



Where form meets freedom

Every second summer, Rosie Pearson shares her manor house garden with 300 sculptures and thousands of visitors. She tells us about creating a space for art, wildlife and the community

Words Zena Alkayat | *Photography* Kim Lightbody

It all began with a garden and its gateposts. In 1998, when Rosie Pearson moved into Asthall Manor, she not only took on a house and 18 acres of land, but also the weight of history: the 17th-century Cotswolds property was once home to the aristocratic Mitford sisters, who grew up there before fame and infamy found them. Restoring such a place would be nothing if not daunting.

‘I thought, oh my god, what have I done,’ Rosie tells me. ‘I didn’t quite realise what I’d taken on, but a friend of mine, to be helpful, brought around Julian and Isabel Bannerman while I wasn’t in. They wrote me this amazing letter about the potential of the garden and their plan to bring it alive.’

And so Rosie started outside, inviting the two celebrated garden designers to create a place of parterres, romantic borders, lawns and wild edges that today remain striking and characterful under the care of head gardener Owen Vaughan.

Rosie also wanted something unusual for the gateposts, and sought the help of sculptor Anthony Turner, who created two knotted stone sculptures to top them. The installation sparked an idea, and in 2002 she established *On Form* – a humble public exhibition showcasing the work of a few sculptors to be held in the Bannerman-designed garden. Twenty years on, Rosie continues to open her garden gate biannually, but these days presents hundreds of sculptures by some of the



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world’s most acclaimed artists, and invites thousands of visitors to appreciate the meeting of art and horticulture (this year, *On Form* is on from June 12 to July 10).

Sharing your home in this way must come with its challenges, but when I ask Rosie if it’s intrusive, she waves away the idea. ‘There are always people coming and going. I actually want to open it up more.’ Over the years, she has found ways of doing just that. Most notably, a whole swathe of the grounds are under the very thoughtful care of grower Tim Mitchell, who started a kitchen garden with the philosophy: ‘Some for the birds, some for the bugs and some for us’.

Tim doesn’t just pay lip service to organic growing, soil health and natural pest control: two minutes in this buzzing,

unruly but productive plot is testament his dedication to ecological vibrancy. ‘Learning to be tolerant and observing what’s going on is the key,’ he explains. ‘Is that insect truly competing for my food? Is it bringing another benefit? It’s about letting go of any preconceived idea of “messiness” or “protection”. It’s about holding your nerve.’ Tim follows a CSA (community supported agriculture) model, running a veg box scheme for locals, and sharing his knowledge, skills and access to land through volunteer days and workshops.

‘We’re part of various schemes helping landowners to link up, plant trees and create wildlife corridors, and that’s so important to me,’ says Rosie. ‘I want Asthall Manor to be a gathering place full of human life and wildlife.’ It’s not quite in the Mitford spirit, but it’s hard to imagine a more worthwhile legacy. **b**