

Book REVIEWS

Quadrangles and a Quandary

the current head gardeners of each place, whose skill makes that beauty possible.

Oxford College Gardens combines erudition with elegant writing. The varied literary references add to the pleasure, as do the quiet jokes and rare words such as ‘festoonery’. Andrew Lawson’s photographs superbly complement the finesse of the text, highlighting the glories of the plantings at different seasons.

The majority of the buildings of Oxford’s colleges are officially ‘listed’, many of them Grade I, and almost all are well and sensitively maintained. Were this not the case, English law provides for warnings to be given and, in extremis, for the property to be confiscated.

A recent case of confiscation was that of Apethorpe, in Northamptonshire, a Grade I house whose mellow stone and wings of different periods of architecture arranged around courtyards make it much resemble one of the smaller Oxford colleges.

It was owned, and then abandoned, by a Libyan businessman. Two of his employees nobly worked on without pay, doing what they could to keep it going – an impossible task. The quandary was: should it be left to fall into ruin – or should public money be spent to save it?

In the end, English Heritage decided to confiscate the property and spend £8m bringing it back to a state where it might be sold to a more responsible owner. But who could afford to buy such a place, let alone continue the restoration and maintain it afterwards? Step forward a Frenchman, Jean-Christophe Iseux, Baron von Pffetten, who bought it for just £2.5m in 2014.

Apethorpe tells this remarkable story, and recounts the extensive research

undertaken by different EH teams. Every paragraph of the book is interesting but unfortunately it is so obviously a compilation of work by dozens of people that it makes for a worthy rather than a riveting read.

When Linden Groves and I were researching our book on the gardens owned by English Heritage, we were strictly forbidden to mention Apethorpe, although it was then in EH’s ownership and although John Watkins, EH’s Head of Gardens, told me there was probably an interesting Edwardian garden there. So I was much looking forward to reading about what had been discovered.

Sadly, the gardens are mentioned only spasmodically. Because the house was built, changed and added to over several centuries, there would always have been gardens suitable for its status, but little evidence has been found for what they looked like. Much of the conjecture is based on a 19th-century copy of a c.1740 plan, which, if accurate, shows flower gardens with pavilions, a bowling green, a yew walk with statuary, and an orchard – probably not all created at the same time. Later new brick walls, a wilderness and an orangery were added. In 1904 new owners brought in Reginald Blomfield, architect and garden designer, who worked on the gardens at the same time as the house. He followed the outlines of the old plan but made radical changes, adding a rose garden with a circular pool and fountain, a sunk (ie. Italian) garden, the ‘Millstone’ garden which had a path made from old millstones, and a rustic pergola – all fashionable at the time, and mostly lost later through neglect. The new owner may decide to start again from scratch – but at least we know what was once there.

Gillian Mawrey

Above: The Radcliffe Observatory, now in Templeton Green College, was designed in 1773 as a ‘Temple of the Winds’ by James Wyatt. From *Oxford College Gardens*.

Oxford College Gardens

By Tim Richardson
Photographs by Andrew Lawson
Frances Lincoln. 320 pages. £40.00.
ISBN 978-0-7112-3218-1.

Apethorpe: The Story of an English Country House

Edited by Kathryn A. Morrison
Yale. 484 pages. £60.00.
ISBN 978-0-300-14870-1.

Trudging bravely in the steps of Mavis Batey, whose *Oxford Gardens* has been the vade mecum for over 30 years, Tim Richardson considers the past as well as the current state of the gardens belonging to one of the world’s oldest and most eminent universities. Although the Botanic Garden and the University Parks are part of the university itself, the gardens in this book are mostly attached to individual colleges, each with its own history and character.

Oxford’s buildings offer gardeners a variety of backgrounds, from old to modern, and of spaces, from tiny courtyards to a massive deer park. One college, Worcester, has its own substantial lake while many enjoy riverside settings.

Richardson, himself an Oxford alumnus, appreciates not only the beauty of what he is looking at but the expertise that lies behind it, and he includes a list of