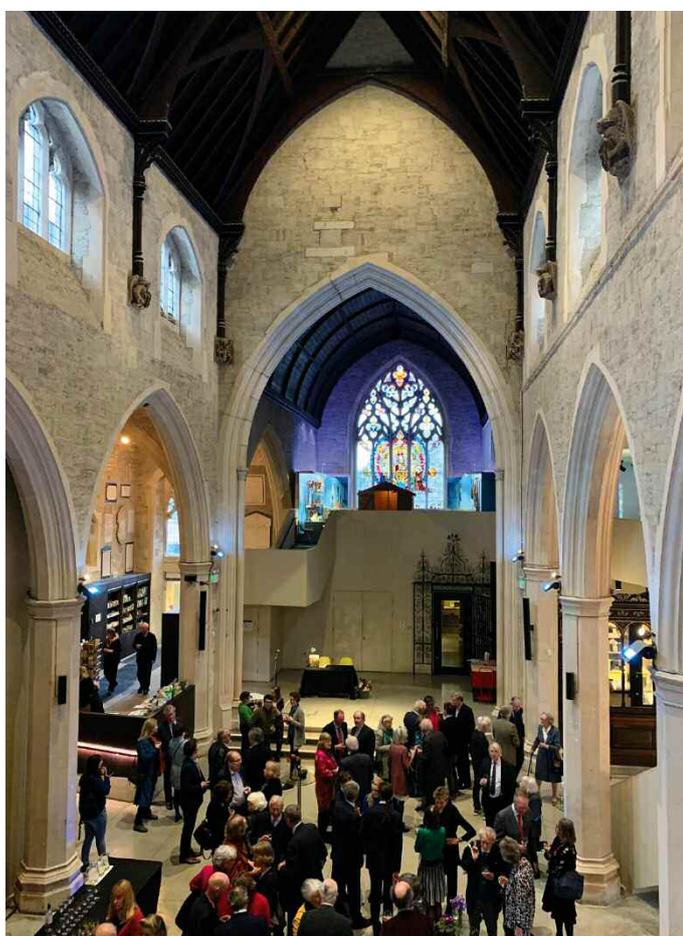




Kiftsgate Court Gardens: *celebrating three generations of women gardeners*



Book launch at Garden Museum Lambeth

On April 23rd the Garden Museum in Lambeth held an evening called “In Conversation – Kiftsgate Gardens”. Very rarely do the owners of Kiftsgate speak in public, so keen horticulturists seized the opportunity to quiz them on their immense gardening knowledge, as well as discover the fascinating history of the garden.

Kiftsgate Court Gardens is found in the heart of the Cotswolds. With its honeyed Cotswold stone and Palladian architecture overlooking the Vale of Evesham, it has a timeless quality to it. One of the interesting aspects of Kiftsgate is that it has been created by three very independent-minded women over three generations, each with their own vision and style. As such, the garden has evolved and changed over time as each woman has taken over and added their signature to the garden.

Who are these three women of Kiftsgate? The first is Heather Muir, who established the garden during the 1920s and 1930s a time when gardening was at some of its most creative. With the likes of Vita Sackville-West, Daisy Lloyd and her friend Lawrence Johnston (who created Hidcote Gardens, which is directly opposite Kiftsgate and is now a National Trust Garden), they all created outstanding gardens that have stood the test of time.

Heather started with an almost blank canvas to create her masterpiece, at first glance what she created looks typically English, with its rose border, bluebell wood and clipped hedges. The top part of the garden is level and boasts wide borders, a sunken white garden and an Italian-style four square garden. It then, however, drops down a dramatically steep slope to a lower garden. Making the most of this steep bank, Heather created narrow, winding paths and steps planting a range of Mediterranean



plants, such as drought-tolerant cistus, rosemary, abutilons, spiky agaves and ceanothus. Along the terraces leading down to the lower garden, Scots pines frame the views across the Cotswolds – it is this aspect that makes Kiftsgate unique.

In 1938, Heather bought what she believed to be a *Rosa moschata*, a rambling musk rose, which was later identified as a filipes and given the cultivar name of ‘Kiftsgate.’ This rose can still be seen today. It is a rampant rambling rose that clammers up trees and walls and cascades down with simple white petals and a heavenly scent. Heather went on to propagate a similar rose to the Kiftsgate but much smaller and less rampant with a simple white flower, which was named ‘Rosa Heather Muir.’

