

A journey round the house

Morton Hall, Redditch, Worcestershire

One of the ambitions for the owners of this new garden was to achieve views from every room in the house. That has been splendidly achieved, finds Tim Longville

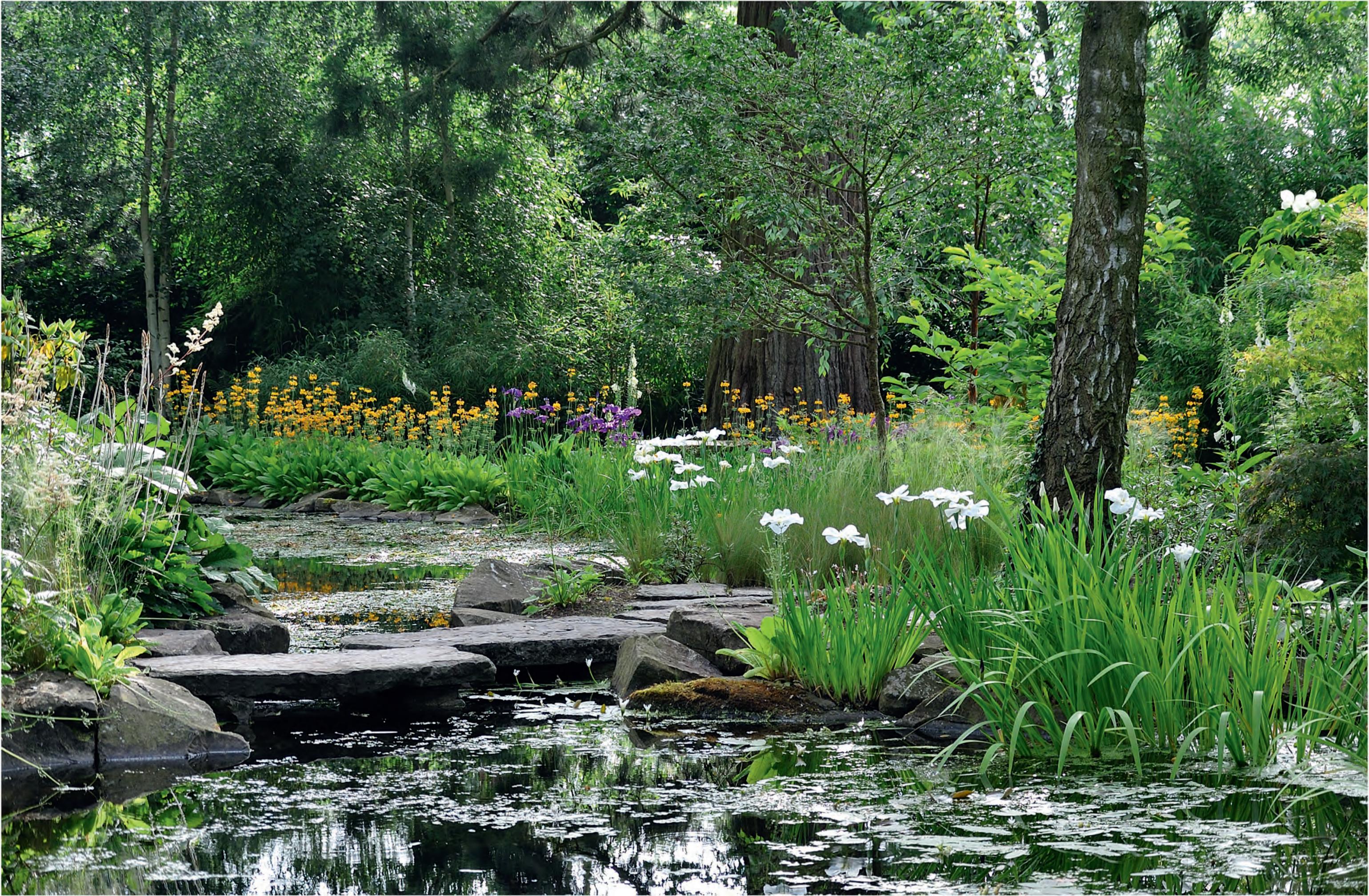
Photographs by Val Corbett

STANDING at the top of an escarpment with views out to the Welsh hills and down into the Vale of Evesham, Morton Hall is a handsome old Worcestershire house, the bulk of which was built in the last quarter of the 18th century. A 19th-century owner added a typically Victorian wing, which, instead of being demolished a century later, as so many were, was sympathetically 'Georgianised' both inside and out in the second half of the 20th century. The end result is what ➤



