

# BEDS, BORDERS & BETJEMAN

*The historic gardens of England are famous the world over for their formal elegance and imaginative flair. Timothy Mowl has made it his mission to chronicle every one of them – along with their creators, many of whom are far from garden-variety. He talks to Hannah Johnson.*

**D**usty archives and green wellies: the two essential components of the garden historian's life, according to Timothy Mowl, Professor of History of Architecture and Designed Landscapes in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. And he should know. His ambitious 36-part series of books on the Historic Gardens of England (that's one for each of the old counties) aims to be the horticultural equivalent of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's epoch-making *Buildings of England*.

Ten books have already been published so there's a mere 26 to go. At 70,000 words and well over a hundred gardens per book, it's a lot of work for one man and Mowl is necessarily sanguine about his chances of finishing the series himself. 'I'm too old, really,' he sighs, 'and I started too late.' Luckily, thanks to a £300,000 grant from the Leverhulme Trust, students on the University's MA in Garden History now co-author the books, undertaking much of the research in those dusty archives before donning the green wellies for site visits with Mowl.

'The Leverhulme Trust grant-aided Pevsner when he was going round the country doing his architectural guides, so I said to them: "Give me some money and I'll do the gardens",' Mowl explains. Along with information from English Heritage, the National Trust and the County Gardens Trusts, Pevsner's guides act as one of Mowl's starting points for researching each book. The curmudgeonly German, however, doesn't always prove helpful. 'Although all the major houses are in Pevsner, he never talks about the grounds,' Mowl laments, 'so he might describe a great 18th-century house but, when we get there, we find nothing has survived of the garden.'

But that's all part of the fun. The real excitement for Mowl is the detective work, comparing the existing site with old maps, photographs and articles to work out how the garden might once have looked.

#### **Pevsner and the poet**

The Historic Gardens of England series is the latest venture in an academic career that can only be described as eclectic. Mowl's work crosses centuries and disciplines: his life at Bristol began in the Department of History of Art but he now comes under the auspices of Archaeology and Anthropology. His first love was architectural history, a passion inspired not by Pevsner but the poet Sir John Betjeman.

'I lived in Wantage as a child,' he says, 'and Betjeman was effectively my next-door neighbour. His wife took me through my first communion: I used to go up to their house, The Mead, for classes. They were both very exotic figures: she drove a pony and trap everywhere, he always wore a battered gabardine mac and a panama hat. Ever since then I've felt a real connection with Betjeman.'

Mowl initially trained as a teacher, but his interest in architectural history won out, and he pursued an MA in the subject at Birmingham University, then a doctorate at St John's College, Oxford. Academic posts proved elusive in the dark decade of the 1980s when 'architectural history was hardly taught in universities', so he became an inspector for English Heritage, travelling up and down the country listing historic buildings. The turning point came in 1992, when Michael Liversidge, then head of Bristol's Department of History of Art, invited Mowl to deliver the Perry Art Lectures. He subsequently joined the Department, and combined lecturing with writing a number of books on subjects including park gate lodges, Freemasonic influences on Georgian Bath and 20th-century architectural experiment in Cheltenham.

He also returned to his earliest influence with a controversial polemic entitled *Stylistic Cold Wars: Betjeman versus Pevsner*, which caused quite a stir. 'We should all be Betjemanians,' Mowl argues. 'Pevsner's work is dry and scholarly whereas Betjeman's engages with human beings. I'm interested in architecture

because of the architects who designed the buildings, the patrons who commissioned them and the men and women who have enjoyed them. Pevsner was a great scholar but he didn't talk at all about the people who made the architecture he wrote about. It's the people that interest me.'

