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## The Medieval Gardens of the Prebendal Manor, Northamptonshire

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*The Prebendal Manor medieval gardens are the subject of a current Time Team and were also featured in the series 'Royal Gardeners', introduced by Alan Titchmarsh, who described the gardens as a "stunning example of a recreated medieval garden".*

The Prebendal Manor is in the north-east corner of Northamptonshire and is the oldest inhabited house in the county. In its present state it dates from the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, although the site has been occupied since c 850 A.D.

The gardens were originally designed as an additional attraction for visitors to the manor, but they rapidly changed to become a research project and an educational resource to provide the facilities for further research where experiments into medieval gardening and the use of the plant materials could take place. A bonus has been to increase the native biodiversity of the site.

The concept was to grow plants that date to the fifteenth century and to be as authentic as is possible in view of research into medieval gardens. The plants must be included in contemporary lists and be capable of being grown without the aid of modern technology. Wild flowers that are known not to be more recent introductions are also allowed. The garden has many of the features that could have been found in a high status garden of the time

Luckily the manor was once in the possession of a genuine historical physician, Nicholas Colnet, who served Henry V during the Agincourt Campaign. He was granted the Manor in 1417, probably as a reward for his services. The garden has plants Colnet he could have used for his medical potions, many of these are found in *A Fifteenth Century Leech Book*. There are other plants that have culinary, cosmetic and practical uses. Dye plants are well represented by Woad, Rose Madder, Weld and Dyer's Greenweed. Samples of wool dyed with these plants are on display. There are also Fullers' Teasels, which have stubbier seed heads than the common teasel, and were used to raise the nap on woollen cloth to make it warmer and more water –repellent. Most of the plants are also decorative, having good flowers, foliage and scent.

### Prebendal gardens: View



Photograph © M. J. Brown

### Sources

So far, archaeology has been unable to reveal the exact layout of a high status medieval garden, although the recent discoveries at Whittington Castle in Shropshire are promising. Tools, pottery and seeds have been discovered which offer some clues, but

most of the information comes from plant lists, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, expenditure accounts, poetry, songs, literature, cookery books and medical books. Many of these were not produced in Britain either, but England was not some far off backwater at the edge of the world. It must be remembered that the upper classes belonged to an international class system and many wealthy landowners were very well travelled and aware of the latest developments on mainland Europe and felt the need to purchase items from abroad to keep abreast of fashion. This is the justification for the fact that the reconstruction of medieval gardens is largely hypothetical based as they are on secondary sources and a certain amount of informed guesswork.

Work on Prebendal Manor gardens began in November 1995. The original scheme was to have only a Trellis Herber and a Trellised Turf Seat. Archaeological excavations had to be carried out before any of the garden features could be made. Whilst these were underway the upper bank of the fishpond was cleared and a Hawthorn close to the fishponds was carefully pruned to become an arbour, creating a shady recess into which a stone-topped bench has been placed. This has been copied from a painting, '*The Mystical Marriage of St Catherine*' c1490, although the depicted seat was probably grown using Cypress. The Hawthorn had the benefit of not only being already large enough to be functional but the scent when the tree is in full flower is deliciously overpowering. Leading to this tree arbour is a hazelnut walk. The young trees had to be protected from rabbit damage using plastic spiral guards. This was one of several modern concessions. The Normans had introduced rabbits from southern Europe, and it was some time before they became acclimatised to our colder weather. This meant that rabbits were not a problem until the late fifteenth century, when having adapted and escaped, they began to breed in the wild. At Nassington the rabbits were securely enclosed and guarded in a warren, known as the Coneygree, behind the site of the present tithe barn.

After the archaeology was complete, work began on the *Trellis Herber*. It consists of sixteen raised beds, each two feet by two feet arranged in a chessboard pattern and enclosed with trellis fencing of green oak. A nearby willow is kept clipped to provide shade.

The main axial paths are four feet wide to allow wheel chair access and the remainder are two feet wide. In the centre there is a fountain whose jet hardly breaks the surface. Fountains were a common feature in high status gardens and some of those shown in manuscripts are very elaborate. We cheated with our fountain, as the water is re-circulated using an electric pump. However, at the Pope's Palace in Avignon a cistern built onto one of the walls is thought to be the supply for garden fountains. The fountains relied on gravity and would have most likely only operated when important people were in the garden, in order to save water. A similar system is still in use at Chatsworth today.

At the Prebendal Manor we had to make raised beds as the soil has a depth of only five to seven centimetres over post-medieval farmyard rubble and natural bedrock. During the medieval period many courtyards may have been stripped of topsoil and cobbled to prevent mud being walked into the house during wet weather, so raised were probably essential to have a deep enough soil to sustain the plants.

