



# Pursuits of love

A combination of dramatic planting and stone sculpture has brought a little magic to the gardens of a Cotswolds manor where the Mitford girls once ran riot. By **Stephen Lacey**. Photographs by **Clive Nichols**

**Left** there is an air of romance and informality throughout the garden, with alchemilla and ox-eye daisy seeding in the paths, and the house walls cloaked in roses. **Top** *Rösa* 'Complicata' blooms on the wall and geraniums spill over the gravel of the east-facing terrace bordering St Nicholas Church. **Above** the steep slope opposite the kitchen window has been used to advantage with an angled box parterre and wave of yew. Emma Maiden's *Totem* stands in the orchard of 'Taihaku' cherries above



**Above** the old mill leat.  
**Opposite** *Blue-backed Angel II* by Dominic Welch and *Cause & Effect* by Ekkehard Altenburger punctuate a meadow colonised by cow parsley and other wildflowers; *Stone Overlap* by Tom Stogdon frames the view down from the natural swimming pool

**I**t couldn't be ordinary. It had to be something magical,' Rosie Pearson said of the new home she was searching for in 1997. The idyll she found, and which now plays host to a biennial sculpture exhibition, is Asthall Manor. Dating from the early 17th century, it sits at the edge of a Cotswolds village, looking on to a medieval church and down over the willows and watermeadows bordering the Windrush. 'The house is part of the landscape. It looks as if it belongs here.'

It has a literary landscape, too, for in 1910 Lord Redesdale, the father of the Mitford sisters, moved here with his family from Batsford Park, staying until 1926. Alconleigh in Nancy Mitford's novel *The Pursuit of Love* is based largely on Asthall,

and it is the backdrop to Jessica Mitford's childhood stories in *Hons and Rebels*.

Until 1997 Pearson had been living in Jamaica, where she had started and run a primary school. But following a split with her musician husband, Palma Taylor, she decided to move back to Britain with her two young children, Annie and Dora. The daughter of 3rd Viscount Cowdray, the publisher and polo enthusiast, she had grown up in West Sussex. 'But Oxfordshire felt like home. I read English at Oxford and knew this part of the country well. And it was beautifully green.'

But the six-acre garden was, she told me, far from magical. 'One rose bed, otherwise nothing but grass and trees.' So she



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invited Julian and Isabel Bannerman, who excel at creating atmospheric settings for historic houses, to redesign it. Entering the drive today, past hefty horse chestnuts, you are soon engulfed in the Bannermans' stylish and romantic planting. Simple, wild and traditional plants in mainly misty pastel colours fuel the mood, with the stone and gravel pathway to the door edged in widely spaced rosemaries and lavenders, and the paving cracks colonised by self-seeding primroses, green-flowered alchemilla, and lilac *Verbena bonariensis*.

The opening view is down the narrow east-facing terrace alongside St Nicholas Church, and you look along box-edged borders stuffed with irises, astrantias, blowsy crimson peonies

and hardy geraniums such as the magenta 'Ann Folkard'. For later in the season there are phlox and Shasta daisies, and in various places shrubs such as winter viburnum and Mexican orange blossom add to the structure.

But at this time of year, the great display is from roses. Wow! Clearly relishing the clay loam, they cloak the house walls and the roof of its adjoining cloisters in bloom: 'Félicité Perpétue', with pale pink rosettes; 'Cécile Brunner', with tiny pink flowers, merging with the larger white cockades of 'Sombreuil'; 'Madame Grégoire Staechelin', with sumptuous flowers of rich deep pink; crimson-red 'Guinée'; and many more. A lot of them have later-flowering clematis growing through them.



**Left** Rosie Pearson and Anthony Turner's sculpture *Hand of Man*.

**Right** Turner's gate pillars caused a stir locally and inspired Pearson to begin her biennial sculpture exhibition in the garden.

**Below** a purple beech provides the foil for Paul Vanstone's *Senator*



Pruning and training these roses must be a mammoth job. It is done by Pearson's full-time gardeners, Mark Edwards and his son Liam. 'The roses look lovely in winter,' Mark told me. 'We strip off all their leaves, and make circles and other shapes from the bare stems. So much nicer than just tying them straight along wires. And bending the stems into curves produces better flowering.'

The roses are not confined to climbers and ramblers. There are shrub roses too, including a hedge of eglantine, *Rosa rubiginosa* and a group of wine-crimson 'Roseraie de l'Haÿ'. This is partnered with foxgloves and sweet williams and placed beside two enormous plants of pink-flowered 'Paul's Himalayan Musk', grown not in its usual guise as a vertical climber up a tree or outbuilding but as freestanding thickets. None of Asthall's roses is sprayed against pests or diseases. 'I couldn't think of anything worse for nature,' Mark said.

