



GARDENS



ABOVE: A SCULPTURE BY ADRIAN GRAY, DISPLAYED AS PART OF THE 'ON FORM' EXHIBITION

ART WITHIN BORDERS

A glorious mixture of tradition and modernism, Asthall Manor has grown into a home for both beautiful blooms and striking sculptures

BY CHARLOTTE BROOK



Approached down a curving drive flanked by horse-chestnut-trees, Asthall Manor, near Burford, resembles a quintessentially English country estate. The handsome gabled Jacobean house is encircled by a blooming, surely centuries-old garden that brims with blowzy shrubs, leading on its north side down to lush meadows and the banks of the River Windrush. Cattle low in pasture across the valley, swifts dart overhead and bees buzz about in the borders. The peace is almost tangible, and it seems that Asthall has ever been thus. But the nearer you get, the more you realise all is perhaps not quite as it seems: look closer, and ethereal, avant-garde sculptures materialise out of the flora and foliage, appearing unexpectedly at home in this rather grand setting.

This harmonious mix of tradition and innovation is the vision of Asthall's energetic proprietor Rosie Pearson, who oversees the manor and its grounds from her vast kitchen, painted strawberry-sorbet pink. The daughter of the 3rd Viscount Cowdray, Pearson grew up on the family's Sussex estate and studied English at Oxford before throwing



ABOVE: ASTHALL MANOR. RIGHT: A ROSE-LADEN GATEWAY IN THE GROUNDS



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convention to the wind and moving with her partner, a Rastafarian musician, to Jamaica, where she set up and ran a preparatory school. After the couple separated, Pearson returned to England with their two young daughters in 1997, and set about finding somewhere magical to bring up her family, eventually alighting upon Asthall Manor – an atmospheric, if dilapidated, 17th-century villa, with almost no garden to speak of. What it lacked in landscaping, it made up for in literary history, having been the childhood home of the Mitford sisters in the 1920s, going on to feature as Alconleigh in Nancy's novel *The Pursuit of Love*.

The first thing Pearson did was call in landscape designers of distinction Julian and Isabel Bannerman, with a brief to create a garden with a sense of unruly beauty that would, at its edges, drift into the surrounding scenery. As Isabel puts it in their book of projects, *Landscape of Dreams*, 'she wanted Charleston, not David Hicks'. The Bannermans cast their signature spell, bringing pastoral romance, old-fashioned Englishness and modern wilderness to the six acres through a master plan that included letting rip on the roses: from May onwards, the manor is wreathed in extraordinarily prolific, deeply fragrant puffs of free-flowering varieties. Thick clouds of petals in every hue of pink and red, including the delicate 'Cécile Brunner', double-flower 'Albertine', sumptuous 'Madame Grégoire Staechelin' and 'Noisette Carnée', hug the upper floor of the house like frothy chiffon.

The property is now closely encircled by poetically boisterous borders, from which phlox, blush-pink astrantia and plump peonies spring forth as summer approaches, underpinned by the peppery leaves of geraniums and Jerusalem sage. Self-seeding angelica and verbena skirmish around path edges and between paving in the new courtyard at the back of the house, which faces a steep bank. As a solution to this challenging gradient, Pearson struck upon



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE HOKUSAI-INSPIRED TOPIARY YEW 'WAVES'. THE NATURAL POOL AND POOL HOUSE. 'NOISSETTE CARNÉE' ROSES ON THE LAUNDRY ROOF



the idea of planting and trimming yew into a cluster of crested waves crashing towards the house, directly inspired by Hokusai's famous print. On the slope's far end, tilted towards the kitchen's mullioned window, is a geometric parterre of box-edged abundance dedicated to Pearson's daughters (an 'A' for Annie and 'D' for Dora can be spotted in the pattern). Out from each neatly trimmed unit's walls explode an ever-changing array of annuals: tomato plants and sun-flowers this year. Even the practical parts of the parkland are rendered charming: a profusion of sweet peas weaves its way around the fencing, shrouding what turns out to be the tennis court, and lily pads float and flower on the surface of the natural swimming pool. Mossy steps in the shadow of several old sweet-gum-trees lead from the pool down to the wild meadows and rushes by the river.