In the ninth century Walafred Strabo, the Abbot at Reichenau, wrote *Hortulus*, The Little Garden. He tells us how the area in front of his door was overgrown with nettles and that it took him several attempts to clear the ground and destroy the mole tunnels with his mattock. Finally he built raised, oblong beds faced with planks. Strabo explains that this helps to prevent the soil being washed away, but in northern Europe raised beds help the soil to drain more quickly and warm sooner, allowing the gardener to sow seeds earlier. The original planting plan was to group the plants by their uses in one or two beds. This proved difficult as most plants have several uses and we risked too many repeated specimens. The final planting has changed most years as more plants are introduced or moved around to a more suitable position. The more invasive plants have been returned to nature and have been replanted in the field area.

It has been difficult to know which plants are meant when checking the old plant lists. Dragons may be one of two plants. *Artemisia dracunculus*, French Tarragon, or *Dracunculus vulgaris* 'Creticus' (a relative of our native Cuckoo Pint – right -), the flower of which emits a stench of rotting meat and looks similar to a purple dragon head with a dark spike tongue. The stalk resembles snake skin, so it is sometimes referred to as *Serpentaria*. It was decided to hedge our bets and grow both.



Close by is a thatched wattle and daub gardener's hut where the garden copies of medieval tools such as mattocks, sheep shears, wooden rakes and pitch forks, two scythes, wooden spades edged with metal, bird scarers and earthenware watering pots. The tools are used to maintain the garden and although most of the grass is cut using a ride-on mower, a scythe is used for both of the turf seat areas.

## Topiary

The Romans had been fond of topiary and admired the skill of the *toparius* who carefully clipped the shrubs to resemble warriors, birds, ships and many other forms. Following the withdrawal of the legions, the art of topiary seems to have died out until the fifteenth century when it suddenly appears in manuscript illustrations. Yet the design of the topiary was restricted to a layer cake effect of no more than three discs on a central

stem. They are known as estrades. The size could vary in size being grown in small pots, in beds or on a clear stem to head height before the topiary work began.

Another oddity was the structures that were used to train the shrubs. Horizontal wheels pierced through the centre by a pole and inserted into the soil next to the shrubs, which were grown through them. The branches were the trained out to the rim.



The wheels are not essential to training a shrub to this shape as we have proved by growing a three-tier estrade in yew. One solution is that these supports must have been considered decorative in their own right.

*Photograph M. J. Brown*

## Vegetables

The small vegetable garden shows some of the edible plants that were cultivated. Carlin Peas, dating from the Elizabethan period and a field bean from Glastonbury have been obtained through HDRA's Heritage Vegetable saving scheme. Peas and beans were rarely eaten fresh, being mainly dried for winter use. If the wheat harvest was poor, they would be ground in with the flour to make bread.

Jon Gardener wrote in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that we should sow wortys three times a year to give a continual supply. Wortys, are the brassica family, represented by both Kale and the Wild Cabbage, neither of which produce a head. Most of our green leaf vegetables are cut when required and produce food throughout most of the year. The onion family includes bulb onions and shallots that can be stored for winter use, welsh onions that are grown for the leaves that are cut during the winter when chives are not available. Garlic was a favoured food, besides being a cure for plague and many other illnesses. Another popular vegetable was the leek, which with careful planning would be available for most of the year, but especially during the winter months when green vegetables were scarce.

There is a poisonous bed to give people the chance to recognise the more dangerous plants, some of which are quite rare locally.

*Solanum dulcamara*, (Woody Nightshade ) was a purging plant to clear intestinal worms as were *Helleborus nigra* and *E. lathyris*, which are mentioned in the Canterbury Tales, where Pertelote the hen recommends them to her husband Chauntecleer, to cure his bad dreams.

Original book source: Prof. Dr. Otto Wilhelm Thomé *Flora von Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz* 1885, Gera, Germa



The botanical name of Deadly Nightshade is *Atropa belladonna*. The first part of the name refers to the atropine poisons in the plant. Taken internally, seven berries of Deadly Nightshade are likely to be fatal for children. Belladonna means beautiful lady. It is said that the fashion conscious Italian ladies would drop the juice in their eyes to make their pupils dilate, thus making them appear more beautiful. The juice is still used by doctors to test that your pupils dilate properly. The side affect of this is that you are not allowed to drive for about three hours, as your vision will be bleary.

One plant that has grown in popularity is the Mandrake. Until the recent Harry Potter books few people had heard of the plant, let alone the myth that it screams when it is uprooted and if you hear the scream you will die. To prevent this you must block your ears. Tie the plant to a dog. Persuade the dog to pull out the plant and you will soon have a very valuable root... and a dead dog. The physician, John of Arderne, wrote in the fourteenth century that if you apply an ointment containing the plant to the pulses, temples and loins your patient would soon be rendered unconscious.