It was this huge legacy that Heather left to her daughter, Diany. Diany was committed to learning all the plants and shrubs in the garden, littering her dressing table and mirror with notes on the names of plants (often misspelled) to help with memorising them. Her mother had moved out of Kiftsgate but was nearby, and Diany admits in one article she wrote that it was difficult to change things and in fact it took me four years to pluck up enough self-confidence to alter my mother’s plans but realised finally that gardens, like time, do not stand still and once I had started to implant my own idea, there was no turning back”.

Diany became an accomplished plantswoman, with a feeling for the unusual. Her first big project, in the early 1960s, was the creation of the half-moon swimming pool on the lawn of the lower garden, she also significantly changed the white sunken garden from her mother’s design, it was one of her favourite places to sit in old age. Diany was more hands-on than her mother, but there was still a team of gardeners helping. In 1974, however, Diany divorced and money became an issue, she moved out of Kiftsgate and even considered removing the roof.

She once commented: “How exciting to have a ruin – a grand ruin complete with Palladian portico in the middle of the garden. It would be so easy to take the roof off Kiftsgate, allowing the yellow Banksia rose to weep over the top and perhaps meet up with the wisteria. No longer would one have to cut the huge leaved magnolia *delavayi* away from the windows, and per-

haps... the Kiftsgate rose would seize its chance to overpower all around and make it the ramparts of a ‘Sleeping Beauty Palace’. I know I will never do it as it still means too much to me.”

Diany was determined to maintain the garden to the highest standard; with this in mind she opened the garden to the public on an annual basis as opposed to the odd viewing her mother had allowed. Having visitors did not come naturally to Diany as she was a shy person. But with strong views on gardening, she would often be heard fiercely quizzing customers who were buying the Kiftsgate rose (from cuttings she had propagated) as to whether their gardens were suitable or large enough for such a rampant rose, and even telling them to put it back. Diany passed the garden on to her daughter Anne in 1988, where she taught her how to manage and maintain Kiftsgate. Diany didn’t always approve of Anne’s changes – she was once caught cutting the heads off the tulips Anne had planted, as she did not like bulbs in borders.

Anne Chambers, along with her husband Johnny, now runs Kiftsgate. Once again, she has placed her own stamp on the garden. They now welcome more than 20,000 visitors a year, yet for Anne, Kiftsgate has remained a personal family garden. “We have only two gardeners and occasional help, because if you employ more people you begin to lose that direct contact with the garden and it’s not yours anymore,” she says.

The Chambers have made two significant extensions to the garden, the water garden is a stunning black pond covering the area of the Heather’s old clay tennis court. The pond is surrounded by high yew hedges with white paving stones leading to the central island of grass. In the pond stands a sculpture of 24 gilded bronze leaves dripping water into the inky blackness of the pond. It is in stark contrast to the rest of the garden with its modern lines and comes as a complete surprise as you round the yew hedge and stumble upon it, yet it is a calm and peaceful space that reflects the changing times of the garden.

An even bigger project was the creation of the ‘Mound and the Avenue’, which opened to the public in 2017. A mown path leads through the orchard to a flight of steps up a semi-circular mound made from thousands of tons of soil excavated from the



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water garden. The banks are planted with hedges of Rugosa roses and an avenue of tulip trees leads to a stainless steel leaf sculpture, designed by Pete Moorhouse. It has a Moroccan feel to it and again the sculptural quality of the garden is in contrast to the dense planting of the more traditional borders, yet it all works in harmony.

These three women have each devoted more than 30 years of their lives to the magical garden, and Anne still prunes her mother and grandmother’s roses herself. The Kiftsgate rose is a lasting legacy to their tireless work and dedication to this garden.



For further information

To find out more about the garden please go to www.kiftsgate.co.uk.

A book to mark the centenary of the garden is available for sale on Amazon titled ‘Kiftsgate Court Gardens – Celebrating Three Generations of women Gardeners’.

For the talk on Kiftsgate at the Garden Museum go www.gardenmuseum.org.uk

Doone Mackenzie-Francis trained at Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland, before becoming head of PR and marketing at Leiths School of Food and Wine. She is available to help teach you some cooking tips and tricks in your house. If you would like to know more email: dounemac@hotmail.com

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