

# WONDER AND WHIMSY IN A FAIRY TALE GARDEN

Snaking moats of inky water, lawns studded with playful topiary, and a castle-like home have made Beckley Park a magical haven for three generations of a family

Sweeping views over the sculpted gardens at Beckley Park to the Oxfordshire countryside beyond, which glows like fading embers in late autumn.





A place to fire the imagination, this past hunting lodge has a special hold on Amanda Feilding, Countess of Wemyss and March, who grew up here.

**A** BEAUTIFUL 16TH CENTURY former hunting lodge rises above Oxfordshire's Otmoor Marsh mists, which serve only to enhance the enchantment and mystery surrounding its extraordinary, century-old, moated topiary garden. Seemingly remote, Beckley Park is reached more than a mile down a rutted, dirt track through a tunnel of trees, which camouflage any sense of place. It is rather like Alice's Wonderland tumble, but along, rather than down, a rabbit hole, culminating at the foot of a medieval, arched stone bridge in front of a tall, narrow, three-storey 'castle'. Other than birdsong and the occasional purr of a distant tractor, the 21st century silence is deafening.

The entrance bridge's moss-riddled, cobbled path bears the patina of age. In its crevices, timeless fragrant plants, such as rosemary, sage and lavender, struggle valiantly on into winter. The bridge leads across the middle of three concentric, but incomplete, moats, which lay askew, ringed like horseshoes around the house, in ever-increasing circles. Chunky blocks of buttress box, *Buxus sempervirens*, frame the west side's main entrance doorway, belying the artistry and wonderful whimsy of the topiarised gardens, which lay through the house to the east.

Beckley Park's chatelaine, Amanda Feilding, Countess of Wemyss and March, has lived in the Grade I listed, moated hunting lodge pretty much all her life. "It still feels like you travel back in time to the 18th century: there's no sign of any other era," she says. Her grandparents Clotilde and Percy Feilding, both architects, bought Beckley Park in 1919, for what Amanda describes as "the pure romance of the place". They sensitively and expertly restored the property, which had remained untouched for years in the hands of Yeoman tenant farmers. Percy is essentially credited with laying out and planting the exceptional 4-acre gardens, which Amanda's father, Basil Feilding, artistically sculpted many years later. On inheriting Beckley, Amanda's parents altered very little.

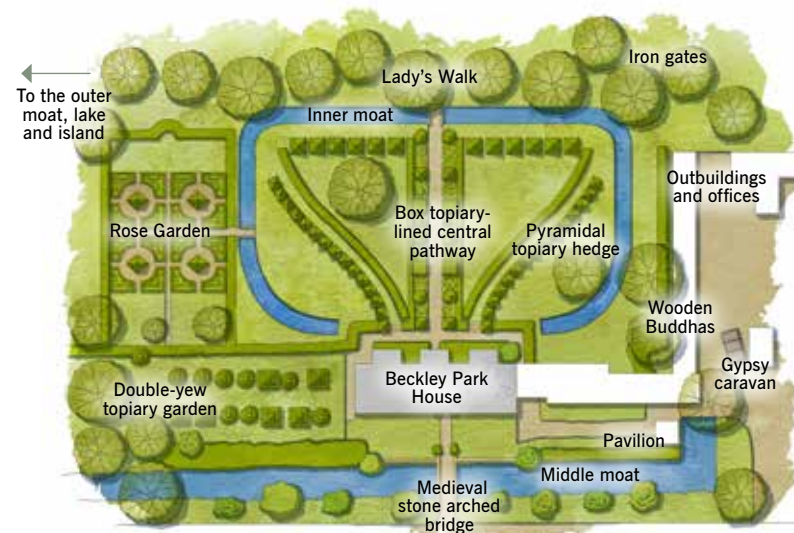
"In my lifetime, there was a terrible shortage of cash," admits Amanda. "My father adored beauty, paintings, antique objects and furniture, which left no money for home comforts or basic



Veiled in wetland mist, the almost otherworldly Beckley Park stands stark against the sky, with its sharp-roofed towers mirroring the topiary spears lining the central stone pathway.



A view along a lawn path to the side of the house, past coils and domes of topiary, shows how narrow the residence is.



necessities, but, somehow, he managed the monumental, largely nocturnal, task of keeping the farm and garden going."

She acknowledges the gardens make the house what it is. "They complement and extend the property, which is really just a passageway with beautiful fireplaces: a hunting lodge built for entertaining, and quite inconvenient for modern living."

#### Topiary gardens

It takes just four strides to cross the elongated house's narrow width, before passing through the back door to witness the unexpected, magnificent gardens which lay beyond. In the grassy void of a long-gone, moated fortress is a towering maze of 100-year-old yew hedging and boxwood topiary, clipped and clean-shaven, with shorn lawn in between. Walls of evergreen yew, 10ft (3m) high, enclose, shelter, separate and conceal the garden from the inner moat.

