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October 2012

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Near the house, the planting is informal, exuberant and full of colour, with plants such as *Agapanthus* Headbourne hybrids, *Salvia* x *sylvestris* 'Amethyst', *Sedum* 'Matrona' and *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low' planted into a gravel mulch

Return to grace

When garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith was called in to restore and redesign the formerly neglected gardens of this Georgian country house in Cheshire, he used an innovative mix of modern planting within a formal setting to give the historic gardens a new lease of life

TEXT **CAROLINE BECK** | PHOTOGRAPHS **MARIANNE MAJERUS**

THIS PAGE A mature purple beech and *Cedrus libani* stand on the lawn on the west side of the house (above). In the south-west corner of the walled garden, a brick shelter overlooks a lawn flanked by *Echinacea purpurea* (this picture). OPPOSITE Intense blue *Agapanthus* Headbourne hybrids line a path leading to a courtyard and the lawns beyond

When work on the garden began, Tom's first impulse was to 'rough it up a bit'

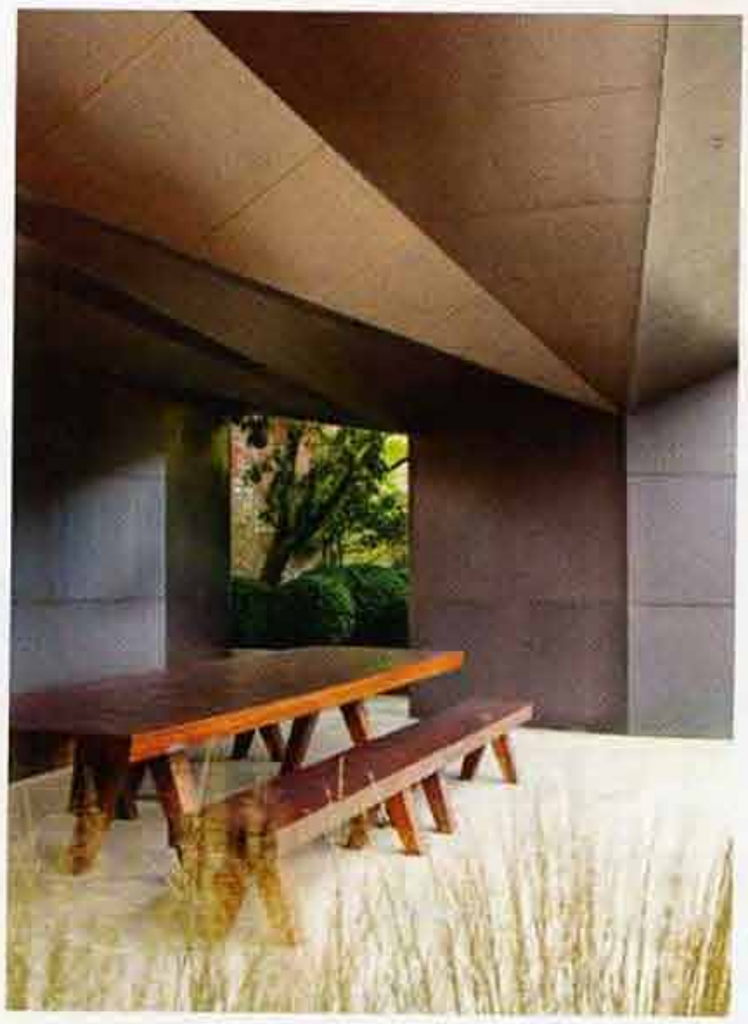
The regular, repeated geometry of the walled garden extends to a long, still, reflecting pool

The writer and philanthropist Elizabeth Gaskell, that great chronicler of Victorian life and author of *Cranford*, called Cheshire 'the most lovely county in England', and the countryside she regarded as her spiritual home. Cogshall Hall looks like an engraving from one of her novels and exactly the kind of house she would have known from her travels around her beloved county. Built in 1830 at the end of the Georgian period, it's a well-proportioned, salmon-coloured brick mansion set in around 100 acres of green Cheshire countryside. Were Mrs Gaskell able to stand at the carriage turning circle today and see the view over the formal lawns, across the ha-ha and into the parkland where cows graze, she would be astonished, and probably gratified, to see how little has changed.

