

Busy Lizzie

Trea Martyn describes how urban living and a historical oasis in the capital inspired her interest in garden history, and in Elizabethan gardens in particular.

I came to garden history by chance. A series of fortunate events led me to the fascinating world of Renaissance gardens, landscapes and architecture and, eventually, to write about how Elizabeth I's courtiers vied with each other to create spectacular gardens – at enormous cost.

Like every other inhabitant of London, I appreciated its parks and squares and tried to live within walking distance of a green space. But the real starting point for me came when I was living in Shoreditch, East London, overlooking a canal though miles from any park. A few minutes down the Kingsland Road, however, in the midst of take-aways, restaurants and shops, stood the Geffrye Museum, a domestic interiors museum located within eighteenth-century almshouses surrounded by spacious grounds planted with ancient plane trees. At the side, a path led to a walled herb garden centred on a bronze fountain.

I was in my second year of a PhD investigating how Alexander Pope's dealings with his powerful patrons enabled him to become one of the few poets to have made a fortune from writing poetry. In between writing chapters of my thesis, I went for walks in the City, finishing with a stroll around the grounds of the Geffrye Museum. Here I would sit, beneath a canopy of jasmine, listening to the fountain and enjoying the scents of the herbs.

The garden at the Geffrye Museum engendered in me a curiosity about plants and their medicinal uses: though I was supposed to be researching eighteenth-century poets and the brave new world of high finance, now and then for light relief I ordered a few books on herbalism from the British Library, including herbals by John Gerard and Nicholas Culpeper; along with this went a typically late-1990s set of interests that encompassed, among other things, pure plant oils, Ayurveda (with its emphasis on the power of plants in healing) and organic fruit, vegetables and herbs bought at Spitalfields Market. I discovered that Hoxton, near my home, was once famous for its market and nursery gardens.

Above: a detail from an 18th-century map of London showing gardens in the East End.



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I had imagined that my thesis, on the nitty-gritty of Pope's friendships with his patrons, and my new enthusiasm for herbs and plants were poles apart until I discovered that Pope and his supporters had a shared passion for gardens. At his headquarters of Burlington House (now the Royal Academy), Pope's most influential friend, Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, dispensed patronage to his protégé William Kent, artist, interior designer and garden designer, as freely as he helped some of the greatest writers, composers and actors of the age, including Handel and Garrick. The revolutionary designs of Burlington's garden at Chiswick and Pope's garden and grotto at Twickenham helped create the new fashion for naturalistic landscapes, as opposed to formal layouts.

Gardens in eighteenth-century England, like sixteenth-century pleasure grounds, seemed to have meant much more than they do today. Stowe can be interpreted as a political landscape: via the iconographic elements in his diverse collection of buildings which celebrated the values of nobility, Viscount Cobham saw his scheme as a challenge to Sir Robert Walpole's government in the 1730s.

Despite their differences, there were many connections between eighteenth-century and sixteenth-century gardens, such as the novelty of their appearance and the importance of Renaissance Italian and classical models in their design. I began to teach garden and landscape history, charting the evolution of gardens from the plots of ancient Egypt to the landscape parks of eighteenth-century Europe. Researching the history of designed landscapes, I found Renaissance gardens to be the most intriguing, as much for the vibrancy of their creators and the extraordinary stories attached to them as for their beauty of design. Elizabethan gardens struck me as particularly haunting since none have survived – there are only ruins and reconstructions. Formal gardens were difficult to maintain. Any that lasted into the eighteenth century were replaced by easier-to-manage, naturalistic layouts. At the time of my discovering all this, there was a growing interest in lost romantic gardens, which reached its apogee in the Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall.

A main attraction about Elizabethan gardens for me was that they were essentially herb gardens: the geometrical patterns enclosing flower beds were outlined in herbs. Hyssop, thyme and lavender not only produced delightful scents but cloaked foul odours, an important consideration for Elizabethans and particularly for the queen with her notoriously sensitive sense of smell. Like her chief political adviser, William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Elizabeth was devoted to herbal cures. Cecil's chief gardener was the great herbalist and plantsman John Gerard (c.1545-1612).

Elizabeth inherited her interest in herbalism from her father, who had his own collection of herbal potions. She was fiercely opposed to physic (more akin to what we would now call conventional medicine), refusing to take it even when close to death. This gave her something in common with her people, most of whom relied on herbal remedies, if only because English physicians charged the highest fees in Europe. On one occasion, she intervened in a dispute between the Royal College of Physicians and a poor woman apothecary, defending her right to dispense remedies, despite the physicians' desire for a monopoly on herbal medicine. Elizabeth drank rosewater cordials and sent them to friends to speed their recovery from illness. Conserves made from flowers such as violets were very popular: as Gerard described in his *Herball* of 1597, the conserve made from clove gillyflowers (pinks) and sugar 'wonderfully above measure doth comfort the heart'.

During her lifetime, several herbals were dedicated to Elizabeth; the earliest was William Turner's *New Herball* (1551). The result of Turner's travels over England, this was the first book of its kind to be written in English, with records of 238 native plants. His dedication revealed both Princess Elizabeth's unusual interest in botany and her increasing prestige. Gerard supervised Cecil's greatest garden at Theobalds Palace, in Hertfordshire; its rival in terms of acclaim was the Italianate garden at Kenilworth Castle, in Warwickshire, created by Elizabeth's favourite of the time, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, for his nineteen-day festivities

held in her honour in 1575. It appeared that Elizabeth's two most powerful courtiers had duelled with gardens for her favour. The story of this horticultural rivalry is the kernel of *Elizabeth in the Garden*. The competition between Dudley and Cecil to create ever more fabulous gardens inspired many others to lay out extravagant pleasure grounds of their own so as to impress the queen. Within a decade, the English garden had dramatically changed.

Looking into Elizabeth's love of gardens and plants brought many surprises: the queen loved walking, and so her courtiers planted long avenues lined with lime, elm and ash trees, leading to elaborate banqueting houses – in the palatial park of his house in Kent, Lord Cobham entertained Elizabeth in a tiered tree house in the boughs of a lime tree. Boating was a favourite pastime: at Theobalds, Cecil and his hydraulic expert created a lake and a labyrinth of canals, with ornamental islands and trick fountains.

When I began writing about Dudley's and Cecil's most celebrated gardens, there were no real plans to develop their sites. I have long imagined how the garden at Kenilworth created by Dudley for Elizabeth might have looked – a contemporary writer described it as 'worthy to be called paradise' – but the chances of its being reconstructed seemed slim. Since then English Heritage has begun work on recreating the sixteenth-century pleasure grounds at Kenilworth; by next year, the castle will have the first Elizabethan garden of royal status.

There have been some encouraging changes at Theobalds (now Cedars Park, near Cheshunt). Cecil's once-magnificent palace has been placed on the English Heritage Buildings at Risk Register. Broxbourne Council has developed a conservation plan in preparation for a bid for funding from the Parks for People programme to carry out work to interpret the history of Cedars Park for all sectors of the community, opening up the possibility of re-forming the sixteenth-century maze garden and boating lake.

Gardens are transient creations, as Elizabeth, Dudley and Cecil knew. But although Elizabethan gardens have disappeared, their designs are of enduring interest. ■



Above: herb beds in the garden at the Geffrye Museum, Kingsland Road, London.

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Elizabeth in the Garden is published by Faber and Faber, £18.99.