Growing obsession

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 borked 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 £22,000. 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

*‘Falmy Days at Mount Vernon’ by Thomas Prichard Rosamilia (1866), depicts Washington (right) entertaining in his garden.* — George Washington Mount Vernon
Fox recently outlined on these pages, the dead 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 Furnell-Edwards built a secret garden at his Gloucestershire home, Stancombe Park, with entrances so narrow that only his yoga 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 UK, two in the US, 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 family’s garden cut the bonds of dependency with Britain. He sought, tested and 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 vegetable garden.

Washington, 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.

Arendt Wolf’s book Founding Gardeners explains that Jefferson’s focus on

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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 Brit-
sia, he spent a hard day visiting the new factories in the British Midlands
preferring instead to head for The Leasowe, William Shenton's farm
Arms, or ornamental farm, nearby.

And in a sense Monticello is a ferris
 Ala, with Jefferson's brick-built pavil-
ion overlooking grand views on one
side and the L000M 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
350 varieties Jefferson grew. Many still
grow there.

As vice-president of the Thomas
Jefferson Foundation, Professor Andre
O'Hanlon says: "Jefferson is so often portrayed as the enigmatic
philosopher and statesman but his
greatest joy was to be at home sur-
rounded 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,
vistors would pour in to see the place in
such numbers (more than 600 in one
eye span), 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. It's almost all about the garden.

Waltz notes that "by the summer of
1776 Manhattan had been transformed
into an armed camp... as the British
troops were preparing for their feroc-
ous 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
managers... at Mount Vernon. As the
city braced itself, Washington pondered
on the voluptuous blossoms of rhodo-
dendron, the sculptural flowers of
mountain laurel and the perfect pink of
cranberry. These 'clever kind of'Trees'... he instructed, should be
planted in two groves by either side of
his house."

The house is a pun on plants with
plasterwork details of agricultural tools
and sheaves of corn but, outside, the
garden obsession is more, well, practi-
cal. The octagonal folly installed by
Washington were in fact laversaries, or
'seaward', for visitors and an inte-
gal part of Washington's commitment
the productive garden by laying it
with every kind of thing.

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

View of the Terrace Gardens with The Andromeda Fountain on the Lower Terrace at Osborne House. — CAR Photoawards images

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

The driving force behind royal gar-
dens 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 help of the man who would buy their
produce for Osborne's kitchen.

Like the other garden-obessed 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, Brit-
sian would probably have remained an

Royal family at Osborne (C897)

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.

Spending away from such imperial
thoughts we headed to Hestercombe in
Somerset, whose 18th-century gardens
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' 1906
garden then inhabited, impossibly,
by the Somerset fire brigade.

"When I first discovered Hester-
combe I had an overwhelming emo-
tional 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 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 piktur-
queen waterfall which cascades into the
calm pool at the landscape's heart. I first
saw it in the mid-1990s and I will go
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 con-
stantly in my garden or farm, as exclu-
sively employed out of doors as I was
within doors when at Washington, and I
find myself infinitely happier in my new
mode of life."

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