The owners moved to the hall in 2004, when, although the house had been largely saved from being butchered because of its Grade II* listing, the same wasn't true of the garden. Historically, such houses would have been set within a formal garden designed to enhance the status of both house and owners – think of all those Jane Austen heroines gasping in admiration as they rounded the corner in their phaeton – but the twentieth-century decline of the country house and garden was, for many, terminal. By the time Cogshall Hall was sold, the garden was drab, with the formal element reduced to a large, tightly mown lawn. All that remained was the walled garden set near the house, which many local people recall being used to grow fruit and vegetables. But in 2004 its heyday was long over and an outdoor swimming pool had replaced the carefully tended produce.

Restoring a 170-year-old house is a labour of love but doing the same with a garden is often bewildering and far from

Eleven cloud-pruned hornbeam trees are reflected by the rectangular pool in the walled garden, beside which grows a bank of *Molinia caerulea* 'Poul Petersen'



THIS PAGE BOTH PICTURES A pavilion designed by Jamie Fobert and made from thin sheets of bronze overlooks the walled garden. OPPOSITE Late-summer-flowering, prairie-style plants such as rudbeckia and echinacea thrive in the walled garden (above), as do grasses such as *Calamagrostis brachytricha* and *Calamagrostis* x *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' (below)

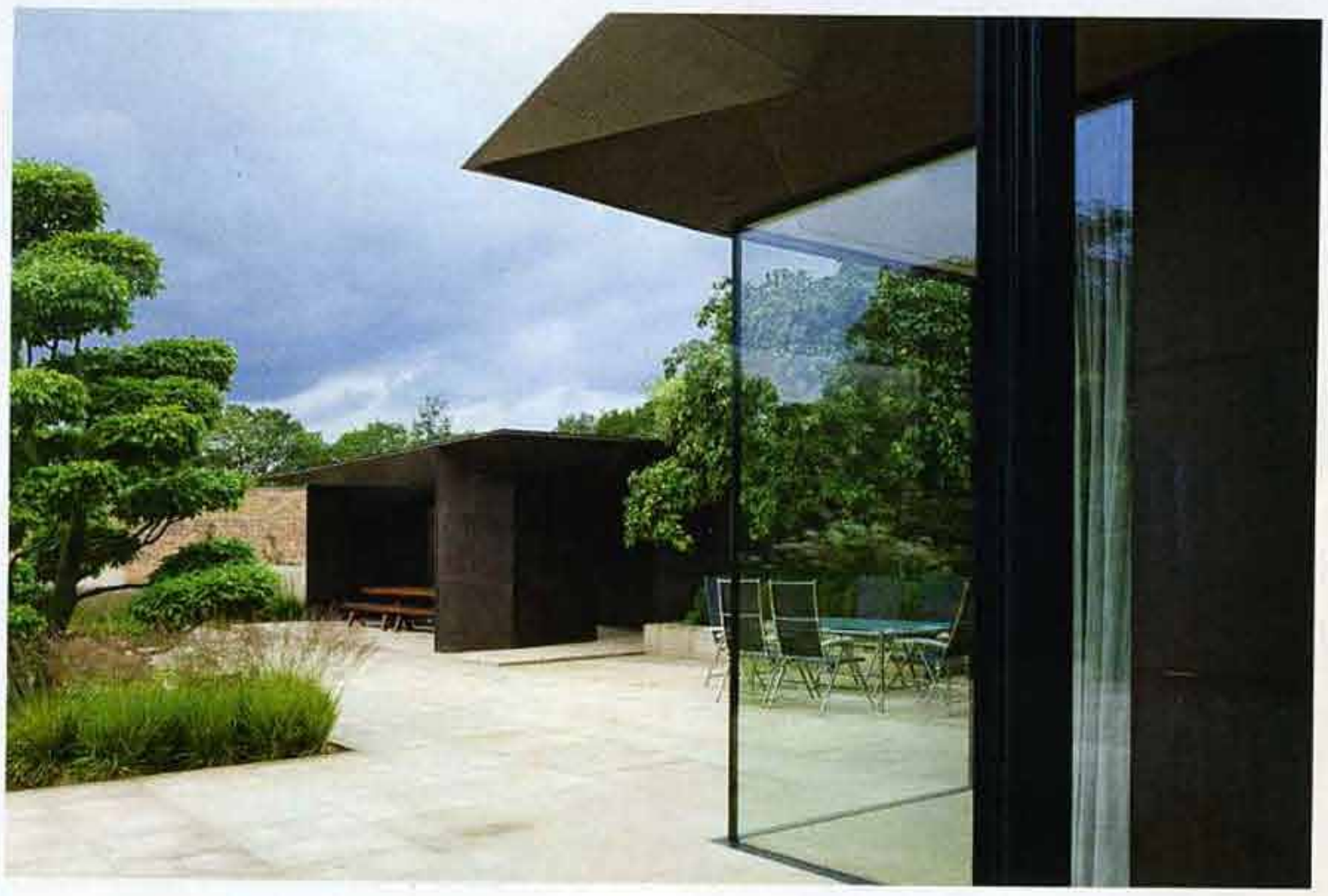
straightforward. The style of the house dictates the restoration but, as fashions in garden design throughout the nineteenth century changed more quickly than necklines, sensitively restoring an historic garden from this era is a complicated process.