Above: The garden is visible from every window and door in the house—this is a view out onto the south garden. **Right:** A fine view from the roof of the house





Preceding pages: **Massed *Primula bulleyana* and purple and white forms of *Iris ensata* illuminate the pond edges in the Japanese stroll garden section of the rockery. Right: At night, the soft lighting in the teahouse makes it a wonderfully romantic sight. Mrs Olivieri describes the lush planting around it as 'prehistoric landscape'**



appears to be the convincing simplicity of a Georgian cube with appropriate flanking wings.

Handsome as both the house and its situation were, neither convinced René and Anne Olivieri, in 2007, to make Morton Hall their new home. What did the trick was their coming along the drive for the first time in April and seeing the wildflower meadow on one side, thick with fritillaries.

Mr Olivieri, currently the Chair of the Royal Society of Wildlife Trusts, remembers his wife at once saying 'This is the one' 'before we'd even seen the house!'. That sort of instant decisiveness and keen sense of knowing exactly what she wants has been the driving force behind the subsequent startling transformation of the eight acres of ornamental grounds here.

Mrs Olivieri is grateful for some good old trees and, of course, for the decision-clinching fritillaries. On the other hand, she felt the existing garden didn't relate sufficiently to the house or the surrounding landscape, both of which were at least half-hidden by the gloomy and claustrophobic remains of various Edwardian shrubberies. Above all, there was what she describes wryly as 'a National Collection of laurels', all 13ft high and 13ft deep. Out went the laurels and in came garden designer Charles Chesshire.

His remit was specific, complex and demanding. He had to create a garden that would work both as a journey round the house—so that, as Mr Olivieri says: 'Now, there isn't a room in it from which you don't have a view of a part of the garden'—and as a journey through



the seasons, one that would offer colour and interest even in the depth of winter.

He also had to create one that was 'in the English tradition', because the Olivieris felt that such a very English house demanded an equally English garden. As a result, although there is a wide range of colour here now, there are 'no big leaves or tropical-looking plants, which, in any case,' Mrs Olivieri adds firmly, 'I don't like.'

A first step was to re-route the drive and abolish the coaching circle to which it led ('I hate cars in front of fine houses,' comments Mr Chesshire) so the garden now comes right up to the house. The back of the house isn't symmetrical, so here, the garden is not formal, but consists of asymmetrical, swirling

Borders to the side of the house, dominated in summer by *Agapanthus Blue Triumphator* and *Perovskia Blue Spire*. A quartet of *Pyrus nivalis* Catalia is flanked by rosemary, with *Veronicastrum* and *Nicotiana* on the right

'lozenge-shaped' beds between paths of old brick, cobbles and gravel. The planting in them is 'gently Mediterranean' in feeling, with lots of nepeta, lavender, rosemary, irises, agapanthus and creeping thymes.

The area before the east-facing front of the house, on the other hand, is kept deliberately if grandly simple—although the simplicity is, to a degree, deceptive. The garden here appears to be no more than a large, flat lawn, dominated by a huge, listed chestnut tree beyond its south-eastern corner (christened the Tree Of Doom, as weeding under it is so difficult) and with unfussy borders framing it. In fact, much earth-moving and wall-building was involved in creating that simplicity, as, originally,

“The garden works as a journey round the house and as a journey through the seasons”

the ground sloped so steeply it made the house seem to fall away.

