

KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

When **Sally Boyce** visited Westonbury Mill Water Gardens, she found the new owners as passionate about the iconic garden's future as its creator was



If you missed the cuckoo this year don't worry. At one extravagantly leafy Herefordshire spot, this elusive visitor to our shores is timed to appear any day, on the hour.

Westonbury Water Mill Gardens, overflowing with an abundance of plants, flowers and trees intersected by water courses, is home to a remarkable cuckoo clock - reputedly the largest water-powered one in the world - and its resident bird is guaranteed to pop out on cue to the absolute delight of visitors.

When Mark and Deborah Constable took ownership of the gardens just over a year ago they took stewardship of one man's dreams. Richard Pim, a true English eccentric with a genius for design and creativity, spent decades developing the gardens.

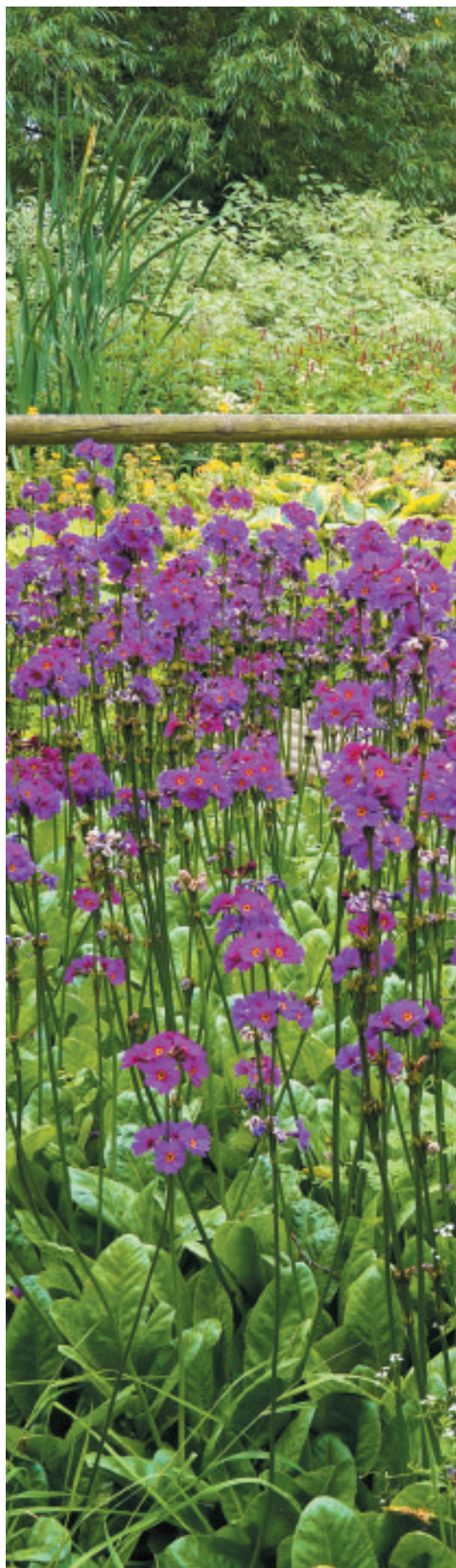
After retiring from his job in Africa where he worked for many years as a hydrologist, he bought the 18th century mill and set to work. The layout of the gardens is dreamlike, magical with the flitting wings of dragon flies and kingfishers, but the three follies - Giant Cuckoo Clock, Stone Water Tower and Glass

Bottle Dome - are testament to Richard's engineering brilliance.

Taking over the running of this much-visited spot exactly a year ago was not a decision to be taken lightly. The Constables understood the need to be "grilled" by the vendor, and honestly answered his key question: "Will you keep it open to the public?"

"As long as it's fun we'll keep it open," says Mark, who retired from his corporate globe-trotting job with his sights set upon working in the great outdoors. "We wondered if we were going to get hassle, but people are so generous in their remarks and not one single visitor has complained."

An important addition to this popular spot on the tourist trail is James Maddox who now runs the Watermill café. He formerly ran the National Trust café at Croft Castle and has now brought his incredible flair for food here. Customers return time and time again for the delicious lunches - one woman firmly extolling the quiches as the "best in Herefordshire" - and the array of wonderful cakes is just sublime.





The Constables, who have in the past lived in Madrid with their four children, and a further five years in India, have slipped into their new role with ease. It's a dream come true for Deborah whose love of gardening began in childhood, and essential to their efforts is Colin Price, who stayed on as gardener after they moved here. He is helping preserve what his former employer created while assisting with the new owners' own vision. Deborah says: "We are essentially preserving what Richard has made. It's beautiful, why would you change it?"

