

Moving on from Country Life

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In 1994, I wrote in *HORTUS* about acquiring several dozen bound volumes of that incomparable weekly, *Country Life*, thanks to the sharp eye of David Wheeler who spotted them in a Hay-on-Wye bookshop and offered to ship them across the pond. Together with early volumes dating from the magazine's birth 1897 that were already on my shelves, I was hoping to eventually have a near complete run. Over the years, thumbing through these heavy tomes offered one of life's greatest pleasures, and from a practical standpoint afforded me bits of knowledge that I was able to use in several books, notably *Gardens of the Arts and Crafts Movement* (2004), *Gertrude Jekyll at Munstead Wood* (1996/2015), and *Gertrude Jekyll and the Country House Garden: From the Archives of Country Life* (2011). Through the latter book I became acquainted with *Country Life* Picture Library, which became one of my treasured resources for research because of their trove of unpublished photographs of country houses and gardens that never made the cut in the magazine.

The problem of where to house this growing collection, including hundreds of loose subscription issues that had been flowing in weekly since the 1980s, proved tricky to resolve. Many of the rooms in our house in the suburbs of Boston were filled with the *Country Life* volumes as well as countless stacks of loose issues tucked away here and there. If that wasn't enough, I soon began acquiring other periodicals, such as *The Studio Magazine*, William Robinson's numerous horticultural weeklies, and American magazines of the same period. At the same time, my book collection devoted to British and American country houses and gardens was growing by leaps and bounds until the entire house became a library. Collections included all editions of every book by Gertrude Jekyll and William Robinson, plus dozens of lavishly illustrated folios on Italian and English gardens published by Country Life Library. As a result I no longer had to leave home to consult

references in dusty libraries because I had them all at hand.

After living in our Massachusetts house for nearly forty years, my architect husband (who has his own collections) and I decided that we needed to think about moving to a smaller place with fewer steps to climb and no garden. Over the years his work entailed renovating condominiums for friends who were moving from the country to the city and we thought, why not us? It was a sensible idea in theory, but reality set in when we spotted the perfect place in the Back Bay section of Boston, just steps from the Boston Public Library and the Charles River. Even more enticing were the architectural treasures and charming sidewalk gardens on every block. But it soon became apparent that we couldn't take our entire library and various other collections with us. With some hard thinking (and plenty of exact measurements provided by my resident architect), I decided it was time to let go of *Country Life*, *The Studio* and other magazines. American periodicals, such as *Country Life in America*, *House & Garden*, and *American Homes and Gardens* were eagerly accepted as a gift by the Cherokee Garden Library in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to a superb book collection, this impressive library holds the archives of many famous American garden writers, including Elizabeth Lawrence, and will eventually hold mine, but that's another chapter. The *Studio Magazine* went to a fellow Arts and Crafts enthusiast and designer of period textiles and wallpaper. *Country Life*, however, with its sheer weight and linear footage, was a more difficult proposition. Happily the entire collection found a new home with a garden enthusiast who eagerly peruses through back issues and builds new bookcases to house them.

Moving entailed a bit of downsizing, but it also provided a good opportunity to reacquaint myself with some of the books that were tucked away in odd corners, such as a long shelf devoted exclusively to B. T. Batsford books on rural England and Scotland, all with distinctive decorative dust jackets designed by Brian Cook. Other shelves were filled with favourite garden writers such as Beverley Nichols, Christopher Lloyd, Margery Fish, Vita Sackville-West and more recent authors rediscovered while packing and

unpacking boxes. In the end, there were more than a hundred heavy boxes of books, including oversize architectural history tomes as well as collections on Queen Victoria, William Morris, James Lees-Milne, the Sitwells, the Mitfords, and more. Vintage travel writing, art history, and other subjects all needed to be dusted off, re-evaluated and eventually relocated on new shelves.

The new garden library is now well organised, with sections dedicated to history, garden writing, design and horticulture. Pride of place goes to three shelves housing the complete thirty-year run of HORTUS and Wheeler's shorter-lived companion food quarterly, *Convivium*. Three of Simon Dorrell's original drawings are displayed nearby. Other subjects have all found places in the new home, but there are still some empty spaces on the shelves that justify acquiring more volumes to round out some of the non-garden subjects. Lest we forget my garden, it was easier to give up than *Country Life*. When I recently read that Helen Dillon was moving on from her famous house and garden, I knew exactly why she was doing so. Last winter, when we were looking for a new home, the architect gleefully announced, 'I'll never have to wrestle with the sprinkler system timer again'.

As I've known for years, in the end it's more fun to travel to other people's gardens and admire their work than to get down on my knees to weed and not be able to get up again. It's more satisfying to plant paperwhite narcissus and amaryllis bulbs for indoor winter bloom. But I did dig up a few treasures and transport them to my small garden on Martha's Vineyard where gardening is easier and more rewarding. Oh, yes, there are hundreds of books stored there also . . . and the *Country Lifes* still come rolling in to Boston.

Note: There were eight published issues of *Convivium: The Journal of Good Eating*, dating from 1993/94 in the same format as HORTUS. A small stock of Numbers 1-4 and 6-8 are held at the HORTUS office and are available for £50 inclusive of postage and packing. Number 1 was dedicated to the memory of David Wheeler's friend Elizabeth David, who died in 1992. (Number 5 is out of print but can occasionally be

found with specialist dealers or online to complete a valuable and highly-collectable contribution to the literature of gastronomy.)