To the south and east now are the three most complex ornamental areas of the garden. Sensibly positioned closest to the rear of the house is the kitchen garden, its four large, productive rectangular beds surrounded by flowerbeds dominated by contrasts

of red and yellow. They include dark-red and yellow roses and peonies, rambling *viticella* clematis, *Cotinus coggygria*, fiery red lilies and crocosmias, heucheras and achilleas. Mrs Olivieri describes this colour scheme as 'an Expressionist palette—there's a huge amount of energy in these borders'.

The adjoining south garden isn't large, but is designed to create an effect of 'intimacy with slight hints of grandeur'. The colours here are very different from those in the vegetable garden borders: mostly soft pinks, blues and whites, from alliums, irises, penstemons, perovskias, lilies and pink and white eremurus to a collection of old and English roses and yet more clematis.

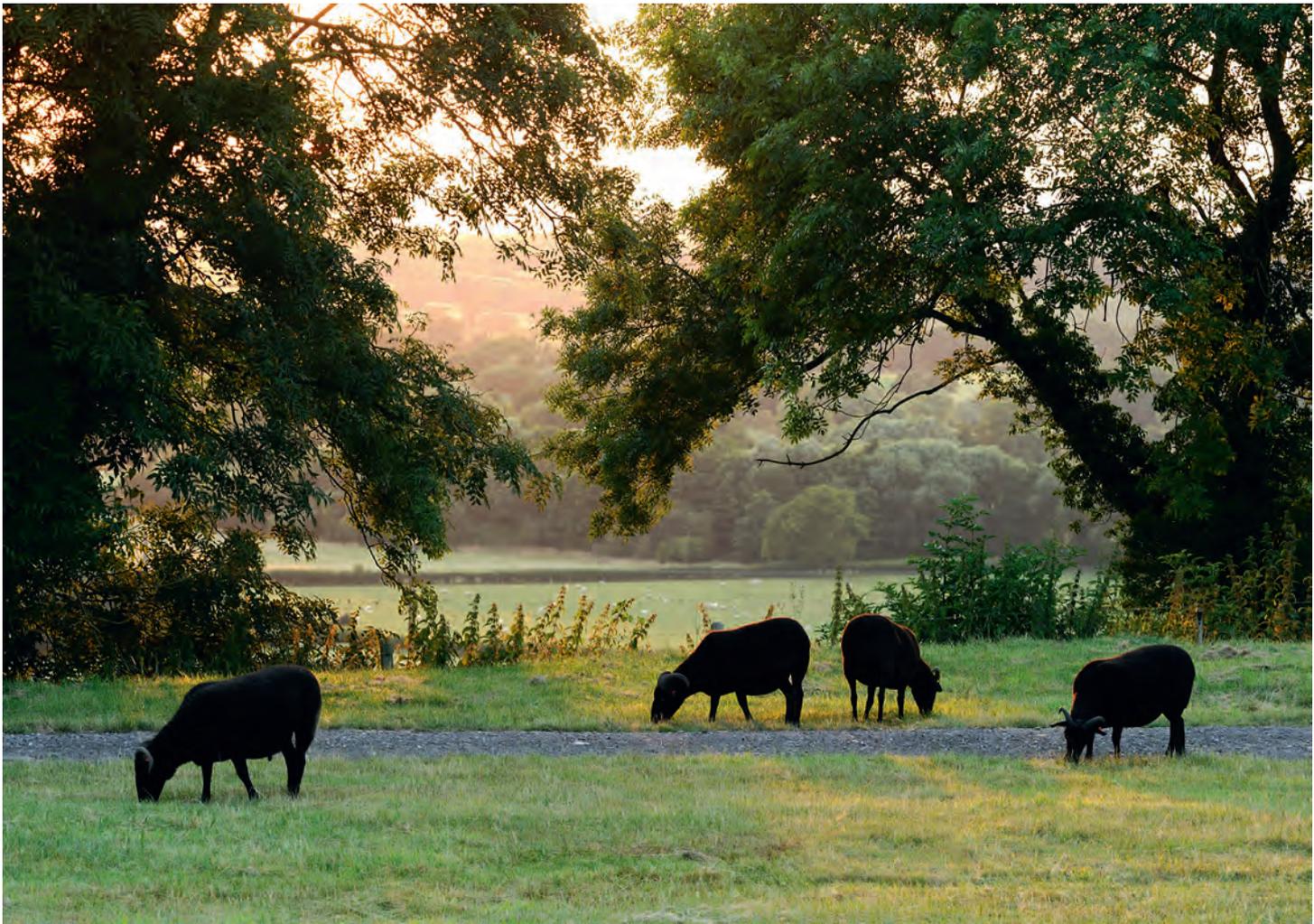
Anne Olivieri on keeping up with the dahlias

