

# Growing obsession

Gardens | Whether building a nation or a landscape, some people go to great lengths to shape the world around them. By Jane Owen

Obsession is a handy gardening tool but it has some unlikely disciples. George Washington, for instance, used to write home to ask about his garden while he was fighting the American War of Independence. Thomas Jefferson did the same when he was away from home on state business and, in 1786 while he was supposed to be in London signing trade deals, he bunked off for a tour of English landscape gardens.

Earlier that century, in Britain, Queen Caroline fiddled the royal ledgers to obscure her prodigious spend on gardens but she still died owing £37,000. A fortune in those days. Charles Hamilton died in debt having poured his money into Painshill landscape in Surrey and, 150 years or so later, the renowned 20th-century gardener Miss (Ellen) Willmott, immortalised by the eponymous ghostly thistle, managed to rid herself of a substantial fortune in the name of garden making, as Robin Lane

Jefferson's focus on plants was fired by the desire to make a thriving agrarian economy



'Palmy Days at Mount Vernon' by Thomas Prichard Rossiter (1866), depicts Washington (right) entertaining in his garden — George Washington's Mount Vernon



Fox recently outlined on these pages. She died while selling off property in order to fund her garden.

Symptoms of obsession range beyond the purely financial: in the early 20th century Sir Frank Crisp sent his gardener to examine the Matterhorn in Switzerland because he wanted an accurate model of the mountain in his garden near Henley in southern England; in the mid-19th century the Reverend David Purnell-Edwards built a secret garden at his Gloucestershire home, Stancombe Park, with entrances so narrow that only his gypsy lover, rather than his plump wife, could squeeze in.

With these delights in mind I set off with a friend to visit four gardens, two in the US, two in the UK, which promised a degree of obsession. We began in northern Virginia where sunshine and the fall set the countryside alight.

At Jefferson's hilltop garden, Monticello, the great man was working with native plants that would help his fledgling nation cut the bonds of dependency with Britain. He sought, tested and



Washington in centre of John Trumbull painting  
Photo by Francis G. Mayer/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images

recorded them in meticulous detail.

Yet his ambition to end dependency relied on another kind of dependency: slaves, 600 of them, including Sally Hemings by whom he probably had six children. Like Washington, he worked alongside slaves in the garden but the contradiction remained for the Founding Fathers of a fair and free society.

Jefferson's airy ground-floor rooms connect to a garden room with triple sash windows opening on to the



Monticello's vegetable garden — Robert Llewellyn / Thomas Jefferson Foundation at Monticello



Washington at Mount Vernon — Granger

gardens, a short walk from Hemings' cramped quarters.

Aside from proximity to Hemings, Jefferson's room and its curious alcove bed is as close as possible to the oval flower beds and to the productive garden that he created. He wanted constant contact with his garden and even while away, as he was for many years, his letters home asked into its minutiae.

Andrea Wulf's book *Founding Gardeners* explains that Jefferson's focus on

*Continued on page 17*



# Growing obsession

Continued from page 1

plants and gardens was fired by the desire to make a thriving, independent agrarian economy. He was so convinced that his new nation would be agrarian rather than industrial that while in Britain, he spent barely a day visiting the new factories in the British Midlands preferring instead to head for The Leasowes, William Shenstone's *ferme ornée*, or ornamental farm, nearby.

And in a sense Monticello is a *ferme ornée*, with Jefferson's brick-built pavilion overlooking grand views on one side and the 1,000ft vegetable garden on the other. This part of the garden is a miracle of productivity because it is cut into Monticello's south-facing hill, giving a long, protected season to the 330 varieties Jefferson grew. Many still grow there.

As vice-president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Professor Andrew O'Shaughnessy says: "Jefferson is so often portrayed as the enigmatic philosopher and statesman but his greatest joy was to be at home surrounded by family and to be overseeing his gardens."

About 100 miles north-east at George Washington's Mount Vernon, obsession worked both ways. During his lifetime, visitors would pour in to see the place in such numbers (more than 600 in one year alone, all expecting to see the man in person) that he used to despair of finding any privacy. Like Jefferson, Washington was committed to finding productive native plants. His letters home are filled with longing for Mount Vernon and questions about the garden.

Wulf notes that "by the summer of 1776 Manhattan had been transformed into an armed camp . . . as the British troops were preparing for their ferocious onslaught, Washington brushed aside his generals and his military maps, sat in the flicker of candlelight with his quill and wrote a long letter to his estate manager . . . at Mount Vernon. As the city braced itself, Washington pondered on the voluptuous blossom of rhododendron, the sculptural flowers of mountain laurel and the perfect pink of crab apple. These 'clever kind of Trees' . . . he instructed, should be



View of the Terrace Gardens with The Andromeda Fountain on the Lower Terrace at Osborne House — GAP Photos/Jason Ingram



Royal children's gardening tools — English Heritage

planted in two groves by either side of his house."

The house is a paean to plants with plasterwork details of agricultural tools and sheaves of corn but, outside, the garden obsession is more, well, practical. The octagonal follies installed by Washington were in fact lavatories, or "necessaries", for visitors and an integral part of Washington's commitment to the productive garden by layering it with every kind of dung.

On the other side of the Atlantic, we boarded the ferry to the Isle of Wight to visit Queen Victoria's estate, Osborne. A 20-minute stroll through woodland took us to the shore and a folly where Victoria could gaze across the Solent. In later years she remained devoted to



The cascade at Hestercombe — Hestercombe



Philip White — Hestercombe

Osborne as a retreat from public life and, according to the schmaltzy film *Victoria & Abdul*, as a place where she and her Indian servant could spend time together.

The driving force behind royal gardens was Prince Albert. He even gave the royal children a vegetable garden each and miniature tools. Albert encouraged them to tend the plots with the bribe that he would buy their produce for Osborne's kitchen.

Like the other garden-obsessed power brokers Albert's interest was more than an escape. He recognised the economic importance of plants. Without rubber, sugar, chocolate, coffee and the quinine plant *Cinchona* to name but a few, Britain would probably have remained an



Royal family at Osborne (c1897)  
Popperfoto/Getty Images

insignificant, empire-less island off the French coast. When Victoria died in 1901 the new king, Edward VII, gave Osborne to the nation. His only contact with gardens appears to have been as seduction plots for his mistresses.

Speeding away from such imperial thoughts we headed to Hestercombe in Somerset, whose 18th-century glories would have been lost if local farmer Philip White hadn't stumbled across the overgrown masterpiece in the 1980s. White mortgaged his house, without telling his wife, in order to restore the landscape behind Jekyll & Lutyens' 1904 garden then inhabited, implausibly, by the Somerset fire brigade.

"When I first discovered Hestercombe I had an overwhelming emotional response that I was here for a purpose and it was to restore this extraordinary landscape. It wasn't until some considerable time later that I discovered my great-grandfather had been a shepherd on the estate and his son, my great uncle, a gardener," said White, who remains happily married.

The origin of Hestercombe's older gardens are mysterious and so we may never know whether obsession drove their creation. But White's continuing interest has uncovered yet more historic gardens at Hestercombe, the latest being a rare Elizabethan Ladies Fishing pond. My favourite feature is the picturesque waterfall which cascades into the calm pool at the landscape's heart. I first saw it in the mid-1990s and I will go on visiting it until my legs or eyes fail.

As Jefferson observed in 1809, after serving two terms as the third president of the US, garden obsession is as happy as it is long lived: "I am constantly in my garden or farm, as exclusively employed out of doors as I was within doors when at Washington, and I find myself infinitely happier in my new mode of life."

Jane Owen is editor of *House & Home* and deputy editor of *FT Weekend*