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IN THIS ISSUE

- CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE
- GARDEN PLANS FOR SCHOOLS UPDATE
- HELP SAVE WINCHESTER'S RIVER PARK
-



Hampshire Gardens Trust

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BOOK REVIEW

BOOK REVIEW | **Eden's Keepers - The Lives and Gardens of Humphrey Waterfield and Nancy Tennant**

Author | Sarah Barclay

Clearview Books, 2022, pp.212, rrp. £25 | ISBN 9781908337634

This is a fascinating book. At its heart is the unusual love story of Humphrey Waterfield and Nancy Tennant and the garden - their own Eden - that they created together before, during and after the Second World War. But also it encompasses the stories of their respective families over almost a century with a particularly vivid picture of upper-class life in the 'golden afternoon' before the First World War and the impact of that war on both families. During the Second World War Nancy, as a senior member of the Women's Institute led the WI contribution to wartime food supplies. Humphrey, as a Quaker and conscientious objector joined the Friends Ambulance Unit, working on front lines from Norway to the Middle East and North Africa. So there is much in this book for historians as well as gardeners to enjoy.

Nancy and Humphrey met in 1933, when she was 36 and he was 24. He was fun, charming, good looking. Nancy, product of a close and loving family, was nevertheless lonely. They discovered a mutual passion for music, art, architecture: he wanted to be her friend. Nancy, for the first time in her life, fell deeply in love. How these soul mates found their path towards the closest loving relationship of their lives is told through the surviving archive of their copious correspondence.

In 1936 Humphrey bought a plot of land at Broxted, near the Tennant family home in Ugley, Essex and named it 'Hill Pasture'. Plans for a simple modern bungalow designed by Erno Goldfinger were drawn up and he and Nancy embarked on planning a garden in 'a run-down field'. Nancy, carrying a feather duster strapped to a broom, standing in for a tree, stumbled around the field while Humphrey started marking out his ideas on the ground with bamboo canes. Over the next few years they grubbed out the scrub and weeded, planned and planted. They spent as much time as they could on this joint project which bedded in and nurtured their relationship. They were aided by Mr Reynolds, the gardener, who wandered up one day to enquire 'what fool had bought that medder'.

Far more than an enjoyable project, the garden became the physical centre of their bond: '...something we have made together and it's got a sort of precious quality almost as a child might have.'

This idyll was shattered by war and the impact it had on Humphrey. He was horrified and depressed by what he saw, often feeling that suicide was the only way to escape. Intense but short-lived infatuations with young men in the Unit exposed his emotional immaturity. Through it all Nancy's long letters full of vivid, lyrical descriptions of their garden in all seasons and all moods gave him a reason to cling on.

As the war ended, Humphrey was a POW. When he came home he saw how Hill Pasture had matured over the years of his absence. The property had been requisitioned, so they dealt with the damage, and in 1956 Nancy bought an adjacent piece of

land to extend the garden so that Humphrey could complete his vision for their 'English paradise'. In the original garden he installed a faux Greek temple with a small pond below it. From here the eye could take in a new 'Bathing Pool Garden'. Nancy was roped in, as in 1936, to help with positioning a new 'Moon Gate' by moving a cardboard cut-out around until the views from both sides - the garden within and the valley beyond, were perfectly framed. In the early 1960s

Lanning Roper visited and wrote of the garden; '... it has been conceived by an artist, who has thought in terms of a series of pictorial landscape compositions....there is a curious blending of Riviera and English gardening, revealing an understanding and affection for the elements of both..' Roper's description of the planting reads like a mix of poetry and a horticultural index. Others described it as 'the most beautiful small garden in England'.

The blending recalled Humphrey's life in France. Since childhood he had spent his holidays at his parents' villa, Le Clos du Peyronnet, in Menton. It survived the war but they had moved to Pau as the German army approached and jointly committed suicide in 1940 when France surrendered. Humphrey could have sold the Villa but he rescued and remodelled the gardens, restored the villa and converted it into apartments to pay for the work. He and Nancy spent happy post-war summers there. It is a well-known and visited garden, still owned by the Waterfield family.

The bones of the garden and some of the planting at Hill Pasture survive: it now lies under the flightpath for Stansted airport. Humphrey pre-deceased Nancy, dying in a car accident in 1971; Nancy died peacefully in 2006.

The author has woven an absorbing story from previously unpublished letters, diaries, memoirs and family photographs. Recommended!

Sally Miller