The owners felt that the house needed a garden setting and decided, after much deliberation, that they should broadly stick to the same principles with which the house was built – a mixture of formal and informal styles – but make full use of modern planting. They called in the award-winning designer Tom Stuart-Smith, famous for his bold use of late-summer-flowering perennials and grasses, to create rich, voluptuous gardens. As well as receiving a clutch of gold medals from Chelsea, Tom had collaborated with celebrated Dutch plantsman Piet Oudolf in the £100 million restoration of nearby Trentham, including a 10-acre Italianate formal garden which had fallen into decay. By using modern plants in an historic setting, he created what many believe to be one of the most imaginative restorations of the last decade.

Work on the garden began in 2009. Tom's first instinct was to 'rough it up a bit' because the garden, such as it was, was so controlled. Around the house, what once would have been tightly clipped evergreens – a linchpin of nineteenth-century design – have been replaced by a much looser structure of undulating box mixed with traditional herbaceous perennials, such as nepeta, sedum, euphorbia, agapanthus, alliums, thyme and viola. The house no longer rears out of the flat landscape but sits comfortably among the shrubs and flowers. But all this is just a preamble to the undoubted star of the show – the walled garden.

As with most walled gardens, the temptation is to see what lies beyond. A gate like an Islamic grille in a constantly extending leaf motif allows a glimpse to some of the garden, but not all. Upon opening the gate, the first surprise is an avenue of 11 cloud-pruned hornbeam trees beneath which are repeat plantings of mainly shade-loving foliage plants such as hostas, the grass molinia, epimediums and the ferny-leafed milk parsley. Tom wanted to make something 'serene and contemplative' and it does have the feel of a medieval cloister. The regular, repeated geometry then extends to a long, still, reflecting pool which mirrors the often-turbulent northern skies, the massed clouds above echoing the rounded hornbeam trees below. Overlooking this is the pavilion, designed by the architect Jamie Fobert and made from thin sheets of bronze, the colour of which is picked out in similar tones in the surrounding trees and shrubs.

From this quiet space the garden becomes much more exuberant and informal, planted like a horticultural firework display, full of strong colour, movement and height. Here, plants are placed directly into a thick mulch of gravel a similar colour to the brickwork of the house, and they thrive in the cool, damp root run and the reflected heat from the walls and gravel. As the summer progresses, plants such as echinacea, eryngium, rudbeckia, achillea and euphorbia fill out the space until all you can see is an undulating wave of plants.

Beyond the walled garden new ventures are still ongoing. The owners, tired of the constant whirr of a lawnmower, have taken Tom's advice to let the lawn break out into a wild-flower meadow with paths weaving through it. The merits of different mixtures of wild flowers have been debated and test areas have been experimented with. Last summer, it yielded a tall meadow of red campion, plantain, stitchwort, corncockle, cuckoo flower, bladder campion and scabious among the grasses. It was no coincidence that the local songbird population also went up, heralding a return to the kind of landscape that would have been familiar in the Cheshire countryside prior to the Second World War, when so many meadows were either ploughed up or planted with a grass monoculture for grazing. This return to an earlier landscape is another sight which Mrs Gaskell would have recognised, and of which she would have thoroughly approved □

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