



Jane Gifford visits a tranquil Herefordshire garden which still reaps the benefit of its calm monastic heritage

Past Blessings

Photographs by JANE GIFFORD

CHARIS WARD came to Abbey Dore Court by chance. 'We were farming in Warwickshire, but the ground was hard and the farming was hard.' Then, in the summer of 1966, a relative told her of a house for sale in Herefordshire. Charis also happened to see a small advert for the property in *The Daily Telegraph*. She bided her time. Abbey Dore Court remained unsold for over a year until Charis and her family were able to buy the house with its eighteen acres of land.

She arrived in the summer of 1967 with three children, fifteen horses, five dogs, several Jersey cows and some special peonies. 'The whole place was overgrown. There was no garden, nothing. But somehow it was all so easy. Everything fell into place. I had no plans, so I had no worries. If I'd known I was going to do all this, I think I would have been hysterical.'

The house was named, by Captain Freke Lewis in 1861, after the neighbouring

Cistercian Abbey of Dore. Prior to that it was The Red Lion Inn. The stable yard is obviously much older than the present house, and the adjacent Stephen's Meadow and Stephen's Orchard have historical links with the abbey through its Abbot Stephen. 'It's not exactly a holy place but it's very special,' Charis explains. 'There is a certain air of peacefulness here. A calming influence that everyone notices.'

There followed months of intensive ground clearance, getting rid of bindweed and ground elder, not to mention the flooding of the River Dore that winter, taking with it the results of much hard work. Charis was undaunted.

'I have gardened since I was married, but I still don't consider myself a gardener. My French grandmother was a great gardener. She was a small woman. I remember her being dwarfed by border plants working in the garden in Shropshire where I spent my childhood. I still use her little border fork and spade.'



Main picture: The old English red apple *Discovery* is planted at Abbey Dore for its flowers as well as its fruit. Top: *Rudbeckias* enliven late summer. Above: Charis Ward feels she is creating 'something beautiful for God'.



'Not a day goes by without someone saying how peaceful this garden is'

Charis may be too modest to consider herself a gardener but visitors to Abbey Dore Court are impressed. Most leave with arms full of plants. All comment on the atmosphere of the place. 'Not a day goes by without someone saying how peaceful this garden is,' Charis remarks. 'I feel I have created an unassuming garden, a garden of peace rather than a garden of statements. I don't want to project myself on to the garden. I'm simply interested in plants.'

Charis believes that the main quality for turning a wasteland into a beautiful garden is a love of the soil. 'I also love weeding,' she laughs. 'If I think I can spend the whole morning working in a border, I am happy. It's a good thinking place. My best ideas come to me when I'm working in the garden'



Top: Echinacea vulgare (viper's bugloss) is lavishly planted and gives a gentle wash of colour. Above: In September, the borders are filled with echinacea, geraniums, Origanum laetigatum and Cypripedium pubescens. Above right: Michaelmas daisies in soothing blues and purples self seed all over the garden.



A wash of subtle shades flows across the border

- and they go, because I seldom remember to write them down. I have made many mistakes, but perhaps the most irksome was planting too early before the ground was really clean. I still do it, but I never go back. I just have to do a lot of extra weeding.'

'Harmony is the most important thing throughout the garden,' Charis explains. 'I plant for the plants themselves rather than for bold effects and I'm very particular about colour.' There are no jarring splashes of pillar box red at Abbey Dore Court. 'It's the one colour I can't abide in the garden,' Charis remarks. Instead, a gentle wash of subtle shades flows across the borders. Gold moves into lemon and silver and turns slowly mauve and blue, then blue green and back to silver. A zinnia, grown from a seed brought from

The Gambia, has produced crimson flowers. Having come so far and done so well, it is allowed to stay in a rising violet and blue sea of viper's bugloss.

As interest grew in Charis's garden, visitor numbers rapidly increased. Fortunately, Charis was able to rely on invaluable help from her daughter Sarah. 'I couldn't have coped without her. The garden is a full time job and I do most of it myself. I have help two mornings a week - Avril, who has been helping me for years, and, recently, Jim, who is happy to do nasty jobs, such as paths and putting muck from the horses on the garden. The garden is more or less organic, although I do use weedkiller on the paths.

'With more help than this, I would feel the garden was slipping away from my con-



Top: There are plenty of places to pause for a moment and enjoy the calm. A bench beneath a giant redwood is framed by tall spires of Japanese anemone. Above: Red is not a colour encouraged in Charis Ward's garden but this zinnia came from The Gambia and has been given special permission to flourish.



