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Opening Extract from...

The Ivington Diaries

Words and Pictures by
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The Ivington Diaries

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Introduction

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In 1991 we bought a derelict house with a two-acre field. There was no garden at all to speak of, although a pile of building rubble sheltered by a curving stone wall had once been a vegetable garden. If this was only a field of dreams, at least it was not cluttered with anyone else's fantasies.

The plot was a long rectangle with the house jammed into one corner so that almost all the land stretched out behind and to one side of the building. One long side of the rectangle was bounded by barns converted into half a dozen cottages, and the other was raised above a water meadow with the river Arrow running through it. The second time we visited the house we looked out of an attic window and glimpsed an otter on the river bank. Curlew call haunted the spring nights. It was awkward, utterly impractical and, of course, irresistible.

The house was very old, with the majority of the extant part fifteenth- and sixteenth-century, and the first year was spent repairing it so that it was habitable. In the process I pored over every inch of it, slowly untangling the architectural evidence. It turned out that its history was much deeper and more fascinating than we could ever have imagined. There is evidence of at least three buildings on the site, with Saxon remains, the footings of a medieval hall house and the existing building – which is itself an amalgam of two separate timber-framed Tudor houses. Whilst the builders worked indoors I did nothing in the garden for that first year beyond clear the scrub and brambles and turn it into a grass field. All the while I dreamed the garden into being, walking the ground, smelling the air. By the time it was ready to begin planting, fully eighteen months after buying the place, I already knew my unborn garden intimately.

I was also rebuilding my own life. Our business had collapsed and we had sold everything we had to bail ourselves out and I felt thoroughly sorry for myself. Then my mother died and I received a small legacy that enabled us to put a deposit on this astonishingly cheap house. To live in a fascinating house with the chance to make two acres of garden on superb soil was the best of all fresh starts. I was not just making a garden. I was making and mending me and us.

It has always been us in this together the whole way. From the very first, Sarah and I have built our lives based upon our home and garden. The children have grown up here. There are three dogs buried in the garden. I have spent almost all my spare time in the garden and Sarah a great deal of hers, but we have been assisted by a series of long-term helpers, all local, and all of whom I regard as lifelong friends. The household has always been a busy place, even chaotic, driven by a





communal human energy. However the decisions, down to the last plant, have always been taken by Sarah and myself as an equal partnership and both of us have always had an absolute veto on everything to do with house and garden. On a day-to-day level I spend much more time in the garden than she does, and I have certainly never seen her touch any kind of garden machinery, but her eye for detail is simply much better than mine, whilst perhaps I see the big picture a little more clearly. I tend to do everything edible whilst she spends days in the jewel garden, tending and moving plants, creating a subtle balance. She waits until she knows what she wants to do and then does it very well. I find out what I want to do by trying it out. But there are no demarcation lines and absolutely no sense of any part of the garden belonging to one of us more than the other. It is the sum of our parts and neither of us could or would have done it without the other.

The 'empty' field that became the garden was, of course, no more empty than a wood or stream is empty. It was overflowing with plants, creatures and, above all, a long and complicated history. To ignore any of that when imposing a garden is a failure of imagination, yet to be shackled to a brand of historical purity stifles creativity. At times this can feel like a fine line to tread, but in practice gardens evolve slowly and are very mutable. We have planted, dug up and replanted almost everything, from bulbs to trees and hedges. One of the great virtues of a garden is that it is so temporal and human in scale. A garden seven years old can seem mature and after fifteen years few would be able to date it to closer than a decade. I recall visiting the oldest garden in Britain, Levens Hall in Cumbria, made in the 1690s and famous for its huge and Baroque topiary, and idly asking how long it would take to recreate the garden should it be bulldozed? Thirty years. That is all. Everything after that would simply be holding it in check.

The truth is that creating a mature garden is surprisingly short-term and attainable. For the first three years it is all dreams and schemes. For the next four there is the satisfaction of seeing it come into being, the next seven a gradual maturation and after that it is a rhythm of maintenance and curtailment. Certainly after eighteen years the garden here at Ivington is being radically cut back to tether it to our original scheme.

