

Charles Quest-Ritson considers Tom Stuart-Smith's design and planting of the gardens' vast neo-Italianate parterres to be a masterpiece

# TRENTHAM GARDENS

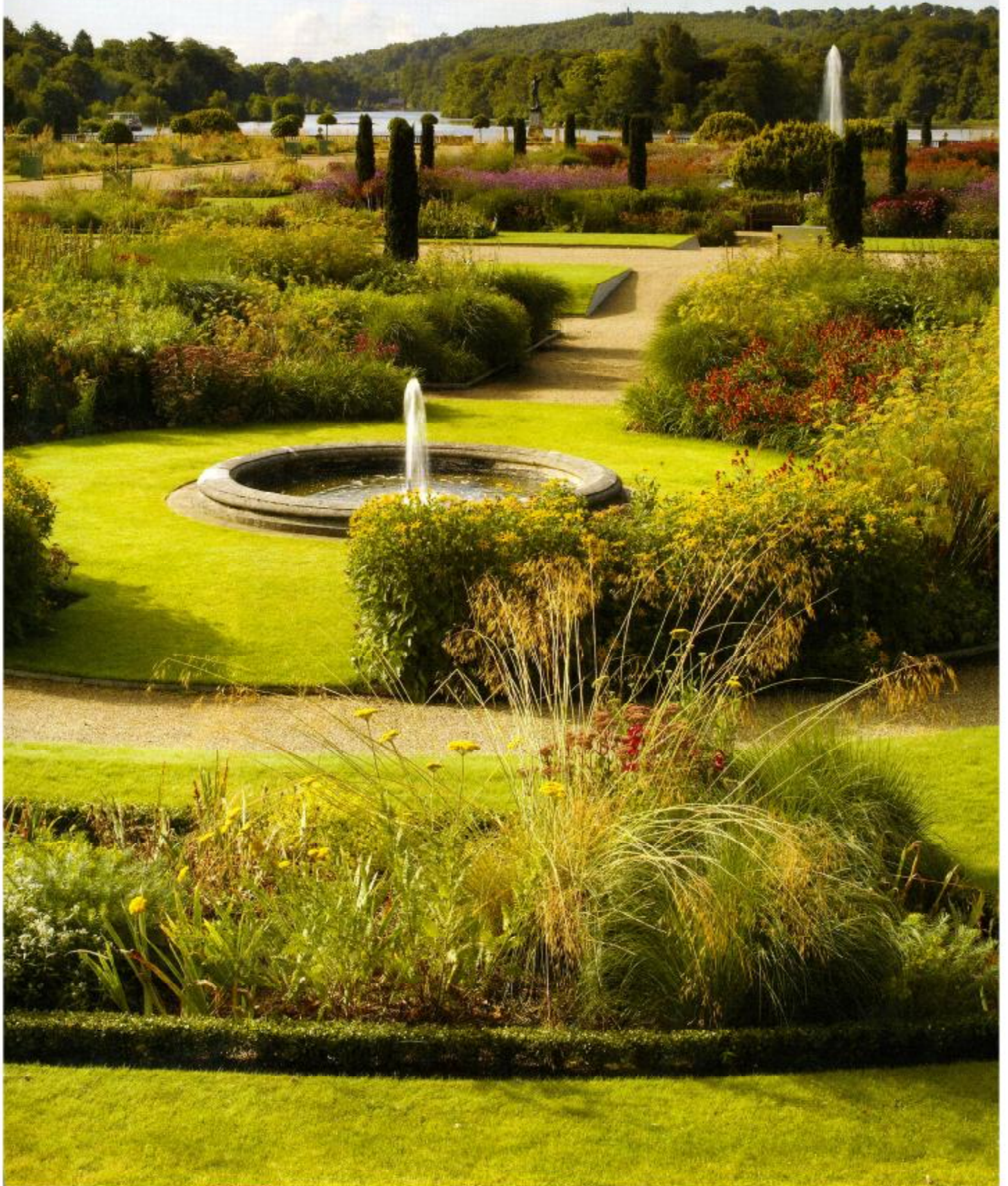
**TRENTHAM HAS ALWAYS BEEN AN ICONIC GARDEN.** It was meant to be. Sir Charles Barry laid it out in 1840 for the super-rich second Duke of Sutherland. It was Barry's first major commission and he chose the Italianate style. There were balustrades, statues, parterres, fountains, clipped yews and a broad central axis that ran from the house for 250 yards until you arrived at a cast of Cellini's Perseus on the edge of Capability Brown's lake. The parterres alone spread over 10 acres on two levels, and the parkland to the side was spaciouly planted with specimen trees. Barry knew the gardens of Italy and saw himself as an apostle of the Italian revival. Did he reinvent the Italian renaissance garden at Trentham? No, but he reinterpreted it. Trentham was the first significant Italianate garden in Britain, and certainly the greatest. Only its scale prevents it from being truly Italian. It was primarily a statement of wealth and power.

