





Return to Munstead Wood

Munstead Wood, Munstead, Surrey (Part I)

Judith Tankard, author of a forthcoming **COUNTRY LIFE** book on the life and works of Gertrude Jekyll (*left*), describes the importance of Jekyll's home garden and how, thanks to the present owners' care, it continues to inspire and influence

Photographs by Paul Barker & Julian Nieman



Preceding pages Munstead Wood house glimpsed from the edge of the woodland garden created by Gertrude Jekyll. Above The north side of the house embraces the gardens



Naturally riven sandstone paving with 'water ripples' enhances the small north terrace beside the house, where low, box-hedged formal beds create an intimate enclosure



MUNSTEAD WOOD, Gertrude Jekyll's celebrated home and garden in Surrey, needs little introduction to *COUNTRY LIFE* readers. It was first featured in the December 8, 1900, issue, illustrated with Charles Latham's evocative photographs of a relatively simple cottage nestled in a magical woodland setting. E. T. Cook, *COUNTRY LIFE*'s gardens editor, surmised that 'this modestly beautiful house, its wood, [and] its garden are clearly destined to become classical', and Avray Tipping declared it 'a home of undisputed peace'. Little did either writer suspect how quickly it would become one of the world's most famous homes, where house and garden were melded into one.

In her many books, as well as the hundreds

of articles she regularly wrote for *COUNTRY LIFE* and other magazines, Jekyll detailed her ongoing trials and tribulations with gardening in a gentle manner that encouraged many would-be gardeners. As her fame spread, however, she found she had to gently rebuff those admirers who wanted to pay a personal visit to Munstead Wood. Her legendary design collaboration with the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens was also eagerly admired by *COUNTRY LIFE* readers, some of whom later became clients. In the early 1900s, photographs of water rills, lily tanks, vine-covered pergolas, billowing flower borders and all the other irresistible Lutyens and Jekyll details inspired generations of architects and designers.

Munstead Wood was Jekyll's home for 35 years, from October 1897, when she moved

in, until her death in December 1932. Even though she travelled to Europe and the Near East in her younger days, she seldom left home once she settled into Munstead Wood, except for an occasional holiday on the Isle of Wight. Who can blame her for not wanting to leave such an idyllic setting? It was here that she entertained her artist friends, fellow horticulturists and her nieces, who modelled for her garden photographs.

Following the initial extravagance entailed in building the house, she barely managed to keep Munstead Wood going, especially after the First World War, through her writings, nursery sales and design commissions. Over the years, changes were made as new areas were developed and old areas revised. There were basically three periods of development: the 1880s,



A view through the *Choisya*-clothed high wall separating Jekyll's main border from her spring garden and the annual flower garden

when the woodland gardens were laid out prior to building the house; the mid 1890s, when the ornamental gardens surrounding the house site were installed; and about 1908, when the financial success of her book *Colour in the Flower Garden* offered new opportunities for garden expansion.

After her death, the grounds were altered somewhat, but not the house, which remains one of the quintessential examples of Lutyens' Surrey vernacular style. Some alterations, such as the addition of an entrance drive (in Jekyll's day, the house was approached on foot from a lane) and clearing the overgrown shrubbery near the house, had been made so it could be let. Her nephew, Francis Jekyll, who penned *Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir* when living in

the house, kept her name alive, but by 1948, when her personal possessions were sold at auction, all of the borders had been swept away to be replaced by lawn, with little else of significance remaining save her rare rhododendrons and Ghent hybrid azaleas. At that point, other portions of the 15-acre estate, including the gardener's cottage, potting shed, the Hut, and the area encompassing her working gardens, were sold.

It is a miracle that all the original components of Munstead Wood still survive today and are well cared for by their respective owners. Even more amazing is that the present owners of the main house and grounds, Sir Robert and Lady Clark, have occupied Munstead Wood for more than 40 years, far longer than Jekyll's ownership,

during which time they have served as careful stewards of Jekyll's legacy. They like to recount the story that, at the time they bought the house after seeing an advertisement in *COUNTRY LIFE*, they were aware that Lutyens was the architect, but knew nothing about Jekyll until people from around the world started arriving unannounced for a glimpse of the famous site. At this point, the Clarks made it their mission to maintain Munstead Wood and open it occasionally for charity.

Their task has not been easy, as most of the original plantings had been removed or were seriously overgrown on their arrival. They set about replanting some of the obvious areas, such as Jekyll's 200ft-long main flower border at the foot of the garden wall, ➤



Jekyll and Lutyens both appreciated the power of a long vista (here framed by *Viburnum opulus*). The restored paths are of pressed earth

as well as some of the beds surrounding the house. It wasn't until the devastation of the storms of 1987 that their task took a more deliberate turn. An inventory of tree losses sustained on the property—nearly 100 trees were lost, including the last of the silver birches—and a trove of Jekyll's own photographs documenting the gardens from the 1890s to 1914 signalled that the moment had come to try putting it all back together again. Working with Jekyll's descriptions, photographs, and a few sketch-plans, as well as a new survey of the grounds, the original network of paths and shrub borders between the house and the main flower border was reinstated. The overgrown rhododendrons flanking the wide grass walk were pruned and nourished and Jekyll's cherished woodland, with its network of paths, was rejuvenated.

During the course of restoration, Jekyll's long-lost garden of her special strain of bunch primroses was rediscovered, and the plants have now been preserved. Many of the trees that had vanished over the years or succumbed during the gale, such as the silver birches, were replanted. For some areas, such as the main flower border, the task was made feasible because of the detailed planting plans and descriptions in her books. These, together with the set of COUNTRY LIFE autochromes taken in about 1912, helped show the general effect, but as everyone knows, it is extremely difficult

‘The moment had come to try putting it all back together again’

to replicate precisely Jekyll's ethereal planting compositions. The October Michaelmas daisy border, which Cook described in COUNTRY LIFE as ‘tumbling waves of purple, and lilac, and palest lavender’, proved problematic as most of the varieties were out of cultivation. One of the last areas to be revived was the spring garden that lay hidden behind the garden wall. Roughly rectangular in shape, it provided a pleasant area for Jekyll's daily stroll from the house to her working gardens. In her day, it was bursting with her distinctive drifts of spring-blooming plants as well as archways festooned with clematis and bold clumps of *Euphorbia characias wulfenii* against the deep green hedge.

More than 20 years after the start of this restoration, the new plantings have fully matured and the gardens now give a sense of what they looked like in Jekyll's day. Like all gardens, they require extensive ongoing maintenance and some compromises. Some of the areas, such as the June-blooming cottage garden surrounding



Ghent hybrid azaleas, one of Jekyll's original plantings, bloom in the woodland

the Hut, have been lost; others, such as Munstead Quadrangle, which once served as the hub of Jekyll's kitchen gardens, have recently been reinstated. Above all, the Clarks are to be commended for putting so much back and, in doing so, invoking the spirit of the place. Jekyll's woodland, which she described a ‘my most precious possession’, remains the most glorious part of Munstead Wood today.

‘Gertrude Jekyll and the Country House Garden’ will be published by Aurum Press on May 25

Next week: How Gertrude Jekyll planted Munstead Wood for maximum effect through the seasons