## Turf Seat

One of the most popular features in medieval gardens was the turf seat. There were several variations on the theme. At its simplest the seat was a stack of turf with turf pegged onto the vertical sides. Having made such a seat at the Prebendal Manor we

now know that they have a limited life span and need a lot of care and attention to maintain them in good order.

Later on, turf seats are shown to have sides of wattle, wooden planks, stone or brick. These seats are, in effect, a soil-filled container topped with turf. The more refined version has a trellis fence set within, on which roses are trained.



*Photograph © M. J. Brown.*

These rose covered seats must have been much loved as they are shown in so many illuminations. Set with trestle tables, they are a very pleasant place to sit amidst the perfumed roses, relaxing with a meal and a glass of wine. One picture even shows musicians standing on a turf seat as people dance on the space in front of them.

## **Tree Seat**

This is basically a turf seat with a tree planted in the centre to provide shade. There were several forms such a seat could take. In the Hours of Queen Anne of Brittany (1501-1507) the calendar page for May shows a decorated tree of three tiers growing from a turf seat of three levels, each stage of the seat being supported with wattle work.

The Sloane Hours has a page depicting the martyrdom of St. Sebastian where the saint is tied to a tree growing from a turf seat. The walling is made of cut stone and decorated with small niches. The Epistle of Othea to Hector (1461) has a two-tiered estrade tree in a wattle base. The Nassington seat is circular, made of local, re-used cut limestone so as to match the trellis turf seat. Underplanted with strawberries and wild daffodils, the tree in the centre is *Cratageus monogyna* 'Biflora', a Glastonbury Thorn, which will be trained into an estrade. Myth has it that the Glastonbury Thorn was originally the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, who on reaching *Weary All Hill* overlooking Glastonbury, leaned on his staff to rest, whereupon it burst into flower. The thorn is unusual in that it flowers at Christmas, but with the unusual weather over the past years it has flowered several times during the year.

## The Tunnel Arbour

Long arbours are another very common feature of medieval gardens, being shown in many pictures. It is thought that these covered walkways were to allow the lady's of high birth to take some gentle exercise on hot days without running the risk of becoming sun-tanned like the peasants who toiled in the fields.

The early arbours of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries seem to have been constructed of coppiced wood, bound together with withies, but this has its drawbacks in that it requires a lot of coppiced wood and the life span of such an arbour may be as little as five years. Also, strong prevailing winds may easily destroy the framework once it is covered with vines and roses. At the Shrewsbury Quest and Queen Eleanor's Garden these problems were overcome by using a metal framework with coppiced wood attached to it. When the vines and roses are fully covering the frame the metal is hardly visible. The tunnel arbour at Nassington is made of sawn green oak as shown in a manuscript depicting the construction of a garden. *Rosa x Alba*, *Rosa Gallica officinalis*, *Vitis vinifera* 'Mullagetau' and *Clematis vitalba* are trained to the framework to give shade. Within the arbour two small beds run along the full length where shade tolerant plants are grown including *Iris foetidissima*, *Helleborus foetidus*, *Polygonatum*, *Vinca minor* and lots of *fragaria vesca*, the wild strawberry, which is allowed to run riot in the gravel path.

## Pleasure Parks and Deer Parks

Pietro Crescenzi, an Italian lawyer writing during the fourteenth century, said that if the minor gentry should have an herber and an orchard, then the King, Abbots and Barons should have, 'an herber, orchard and also a Pleasure Park'.

Parks for hunting were a common feature for wealthy landowners after the Norman conquest, not only for the provision of food, but also for entertainment and exercise. Hunting was considered vital to keep fighting men fit and accustomed to danger (hunting boar was an extremely dangerous pastime). Hunting also helped burn off excess energy during more peaceful times.

Deer Parks were usually enclosed with a double ditch and hedging, designed to allow other deer in, but preventing them from leaving. The park itself would not be densely planted with trees. Forestland was a fairly open landscape and undergrowth had to be cleared to allow access for dog-handlers and the beaters.

Allees (rides) were needed to allow horsemen room to give chase. These were probably the forebears of the allees used by later garden designers such as Andre la Notre. A more refined version of the hunting park was the Pleasure Park, also known as the *Viridarium*, *Virgultum*, *Virectum* or *Verger*. This could be laid out in much the same way as the deer park, but would probably have been much smaller, being really a park-like garden. If you could not afford a Pleasure Park, an Orchard could be used for the same

purpose. Most pictures of Pleasure Parks show them as being enclosed by either a wall or a hedge.

