



Garden Special: **Inside Iford Manor**

Thought lost after the Second World War, these exquisite Grade I listed gardens have been restored by two generations of the Cartwright-Hignett family – with some expert help...

WORDS | ADRIENNE WYPER

ACCLAIMED AS ONE of England's most beautiful gardens, Iford covers two-and-a-half acres in the tranquil Frome river valley in Wiltshire, on the edge of the Cotswolds.

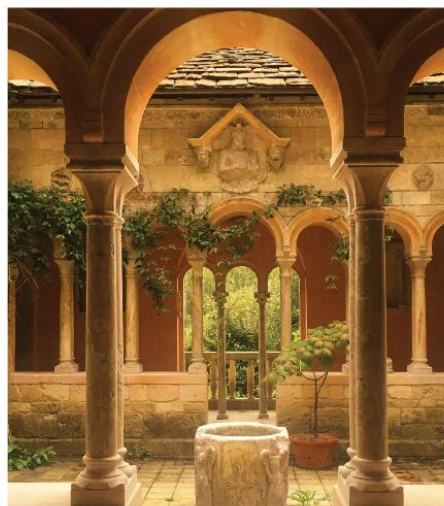
Home to the Cartwright-Hignett family since 1965, the garden was taken over by current owners William and Marianne in 2018. Head gardener Troy Scott Smith joined the team in 2019, from Sissinghurst in Kent, the garden of writer Vita Sackville-West.

The garden came into being in 1899, when landscape architect and designer, Harold Peto, purchased the Manor (where he lived until his death in 1933) and created a garden that showed his love of Italianate design and incorporated the artefacts and architectural elements he had admired and collected on his travels.

One of the UK's oldest wisterias, and historic roses, scramble through breathtaking views of 'borrowed scenery' and the changes of level that are key to the design, making the garden feel much larger than its actual size, and the wealth of ancient statues, colonnades, cloisters and classical buildings mean that it's sometimes hard to know which country, or indeed century, you are in.

Another of Peto's gardens, the *Arts & Crafts Innacullin* on an island in Bantry Bay, Co Kerry, is another favourite destination for *Dream Escape*.

Located on England's new *Great West Way* touring route, a beautifully authentic region of the south coast, *Iford Manor Gardens* is one of the highlight attractions. *Dream Escape* tours offer fascinating owner- and expert-led visits as well as unique private access, allowing you to dig deeper into Iford's history, and learn about future plans. →



Meet the owners on a private evening visit outside normal opening hours, hosted in English, French or Spanish, with a glass or two of fizz along the way. You can also explore the private walled garden, not usually open to the public, with an introduction by the family. Head gardener Troy also heads a monthly behind-the-scenes tour.

Want to stay a little longer? The newly restored Rowley Cottage, which dates from the 1400s has three bedrooms housed within honey-coloured stone looking out over the valley, the river Frome, set in its own garden.

Dream Escape asked William Cartwright-Hignett and Troy Scott Smith about the Estate's heritage, exciting plans ahead, and their tips for making the most of your time here.

Pictured previous spread: View from the loggia window. Inspired by this glorious 15th century Venetian window, the loggia was one of the first things that Peto built when he moved to Iford. **Above left-right:** Troy Scott Smith expertly prunes and ties in historic roses; the newly restored cloister originally built by Harold Peto.

What are you most excited about for the year ahead?

Troy: Sharing the garden with visitors again and starting to see the results of all our hard work.

William: Just being able to welcome visitors has been amazing! It's what makes me get up in the morning. Our new restaurant and holiday cottage are very exciting as they will allow people new ways to engage with the spaces, and stay in Iford itself. We are also excited to see the new succession and restorative replanting in areas where a lot of work has been undertaken in the past year, led by Troy.

What has been the most challenging aspect of the pandemic?

William: Gardens cannot be furloughed, the weeds keep growing. At the start of the

“One of the joys of historic gardens and beautiful landscapes is that there is always either a restoration project, a renewal or expansion to be undertaken.”

pandemic Government support was scarce for places like Iford so careful planning was needed to ensure that the garden was managed sustainably. Thankfully later the Government saw fit to provide the Culture Recovery Fund, with Iford a most grateful recipient of the grants, enabling us to keep people employed, and the garden in improved condition as we took the opportunity to undertake significant replanting and restoration projects whilst closed.

