

Rare brilliance

Ven House, Milborne Port, Somerset

The home of Mike Fisher and Charles Allen, the Lord Allen of Kensington

There are few more beautiful houses in the South-West than Ven. But its formal gardens are in some ways even more remarkable, representing an extremely rare survival from the English Baroque. Christopher Stocks delves into their long and fascinating history

Photographs by Clive Nichols







VEN, near Milborne Port, Somerset, has to be one of the most romantic houses in England. Begun in about 1700 and extended in the reign of George I, it remained in the same family until 1957, at which point it seemed to be in terminal decline, before being rescued in the 1980s and magnificently restored. It was built for James Medlycott, an ambitious London lawyer who bought the manor and its existing farmhouse mainly, it would seem, as an easy route into political power: Milborne Port was a classic rotten borough, fielding two MPs despite its diminutive size, and, after showering the local people with cash, Medlycott was duly returned to Parliament in 1710.

In 1725, presumably to underline his upgraded social status, he commissioned the Wincanton architect Nathaniel Ireson to enlarge the original house. Ireson and Medlycott may

‘Heritage pears are trained over a 100ft-long pear tunnel’

have taken their inspiration from the London home of the 1st Duke of Buckingham and Normanby, which had been built some 20 years earlier. Designed by William Winde on a prominent site overlooking St James’s Park, Buckingham House is now rather better known as Buckingham Palace, having since been aggrandised beyond all recognition by John Nash and Sir Aston Webb.

The new, improved Ven needed a suitably smart new setting, so Medlycott engaged the services of a landscape architect to remodel its grounds. The design is generally attributed

to Richard Grange, whose name appears on a series of plans that have recently returned to Ven, although there are some doubts about the attribution: Grange is otherwise unknown to history and the plans are dated 1739, some eight years after Medlycott’s death.

Yet, whoever the designer was, the result was a masterpiece of the English Baroque and what makes Ven so special is that many of its features can still be seen 350 years later, making it one of the most complete early-18th-century gardens in the country. It’s a remarkably rare survival.

The 1739 master plan shows the house at the centre of a series of formal gardens, approached from the north by a short, straight entrance drive that runs between narrow canals. To the east is a service yard, with two rectangular enclosures beyond it, containing an orchard and the kitchen garden. To the south,

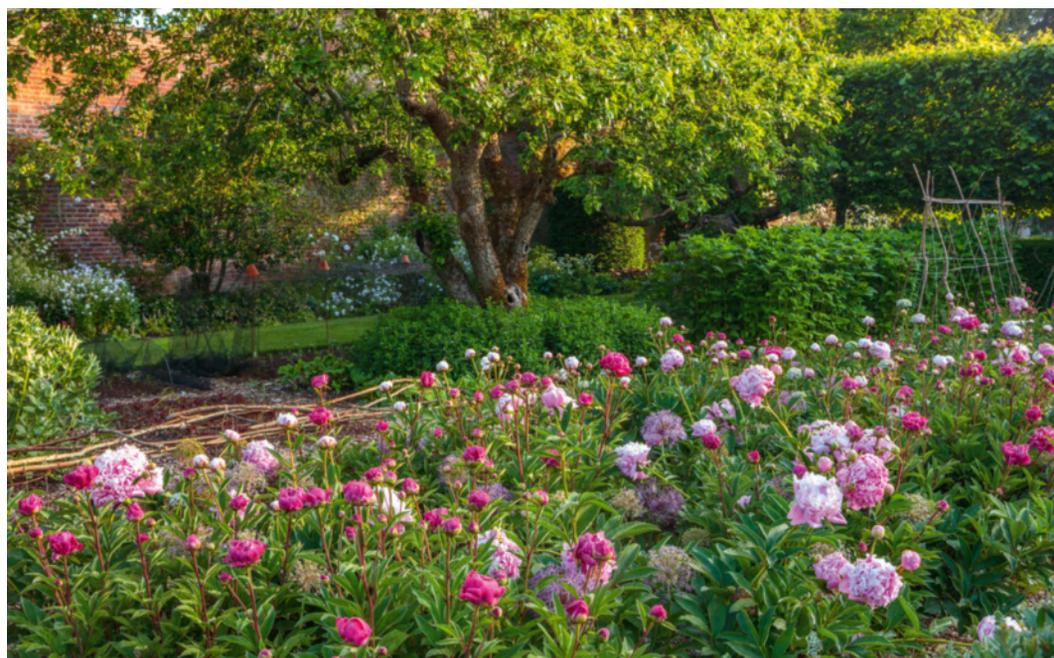


Preceding pages: Alliums and peonies in the walled garden with Ven House behind. Above: *Rosa* 'Constance Spry' and *Nepeta* 'Six Hills Giant' with the orangery beyond

a raised terrace with brick pavilions at either end overlooks a sunken parterre with a central canal, as, to the west, the designs shade off into informality, with a series of shrubberies and wildernesses to screen the outskirts of Milborne Port. Water plays an important part in the plan, with ornamental pools immediately west of the house and another large canal in the south-west corner of the park, but the most delightful feature is the clear stream that emerges from beneath the southern terrace of the house, which flows smoothly on today. Its original function isn't clear, other than as an attractive novelty, although it has been suggested it helped cool the cellars.



Above: The restored kitchen garden is now run under a no-dig regime. *Below:* Peonies in the abundant cutting garden, which is once again producing flowers for the house



These complex and sophisticated designs must have cost Medlycott a pretty penny, on top of the vast expenditure he laid out on the house, but he was not to enjoy the fruits of his success for long. Echoing many an ambitious man before and since, he ended up over-extending himself and, in 1731, died bankrupt.

