

# PRIVY GARDENS

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MOST of those who have ever browsed in the pleasant land of Historical Research are well acquainted with the broad pastures of the great public collections of MSS, the British Museum, the Public Record Office, the Bodleian, and the like. Comparatively few, however, seek out the no less rich provender which is to be found in private or semi-private collections. That is a pity, for the owners and custodians of these are often only too pleased to help the searcher, and the collections themselves not only supplement the information gained elsewhere, but also contain material for study of points in which the public collections are of very little use. The present writer has recently had the privilege of cataloguing two great private collections in the custody of the Northamptonshire Record Society, and she hopes to be able to indicate something of the riches hidden there.

And what riches! Every phase of human life from the cradle to the grave for the last seven hundred years is recorded on parchment or paper, exquisitely set forth in the days when writing was a craftsman's pride or laboriously scrawled when it was a new and irksome obligation, formally for official purposes, or intimately for one reader alone. Let us gather a little at random. Is your interest local government? Here is a long series of Court Rolls, with village misdemeanours of the 14th century and their punishments, with by-laws as to boundaries and water-courses, control of stock and rights in the common field. For agriculture, here are farm accounts from the same date, with the acreage and yield of crops, prices of live and dead stock, wages of labourers and artisans, names of buildings and implements.

There is a beautiful tabulated survey of the estates of "the late attainted monastery of Colchester" in several of the Eastern counties. The survey, on several membranes of vellum sewn into two strips each some yards long, occurred in fragments throughout the collection, and when re-assembled was found to be complete except for its main heading. The tail-piece is a fine example of 16th century pen-work, including a capital S with a rather fleshy Venus and Cupid which moved one beholder to remark that if *that* were the moral atmosphere of the monastery, it was high time it was suppressed; to which a Roman Catholic rejoined that it

was clearly a base attempt by Henry VIII's Commissioners to discredit the establishment and justify its abolition. It was therefore particularly annoying that the first membrane should thus have vanished—and particularly interesting to find, quite by chance, a reference to Colchester in a catalogue of the Egerton MSS at the British Museum. The document in question was sent for at once and turned out to be the missing membrane, a magnificent drawing of the judges riding away from Colchester after the trial of the last Abbot, whose execution is shown in the background. Though there is no hope of the MS being re-united, a photograph of the heading has now been sent to balance Venus and Cupid and give an idea of the original aspect of the whole.

There is also a complete survey of a country gentleman's property in 1681, his house, furniture, clothing, his outbuildings and fields, with entries such as this:

Briar Furlong, so many acres of grass worth so much, a wheelbarrow in the corner worth half a crown, and a spotted cow called Daisy worth £5.

More domestically we have a tattered account book about 1550, with buying and selling of all sorts of necessaries, including rueful entries among the debits "Item, lost my purse and 40 shillings. . . . 40s." or "Item, to my son Thomas to forbear playing at dice. . . . 16s." Thomas was evidently a little expensive, for he had also to receive money and a new suit of clothes at Christmas. There are bills and inventories, in plenty, of household stuff and clothing. One can trace the family taste in dress from one generation to another, and admire without hoping to equal the amount of food and drink they put away and the price they paid for it. One particularly good inventory describes the contents of a great house in London in 1645. In my lady's dressing-room there were two tubs, one for a wet and one for a dry bath (whatever that may have been). Her taste, one fancies, was a little loud, for her drawing-room was upholstered in red velvet and yellow taffeta, with gold fringe. Musical instruments were there in plenty, and a few years earlier there had been a long bill for Italian motets and arias and some madrigals, supplied by a well-known London bookseller. The family books as catalogued at various times comprised, as was usual in the 17th century, a vast quantity of theological controversy and ponderous commentaries, histories ancient and modern of this and other countries, works on law, on medicine, on political science, on heraldry, on hunting, on military science, and a very few volumes of poetry and plays, though the last deficiency was

partly made up when one of the family in exile in Paris just before the Restoration had a few books sent him, including Crashaw's *Steps to the Temple* and a volume of George Herbert. The languages include—besides English—French, Italian, Spanish, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Saxon and Syriac. Throughout the collection are scattered fragments of music written by a versatile and competent steward who appears to have supervised the intellectual as well as the material welfare of his employers.

Another interesting personality was John Simpson the gardener, who at about the same period was engaged by a formal written contract in which his duties, wages and perquisites were clearly defined. Long lists of fruit and rose trees were drawn up, the former to be bought of no less a person than John Tradescant, and it is curious to find so many "named varieties" of roses at this date. None of these names, of course, would appear in any nurseryman's list to-day; and like the names of to-day, they are far more often a compliment to someone the grower wished to please than a description of the flower. There is one list of foreign plants for which travellers were to be asked to seek, and others of plants flowering in London gardens that are now not even a memory.

Nor are these collections entirely devoid of "heart interest." One important document is a marriage settlement of 1450, providing for the wedding of Thomas Seyton and Jahane Boughton (aged respectively 9 and 8) to take place within the next six months. Most of the provisions were material, but the possibility was considered that Thomas might "refuse and disagree unto the said marriage" on reaching the age of 14. Jahane had no option. As it happened, they grew up together and got used to each other, for some twenty years later they were still married. Then there is an "Acrostical Epithalamium" of 1634, an effort in verse whose lines begin alternately with the letters of the bridegroom's name in red and the bride's in blue, the whole adorned with hearts, arrows, etc., rather in the style of a mid-Victorian valentine. Unfortunately (but not surprisingly) the fifth baby in four years was too much for the lady, a sketch for whose ornate tombstone is found near by. With this are several documents of a similar nature, including one epitaph of 1638 which is actually carved in a Northamptonshire church and deserves to be quoted in full:

Here she who with afflictions tryed and tried  
Of mind and body was so purified  
That by the sacred Heart of Divine Love  
Her soul, soon hatch't, flew to the Saints above.