One such restoration was the work on Harold Peto's Grade II listed cloisters, which won the 2020 Historic Houses Association Restoration Award – can you tell me more?

William: Yes, it has reopened this season and people are overwhelmed by its beauty. We were over the moon to win the award, particularly in respect of those expert, skilled craftsmen and engineers who poured their time, effort and skill into what was a particularly challenging and detailed restoration.

How far in advance do you plan in the garden?

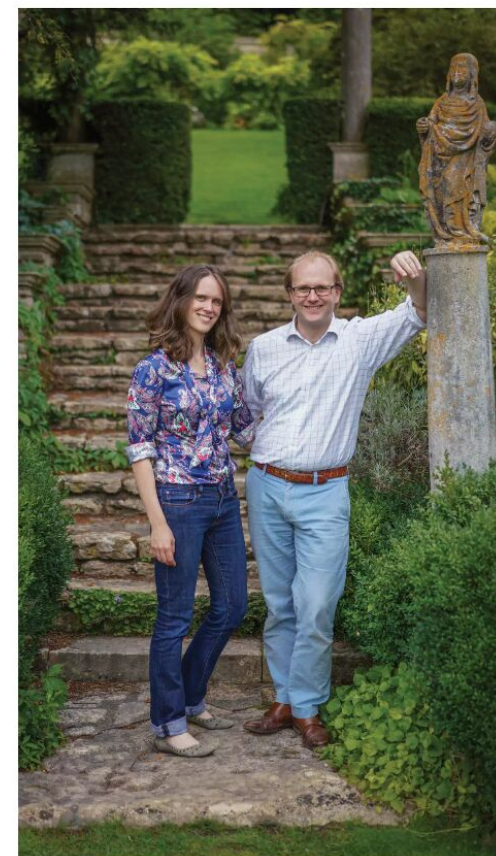
Troy: We have a long-term vision with annual goals and monthly and weekly tasks. We will start to flesh out our autumn/winter work shortly.

William: Quite a few decades... but seriously, planning has to be on a number of levels in a historic garden. Tree belts are planted for centuries ahead, and stonework should remain in perpetuity. Evergreen shrubs take time to develop, whereas soft borders can have a much shorter lifespan to remain fresh and relevant.

Do you have any tips to help everyone planning a visit to get the most from it?

Troy: Take your time, don't rush. Iford is a garden to linger in and absorb the atmosphere.

William: Make sure to do the audioguide or guidebook. Unusually for a garden, the history and architecture at Iford is significant, so as well as enjoying the planting, birdsong and surroundings a deeper understanding →



Pictured below: Owners Marianne and William Cartwright-Hignett



“Our aim is to preserve and maintain wherever possible the hard landscaping and structural planting so that if Harold Peto were to wander the garden today he would recognise it.”

William: Absolutely! Bath is just 15 minutes away, and lesser-known Bradford on Avon is a delight, with Lacock and Castle Combe a short drive away. For garden enthusiasts there is Derry Watkins' Special Plants, Great Chalfield and Bowood. Iford is also located on the southernmost point of the Cotswolds.

Troy: Most certainly, you don't have to go far or even need your car. Walks radiate out from Iford, to nearby villages of Freshford and Tellisford and stunning little towns like Bradford on Avon.

The garden, of course, is the main attraction, and its design combines formality with natural elements. How important is nature here?

William: Our ethos as a family is to ensure that the Iford valley is conserved for future generations – its wildlife, nature and heritage, as well as putting it onto an economically sustainable footing.

The Iford Valley is a Site of Special Scientific Interest as it is home to one of the UK's largest maternity roosts for extremely rare Greater Horseshoe and Lesser Horseshoe bats. We have another 10 bat species across the estate. →

of the design, history and architecture can be gleaned – and it's not unlike going on a mini Grand Tour.

Also, if you are planning a visit with children under 10, this will need to be arranged by prior arrangement or they will not be admitted to the garden.

What can visitors expect from an exclusive Dream Escape tour?

