

The family LEGACY

Ned and Clare Mersey are continuing the evolution of the historic gardens at Bignor Park while looking to the future

Words & Photographs LEIGH CLAPP



The curvaceous Aeolian harp by Geoffrey Stinton, set in a circular pond which is a breeding ground for dragonflies, is the central focal point of the walled garden. The parterre is infilled with seasonal blooms, including *Penstemon 'Sour Grapes'* and *ambig*.

Ned Bigham, Viscount Mersey, and his wife Clare moved to Bignor Park in Sussex with their two young daughters in 2010, after Ned took on the running of the estate following the death of his father in 2006. Home to the Bigham family since 1926, this historic 1,200-acre estate comes with both pleasures and great responsibilities. The Regency house that sits imposingly in the grounds was built in 1826 by the then owner, John Hawkins, but the history of the park dates back to medieval times, when it was used to fatten deer for the Arundel Estate.

The essence of the parkland layout, created by renowned landscape designer and artist William

Sawrey Gilpin in the 1820s, remains and the formal gardens by the house have much the same structure as depicted in photos from the end of the 19th century. With wonderful memories from childhood, Ned has wholeheartedly taken on the custodianship of Bignor Park, to develop it for future generations to come. 'I fell in love with the place from an early age and above all want to keep it going. Once there was a sense of the country gentleman and his estate; times have changed and diversification is needed, but we want to keep the garden looking very special,' he explains.

Elements of the past are combined with new planting and redesign. Ned's father was passionate about planting trees and now in turn Ned, with >



assistance from Natural England, has embarked on an ambitious restoration plan for the parkland, drawn up by Dr Philip Masters who is an expert on Gilpin. This includes extensive planting of trees, including oaks, planes, limes and tulip trees. 'In this context of parkland, you have to think ahead. For instance, when a tree may fall down, there needs to be something growing up in readiness. We have to be quite conscious of how well this garden will look in 100 years time, and hope one of our daughters will take over and continue the estate,' says Ned.

With 11 acres of gardens there is a lot to care for. In the informal areas are woodland paths meandering through wildflower meadows with rare native orchids, mature rhododendron shrubberies and tranquil ponds. The formal sections, in contrast, include a large walled garden and a parterre Dutch garden. Much of the credit for what you see today is down to past generations. 'My grandmother, Katherine Baroness Nairne, did a huge amount from 1959 and really transformed

'The garden was a bit daunting but now is a real joy, and it is exciting thinking of new ideas'



the garden from what was a bit of a wilderness,' says Ned. His mother, Joanna Lady Mersey, redesigned various aspects of the garden too, including the creation of the Zen Pond in an area that had once been a water garden.

Admitting that they are not natural gardeners themselves, Ned and Clare have called on local designers and RHS Chelsea gold medal winners, Louise Elliot and Lisa Rawley, to manage the walled garden. 'I felt that it lacked colour,' says Clare, 'and Louise and Lisa have transformed it with cleverly thought through planting, using a variety of flowers, including some vibrant dahlias, >



THIS IMAGE Lovely wrought-iron gates open into the walled garden, which is being developed with successional flowering
RIGHT The hardy *Sempervivum tectorum* tolerates extreme temperatures, making it an ideal container plant
BELOW A line of pruned, pleached *Tilia*



Key facts

- Character** A 1,200 acre private estate with formal areas and parkland, mature trees and infill herbaceous seasonal colour
- Size** 11 acres of gardens
- Aspect** A variety, with some of the main garden south-west facing
- Soil** Mostly acidic clay
- Owners** Viscount and Viscountess Mersey, Ned and Clare Bigham. Ned's mother, Joanna Lady Mersey, also lives on the estate
- Date of house** 1826 on site of 1632 mansion house
- Open** Bignor, Pulborough, West Sussex RH20 1HG. Gardens open on selected days for the National Gardens Scheme; bignorpark.co.uk



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Ned and Clare Bigham; *Dahlia* 'Karma Fuchsiana' with its coral flowers and deep burgundy 'Arabian Night'; the large rich

red hips of *Rosa rugosa* stand out against golden foliage; Roly, Louise Elliot's terrier, keeps a look out next to pots of tumbling *Sutera cordata*



which I particularly love. The garden was a bit daunting before but now is a real joy, and it is exciting thinking of new ideas.'

Reached via a loquat tree walk and an orchard of apples and pears, the walled garden is developing as a colourful highlight through the seasons. In autumn massed candy-pink *Dahlia* 'Karma Fuchsiana' and dramatic 'Arabian Night' combine with salvias, *Aster novae-angliae* 'Purple Dome', and *Penstemon* 'Sour Grapes' ambig. against a foil of shimmering ornamental grasses, such as towering *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Flamingo'. Bounded on one side by a row of pruned pleached limes, now turned to bright golds, the walls are not much taller than the hedges and herbaceous borders they frame. Central to the geometrical design is the focal point of a sculptural Aeolian harp by sculptor Geoffrey Stinton, which also adds an element of sound, as it hums softly whenever the wind blows. Purchased by Joanna, the sculpture lends a contemporary touch to the traditional landscape. To one side of the walled garden is a maturing cut flower garden, as Clare loves to have armfuls of blooms for the house.

From the large walled garden, past arrays of pots billowing with pelargoniums and dainty mauve *Sutera cordata*, you enter into the more intimate and equally manicured Dutch garden, so called because of the traditional Dutch desire to control nature. Hedges enclose intricate topiary spirals, pyramids and spheres, while heavily pruned bay, buddleia and lavender also draw the eye in this charming parterre garden. In autumn, the clouds of white cosmos are just going over as they peer above the neatly trimmed hedges.

To the side of the Dutch parterre, draped in *Vitis coignetiae*, is a charming Victorian glasshouse adorned with a swathe of pale blue *Plumbago auriculata* and dangling dried seed heads of alliums and honesty on its whitewashed walls. By the windows are rows of potted crimson pelargoniums and dancing fuchsias.

As you wander the gardens at Bignor Park on a hazy autumnal day, among the burnished foliage, you get a real sense of timelessness. ➔



In the area

- * **Woolbeding Gardens** 20th-century gardens with colour-themed rooms. Midhurst, West Sussex GU29 9RR. Tel 01730 811960; nationaltrust.org.uk
- * **Hillside Nurseries** Family-run specialist plant nursery, with an extensive range of herbaceous perennials, shrubs, climbers, herbs, patio and container plants. Bury, West Sussex RH20 1NR. Tel 01798 831325; hillsidenurseries.co.uk
- * **The Vintage Garden Company** Vintage and antique garden reclamation. Hardham, West Sussex RH20 1LD. Tel 07828 814522; vintagegardenco.com



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Tightly clipped hedges and topiary in the Dutch Garden are augmented with white dahlias and cosmos; terracotta containers filled with scented pelargoniums against vibrant *Vitis coignetiae*; fiery *Cotinus coggygria*; the whitewashed Victorian glasshouse is home to tender pelargoniums and fuchsias, along with bundles of drying flowers



THIS IMAGE A well-worn bench is a lovely place to sit and take in the seasonal changes in the garden
 TOP The orchard has varieties of old apple, pear, quince and medlar trees
 ABOVE Ripening apples on the bough