In practice, we have found that the longer that we garden here, the less we want to impose ourselves on nature. The greatest changes are conceptual as well as physical and have come in the past few years as we have tried to restrict our control and increasingly let the garden run untrammelled. To do this and yet retain the essence of the garden –

which is always a self-conscious control of nature – is tricky, and thus increasingly interesting and rewarding.

Although I had drawn extensive plans of the garden, and the parts appeared bit by bit, the whole scheme was only visible in my own mind. Then, some six or seven years after moving in, we bought the empty barns that separated us from our neighbours and started to repair them. They included a pair of hop kilns with enormously high pyramid roofs and these were scaffolded out. This meant that Sarah and I could climb forty feet and see the entire thing from the air. For the first time it gave a coolly objective view, and in the process translated the garden into something entirely different. It seemed much grander and more grown up than the sensuous struggle that confronted and delighted us daily.

The truth is that this garden has always been a place growing from me and that I have grown into, the earth engrained in my boots and hands rather than viewed dispassionately from afar. I cannot write about it with anything but complete subjectivity. The eye with which I see the garden is the same eye with which the garden sees me.

Practicality is, of course, at the core of gardening, if not gardens. As someone who is happiest when active on his own land, doing something that demands enough skill and expertise to fully engage his attention but not so much as to undermine his competence, the direct, visceral practicalities of gardens and gardening are an essential part of my life. Everything in these pages stems from what I do and have done.

But thought and emotion suffuses every aspect of human life. As a writer it is instinctive to keep a record of events and how they have affected me, and as a gardener a diary is an invaluable tool for future years because otherwise you forget. You think you won't, but you always do. The pattern that builds up from years of a garden diary is a mosaic that can be incredibly detailed even if the entries are very simple. The emotional and intellectual pattern that I have always written down is, in its own way, just as practical. It tempers triumph and comforts despair, both of which run like a river through this place. I have also always recorded the garden with photographs and found the development of the digital camera enormously helpful, so that over the past ten years I have accumulated an archive of tens of thousands of images of it in all its states and dates.

My own obsession with gardening has always been driven by a love of soil and place rather than of plants. I am not, by anybody's stretch of imagination, any kind of plant expert. For many in the British



horticultural world this is an admission of failure or incompetence, but it is simply not the driver of my passion. In fact I love many plants for many reasons and by default know a lot about how many of them grow, but the ones I love most are those that strike the deepest emotional and poetic chord within me. I could not care less if they are common, or unfashionable. With plants, as with everything in my garden, I have little sense of objectivity. Everything is personal and all the best moments in my garden are when the sense of self dissolves into grooved movement and flowing, nameless green.

The context for this is a profound hunger for a sense of place and the urge to make a home. The two are not necessarily the same thing. Our home, that we have made from the ruins of a house and a bit of field, is a noisy, rude, scruffy, lovely place with dogs and cats, chickens and music, rows and laughter, food cooking and lights left on. I would forgo all the gardens in the world for home and family – but our garden would always be part of our home and our family.

I realise that this place could, one day, become someone else's home with just as much success. It is transferable. The essence of *place* is fixed absolutely in the thing itself. It is not transferable and can exist in wilderness or public spaces just as much as a garden. So when I visit any garden I always start by looking for the place where it most is itself. Any good garden presents you with this sense of identity from the first. I am sure that the reason one can visit a garden comprised of all the box of horticultural tricks and yet remain strangely unmoved is because it is a space rather than a place. This distinction is the essence of every kind of domesticity. It is what separates a house from a home. It might well be beautiful, botanically fascinating and cared for with supreme expertise but, admirable as they undoubtedly are, none of these things are ever enough.

However you go about it, it is not an idea or technique or any particular plant combination that makes a garden lovely but that sense of place – the indefinable quality that makes you want to be *here* – which the gardener falls in love with. And this book, above anything else, is a love story.