Crescenzi continued, 'A grove of trees should be planted ... wild beasts placed in there may hide... hares, stags, roebucks, rabbits, and the like harmless beasts may be put among the bushes...also a timber-framed summer palace to which the King and Queen may resort'. Known as a 'Gloriette', these buildings could be simple constructions such as an open, timber-framed pergola with temporary walls of cloth and tapestries; or more permanent buildings of wood or stone. They could be used as banquet houses or hunting lodges.

The trees were to be for 'the pleasure of the flowers', not necessarily the fruit, which was considered a bonus. The trees were planted leading from the house, 'to show the animals as they cross the rides'.

Pleasure Parks often housed menageries of exotic animals such as lions and aviaries where you could admire brightly plumaged birds and enjoy the sound of songbirds. Ponds and fountains are shown in most pictures of Pleasure Parks. Many illustrations show wild (but harmless) animals, and beneath blossom-laden trees people are shown walking, talking, eating, dancing, playing musical instruments and generally relaxing and enjoying themselves, amidst the flower-strewn grass.



*Prebendal view – photograph Mike Brown*

## The Coppice

As coppicing was an important method of woodland husbandry, a small area has been planted on the site to demonstrate the coppicing system. *Salix alba* (White willow), *Corylus avellana* (Hazel), *Fraxinus excelsior* (Ash) and *Alnus glutinosa* (Alder) have been planted. Hazel was used for wattle fencing and the wattle infill of timber frame buildings to hold the daub in place walls, baskets and firewood; Ash was used for tool handles, fencing, arrows and firewood. The main use of alder was for making pattens, but during the reign of Henry VIII, it was also used for arrows. Willow was used for wattle fencing, baskets, fish traps, stiffening arrow bags and firewood.

As the coppice canopy reduces the vigour of the grasses, wildflowers such as Red Champion, Primroses and Bluebells will be planted among the trees.

The coppice has survived, thanks mainly to the use of spiral guards, but is a hybrid between true coppicing and pollarding, in order to let the new shoots grow above the reach of the rabbits and Muntjac. The wood produced from the coppice is used to repair the wattle fences and it also provided the wattle infill for the gardener's hut.

## Vines and Vineyards

The grapevine was probably introduced into Britain not long after the Roman invasion. Until circa 280 A.D., Roman Emperors had prohibited the growing of grapevines outside of Italy to protect the trade for Italian vineyards, but Emperor Probus ordered his soldiers to plant vineyards wherever they were stationed, hoping to keep them occupied and thus prevent the unrest and likelihood of revolt that often resulted from idle Legions.

The British climate between AD 1150 - 1300 was warmer than it is at present, but then became colder. In 1303 and 1306/7 the Baltic completely froze over to its southern limits. In some parts of Europe the colder weather led to a drop in population. In Britain it marked the decline in the acreage used for vineyards. This wasn't really a problem for the English as they still held lands in the Bordeaux area of France, which meant that it was both easier and cheaper to import good quality wine than to try to produce it from home-grown grapes in England.

English vineyards continued to grow grapes, but now they were mostly used to produce Verjuice, a type of vinegar widely used in medieval cookery. Yet grapevines were still grown for decoration to cover walls, arbours, tunnel arbours.

There are only some two hundred and fifty plants grown in medieval gardens. Many visitors to a modern recreation of a medieval garden are surprised by the lack of structure and the short flowering period, but without the later plant introductions from America, China and Japan, the flowering season was all too brief.

Having spent the winter wrapped in clothes and huddled over the fire, the coming of spring was a time of great joy for people during the middle ages.

Poems and songs, many are set within a garden, extol the pleasures of being outside in the warm sunshine. The garden was used as an outdoor room, even though this is considered a modern concept.

Summer was time of the eating, drinking and making merry amongst the heady scent of roses and lilies. Yet this period of pleasure soon faded, a fact recorded by poets who bemoaned the passing of summer and the all too hasty return of winter.

**'Now shrinketh rose and lilye-flour,  
That whilen ber that swete savour.  
In somer, that swete tide.'**

*'The Penitent hopes in Mary' a 13/14th century poem.*

*(Medieval English Lyrics. A Critical Anthology. Edited by R. T. Davies. Faber and Faber. 1963.)*

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**For further information visit the web site: [www.prebendal-manor.co.uk](http://www.prebendal-manor.co.uk)**

### **Other medieval gardens to visit.**

Queen Eleanor's Garden, Winchester, Hampshire.

Sir Roger Vaughan's Gardens, Tretower Court, Crickhowell, Wales.

The Yeoman's Garden, Bayleaf Farm, The Weald and Downland Museum, Singleton, Sussex.