'The garden is full of birds and insects, including woodpeckers, flycatchers and a lot of butterflies,' Pearson added. 'As part of the Bannermans' design we planned lots of areas for wildlife including the wildflower meadows.' At the edge of the lawn, these meadows spill down the sunny banks towards the fields, with splashes of pink ragged robin and great swaths of cow parsley drifting under the trees. The meadows are made by sowing a mix of annual and perennial wildflowers on to bare soil. 'In the first year or two they are very colourful, then they get quieter, and when the display gets poor we start again. The cow parsley comes in by itself.'

At the bottom of the bank is a pool of water, fringed in trees. 'The Bannermans discovered this and opened it up. It is the old mill leat but was all silted up when we came,' Pearson explained. Native water iris and parasol-leafed *Darmera peltata* grow on the edge, and there is a thatched shelter built into the mossy stone wall from which to view it. 'It has a fireplace and a chimney, and now and again we come down and cook supper here.' Indeed, part of the charm of Asthall is that, amid its pastoral informality, it is a garden very much designed for family life. There is an astonishing tree house up the slope from the pool, and higher up still, a natural swimming pool and a tennis court, whose wire sides are used for growing sweet peas – 'the scent is wonderful when you are playing'.

A stone dining table, its underside encrusted in

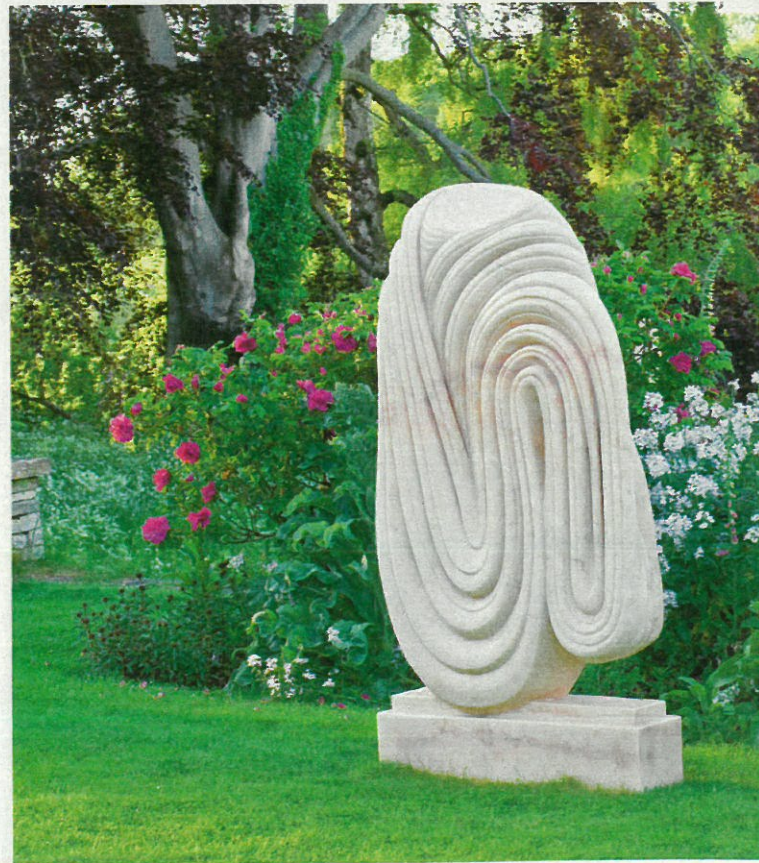
tufa and shells in classic Bannerman style, dominates the flagged terrace outside the large kitchen. The steep slope behind it needed a clever solution to make the view interesting from the kitchen window; the splendid result is an angled box parterre, incorporating the initials A and D of Pearson's daughters, and casually infilled with tomatoes, tobacco flowers and other vegetables and bedding. Triangular wedges of yew make a pattern above it, with further great crests of yew, like Hokusai's *The Great Wave*, flanking the steps.

Every other June, some 200 sculptures, from artists in Britain and abroad, arrive for Pearson's **On Form** exhibition, and transform the garden into an art gallery. The first exhibition, in 2002, had sculptures made of varied materials, but now they are all of stone. 'They are what I really love, and they connect well to the setting and the rich geology we have

here. When placing a sculpture Anna Greenacre [the co-curator] and I will consider its texture, shape and colour and how it relates to the landscape. We also like creating surprises, such as under trees.'

I wondered how it all started. 'It began when I commissioned some gateposts from an old friend Anthony Turner. They are semi-vegetable shapes but almost like creatures. The initial reaction from people locally was negative but that seemed to quickly change. I thought that was interesting – how you rush to a judgment, and then as you look more closely you see things differently.' Making gardens: a voyage for the mind has been sculpture's role over many centuries – and staging a pocket production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (by students at the Oxford School of Drama), Pearson is this year adding further magic to that voyage.

[onformsculpture.co.uk](http://onformsculpture.co.uk)



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