Within the internal garden, the design is geometric; dissected by a central, stone pathway, lined either side by broad, relatively low-lying boxwood hedges, studded at regular intervals with taller sculpted box balls, blocks and pyramids. Twin, sharp, triangular swards of grass radiate along the central axis, bound by a second low-lying hedge. Behind these rise, somewhat

menacingly, protective, jagged jaws of pyramidal topiary, like the defensive grill of an upturned portcullis. "My grandfather, with an architect's eye for geometry and an appreciation of Renaissance Italianate gardens, designed and implemented a classical layout, which incorporated the unique features of the triple-moated site," says Amanda. "The garden's inherent style was perhaps the influence of my grandmother, one of the first female international architects of her day, who had lived and worked in Italy. She built a palace in Rome at the age of 20."

Percy died before the planted gardens were fully developed, and it fell to his son Basil Feilding, aided by his friend Bertie Moore, to design, cut and conjure wonderful and fanciful topiary in the matured hedges in the late 1930s. Together, they sculpted pyramidal castellations in the main east-facing garden and created additional concealed topiary gardens, accessed by tunnels and archways cut through the high-walled yew. "It was a marvellous garden for hide-and-seek," says Amanda. She developed a strong connection to the garden and the wilder, more spiritual woodland and countryside beyond.

Most impressive is the double-yew topiary garden, which can be accessed from steps descending from a wooden panelled doorway set in the corner of the narrow north end of the house. ➤



The hedges provide a backbone to the grounds, enclosing sections of garden from the moats. Here, the spikes of topiary are reflected in the dark water.



The ornamental double-yew topiary garden, with its tiered, grooved shapes like giant chess pieces, next to the bear, which evolved unintentionally (above left). The more intimate Rose Garden, wrapped in dark yew hedging and defined by low parterres enclosing the plants (above right).



Here, monumental yew sculptures, some over 20ft (6m) tall, tower above visitors. They are shaped into a geometry box of pyramids, double helix, spirals, wedding cakes and fantastical beasts, including peacocks and a bear. “The bear was a mistake,” says Amanda. “It had originally been a geometric shape, but as patches died off, it began to resemble a bear, and so my father shaped it so. He got very annoyed when everyone loved the bear, as he actually hated it.”

Trimming, then and now

The boxwood and yew formations are the structural and ornamental backbone of the garden. “They are beautiful all year round, in every season,” says Amanda. “In autumn, they are magically shrouded in Otmoor mist; exquisitely snow-capped in winter; in spring, they look as if they are floating on a cloud of cow parsley; and in summer, they make a fine backdrop to seasonal irises, peonies, roses and hollyhocks.”

Their unfaltering upkeep is vital to retain the very essence of this garden. “In my childhood, the gardens were utterly beautiful, but much wilder. Back then, clipping the topiary all had to be done by hand with shears: we had no electric tools.” This meant Amanda’s father spent many hours a week cutting

Gardener Arthur Jenkins is responsible for the time-consuming job of keeping the topiary in its immaculate shape.



HISTORY OF BECKLEY PARK

The 400-acre parkland was originally enclosed in the 12th century, stocked with deer for hunting parties held at the purpose-built lodge, which dates back to at least 1347; later rebuilt and thought to have been moated for King Edward III in 1376. The moats were originally dug by King Alfred in the 9th century to protect the fort against the Danes. The ‘Crown property’ was occupied for two centuries, by Royal appointment. In 1550, Lord Williams of Thame was granted residency and rebuilt the present lodge on the perimeter of the inner moat. The three-storey, gabled, diapered-brick hunting lodge survived little altered until bought by Clotilde Feilding in 1919, grandmother to third generation, current owner Amanda Feilding. Clotilde and her husband Percy restored the house, respecting and preserving its character, but filled in the arm of the inner moat at the back of the house, in the hope of stopping frequent flooding of the kitchen in the cellar. Percy drew plans for a classical and enduring topiary garden which now claims the central site where the original fort once stood.

the hedges and topiary. It was a job he preferred to do between dusk and moonlight, so as not to waste the daylight hours. Like her father, Amanda says she loves the place, but not the upkeep. “I’ve never had the time to actually garden, as I am too busy running the Beckley Foundation, but I love to visualise the landscape like a sculpture and oversee its increasing beauty.”

Today, the task of maintaining the topiary falls to gardener Arthur Jenkins, who has been working at Beckley for 20 years. He starts the clipping at the beginning of September with the lower box hedges behind the main lawn. “I do the straight-lined hedges first, to get my eye in, before moving on to the taller and more intricate shaping,” he says. It takes approximately 10 weeks to complete the task, working with ladders and using battery-powered hedge cutters. Arthur cuts all the box first. ➤





The path to the lake island, from the irregular stepping-stones and across the planked bridge to the larger and smoother set of stepping-stones reaching the circle of columns. The mound is hidden behind in the November mist.

“Yew can be cut later, so I tackle the more complex, double-yew topiary shapes towards the end,” he says. With the yew walls enclosing the entire main garden being over 10ft (3m) high in places, the platform ladders are not tall enough to reach the top. “I rig up higher staging, tying ladders through the hedge to the trees behind, with boards across for top-cutting,” explains Arthur.