Luckily for Ven, his descendants managed to hang on, settling down to the comfortable life of country squires. A century later, in 1835, Sir William Medlycott engaged Decimus Burton, architect of the Wellington Arch and the Temperate House at Kew, to modernise the house. He also made some changes to the gardens, removing the terrace pavilions and

replacing them with a broad flight of steps at one end and a tall conservatory at the other, as well as adding new courtyards on either side. By this time, most of the complex Baroque water features shown in the Grange plans seem to have been modified or lost, although the documentary evidence is thin. Burton retained the stream beneath the terrace, but extended the culvert it runs in well beyond his wide new steps, muting the impact of its re-emergence by the wall of the kitchen garden.

In October 1898, Ven was one of the first country houses to be featured in the pages of an influential new magazine. *COUNTRY LIFE* had been founded by Edward Hudson only →



a year previously and was still finding its feet when its (anonymous) writer visited Ven. The article focused on the gardens, describing them as 'in character appropriate to the house. Near it they have a certain classic formality. At a little distance the regular lines give place to the features of a more picturesque style, and the grounds approach to native simplicity'.

COUNTRY LIFE visited Ven for a second time in 1907, describing house and gardens in much more detail. The feature, by the architectural historian Henry Avray Tipping, marked the first realisation of how rare a survival the gardens were, but also caught Ven near the end of its nearly 200-year run as the Medlycott seat. Agricultural depression, the introduction of death duties and steep rises in income tax had all eaten into long-settled fortunes, before the First World War struck the final blow for many county families.

In 1916, the Revd Sir Hubert Medlycott moved to Sandford Orcas and started selling off parcels of the estate, a process continued by his son. Ven's decline accelerated during the Second World War, when, as were so many country houses, it was requisitioned, in Ven's case as a boys' school. The boys evidently



Top: Cornus kousa in flower by the balustrade overlooking the formal garden. Above: 'At a little distance the regular lines give place to the features of a more picturesque style, and the grounds approach to native simplicity,' commented COUNTRY LIFE in an 1898 article



The sunken parterre appears on the 1739 master plan of Ven. The broad steps were added by Decimus Burton in the 19th century

had the run of the park, playing football on a pitch covered in cowpats and attempting to dig out part of the river to form a swimming pond. Left empty after the war, Ven was put up for sale in 1957, and a succession of new owners followed, none of whom seem to have had the means or the mettle to tackle a large country house and what was left of the estate. By the late 1980s, Ven's grounds were in a sorry state: long gone were the herbaceous borders and the gravelled paths; the huge stone slabs on the terrace were cracked and the balustrade had lost some of its Coade stone urns.

Luckily for Ven, a saviour was about to ride to its rescue, in the larger-than-life character of Tommy Kyle, an American adventurer with an intriguing past and several big house projects already under his belt. After seeing it advertised in *COUNTRY LIFE*, he bought Ven in 1991. Over the next three years, he and his partner, Jerome Murray, spent a fortune upgrading and redecorating the house and grounds, using Richard Grange's plans to re-create the sunken and kitchen gardens, as well as refashioning the lake and planting hundreds of trees. By 1999, however, Mr Kyle had found another house to restore and Ven was sold again.

Two owners followed in relatively quick succession, then, in 2007, Ven was bought by the fashion designer Jasper Conran, who offered Mr Kyle his thanks for 'bequeathing a fabulous semi-mature garden that I could

bend slightly to my will'. Mr Conran added his own stamp to both the house and grounds, adding a swimming pool in the kitchen garden, but removing the tennis court, noting waspishly that 'This is Somerset, not Wimbledon.' As he told the garden designer Tania Compton for her 2015 book *The Private Gardens of England*, his aim at Ven was 'to make it into a gentler, more romantic place than the one it had become'. He filled the

'A saviour was about to ride to its rescue, a larger-than-life American adventurer'

conservatory with jasmine and paulownias so that their scent wafted through the house, and introduced towering New Zealand tree ferns (*Dicksonia antarctica*) to the orangery. Like Mr Kyle, however, when it came to houses Mr Conran had a wandering eye, and, in 2015, it was back on the market yet again.

Ven's current owners are Mike Fisher, architect and founder of the prodigiously successful international design company Studio Indigo, and Charles Allen, The Lord Allen of Kensington, former chief executive of Granada Television and ITV and chairman

of Global Radio. Mr Fisher refers to Ven as: 'My salvation. It's a reason for working as hard as we do.' Since their arrival, he has restored and redecorated the house from basement to attic, but he is a keen gardener, too. With the help of James Foster-Pegg and Kay Brewer of Howell Landscaping, all the outgrown borders have been refreshed and the kitchen garden has been converted to a no-dig system. The orchard has also been upgraded, with grand new iron-framed fruit cages and hundreds of extra fruit trees and bushes, plus numerous heritage varieties of pears, trained over a 100ft-long pear tunnel.

For the future, Mr Fisher has commissioned the garden designer Iain MacDonald to completely refashion the west courtyard; originally laid out for Mr Kyle as a white garden, its box parterres were already suffering badly from blight in Mr Conran's time, so this area is ripe for redevelopment.

After a long decline, it's exciting to see how these remarkable gardens have been brought back into such fine fettle and it's to be hoped that their future continues to be as bright. Mr Fisher certainly feels a strong sense of commitment to Ven and its gardens. 'Houses like Ven need to be used and to be part of the community. Ven has been an important part of village life for 300 years and we want to maintain that.' It's a sentiment that the Medlycotts surely would have seconded. 🍷