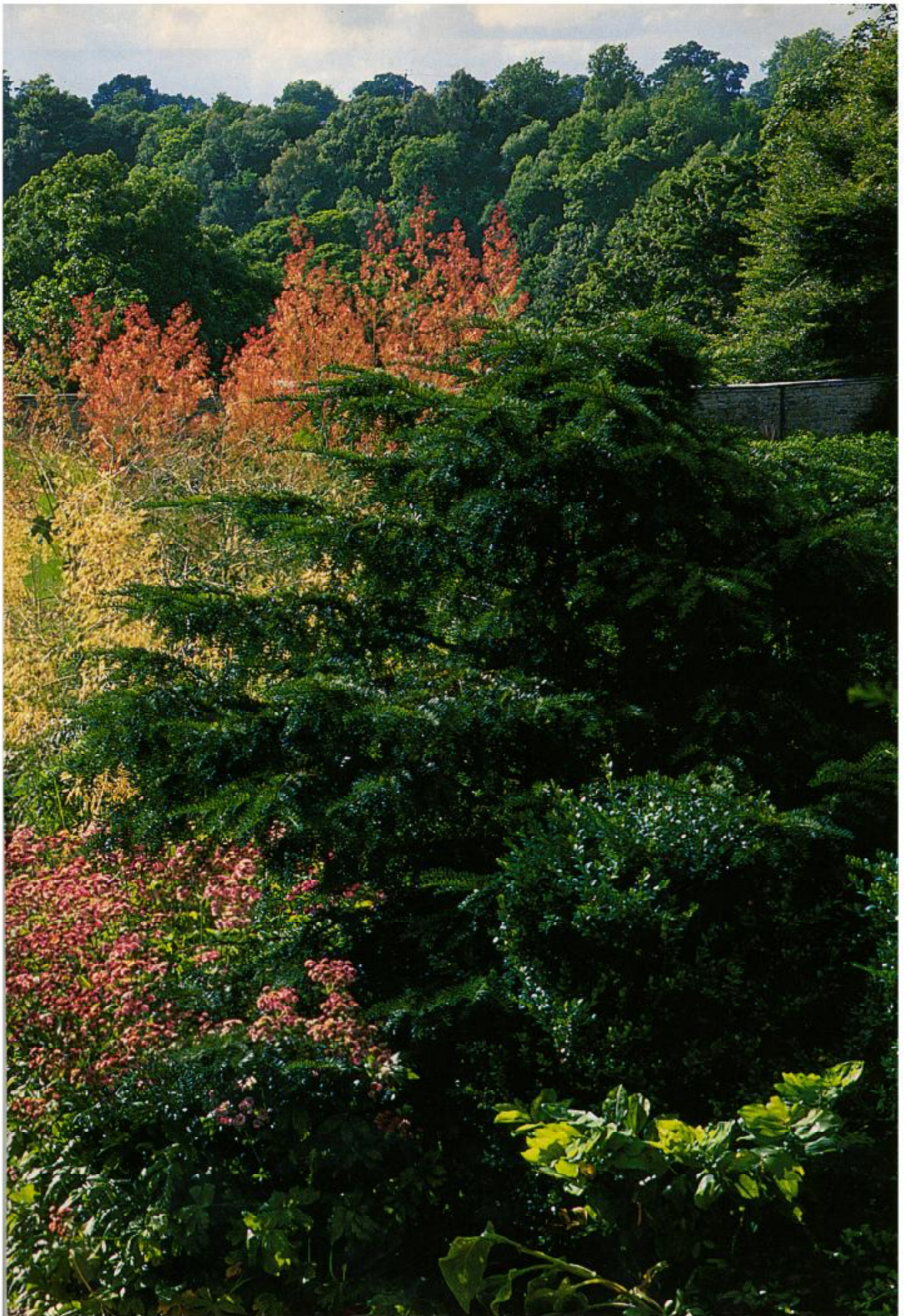


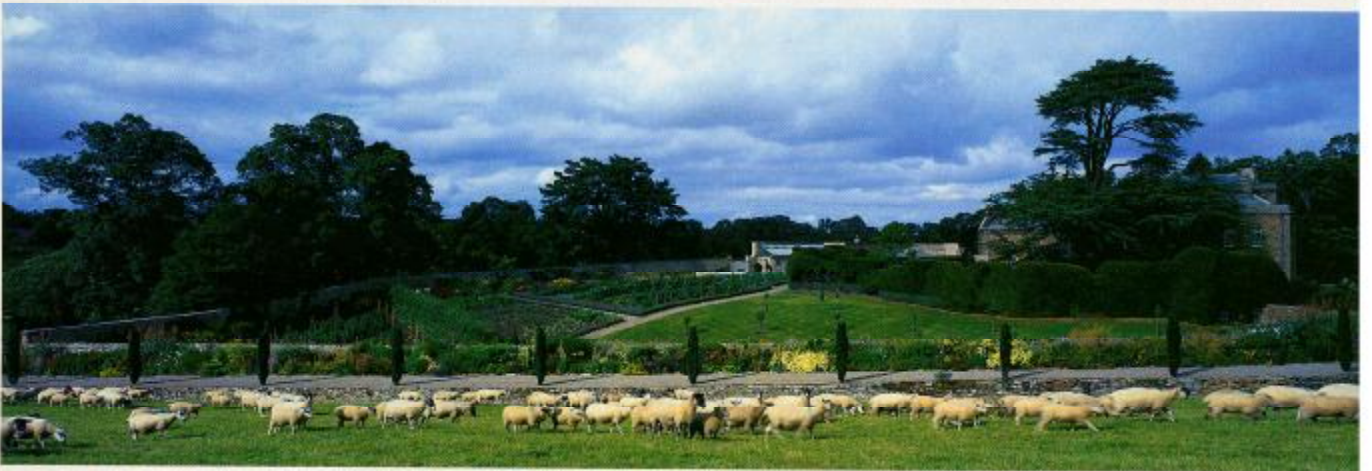


DESIGN

RETURN TO SPLENDOUR

AT WYCLIFFE HALL IN COUNTY DURHAM, TOM STUART-SMITH HAS MADE
A ROBUST, CONTEMPORARY GARDEN AT ONE WITH THE 18TH-CENTURY
LANDSCAPE. SUSAN ELDERKIN VISITS. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW LAWSON





PREVIOUS PAGES: SUN TERRACE WALK, ALONG THE SOUTH-FACING OUTER WALL OF THE VEGETABLE GARDEN. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: WYCLIFFE HALL, THE WALLED GARDEN THROUGH A TOM STUART-SMITH GATE. SHEEP GRAZING. BELOW, FROM LEFT: PTOLEMY DEAN ADDED TO THE EXISTING WALLS TO CREATE A QUASI-BATTLEMENT EFFECT. THE FRONT LAWN. OPPOSITE: SPHINXES DATING FROM 1740.





OPPOSITE: NORTH COURTYARD WITH GREEN-OAK COLUMNS. ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TAPERED YEW TREES LEAD TO A STONE DOVECOTE, COMMISSIONED BY THE PREVIOUS OWNER AS A PRESENT FOR HIS WIFE. *LILIUM CITRONELLA* GROUP. ELEPHANT FRIEZE CUT INTO YEW DESIGNED BY THE PREVIOUS OWNER. BELOW, FROM LEFT: THE NORTH COURTYARD. GREENHOUSE DESIGNED BY PTOLEMY DEAN.





ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: PLAN OF THE GARDEN. THE WILLOW TUNNEL WITH SWEET PEAS AND GOURD PLANTS CLIMBING UP THE STEMS. SIR WILLIAM WHITFIELD DESIGNED THE SQUARE STONE DOVECOTE IN 1950. BELOW, FROM LEFT: LYTHRUM SALICARIA. COURGETTES AND CABBAGES IN THE VEGETABLE GARDEN. OPPOSITE: ROSE GARDEN WITH MACLEAYA, WHITE PHLOX AND STACHYS BYZANTINA.





Garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith received a phone call in the summer of 2000 from a client he had just taken on. “There’s some good news and some bad news,” said the client. The bad news was that he and his family were moving, and the old rectory in Yorkshire for which Tom had been drawing up plans no longer needed a new garden. The good news was that there was a “rather magnificent” new pad that did.

The new pad turned out to be Wycliffe Hall, just over the border in County Durham – a part Elizabethan, part Georgian stately home set in 50 rolling acres that had remained virtually untouched since one Marmaduke Tunstall lived there in the 18th century. Fronting the imposing Durham-stone façade was a bare lawn sliced through with a ha-ha, a charming dovecote (designed by a young Sir William Whitfield) and woodlands beyond. To one side an ancient cedar, planted by Tunstall and boasting the biggest girth in the county, stretched a horizontal arm over the roof. Round the back was a different but equally untouched story: a fast-flowing loop of the ruddy River Tees biting into a

craggy sandstone cliff, trees latched on with exposed roots. With the ever-present gush of the river, it’s a scene of such classic rugged, 18th-century romanticism that it’s no surprise Turner was inspired to paint it, with the austere, Elizabethan side of the house behind, in 1816.