All this is overseen by the head gardener Owen Vaughan, a Highgrove alumnus who leapt at the chance to join Asthall last summer, having been closely following the groundbreaking way roses were grown here. In order to better echo the free-form bounty elsewhere, his predecessors had decided to replace the traditional technique of training the shrubs into straight lines with hand-tying stems into spiralling circles – an idea that yielded miraculous results. By stripping all leaves and bending stems round and round, into both flat circles up against the house and three-dimensional orbs that encase perennial shrubs in the borders, they were able to slow the sap travelling along the branches, which – it turns out – makes the rose produce up to four times the quantity of buds. 'A team of us start pruning in September and we all have horribly scratched hands to show for it by the time we finish in March,' he says. 'But when they start flowering... it's a dream.' On a breezy



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: SCULPTURES ON THE LAWN. THE MITFORD SISTERS UNITY (LEFT) AND JESSICA IN THE GARDEN OF ASTHALL. 'SARAH BERNHARDT' PEONIES AMONG FLOWERING SEA KALE. ASTRANTIAS, VERBASCUMS AND PEONIES COMING INTO FLOWER. THE ENTRANCE TO THE MEADOW

day, the scent from the flowing pearl-pink 'New Dawn', which festoons the upstairs windows, floats into bedrooms, while visitors to the ground floor will be hit by a citrus fragrance released by white philadelphus that rambles up the house's north corner.

For a month every other summer, Asthall has hosted a stone-only sculpture exhibition titled 'On Form', which, since launching 18 years ago, has quietly gained a reputation for being as enchanting as it is educational. The garden's perfumed pleasures and wayward beauty were, from the outset, designed to be at their best in June, in time for the opening. The fact the landscape has turned into a sculpture of its own seems to be almost a happy accident. But Anna Greenacre, who curates the selling show, visiting sculptors at their studios throughout the year and picking works to bring to Asthall, believes it is their co-existence that makes both flourish. 'A whole other sensory world appears here, for a month,' she says. 'Sculptures bring contours, texture, intrigue, provoking thought and conversation – and plants have a lovely way of softening them. Alchemilla spreads wonderfully over the bases, and verbascum leaps up next to a shoulder-height statue. Life hums around each piece.'

Pearson is equally passionate about the project. 'It's so exciting seeing the artworks arrive and settle into their places in April, and then watching the botanical explosion happen around them as the opening approaches,' she tells me over a convivial beetroot risotto team lunch at her



kitchen table, an indoor papaya-tree fluttering overhead. Along the rose-clad cloister from here stands the former barn, which the Mitfords' father, 2nd Baron Redesdale, converted into a soaring Arts and Crafts ballroom. This is transformed, for the purposes of the exhibition, into a domestic space, partly inspired by

Kettle's Yard, the home-turned-museum in Cambridge, to display the more delicate creations and to show ways of living with sculpture.

Things will, of course, be a little different this year. As visitors cannot see the exhibition in person, they will be able to enjoy the planned programme of events – daily talks by a sculptor, plantsman or curator, poetry readings at dusk and birdsong walks at dawn led by a composer – virtually, via a wonderfully evocative new website that will showcase the full curation and allow everyone to admire the art from afar.

'The exhibition is a living work of art in a way, with all its moving parts,' Pearson reflects. 'We are adapting as we go. When you're sculpting from stone, as with gardening, you work with what you've got – maybe that's why the two work so well together... It's about form and freedom, isn't it?' □ 'On Form' (www.onformsculpture.co.uk) opens online on 13 June. 'Landscape of Dreams' by Isabel and Julian Bannerman (£25, Pimpernel Press) is out now.



'SONG (VERSION 5)' BY JON ISHERWOOD ON THE LAWN

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