'I give thanks that I can afford the luxury of a decent lawnmower'

control and I do need to feel in control. Mowing is a major job. This year, I have had to mow every five days. It takes two and a half hours and can't be done until the garden closes at six. Every time I do it, I give thanks that I have been able to afford the luxury of a decent lawn mower.'

Charis only ever plants one of anything in her garden. Many of her plants have exceptionally long flowering seasons and are happy self seeders. 'I cut the geraniums back hard when they're over and then they usually reward me with a second flowering. Deadheading is also important to the feel of the garden. I am painfully tidy,' Charis admits.

In her garden, she treads the

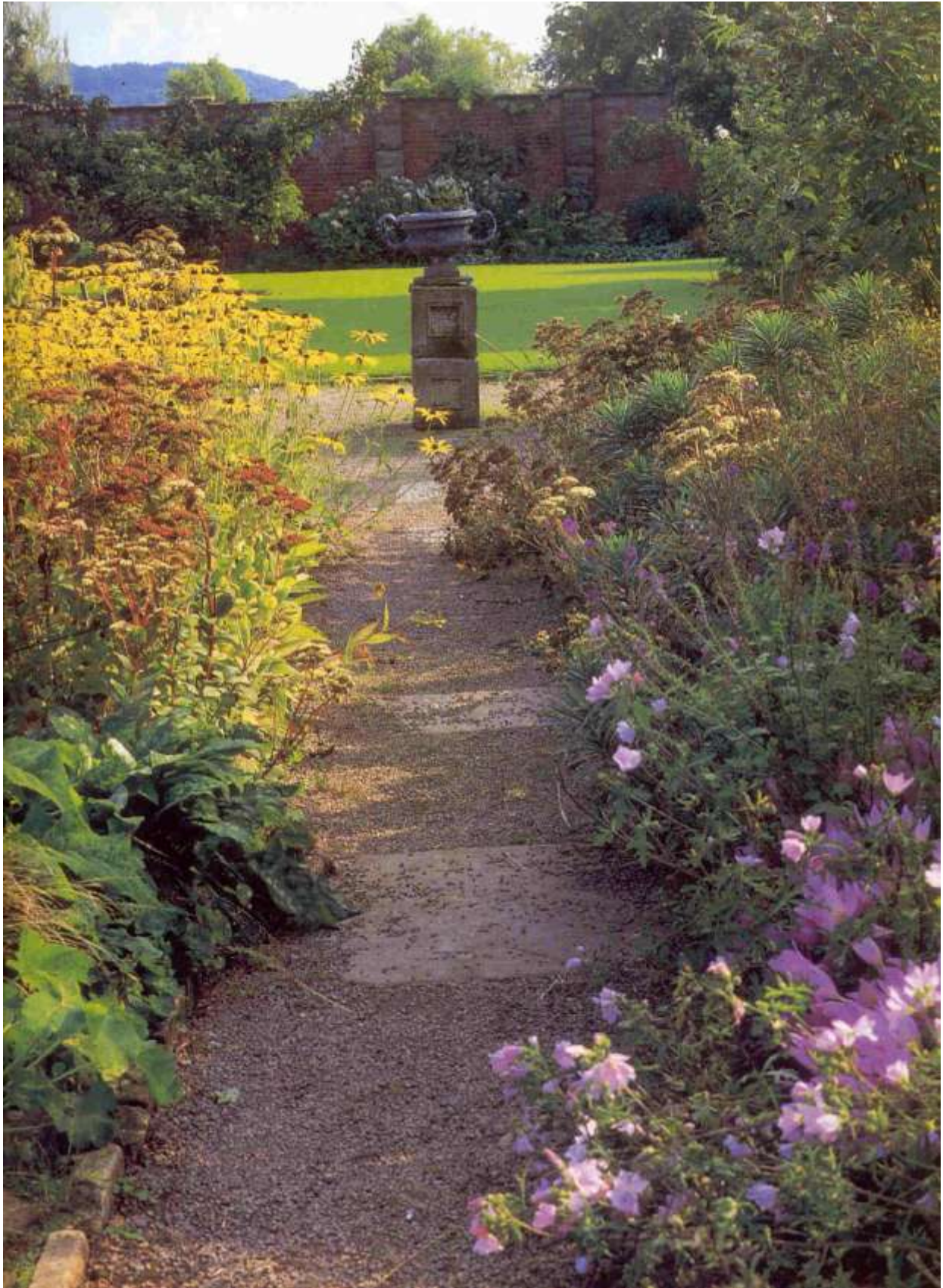


fine line between delicate abundance and rampant overcrowding. It all works well, in part, because so many of the bedding plants have their equivalents among our native wildflowers, blending happily together in the mild Herefordshire climate.