In many ways it was a dream commission for Tom. His client Richard, a businessman, had seen photographs of a Stuart-Smith garden and loved the boldness of the planting schemes – the trademark towering perennials that even Tom (himself over six foot) has to tip his head back to admire. What Richard wasn’t aware of at the time was Tom’s experience with renovating historic gardens. At Wycliffe, Tom could exercise both muscles – creating something robust and thoroughly contemporary, while honouring the symmetry and grandeur of the architecture and the scale of what still felt very much like an 18th-century landscape.

On Tom’s first visit to Wycliffe he found “ghastly leprechauns” sitting on the gateposts, a bog garden round the back quietly seeping into the cellars and a general feeling of nakedness. “There was nothing to



root the house in the landscape," he recalls. "You walked out the door and into a void." He began by creating a frame for the lawn: two elegant rows of tapered yew trees march down the sight-lines of the side windows, foot soldiers to four generously proportioned beds behind. The beds are themselves framed in yew hedging, two metres high at the back and sloping down at the sides like the most comfortable of armchairs, clumps of euphorbia softening the corners. Within these armchairs Tom's riotous planting gets a free reign, the summer drama starting with the early *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'. By the time the *Allium cristophii* is out, the beds are building to their full, heady stature, with mauve spikes of veronicastrum and *Thalictrum delavayi*, a froth of cream *Persicaria polymorpha*, feathery plumes of macleaya and blue spires of *Aconitum carmichaelii* var. *truppelianum* 'Kelmescott' all competing to see over the back of the yew hedge. Phloxes, anemones and cranesbill geraniums provide splashes of colour mid-tier, while sprays of *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' let the air in and ensure that the beds don't feel

cramped. Richard is clearly delighted with the effect. "It starts tall at the front and just gets taller," he laughs.

The estate employees at Wycliffe, Brian and Adam, responded enthusiastically to working with Tom. Hundreds of new trees were planted, including a 'replacement' cedar that will one day succeed Tunstall's. Behind the hall, Tom decided to keep everything wild and rough and romantic, planting some 2,000 little gorse bushes and 6,000 wild flowers on the steep banks: primulas, primroses, cowslips, pignut, ragged robin, geraniums – "huge drifts of what should be here in Teesdale". Richard shakes his head and gives a wry smile. "Imagine having your chequebook worn out by buying gorse," he murmurs.

In the north courtyard where the bog garden used to be, Tom has created a second formal garden – a monastic, almost primitive response to the wild landscape beyond. A series of tall, green-oak columns, topped with lead balls, act as intermediaries between the forbidding sheer walls and four low-level, boxed-in beds. Not much sun reaches this courtyard, and the planting is modest and muted – "like a formalised



woodland”, says Tom. In spring there are creams and purples (crocuses, tulips, hellebores) and in summer red dicentra and astrantia and little white *Trillium grandiflorum* are delicate dots of colour in among a graceful green grass with arching stems, *Hakonechloa macra*.

The westerly winds are bitter here – “they go right through you”, says Brian – and the place to escape them is the large, handsomely walled vegetable garden to the west of the house. Even the noise of the river is reduced to a peaceful whisper here. Richard was keen that the vegetable garden should look as it might have done in Victorian times, and it does – but there is fun here too. Running inside the box borders like a parallel train track is a lavender border, offering a lovely colour contrast, and at the corners of the beds are onion-shaped box domes. A delightful willow tunnel – planted and woven by Richard and Adam after attending a day’s course – not only provides a shady walkway on a hot day, but gourds have been trained up the willow stems, and the heavy fruit dangles down within the tunnel like Chinese lanterns that you have to duck. A good, loamy soil ensures

such an abundance of organic produce year-round that Richard invites the chef/owner of a local gastro pub (an émigré from Notting Hill) to come and help himself to raw ingredients every Wednesday. “Sometimes I get a pint of Timothy Taylor in return,” says Richard.

Wycliffe’s overhaul has been thorough. Every gate on the estate (which Richard has now returned to its original size by buying the surrounding home farm) was redesigned by Tom and cast by a local blacksmith. The mark of architect Ptolemy Dean, who worked closely with Tom throughout, is everywhere – from the exquisitely designed greenhouse, camellia house and cold frame behind the hall, down to the crenellated wall he added at the back to augment the castle-like austerity. Even the outside door handles have been designed individually and cast in traditional, unlacquered bronze that the cleaning lady is under strict instructions not to polish.

For all its grandeur, Richard is down-to-earth about the property. Looking down on his private stretch of the Tees, he says, “There’s trout and salmon in there. That’s the only reason I bought the place really,” and it’s only half a joke. ■