



OLD ENGLISH
Asthall Manor in Oxfordshire, the walls covered in climbing roses

Winter in Asthall's fairy tale world of old roses

The bountiful, beautiful and healthy roses at Asthall Manor are the product of patience and skill. By Val Bourne

Conjure up an English garden in your mind's eye and you'll almost certainly imagine mellow stone walls festooned with roses, a mullioned house and a gently rolling landscape sloping down to water meadows alongside a fast-flowing river. That's Asthall Manor to a tee, a 17th-century Oxfordshire house with a six-acre garden that drifts into the Windrush valley where red kites swoop over the fields below.

Asthall Manor has a romantic past to live up to. Lord Redesdale, father of Unity, Diana, Jessica, Nancy and Debo Mitford, extended the house after moving here in 1919. The ballroom, once the barn, welcomed visitors such as Winston and Clementine Churchill to summer parties and in winter there were hunting and shooting weekends. After seven happy years the family decamped to a newly built house in nearby Swinbrook. Three of the sisters are buried in Swinbrook churchyard, a place of pilgrimage for Mitford devotees. Today Asthall Manor is home to Rosanna Pearson, who acquired the property almost 20 years ago. With no garden to speak of, in 1998 Rosie invited Isabel and Julian Bannerman, leading garden designers famous for adding an element of fairytale magic, to cast their spell.

Since then it's fallen to Asthall's head gardener Mark Edwards to keep the Bannermans' magic flowing. He's been here for 17 years. The first words Julian Bannerman ever said to him were "don't go" because the couple sensed he shared their vision and, more importantly, had the skills to make it happen. As Mark says: "I want

whimsy here and there, like a brightly painted gypsy caravan. The main house, ballroom and the cloisters are rose-strewn and every archway and gateway supports them.

However, when Mark arrived, the roses and shrubs were only a year old, so he fed and nurtured them for a year or two. "We got the wires up the walls and I started to train the stems horizontally, but it didn't look right against the house, so I took the leaves off and began bending the stems to form circles against the walls. It looked like a medieval tapestry, like a briar rose around the edge of an ancient manuscript. You get the perfume and colour in summer and, in winter, you get a dramatic effect like a wall sculpture."

By the time I discovered the garden, on a very soggy NGS Sunday in June, it was a vision. The archway by the road dripped with roses, hanging their heads slightly in summer rain. They were so full of flower, almost as though extra blooms had been added by a *Midsomer Murders* crew member. 'The Garland' (Wells, Britain 1835), was better than I've ever seen it, with clusters of white flowers softened by a suggestion of rhubarb-red. This is Mark's favourite rose and it was Gertrude Jekyll's, too. However, this *R. moschata* x *R. multiflora* hybrid often produces too much stem so that the flowers dangle and bob about. At Asthall it was tight to the wall and rubbed shoulders with ramblers such as 'Rambling Rector' and 'Wedding Day'. A free-flowering buff-apricot French rose, called 'William Allen Richardson' (Ducher, France 1877), softened the whites; this is the rose visitors always ask about. I'd never seen it before.

The secret of Asthall's success with roses is simple: it's all in the pruning and feeding. Mark trains each rose between late September and late

ANDREW CROWLEY FOR THE TELEGRAPH; ISABEL BANNERMAN



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