'We got tired of digging our dahlias up, overwintering them inside, then replanting them—and losing some every year in the course of the procedure—so we decided to combine necessity with aesthetics.



After cutting back, the dahlias get covered in bamboo cloches filled with old-fashioned wood wool. In April, we take out the wood wool and swap the "winter cloches" for "spring cloches" lined with fleece. After the last night frosts, we uncover them. Using this method, we haven't lost a single plant. We use the winter cloches on agapanthus as well.

The cloches not only protect the plants, they also make quite attractive additions to the garden at a time of year when there isn't much else to look at.'



East of it lies what the Olivieris call the rockery, but much of which is, in fact, a hybrid between two Japanese garden forms, a tea garden and a stroll garden, although it's one that also nods both to the Picturesque and to the later British fascination with 'the Orient'.

Here, after an impressive descent into the actual rockery, Japanese-style stepping stones across the first of two pools, together with clumps of cleverly placed birches beyond, lead the eye on to a fine Wellingtonia in the distance, with, beside it, a lovingly crafted tea house (designed by Mr Chesshire and the artist and designer Jon Wealleans).

The rocks used in this area each weigh several hundredweight and they and the cut-back laurels arching overhead and the lush growth of rhododendrons, acers, hydrangeas, magnolias, cornus and bamboos combine to create what Mrs Olivieri describes as 'a pre-historic landscape—you expect mammoths to appear at any moment'.

Varied as they are, these areas around the house are only a small part of the still-expanding garden. Beyond are the larger but more simply designed woodland areas, cared for

Looking towards the Vale of Evesham from the ha-ha paddock

by grounds manager Joe Humphrey. They begin, of course, with what Mrs Olivieri laughingly describes as 'the holy meadow', full of fritillaries, anemones and daffodils—and now with the added attractions of tens of thousands of crocuses and a nut walk.

Then there is a section of field-become-park in which the original mature hornbeams and limes have been given the decorative additions of a hamamelis walk and thousands of bulbs planted into the grass. Adjoining it, an old concrete tennis court has been removed, grassed over and turned into a spring garden dotted with white birches, Japanese cherries, *Cornus kousa*, arching 'wild' roses such as Nevada and belts of viburnum and amelanchier, with, beneath them, thousands of snowdrops and species tulips.

Even this is not the end of the garden, as, beyond, the original blocks of trees have been thinned to create a parkland effect, with broad rides through those that remain—not just for decorative effect, but for riding the horses that are another of the Olivieris' passions. Hence the carefully sited Modernist timber stables and garages, designed by Mrs Olivieri's brother-in-law, the Berlin-based architect Carl Georg Luetcke.

It was also Herr Luetcke's idea to open the western façade of the house with the addition of dramatic two-storey windows, which provide huge views out to the garden and the landscape beyond. Indeed, his first reaction to Morton Hall was that he felt it needed to be 'liberated'. When he visits today, he must surely feel that that liberation has been successfully accomplished.

The gardens at Morton Hall, Holberrow Green, Redditch, Worcestershire (www.mortonhallgardens.co.uk; 01386 791820), are open by appointment to groups on Tuesdays and on Wednesday and Thursday afternoons from April to September. To find out more about Charles Chesshire, visit www.charlescheshire.co.uk



Need to know

- **Size** Eight acres of gardens within 90-acre estate
- **Soil** Neutral loam over clay. Good for roses, but needing a lot of grit to improve drainage
- **Height** 220ft above sea level
- **Climatic challenges** 'On a high site like this, wind could be a problem, but, in fact, we have enough trees, still, to provide a reasonable amount of shelter'