The verbascums first come into flower at Abbey Dore in July. They are perennial self seeders and Charis allows them to appear when and where they want. Achilleas also seed themselves around the garden. Charis picks out the nicest and names them for sale to visitors. For example, there is 'Abbey Dore Strawberries and Cream' which opens a deep pink and fades to cream.

By September, cyclamen and ▶

Top: A tree trunk, clad in clematis, has been carved into a seat. Above left: Verbascum chaixii and V. 'Album' thrust tall spires above self seeded astrantia. Above right: Colchicum speciosum 'Album'. Main picture: A golden September glow lights up colchicums, sedums, euphorbias and rudbeckias in the borders.





colchicums are in full flower beneath two large sequoias on the top lawn. The colchicums, like so many of the plants at Abbey Dore Court, were given to Charis by her close friend Netta Statham. 'She gave me car loads of them. Sadly, I don't know precisely what they all are and Netta died from cancer, so I cannot ask her. I treasure her book, *My Plants and Other Friends* which, happily, was published just before her death.'

The colchicums naturalise rapidly and although Charis has allowed masses to remain, they still add to the general feeling of tranquillity in the garden rather than dominating it. 'Their flowers, which first appear in summer, give me special pleasure in autumn. When most else has faded, they can be relied on to look good until the first hard frosts of winter.'

White flowered *Anemone x hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' borders one side of the top lawn and the later, pale pink flowered



Top: The new bridge, replacing rickety old planks and a rope, cuts a neat swathe through *Senecio tanguticus*. Above left and right: *Eupatorium purpureum atropurpureum* in Stephen's Meadow and *Anemone hupehensis* 'September Charm' on the banks of the River Dore.



Japanese anemones look particularly good in the dappled shade

A. hupehensis 'September Charm' looks particularly good in the dappled shade beneath the trees along River Walk. On the other side of the river, *Eupatorium purpurascens* continues to attract butterflies, moths and bees well into autumn.

The River Dore adds to the peaceful ambience of the garden. 'We have at last been able to make a major investment in a sturdy bridge. We used to rely on planks and rope - but shrieks from slipping visitors persuaded us this had to change.' The river stills floods every April, but this is now welcomed, as it enriches the soil and irrigates the garden. 'My gunneras were always flooded before they really got going and then dried out completely in summer. Now, at last, they are established and it was worth the wait.'

Although Charis has made few

specific long term plans, her planning on a daily basis is meticulous. 'I always make a detailed plan of my day's work. I feel smug if I manage to achieve more than I set out to do, and rather let down if I don't.' The garden can't really be expanded any further,

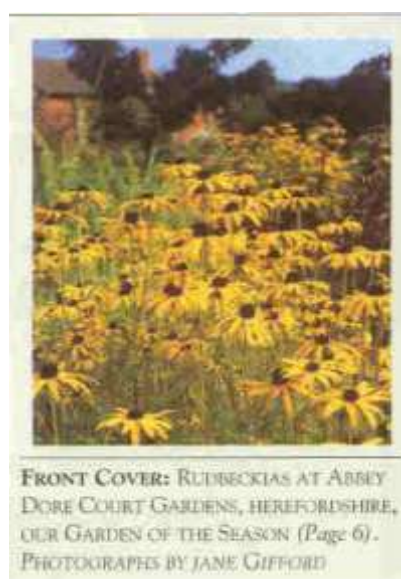
otherwise the farm animals won't be able to cross from field to field, so Charis is concentrating her attention on Stephen's Meadow across the river from the house, where she has already made a pond and planted a wide selection of willows and sorbus trees.

In the long term, Abbey Dore Court Garden has taken on a life of its own, but from day to day, Charis is totally in control. 'If I ask myself why I do it, I find it hard to explain. In the words of Mother Theresa, I can only say that I am creating "something beautiful for God". I can see no other reason for all this.' ❧



Abbey Dore Court Gardens, Abbey Dore, Hereford HR2 0AD. Tel: 01981 240419. Open from March to October, 11am to 6pm daily, except Weds. Homemade produce available.

Top: One of the best plants in the September garden is Anemone x hybrida 'Honorine Jobert'. 'Its flowers give me special pleasure - particularly when everything else has faded,' says Charis. Above: Plants for sale at Charis's well stocked nursery are arranged to tempt the visitor.



FRONT COVER: RUDBECKIAS AT ABBEY DORE COURT GARDENS, HEREFORDSHIRE, OUR GARDEN OF THE SEASON (Page 6). PHOTOGRAPHS BY JANE GIFFORD