The Duke was fortunate enough to have a brilliant horticulturist as head gardener. George Fleming stuffed the formal gardens with show-off displays of tender exotica. Scarlet geraniums and purple heliotropes filled the parterres. These spectacular plantings were instrumental in popularising the use of seasonal bedding plants. Yes, it was an extremely labour-intensive process, but the Duke was a rich man and his gardens were intended to amaze. So Trentham invented both the neo-Italian style and the practice of bedding out. It was the contrast between them that made the garden iconic. ☺

Photography *Allan Pollock-Morris*

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Early-morning view in late summer across the extensively planted parterres to the lake



☉ Sir Charles Barry rebuilt the house too, but it was demolished in 1910-12. When I first saw Trentham, more than 30 years ago, it made a sorry municipal sight: a run-down structure, miserly plantings and glorious tarmac surfaces. It needed new capital, new ideas and new management to guarantee its continued existence. Trentham had to wait for an economic renaissance before these became a reality – the result of a regeneration project shared between the local authority, Stoke City Council, and the development company St Modwen Properties plc. Outside the peace of Trentham gardens today – so calm and spacious that you scarcely notice other visitors, even on a sunny Saturday afternoon in July – lies a huge village-style complex of shops, restaurants and cafés, where visitors are persuaded to part with their money in exchange for pleasure. It's this new Jerusalem that has made the revival of Trentham gardens possible.

Tom Stuart-Smith was asked to restore and replant the gardens. He preserved the Italianate structure but chose to pack it with 'new perennial plantings'. The raised edges of the parterres would have steppe or Mediterranean species and the lower parts be put to damp-loving plants. But the proportions within the parterres were all wrong – he needed to enlarge the beds and double the area of planting, which he did. Now you can walk into the heart of the parterres to get up close and personal with plants. Tall, lush, leafy perennials thrive in the damp sections, where *Eupatoriums* and *Rudbeckias* tower above you in late summer. Mass plantings of bulbs give colour in spring, and these are followed by swathes of irises (over 5,000 plants) for May, until the herbaceous interest gets going: salvias, sedurnis, *Verbena bonariensis*, alliums, knautias, euphorbias, dahlias, penstemons and paeonies in the dry parts. It's still the scale that amazes: those ten acres now boast 100,000 perennials and 120,000 bulbs.

## “The greater the liberation from traditional ideas, the greater the need for firm shapes, crisp boundaries and neat hedges”

How are they planted? Stronger colours near the house (which is going to be rebuilt shortly) merge into cooler tones as you then move towards the lake. Small groupings that work well together are repeated, to build up their effect, and the plantings everywhere are thick. Tall grasses (*Stipa gigantea*, *Miscanthus x giganteus* and *Calamagrostis x acutiflora*) provide vertical structure until they are then cut back down in January. Stuart-Smith has planted them arrhythmically, as a network that represents the River Trent and its tributaries. This is not completely obvious, and its visual effect is neutral, but the idea behind it definitely tickles the intellect.

What's so new about Trentham? Let's look again at the history of 'modern perennial planting'. It owes its origins to the naturalistic styles developed by the Potsdam nurseryman Karl Forster from about 1900 onwards. There are stunning examples at Grugapark in Essen, Westfalenpark in Dortmund and Westpark in Munich. The style spread quickly to the Netherlands and North America but was slow to gain appreciation among the more traditionalist English, who worship the memory of Gertrude Jekyll. One of its earliest champions was Noel Kingsbury, who had studied the German models and immediately understood their potential in the British Isles. His book, *The New Perennial Garden*, and his gardens at Cowley – now lost – were crucial catalysts; their importance cannot be over-emphasised. Dan Pearson and Christopher Bradley-Hole were also quick to explore the possibilities. Then came John Coke's garden at Bury Court and Piet Oudolf's work at Scampston, but the former is small in scale and the latter looks like an attempt to create a visitor attraction in a rather dull walled garden. Structure is essential to the success of this style. Henk Gerritsen demonstrates at Priona in Overijssel, and in his English masterpiece at Waltham Place, that the greater the liberation from traditional ideas, the greater the need for firm shapes, crisp boundaries and neat hedges.

So why is Trentham so 'iconic'? Simply put, it's because of the contrast between the vast Italianate layout and the free perennial plantings. Stuart-Smith calls it “a dramatic juxtaposition



Tom Stuart-Smith has created form and colour at every season: the irises and geraniums in the foreground will shortly take over from the tulips



of opposing styles." But there is more to Trentham than that. For a garden to be able to qualify as 'iconic' it really has to be young or young-ish, innovative, high-achieving, publicly accessible and financially secure. What distinguishes Trentham from previous 'new perennial gardens' in Britain is its scale – it is still a show-off garden – and the way the 'dramatic juxtapositions' reveal Stuart-Smith at the peak of his creativity. It is intelligently managed and visitor numbers are rising quickly – up to an impressive 270,000 last year. Trentham is opulent, exciting, challenging and beautifully maintained. And this is the clever bit: Tom Stuart-Smith designed his makeover in such a way that at any time the plantings can all be quickly removed and Trentham restored to its original 1840 structure. ☺

*Trentham Gardens are open to the public all year. Other features include a grass amphitheatre, twelve show gardens, a stumpery, a potager, a new maze (open Easter 2008) and Piet Oudolf's eight-acre floral prairie and natural meadow, which is worth a visit in its own right. Contact them on 01782 646646 or [www.trenthamgardens.co.uk](http://www.trenthamgardens.co.uk)*

Photo courtesy of Emma Fox



Groupings of grasses offer a distinct architecture, especially valuable when herbaceous plants die down in late autumn

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