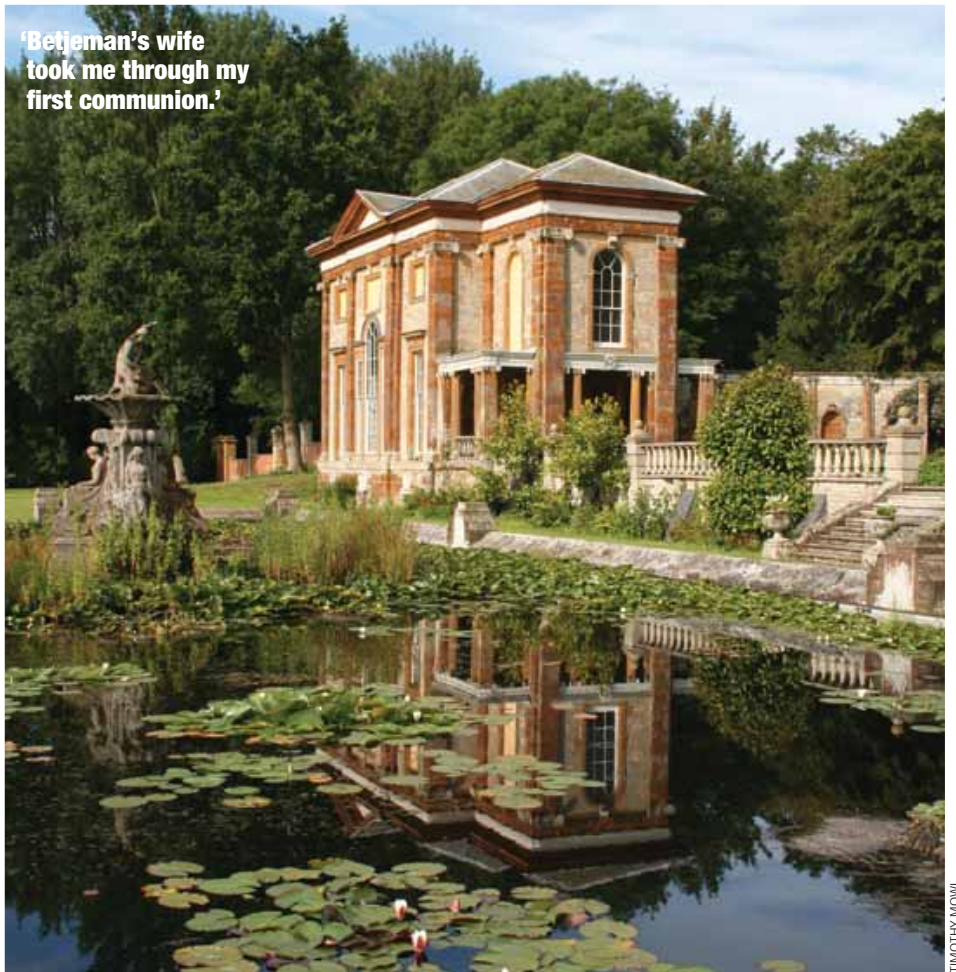
#### **Colourful specimens**

This interest informs the writing of the Historic Gardens of England series. Rather than being simply collections of facts with a gazetteer entry for each garden, the books are set out chronologically, each chapter driven by strong narratives about the men and women who created the gardens.

As a result, they teem with colourful characters such as Sir Samuel Hellier, an 18th-century Wolverhampton man whose garden included a mechanical hermit, 'Father Francis', posed as a monk at prayer, which would jerk into life when unsuspecting visitors approached. Hellier also hoped to build several stone temples and other follies but lacked the money to realise his plans. 'He ended up having to construct them from canvas instead,' Mowl says. 'He was waiting for his inheritance but it never came; his rich grandmother lived to be 92.'

Then there's Admiral Richard Whitworth, who staged mock naval battles in his ornamental lake, complete with a full-size frigate, cannons, miniature forts and local boys dressed as ratings. An oil painting in his Staffordshire house depicts the Admiral in full nautical regalia watching the 'battle' through a telescope.

Such English eccentrics don't just reside in the past. One of the joys of writing the series has been the encounters – some friendly, some rather less so – that Mowl has had with current owners. 'One of the gardens in the Wiltshire book was created by naturalists,' he says. 'Extraordinary people. I got very worried about them pruning the roses.'



'Betjeman's wife took me through my first communion.'

TIMOTHY MOWL

**Top left:** Geometric form entwined with flowers at Barbara Hepworth's Trewyn Sculpture at St Ives, Cornwall **Bottom left:** 1920s topiary designed by a Buddhist monk for the Tudor hunting lodge at Beckley Park, Oxfordshire **Right:** A Michelangelo design realised in Northamptonshire? One of the two 17th-century garden pavilions at Stoke Bruerne

Aristocrats, however, can prove difficult: 'They don't like you questioning things their ancestors might have done,' he says. One county proved particularly trying: 'It's effectively run by about nine families; they all know each other and they're all intermarried and incredibly proprietorial. They weren't too happy about someone coming into the county and criticising their gardens; but my books are scholarly analyses so I have to make judgments about good and bad design.'

Mowl is also fascinated by how gardens reflect their owner's character: 'You only have to go round Highgrove to know that,' he says. 'You can see exactly what kind of man Prince Charles is and what his interests are.' Likewise, when visiting a garden designed by the potter Clarice Cliff, he found it full of peonies, tulips and crocuses, 'all the things she painted on her pottery'.

#### New growth

So, what would Mowl's garden say about him? He quickly confesses to not being a gardener at all, leaving the creation of his own back garden to his wife and mother-in-law. 'It's very mixed,' he says, 'quite traditional in its planting, with a

herb garden and a "fairy garden" for our nine-year-old daughter. The one concession to modernism is our collection of contemporary figurative sculpture by local artists.'

He has recently been instrumental in creating a brand-new garden, though, as part of the University's centenary celebrations. Choosing the site was crucial: 'I wanted something that was really public,' he says, 'because I think it's very important for the University to reach out to the city. Our most public space is the green by the Wills Memorial Building, so that's where we decided the garden should be.'

The garden, designed by Anne de Verteuil, a former student on Mowl's MA in Garden History, is strongly architectural, with a row of gum trees running parallel to Park Street providing a sense of enclosure and privacy. The garden was constructed by Gardens and Grounds Services and co-ordinated by Alan Stealey of the University's Estates Office. Nicholas Wray, Curator of the University's Botanic Garden, advised on planting. It opened in May this year and has given Mowl a taste for more: 'What I'm also hoping is that the centenary garden makes people aware of what we can achieve, what we own as a university and how we ought to preserve, restore and engage with it – and with the city.'

For example, he'd love to see the 'fabulous, decayed' garden at Clifton Hill House restored to its former glory and occasionally opened to the public, its paths and terraces put back,

the summerhouses rebuilt and the planting recreated. An astonishing record of what this garden used to look like is drawn on a 1746 map belonging to the Merchant Venturers, who owned the entire manor of Clifton at that time. The superbly detailed map, kept at Merchant Venturers' Hall, shows the gardens of every house in Clifton right down to the little summer houses, labelled 'turrets', which all faced the Gorge so that the residents of Clifton could see the ships coming back to Bristol.

It's this human interest that stimulates Mowl most. One day he hopes to return to his first love: biography. In the past, his subjects have included the 18th-century aesthetes Horace Walpole and William Beckford, and the architect William Kent, but his sights are now set on a modern subject: Germaine Greer. 'She's a really iconic figure, one of the most important influences on late 20th- and early 21st-century culture. I'd love to meet her,' he says with a grin. 'And she's a passionate gardener ...' ❀