a beautifully built original summer house and original walls and gates. Gillian has remained fairly faithful to the layout (she simplified one area made impractical through too many paths and too narrow borders), but she was left no evidence at all of the original planting.

It was a great excuse to give herself an entirely free hand when it came to the plants, leaving the mophead hydrangeas and box and yew topiary as her only nod to plant fashions of the era. "I plant plants that I like, but above all they have to be easy to grow and extremely tough in order to survive our conditions." The garden is high up on the western side of the Malvern Hills. "It is always a degree colder than in the valley, and wetter and windier too." So she leans ▷

“The area that most closely chimes with the house is the walled garden”

THIS PICTURE The burgundy red of *Dahlia* 'Arabian Night' adds a bold contrast to the more subtle hues of *Aster novae-angliae* 'Andenken an Alma Pötschke', *Aster* 'Little Carlow' and *Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks'.

RIGHT In the walled garden, Gillian has maintained the unusual topiary of the original Arts and Crafts garden that give the house its *Alice-in-Wonderland* feel.



▷ towards late-flowering herbaceous plants – rudbeckias, grasses, sedums and asters, which she finds are among the toughest here.

Beyond the formal garden and sloping away from the house are extensive wild gardens, which Gillian and her full-time gardener Angus Smith have nurtured into being through careful, thoughtful management. “We have brought nothing in, and planted nothing. All of this has come from mowing at the right time and making the conditions right for those plants that were already naturally in the soil.” In spring, native lent lilies (*Narcissus pseudonarcissus*) spread generously across a path and up the hillside, while wild flowers, such as rough hawkbit, betony and oxeye daisy, fill the meadow that drops away from the house with colour in high summer. At the base of the slope is a large pond, again filled with nothing but plants that have alighted there naturally and all managed by editing rather than planting. Here Gillian has designed a walkway that echoes the lines of her benches and floats garden visitors out across the water, stamping her own careful craftsmanship on its furthest, wildest reaches. □

#### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS Perrycroft, Jubilee Drive, Upper Colwall, Malvern, Herefordshire WR13 6DN.

TEL 07858 393767.

WEBSITE [www.gillianarcherdesign.co.uk](http://www.gillianarcherdesign.co.uk)

OPEN 30 September (2pm-5pm) for the NGS, [www.ngs.org.uk](http://www.ngs.org.uk)

See overleaf for Gillian's plant choices and other Arts and Crafts gardens to visit ▷

# 9 of Gillian's favourite plants for late summer

## 1 *Centaurea nigra* (knapweed)

"One of the plants in the summer meadow, it floats right up to the box balls near the house. I love the contrast of the purply brown seed heads against the bright green of the grass alongside."

## 2 *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Lustre'

"The pure white petals droop sadly around the prominent cone. The flowers look like they might float away."

## 3 *Phlomis russeliana*

"Statuesque and sculptural, phlomis has a rough, hairy leaf and yellow whorls of flowers, and looks good in all seasons. I plant it near *Euphorbia griffithii* 'Dexter', which always has a touch of orange but turns brilliant in autumn."

## 4 *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *deamii*

"Such a vibrant yellow, but not at all brassy, and beautiful against the black centre. The stems are so slender and elegant. This flower stands up to close examination at the front of a border."

## 5 *Aster* 'Little Carlow'

"It is nice to have autumn warmth but this is a cooler shade and the sort of colour you would expect to see in spring. It is good against warm autumnal colours."

## 6 *Hydrangea aspera* (Villosa Group)

"Grown in the woodland garden, this plant has a beautiful, pointed leaf and wine-coloured flowers. Stalks have a flush of wine too, so it rewards close examination."

## 7 *Hydrangea paniculata*

"The flower of this hydrangea opens white and turns pale pink. It's a very graceful bush with an open habit."

## 8 *Sedum* 'Herbstfreude'

"This plant never looks less than beautiful. Juicy pink green flower buds gradually open to brilliant pink then fade to a lovely fox colour. I like the undulating, textured surface a group of them forms."

## 9 *Abelia x grandiflora*

"I like plants that come into their own in autumn, and abelia does. The combination of red-tinged foliage and pink flowers is unusual and subtle."



1 & 3 RICHARDELOM/GAPPHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL TRUST IMAGES / JOHN MILLAR

MARTIN KULLS

JONATHAN BUCKLEY

## Arts and Crafts garden

### Gardens to visit

Gillian was inspired by three of the UK's best Arts and Crafts gardens

#### Lytes Cary Manor, Somerset

Dating from the 15th century, the house and gardens were restored in Arts and Crafts style by Sir Walter Jenner in 1907, and is, says Gillian, "beautifully planted and maintained". A delight in summer, its large orchard (see page 20) is an autumnal treat.

OPEN 17 March to 4 November.

ADDRESS Somerton,

Somerset TA11 7HU.

TEL 01458 224471.

WEBSITE [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)



#### How Caple Court, Herefordshire

With magnificent views towards Welsh Mountains and the Forest of Dean, the 11-acre garden was laid out by Lennox Bertram Lee in glorious Anglo-Italian, Arts and Crafts style from 1901.

Completed almost ten years later, it is now, says Gillian, "in a marvellously romantic state of seeming dishevelment". Although open to the public, it is often used for weddings, so check before planning a visit.

OPEN Daily from mid March to mid October.

ADDRESS How Caple Court, Herefordshire HR1 4SX.

TEL 01989 740611.

WEBSITE [www.howcaplecourt.co.uk](http://www.howcaplecourt.co.uk)



#### Great Dixter, Sussex

This famous Arts and Crafts garden, laid out by Nathaniel Lloyd and Edwin Lutyens from 1911, encloses a medieval manor house with "yew topiary and exuberant planting by Nathaniel's son, the late Christopher Lloyd", says Gillian. GARDENS ILLUSTRATED readers can discover some of Great Dixter's garden secrets at an exclusive reader day on 12 November (see page 16 for details).

OPEN 1 April to 28 October, Tuesday to Sunday and Bank Holidays.

ADDRESS Rye, Northiam, East Sussex TN31 6PH.

TEL 01797 252878.

WEBSITE [www.greatdixter.co.uk](http://www.greatdixter.co.uk)