William: Visitors have the option of exclusive garden use, and tours tailored to their specific interests. If they are interested in horticulture, a tour with

Troy is often best, but *Dream Escape* visitors also enjoy a tour with myself and Marianne. We offer an understanding not only of the horticulture but also the garden design, history, architecture and plans for the future.

As well as tours, you've previously held many events. What can we look forward to?

William: Last year we hosted the *BounceBack Festival* – four nights of world-class jazz and classical music with the Manor as a beautiful backdrop to the

stage. We made a last-minute decision to do it when it was announced such events could take place again and it was a resounding success. This year our *BounceBack Festival* is from July 1st to 4th with tickets on sale in May.

In May 2021 our new restaurant with incredible Head Chef Jaq Brewer will open, as well as later in the season our newly restored Great Barn, which will host art and sculpture exhibitions. In 2022, if not before, we will curate a series of dinner talks with top speakers

Pictured above:
A view across the valley from the wisteria-clad colonnade on the Great Terrace, with Aslan, one of the Manor's three cats, and a 19th-century copy of Rome's she-wolf statue.

from the worlds of design, fashion, architecture, gardening, art and more.

On the far side of the estate is the oldest, natural, continually running motocross circuit in Europe, which started in 1936. The Motocross World Championships have been held here in the past and we host the UK leg of the Veteran World Championship each year (Covid permitting).

Would you advise visitors to spend longer in the local area? What other attractions are there nearby?



Iford is recorded as pasture land in the Domesday Book, and the land is still used for grazing, under a Higher Level Stewardship scheme with Natural England. Many rare birds and animals live at Iford and can be enjoyed on walks, from otters and kingfishers to rare birds, orchids and many other creatures in the woodland, meadows and fields.

Nature has always been at the heart of the design and our ethos. Even Harold Peto regularly spoke about letting nature into the garden as his time as a designer was a move away from the more formal gardens that predated it. Instead, areas of unmown grass to encourage wildflowers,

Pictured above-right: Quintessentially English and in many ways unchanged for centuries, Iford in its unspoilt rural valley; historic roses from the garden displayed in bottles in the loggia

perfect habitats for slow worms, grass snakes (harmless), frogs, newts and toads which are all regularly spotted in the garden, especially by the Japanese Garden created by my father.

How do you collaborate with the gardeners?

William: We work very closely because we all share a passion for the long-term future of Iford. It's an absolute delight working with such extraordinarily experienced and knowledgeable people, and necessarily so because Iford is by no means a straightforward garden to manage. The complexity of the spaces, the way they interact and the need for

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all-year interest means that the skills involved in navigating the years and decades ahead range from pure horticulture to landscape design, conservation, and much more.

How important is the work of the gardening volunteers?

Troy: We simply could not have done all we have without help from our garden volunteers. They are such nice people, too. We have 20, each coming one or sometimes two days per week. We all do everything from pruning to planting.

William: Volunteer gardeners are new to Iford and they are absolutely essential. It is important too for us that the volunteers learn a lot here, under the expert guidance of Troy, Senior Gardener Helen Braithwaite and Propagator Alison Clarke, as well as enjoying the surroundings of the garden and working as a team. Once Covid permits we look forward to our summer and Christmas parties with the volunteers which my wife Marianne arranges.

And finally, could you share your favourite spot in the garden – and what makes it special?

Troy: My favourite part has to be the view from the Japanese cherry bank out beyond the garden to Iford Estate. One looks over the blossoming trees in the orchard with a flower meadow below, out to the sublimely beautiful valley of the river Frome.

William: It would have to be sitting on the exedra [semi-circular recess] at the end of the Great



Terrace, looking down its length and watching birds, bees and butterflies busy themselves in the plants under the colonnades. Not only is this a wonderful place to “soak up” the atmosphere at Iford, but it is also where I proposed to my wife Marianne, so it has particular personal import! 🌹

Find out more

DREAMESCAPE.CO.UK

Rosie Peattie, Head of Guiding
There is very little that Rosie doesn't know about the gardens of the UK & Ireland. “I am fortunate to have visited many wonderful gardens over the years and one of my favourites has definitely got to be Iford Manor. Sharing my passion and love for our gardens, whether they are the higher profile or lesser known ones, definitely transmits to our clients!”

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