

The Gardens at Rydal Hall

Pam Martin talks to Bruna Remesso, the new Head Gardener, about caring for a historic garden in a modern way

It was a real delight to find myself – on one of those super-hot days at the end of July 2019 – talking to Bruna Remesso at Rydal Hall.

The first Rydal Hall was built in 1409 close to the current Cricket Club, but as the family grew in importance they needed a larger site and in 1600 William Fleming built a new hall on the present site. There were many further developments right through to the Edwardian period – the high point being the addition of the Georgian wing in 1789, providing the iconic south-facing elevation we know today. After the death of the last Squire le Fleming, the Hall was let out – from the 1940s as a school and later as a hotel. In 1963 it was let to the Diocese of Carlisle as a retreat centre, and in 1970 it was purchased by the Diocese, together with 30 acres of land.

Since that time, in partnership with English Heritage the Diocese has engaged in an extensive programme of restoration of the buildings, the grounds, the hydro-electric system – but most importantly for the purposes of this article – of the formal gardens designed and built by Thomas Mawson (1909-1911). In the turbulence of the two world wars and the letting out of the Hall to various bodies after 1940, the formal gardens



Left: the Georgian elevation
Below: the Mawson terrace and partierre pre-2019



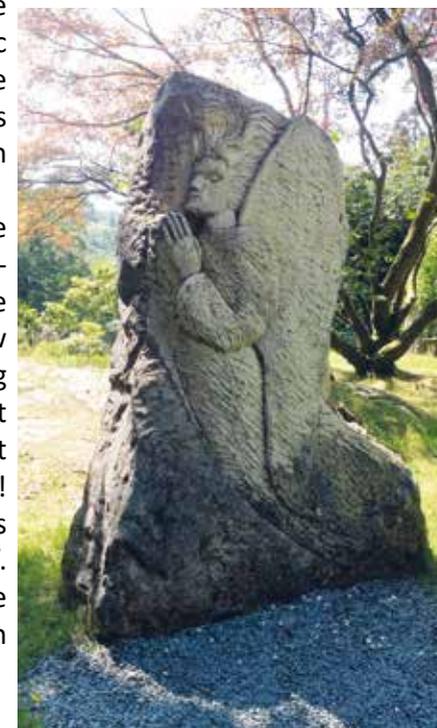
had fallen into disrepair; they were restored in 2005-7 by Tom Atwood.

We shall return to the Mawson garden in a moment – but the site at Rydal is so much more than the sum of its parts. At the time of the restoration of the formal gardens, a community vegetable garden was developed on the fellside to the north of the buildings. The vision was to develop this as something that would serve the local community, but in recent times it has met with limited success. However the vegetable garden and its orchard and other areas of the gardens are indirectly helping to build a sense of community among military veterans struggling to re-establish themselves in civilian society. Tom Harrison House (Military Veteran Addiction Recovery Centre, Liverpool) brings groups on a regular basis to work in the gardens and to benefit from the healing power of the soil. They have recently done much of the heavy groundwork involved in reviving the vegetable garden and in other areas.

Wherever you are in the gardens, you are constantly aware of the sound of water as Rydal Beck crashes over a series of high waterfalls on its way down the rocky ravine through the woodland garden. The hydro-electric turbine which continues to generate all the power for the Hall as it has done since the 1920s, is located on the Beck.

Above the Hall are meadows where visitors can camp and there are Eco-Pods and Yurts for hire. There are woodland walks above and below the Hall containing an interesting sculpture trail and some very ancient trees; one specimen sweet chestnut may be as much as 500 years old! Part of the lower woodland area has been developed as a 'Quiet Garden'. To quote the sign: "Reflecting the period of the 'Picturesque', this is an

Right: The angel by Shawn Williamson in the Sculpture Garden





Above: woodland with Rydal Beck (left)

area of relaxed and tranquil woodland with ponds and paths leading down to the summerhouse and Lower Rydal Beck waterfall, demonstrating this famous landscape ideal of working in harmony with nature.'

The grounds at Rydal are open all year round, to anyone – and are widely used as a place of solace and reflection – another way this wonderful garden serves the wider local and global community.

