





In glowing colours

The garden at
Littlethorpe Manor,
near Ripon, North Yorkshire
The home of the
Thackray family

Ornamental, colourful
and filled with good ideas,
this is a consummate
achievement, writes
Charles Quest-Ritson

Photographs by Clive Nichols

THE garden at Littlethorpe Manor in North Yorkshire is a splendid example of what can be achieved by an immensely gifted gardener who is trusted and given a free hand by his employers. John and Christin Thackray bought the Georgian Littlethorpe Manor in 1985, together with 11 neglected acres that ran down to the old Ripon Canal, where the loam over gravel soil gives way to alkaline clay. John Thackray, who died in 2018, landscaped the wilder extremes of the land with clumps of trees—one of Norway maple (Christin is Norwegian) and one of lime, both thickly underplanted with daffodils. He planted a third copse of Himalayan birches, *Betula utilis* subsp. *jacquemontii*, the bright white trunks and branches of which have become a key part of a substantial winter garden. The Thackrays also wished to make those parts of the garden near the house into a series of outdoor areas, each with a distinct individual character.

This vision became a reality when they appointed Eddie Harland as their head gardener in 1998. Mr Harland had trained at Askham Bryan, North Yorkshire's county horticultural college, and at the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh. He had also been head gardener at two major gardens in the →

The pavilion by the pool with *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica' and *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw', with a floating fountain amid the waterlilies







south—Knebworth in Hertfordshire and Haseley Court in Oxfordshire.

Mr Harland, who is helped by two other gardeners, one estate craftsman and volunteers, is a consummate plantsman, with a detailed understanding of what will flourish in combination with other plants. As well as having a discriminating eye for colour and shape, he is a fine draughtsman, able to draw up his designs. His first substantial improvement required him to take over the walled garden and turn it from food-growing to ornamental horticulture, planting the mellow brick enclosure as a four-season garden. The section representing autumn, for example, has plants of *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy', with pink flowers in spring and purple leaves in summer that extend its season of usefulness. Everywhere is a rich herbaceous

underplanting with clever blends and contrasts of outline, texture and colour.

Mr Harland's next development was the Sunken Garden, which fills a critical space between the Four Seasons gardens and the house. Here, the shapes of plants are strictly controlled—formal elegance instead of romantic exuberance. Structure comes from clipped domes of Portugal laurel—such an underestimated beauty—and the silver-leaved pear tree *Pyrus salicifolia*. The gravel soil is extremely free draining, perfect for the irises, lavender, peonies and silver-leaved *Convolvulus cneorum* that give rise to the alternative name the Scented Mediterranean Garden. The garden is enclosed by trellising, handmade from iroko wood by the gifted estate craftsman Andrew Welford, who is responsible for the extensive woodwork and metalwork

throughout the garden. At the centre is an armillary sphere by David Harber.

The house is the starting point of a long view across the main lawn and down towards a spacious pond that Thackray made as part of his landscaping before the arrival of Mr Harland. Both the view and the pond needed upgrading. This was achieved by installing a small fountain in the middle of the lawn and blocking the wider view of the park by edging the far side of the lawn with a tall yew hedge. The line towards the pool was emphasised by rows of Irish yews, known for their upright habit of growth, on either side of the fountain. Handsome stone steps at the edge of the lawn lead down into the park, where the view towards the water is continued by an avenue of red-stemmed limes *Tilia platyphyllos* 'Rubra', brilliant in the winter sun, but also



Preceding pages:
The Physic Garden with a 6ft installation of an artificial hip joint, which was perhaps the family's greatest contribution to the advancement of surgery. Left: The Winter Garden. Above: Eddie Harland's reworking of the walled garden, with ornamentals including purple-leaved *Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy' and orange tithonias

underplanted for spring display with 3,000 Triumph tulips in shades of pink, red and purple, including such cultivars as 'Don Quichotte', 'Jan Reus', 'Havran' and 'Cassini'.

The focal point of this long axis is the Cranborne-stone Classical pavilion that Mr Harland designed and Mr Welford constructed on the far side of the pool. Its off-white Doric columns and beautifully proportioned pediment bring the whole garden together. The pool is a fair size—perhaps just over half an acre—and its banks have been lushly planted with damp-loving herbaceous plants, including gunneras, ferns, irises and hostas. A fine floating fountain from Otterbine takes centre place among the large clumps of waterlilies and a floating island from Biomatrix has been colonised by native plants and visited by nesting waterbirds.

A substantial double border planted with autumn-flowering herbaceous plants curves around one side of the pool and connects it with Thackray's copse of white-stemmed Himalayan birches, which is now the focal point of an arcadian winter garden. The birches themselves are thickly underplanted with the semi-evergreen soft shield fern known as 'Herrenhausen' and then connected to the edge of the garden above the canal towpath with a light canopy of more birches and a wealth of beech topiary, hard-pruned dogwoods, *Erica carnea* and winter-flowering bulbs.

‘At one end is a painted frieze of surgical instruments’

One might suppose that, with the establishment of the winter garden, there was little left to complete the garden at Littlethorpe, but, after Thackray's death, the opportunity arose to convert the old tennis court into a physic garden that would commemorate not only his life, but also the achievements of his family company Chas. F. Thackray, a major manufacturer of orthopaedic implants and medical instruments. You will never see a finer display of herbal plants. There are hanging gardens, herb lawns, and collections planted in large Corten-steel boxes, each devoted to herbs that will treat a particular group of ailments. The layout—still Mr Harland's—is as clinically modern as his earlier designs and plantings are lush and romantic. The focal point at one end is a painted frieze of surgical instruments

and, at the other, a 6ft metal installation of an artificial hip joint, the manufacture of which was perhaps the family's greatest contribution to the advancement of surgery. It sounds extraordinary—it is extraordinary—but every detail of the design and planting is well chosen and exciting. Many of the herbs are horticultural varieties, selected for their coloured leaves or handsome flowers. Even a collection of medical herbs cited by St Hildegard of Bingen in her 12th-century treatise *Physica* is both interesting and attractive.

There is much more to enjoy and learn from in other parts of Littlethorpe's garden. Look at the cultivars of *Magnolia grandiflora* pruned hard against the house—the flowers are few, but the leaves make an arresting cover for the white-rendered wall. Note the blue-and-yellow colour schemes around a pergola of wisteria and honeysuckle. Study the garden of annuals where the seed proved so attractive to birds that the planting is now moving towards a succession of perennials emerging from a ground of ornamental grasses: dark-blue *Salvia nemorosa* 'Caradonna' with swathes of yellow *Phlomis russeliana*, followed in late summer by *Digitalis ferruginea* and purple orach (*Atriplex hortensis* var. *rubra*). Finally, ponder the electrical installations all over the garden and contemplate the theatrical effect of highlighting the beauty of the trees at night—a pleasure known only to the owners, their guests and their ever-competent gardener Mr Harland. 🐌

Littlethorpe Manor, North Yorkshire, opens for the National Garden Scheme and groups by arrangement (www.littlethorpe Manor.com)