The seemingly endless yards of century-old box and yew are in apparent rude health, which Arthur puts down to the very heavy, moisture-retaining clay soil. The gardens and farm have been managed organically throughout three generations of Feildings, and in Beckley’s natural damp and heavy clay, the plethora of evergreens prosper. “We don’t need to feed or mulch and have only suffered lightly from a little box blight a few years ago, but it wasn’t bad, and it didn’t spread,” adds Arthur.

#### Crossroads in a hidden garden

Towards the far end of this gargantuan topiary parade, an apparent dead end is actually a concealed side archway cut in the high yew walls. It reveals the secreted Rose Garden: a classically laid out, quartered rose parterre, with a pyramid box design echoing the pointed ‘fortifications’ of the main garden.

This seemingly isolated garden room forms a crossroads. The parterre’s cross axis disappears north through another concealed yew archway, down to stepping-stones across the middle moat. Originally, this was the only way to cross the moat, but Amanda has introduced several additional bridges. Constructed from relatively inexpensive telegraph poles covered with grass, they increase access and encourage further exploration of all three moats and their connecting gardens. The southbound axis disappears through the yew to a bridge across the inner moat, connecting the Rose Garden to the main garden. In the far eastern corner of the Rose Garden, a yew passageway leads to a bridge across the middle moat onto the Lady’s Walk.

#### Island temple and mound

The original jagged-edged stepping-stones cross the northern arm of the middle moat: a broad stretch of 3ft (1m) deep, clear water, strewn with autumn leaves and, in November, mirroring mostly bare-branched trees. A second, planked bridge crosses the outer moat, and a lightly wooded enclosure gives way to wider, open countryside, where Amanda has dug a lake, with an island, and created a corresponding mound from the spoil.

The island is reached by a wooden boat or the long stride of stepping-stones, raised on underwater columns, with supporting



Grass carpeted in the bronze of fallen leaves, and bound by a moat, leads to the wrought-iron gates installed by Amanda’s father.

carved capitals, designed by Robert Adams. These, and the circlet of eight, more slender ‘temple’ columns, were found in the woods at Gosforth House in Scotland, which is the home of Amanda’s husband, Jamie, and are remnants of the old wings, which had been pulled down.

The development of the lake is of great significance to Amanda, whose spiritual connection with the garden is as strong as it was in her childhood. “I couldn’t imagine life as a child without Beckley. I always just wanted to be in the place: it had such a strong calling for me,” she says.

Amanda studied art, mysticism and comparative religions at Oxford, and decided to design the lake according to the proportions of sacred geometry. “An ex-priest helped with the mathematics,” she says.

The temple is reminiscent of visits to Sri Lanka, and the mound, too, has Buddhist roots, akin to Indian ‘mounds of honour’, or ‘stupas’. “The mound is a tribute to my beloved pigeon Birdie, who lived, uncaged, with me for 15 wonderful years,” says Amanda. Wild birds now flock to the lake, increasing Beckley Park’s biodiversity; encouraging wild swans, ducks, kingfishers, and other incoming birds from the nearby RSPB reserve of Otmoor. “I’ve often seen a pair of otters, and

“So wondrous wild, the whole might seem  
The scenery of a fairy dream”

**Sir Walter Scott, ‘Lady of the Lake’**

families of water snakes and vipers that live in or near the moats,” adds Amanda.

#### Lady’s Walk

In the light woodland between the moats, the sound of woodpeckers and cuckoos are easily distinguished. Hares, herds of deer, and muntjac frequent the no man’s land, which lies between formal garden and open country. Ducking through the Rose Garden’s rear hedge, just before the moatside Lady’s Walk, there is an area of mysterious enchantment: a sleepy hollow, which rises to a mossy bank, set with a stone maiden and her fawn. “I’m particularly fond of this area: as a child, I felt it was very mystical,” says Amanda. “I longed for my parents to give me an old cabin, ➤





“When I used to read fairy-tales,  
I fancied that kind of thing never  
happened, and now here I am in the  
middle of one!”

**Lewis Carroll**, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*



A maiden wraps her arms around a fawn in this stone sculpture, which adds to the enchanting atmosphere of the grounds.

Tucked beside a path amid the greenery, a gypsy caravan is both a romantic feature and ideal hideout for Amanda's young grandchildren like their parents before them.

so I could live right here in the woods, where we used to have small bonfires at night.” Amanda is now intending to create a new garden in this dell.

She often wanders, unseen, along the Lady's Walk, turning sharp right towards the farm's yard, just before the leaning, metal gates her father installed. “He somehow brought them home one winter during the war, through thick snow, on the top of his old Austin 7,” she remembers. A stone archway leads into the large, rectangular work yard, decorated by a timeless, beautifully faded, gypsy caravan, bought for Amanda's children, and now her grandchildren, to play in.

The old cowshed and the adjoining barn have been converted into the Beckley Foundation's offices. This charitable organisation was founded and run by Amanda more than 25 years ago, and is dedicated to scientific research into the potential medicinal value of psychoactive compounds.

Amanda, now in her 70s, still works tirelessly from the heart of her lifelong home. “I feel such a strong calling in this place. Even though I have lived here all my life, I still get a thrill at how beautiful, wonderful and mysterious it is,” she says. ■

• Words: Jacky Hobbs • Photography: Richard Bloom