But to return to the formal garden; it is archetypal Mawson and is Grade II listed (Historic England Natural Heritage List 1245407) sweeping stone steps leading between the different levels, harmonious symmetry in the design at each level and always that electric tension between the strict formality of the garden and the natural landscape from and into which it flows.

Mawson started out as a builder, moved into landscape gardening and later set up Lakeland Nurseries. One of his strengths as a garden designer was his ability to create landscapes using his whole mix of skills to emphasise the connection between the built environment and its immediate landscape – so there is often that interesting interface between the house and the formal garden, the edge of the formal garden and the view over the natural landscape. Trademarks of a Mawson garden are terraces bordered by stone balustrades close to the house and at lower levels, timber pergolas supported by stone pillars, sweeping steps and garden ornaments – especially planting urns set along balustrades and at focal points in a parterre design. All these are present at Rydal Hall. Here he also conforms to the syntax of a formal garden with the axial and symmetrical arrangement of paths and beds which are typically fringed



Above: Rydal Hall today with wildflower planting

with low box hedges, and with flower borders round the periphery of the designated garden area. He also uses the central accentuation of a round structural element made of dimension stone. Of particular interest here is the extensive use of exposed aggregate pre-cast concrete to form the main elements of the design instead of the more usual stone; a very early example of concrete used in this way.

Of course when Mawson designed this garden there would have been a team of gardeners to tend it, and decorative carpet bedding within the beds of the parterre in the formal garden would have been the norm. Now, the whole site – the formal garden, the vegetable garden and the Quiet Garden - is managed by one full-time gardener and two very much part time volunteers with input from mowing contractors. This raises interesting questions about how possible it is to remain true to every aspect of the history of a garden such as this, especially when, in addition to manpower issues, there are now other things to be taken into consideration. The production of annual plants is labour intensive, but also uses up resources in a way that is now deemed less acceptable than a century ago because of the negative impact on the planet – resources like plastic pots and seed trays, potting compost that has a transport-related carbon footprint and water which is becoming a precious resource in many parts of the world – even if not in the Lake District!

Head gardener Bruna Remesso spoke movingly of her innate sense of the magic of all living things and her desire not to do anything to disrupt further the balance of the natural world, so she gardens here organically and without peat. She also spoke of the deep respect she has for the history

Right: round beds at the heart of the formal garden
 Below: urns are planted with combinations of small shrubs rather than annual bedding



of the garden. So there is tension here isn't there - a tension which she has resolved very sensitively. She has done nothing to change the structure of the garden, but has taken the decision to sow pictorial meadow flowers in the beds in the parterre. This immediately removes all the plastic and imported composts from the equation, as well as the hours of pricking out and watering; it makes the situation more sustainable in every sense of that word. And the parterre beds look truly beautiful; they were alive with bees and other

pollinators, bringing an additional 'spiritual' dimension to the experience of being there. She has also tried to 'recycle' plants wherever she can – so has used ornamental banana plants from 2017 as accent points in the round beds at the heart of the formal garden. This care has also been extended to the urns which are no longer full of annual plants – but interesting combinations of small evergreen shrubs or other perennials and plants grown from seed in situ – plants like *Cerinth major* softening the edges of urns containing cordylines which will stay in place potentially for many years.

Left: planting below the terrace
 Below: site where a magnolia blew down and temporarily seeded for summer colour



I think partly because of Bruna's integrity and gentle approach, there is no sense of urgency 'to perform' here. For example, in the winter gales a large Magnolia blew down. No organic material leaves the site, everything is composted and reused in the gardens, so the top growth was removed and dealt with responsibly and where the root-bowl is now sitting proud of the soil – the shake of the packet of seeds has seen the introduction of a beautiful burst of summer colour – giving time to consider what might be done in this spot, that will be a longer term solution.



As I left Rydal, I reflected on a recent article about the gardens of Ford Abbey – where another young head gardener, also lacking team support – has taken the decision to retain the structure of that ancient garden – but to garden sustainably within it. At any time in both contexts – if a different situation were to pertain – the gardens could be returned precisely to their historical appearance. In the meantime respecting historical form and structure but moving with the times within that backdrop – seems to me to be a sensible and responsible way to approach the future.