

The Secret Garden

Hidden behind ancient walls, steeped in history, The Walled Garden at Mells has new custodians who are busy restoring and replanting to create a natural sanctuary for visitors

WORDS: Natalie Millar-Partridge



Tucked away behind ancient honey-coloured walls, set in the pastoral hills of Somerset, at the heart of the pretty village of Mells, you will find The Walled Garden and Nursery – a delightful space with spectacular views across church meadows and the surrounding countryside.

The garden is now under new ownership by local duo, entrepreneur Cosmo Fry – Fry's Chocolate heir and son of inventor and entrepreneur, Jeremy Fry – who has a locally-made furniture business, and American-born, singer-songwriter Diane Birch. There's a redirection to the offering including a focus on English roses, a new Somerset-born chef, Jesse Gilchrist, cooking inspiring and delicious seasonal dishes – and plans in progress to house some open air events.

Built on old ley lines that run through to Glastonbury, it's a peaceful space, currently being restored and replanted, designed in the form of a natural sanctuary, capturing the spirit of an English cottage garden.

'We are the new custodians in a long line of those who have lavished time, care and attention on this garden, committed to honouring its legacy and continuing to unfold the abundant beauty – simply building upon what's already there – looking and listening to the landscape and slowly threading our own vision and imagination through it,' says Cosmo.

Just a short distance from Bath and the market town of Frome, the garden's 17th century walls have enclosed a nursery and café since 2007, although there has been a garden on the site since the 15th century. The history is somewhat of a mystery with many varied theories, though it is thought to be the site of an old monastery, formerly part of Glastonbury Abbey. Although tradition suggests it would have been the kitchen garden supplying the Manor House. The garden has continued over a variety of stewardships whilst always belonging to the Mells Estate.

Cosmo and Diane are keen to preserve this idyllic spot – peat and chemical-free, it's a sanctuary for the natural world – supporting the local community and encouraging indigenous wildlife and biodiversity, working in harmony and integrity with mother nature to ensure it remains a thriving habitat. Cosmo, who was born and raised in the



above: Cosmo and Diane are keen to preserve this idyllic spot – peat and chemical-free, it's a sanctuary for the natural world. Photo: Iain Kemp

left: With its vibrant fusion of perennials, wildflowers, roses, shrubs and a hearty array of very old apple trees, The Walled Garden has something of a whimsical beauty to it. Photo: The Walled Garden

Westcountry and lived in Mells for 43 years, now wants to give back to the local community, whilst Diane fell in love with Mells when travelling the Westcountry and is excited to live the 'storybook country life'.

‘We create dishes that pop and zing with flavour, in a location that is alive with colour. We use what we can from a 30-mile radius’

‘Mells has changed very little over the past 43 years; it has always been a sanctuary of privacy and understated charm. I have been at the heart of the community since I arrived in 1982. The Walled Garden is however my most exciting challenge to date,’ enthuses Cosmo of the couple’s venture.

Walk through the stone archway of the garden’s rear wall, and you will find yourself on the beautiful Rose Terrace, a romantic backdrop with inimitable views across ancient meadowland – it’s an entirely captivating setting and every inch the quintessential Somerset rose garden. With its vibrant fusion of perennials, wildflowers, roses, shrubs and a hearty array of very old apple trees, it has something of a whimsical beauty to it. ‘Diane’s insatiable love of roses and a perfect setting in which to showcase some of the finest – many being old classics, mixed with rare varieties – bring a new energy to the garden.’

Alongside a deep commitment to ecologically sound practices that will maintain and enhance the biodiversity of the garden, the walled garden also supports local and small businesses, organic wherever possible, stocking

products in the ‘Shed shop’ that are aligned with this ethos and sourcing free range, local meat and various other local produce for the café.

‘We’re not completely rewilding, though we strive to preserve and expand this garden to support the indigenous wildlife and greater environmental community as a whole.’

The focus with the food and drink served at the garden is very much about connecting people to the locality, enabling visitors to soak up the natural energy, sunshine and tranquil atmosphere. Chef and restaurateur, Jess Gilchurch has created a bespoke menu that fuses international flavours and concepts with local produce, celebrating the abundance of native produce – think seasonal salads, slow cooked dishes and an extensive pizza menu created from the on-site pizza oven, topped with local and seasonal ingredients. Having worked in Australia for a decade, developing his skills in the culinary melting pot that is the east coast, Jesse has extensive experience with flavour pairings, showcasing the bountiful growers and artisan producers of the Westcountry with his inventive menu that draws on his experiences overseas.

‘We create dishes that pop and zing with flavour, in a location that is alive with colour. We use what we can from a 30-mile radius, including Bruton, Kingweston, Midsommer Norton, Evercreech, Ditcheat and Frome.’

‘The plan is to increase what we’re able to grow in the garden over the next few seasons to become more self-sufficient. I’d say I’m both new-age and rustic, and I have always pushed through boundaries when it comes to cooking. I love to present food on the plate that aesthetic and inviting, but with portions that are designed to leave you feeling satisfied!’ says Jesse.

For Diane, moving to Mells permanently has felt like home, after passing through the village some five years ago, gave her chills. ‘There was something about it which made me feel that I’d been here before maybe lifetimes ago! Though I didn’t know anyone living here, it felt instantly like a kind of home. The progression of my life now with the walled garden is truly a fairytale adventure for me. Getting to flush out my passions, learn, listen and work with the land and wildlife feels like the greatest gift.’

Magical, whimsical and sacred, The Walled Garden is a special spot that beckons your return – there’s a restorative vibe to the space, where it’s all about getting back to nature in a peaceful environment. If you’re keen to delve deeper into the site, then there’s an exciting membership program, inclusive of exclusive access to newly accessible parts of the garden, alongside an array of upcoming events.

‘The garden sits behind ancient stone walls that are traditional to walled gardens, and we have also unencumbered southerly views of the surrounding countryside which add a beautifully distinctive feature for visitors to enjoy. Perhaps it’s the garden’s reputation for being a truly special and sacred place over the years, also the location being at the heart of this quintessential Somerset village that brings people back to The Walled Garden time and again.’ ●

right: Walk through the stone archway of the garden’s rear wall, and you will find yourself on the beautiful Rose Terrace, a romantic backdrop with inimitable views across ancient meadowland. Photo: The Walled Garden

below: The Walled Garden is a special spot that beckons your return – there’s a restorative vibe to the space, where it’s all about getting back to nature in a peaceful environment. Photo: The Walled Garden



VISIT THE WALLED GARDEN AT MELLS

Open Wednesday - Sunday, 11-5pm.

Well behaved dogs on leads are welcome.

Open until late October.

01373 812597

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