The conception of Providence as a species of incubator is at least novel. An earlier production is a passage from the will of a worthy who, born one of the numerous family of a country squire, went up to London to make his fortune, did so as a mercer, and then returned to his native district, bought a manor, settled down as head of a family of his own and died in 1595. He left the most detailed instructions as to the design of his tomb-stone, the coats of arms in each corner and their significance, and wrote various epitaphs for himself. One (which does not, alas, appear on the stone) is a brief autobiography in verse:

Of twenty children one was I,  
 My parents lately were  
 Of Picheley, Ann and Euseby,  
 The first so callèd there.

To London went I in my youth,  
 My fortune was but small,  
 The whole and entire sum in truth  
 Was twenty nobles all.

And so on, in the metre of "John Gilpin," complete with moral reflections.

Then there is an 18th century letter saying—"My Lord C. is anxious to know how a kinsman of his, a man that will have £1200 a year, may come by a sight of my nieces," going on to remark that it would be a pity to let it go out of the family, or words to that effect. Unfortunately the letter lacks address and signature, so there is no means of knowing whether the young ladies were viewed and approved. The suitor's income was evidently all that needed to be known about him.

But the gem of the collection in this line is a set of letters in the late 1660's and early 1670's from a young girl to her betrothed, later her husband. They reveal throughout a charming personality, deeply affectionate, full of courage, gaiety and a quiet mind. There is one written before marriage, when their prospects were rather dark, and correspondence between them was not approved by the authorities. She had taken his letter in unseen, and had secured an extra candle that she might write after the household had gone to bed, borrowing also her mother's seal so that her letter might not be opened. She pours out her heart to "My deare Joy" who is the only man for her: she would rather be poor with him than rich with anyone else, and things simply *must* come right in the end, but he must burn this letter. Not being an absolute clod, of course he did not—but it seems intrusive

even now for anyone else to read it. After their marriage they had to be separated a good deal, as he had duties out of England, but she kept "My deare Lord" informed as to what was going on. When a baby was on the way, she was cheerful as ever—he was not to worry about her, she felt very well and all her symptoms indicated that she was going to have an easy time. Later the progress of "little Nan" and "little Marget" is reported. There was a long journey by coach from London to Northamptonshire, with all its stages described. The first day little Nan was very bright and "talked much about her dear Lady Granny," but the second day was wearisome, and Margaret throughout was "much troubled with the wind." However they soon revived in the country, and we are told that "Nan runs like a lapwing, I dare not let her out of her strings." Sometimes a proud grandmother described how Margaret "puts up her little hands to ask a blessing when she is laid in her cot and coos herself to sleep." It is pleasant to think of all the happiness and love these letters reveal, for the writer's time was short. After barely six years of matrimony she was killed in an explosion together with her mother-in-law, her husband and children having miraculous escapes. It was a long time before he could bring himself to a second marriage to secure the male heir his position required; and as it turned out, it was little Nan who in the end carried the family honours to her husband.

But there is much still to be found in this collection. A treatise describes "How the Kings of England may and did raise money," so that one wonders whether it is not the duty of a loyal subject to send a transcript to His Majesty. A 14th century terrier of land in Lincolnshire, with some verses in Middle English on the back is said by experts to be a charm of sorts—though no marked results either for good or evil appear so far to have been produced by its transcription. We have a deed of sale conveying a swannery and the right to use a certain swan-mark, seisin to be by delivery of a live swan—one would like to have been present at the ceremony. Then, a list of regulations for the Garrison at Castle Cornet in Guernsey, in 1671, exquisitely written in a neat Italic hand, and ranging in subject from blasphemy to sanitation. There is the will of a yeoman (c. 1620) making good provision for his young daughter, who was to have lodging, meat, drink and apparel, "with such further education of book and needle fit for her degree." And another will, of a worthy if somewhat morbid individual who, distressed at the unseemly fashion in which the bodies of criminals were disposed of after execution and the consequent peril to their souls, bequeathed a substantial sum to the Mayor for the time

being to ensure decent Christian burial in a specified churchyard for the bodies of such malefactors as died penitent and confessing their sins.

A deed of apprenticeship in the late 14th century makes elaborate provision for the youth's maintenance, technical education and moral training—he was not to mis-conduct himself with women of his master's household (though it did not seem to matter what he did outside), and the master might beat the apprentice when necessary but not otherwise; it is not stated who was to judge of the necessity. Finally, among a mass of material relating to the Civil War, the Scottish invasion, oppression of Delinquents, etc., comes a copy of a letter from a young man of studious tastes consulting an elder as to whether he should take up arms in the struggle. The other explains how it is impossible for a man of honour to stand aside, and ends "If after my death God shall send victory to the King and cause we have in hand, my very dust in the grave will exult for joy that this body of mine had living and dying share in so honourable and great a purchase."

On that note let this brief survey end. Each collection in the country has its own outstanding treasures, but the seeker will often find in the hidden places more intimate revelations of the lives, minds and hearts of those our forbears who are separated from us merely by time, and the more we seek the flimsier does that barrier seem.