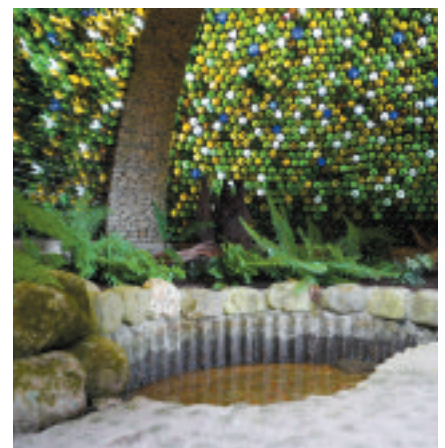
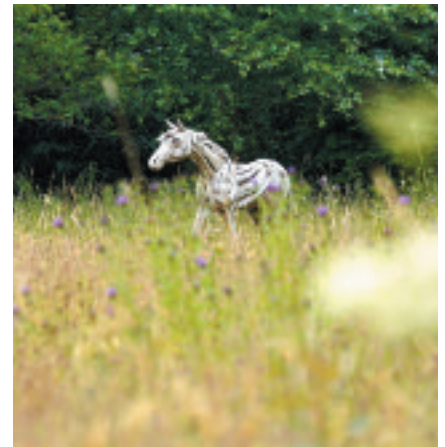
Naturally they will make their own contributions, among them their plans to expand the grounds. Already a striking "two-metre high Moon Gate" in rusty steel, set amid a newly laid beech hedge, captures the gaze on approach to the gardens. In time this will lead the curious on a romantic pathway to the first of the new gardens the Constables will be laying out, following the Curl Brook - with a tiny island - on its way to Pembridge.

"I don't want to make it over-formal," says Deborah. "You can't lose this bucolic environment."

In fact that scene of English pastureland includes sheep, and the Constables are constantly on their guard to make sure they don't get into the gardens. One or two have already demonstrated an impressive ability to leap a ha-ha, and one ewe was even caught nimbly stepping over the cattle grid. In the nursery they endeavour to discourage rabbits from nibbling on young saplings, but their children, now in their twenties, are pretty vocal on any thoughts of taking Beatrix Potter's Mr McGregor approach to the problem!

There is much to be done to keep the gardens at their luscious best.

Monumentally large gunnera can be found all over the garden, and a "canal" linking two streams is edged with dramatic *darmera peltata* (umbrella plants). The former mill pond is now a bog garden and tiny pathways lead through forests of colour from sizzling orange and yellow candelabra primulas and butterflies and dragonflies abound. ➔



The enormous job of weeding has been eased by efforts to tackle the job early in the season, as well as a generous application of mulch to deter any weeds. Ever resourceful, Mark keeps a pair of waders in the porch ready to attend to tasks in the many watery sections. The present five acres of garden lie around the Curl Brook, and there are ponds, streams, springs and a leat passes in front of the house.

“I was a bit worried at first – there is a lot of water!” says Deborah. But despite a destructive storm during the winter – which brought down a massive horse chestnut tree – water has not been a problem. Even water passing beneath the old mill poses no trouble.

They felt the wild flower meadow was looking “a bit sad” with flowers struggling against a preponderance of grasses, so they scarified the area. “We were so brutal!” says Deborah. But the cornflowers, yellow rattle, common knapweed and orchids have made a vigorous return and a lovely horse statue made from reclaimed pieces of wood is an effective addition – even winning the approval of a nearby riding school!

A handsome pergola has gone up near the Spiral Mound, (a popular feature with children), which will eventually be festooned with fragrant roses while a rill will connect the two features.

White doves continue to live in the Stone Water Tower, an impressive building prompted by Richard’s discovery of an

ancient water wheel in the grounds. It had been used to pump water to the neighbouring farm and cast aside when corn milling ceased at Westonbury around 1900.

The wheel lifts water to the top of the tower by little buckets mounted on a belt system, and water spills from the mouth of one of three gargoyles. Deborah was greatly amused when she spotted one of the doves taking a ride on one of the buckets.

Meanwhile photographs of the glass bottle dome have appeared in newspapers and magazines the world over. This creation, glittering with 5,000 multi-coloured wine bottles embedded in concrete quadrants, has been widely regarded as an architectural feat. The introduction of a fernery inside the construction is down to Deborah’s persistence. She was advised against the idea, but undertook a course and duly planted up ferns which are clearly flourishing.

Much time has been devoted to the giant cuckoo clock. Last winter, Mark, with the help of an agricultural engineer and an amateur horologist, finally succeeded in getting the cuckoo’s hourly performance working.

Visitors are invited to gather in front of the seven-metre high half-timbered tower for the ceremony, and Mark gives a well-oiled account of its clever workings. The attendant birdsong and cuckoo calls, produced by a barrel organ mechanism, are beamed out on the hour. He believes birds in the gardens are provoked into singing considerably louder when the cuckoo does his bit.

Deborah envisages the new gardens

beyond the Moon Gate. Already the haunt of heron and swallows, there will be lots of tree planting to come, twisted willows, black poplar and hornbeam, and a line of cherry trees offering a blaze of white flowers. There will also be a shelter belt of trees to spare plantings from the prevailing wind.

What’s abundantly clear is that Richard Pim’s extraordinary creation is in safe hands. The Constables have taken on his dream, including three elderly Welssummer hens and a colony of wild bees, and of course the demands of a very vocal cuckoo.

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