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CONSERVATORY REVIVED

The great feature of Cecil Beaton's garden in Wiltshire is the conservatory, a haven of palms, climbers, geraniums and lilies. "Here time never matters." By H. E. BATES

THE countryside on the southern edge of Salisbury Plain is some of the loveliest in the south of England. Great avenues of giant beeches, forming in summer dark tunnels of shadow, give the impression of having been deliberately planted in order to compensate for the wide close-shaven shoulders of the plain itself. Not that these shoulders are themselves without beauty. On a bright August day, after a brilliant summer, their fields, "white unto harvest", have not only a ripe brilliance of their own but also create the effect of spanning half the world. They are surely the nearest thing to prairie that we have in this domesticated tight little island of ours.

Here in one of those Wiltshire villages whose thatched cottages sit like clutches of earth-brown eggs in the nests of small hills, Cecil Beaton lives in a Queen Anne house of moderate size built in brick of indeterminate colourings ranging from pink to cream: a house of unpretentious charm, style and dignity set in a garden that is a good deal larger than at first sight it appears to be, and moreover unique, in my experience, in that although a considerable area of it is flat the rest leaps up from the very walls of one side of the house at an alarming angle of 45 degrees.

I stood in the sun and pondered on the slope, thinking that whereas most gardeners would gladly settle for a garden on several levels this steep toboggan slope of Cecil Beaton's is perhaps too much of a good thing—or so it would appear until you finish climbing the steep steps from the terrace at the side of the house to the stone seat set some quarter of the way up the slope. From here, as from some well-chosen eyrie, you have an almost aerial view of house, garden and paved and balustraded terrace, the balustrades seemingly built in cool grey stone until closer examination reveals them to be the work, in wood, of a local carpenter—the sort of ingenious touch of design you would expect from Cecil Beaton.

From the same stone seat you also look down on what, for my money, is the most Beatonesque and charming feature of the entire property—namely the conservatory, or winter garden, set at one end of the house, an Edwardian oasis from which it would be no surprise to see one of the older Forsytes emerge with a lady of great elegance in mutton-leg sleeves clinging to his arm. This impression of Edwardian elegance is further strengthened when

you go through the glass doors to find yourself in a miniature version of one of the palm houses at Kew, furnished with high-backed cane chairs of the period and curtained with plants, many of them climbers, of sub-tropical and leafy brilliance.

Huge tubs of datura, dangling moon-coloured bells, geraniums grown as climbers, the pale blue *Plumbago capensis*, orange bignonias and that lovely if slightly over-possessive beauty, the most exquisitely fragrant *Jasminum polyanthum*: the entire combination is at once rich and restful, so that I for one wonder, and not for the first time, why the winter garden conservatory, so beloved by our forbears, should have been allowed to slip away from the brittle and abrasive pattern of our modern existence. When you think of the infinite number of greenhouses up and down the country that suffer, year in, year out, from that dreary affliction the tomato-chrysanthemum complex, when they might with the minimum of heat and trouble be run on the Beaton pattern, you may well think, as I frequently do, that the Edwardians, so often despised in the horticultural sense, can still teach us a thing or two.

The winter garden's abiding impression is one of great taste on a level at once elegant and cool: qualities that are repeated on the terrace, where much silver leaf rambles with sowings of night-scented stock, and on the walls of the house, where roses of the Gloire de Dijon era join with the mauves of clematis.

It is a not at all unsurprising Beaton characteristic, in fact, that he abhors violence and gaudiness of colour. He intensely dislikes, for instance, the modern floribunda rose, in particular the glaring flames of Super Star and its many flamboyant companions. In addition to this he is, like me, fed up with the average rose of today: tired of its miffiness, its lack of scent and constitution, its perpetual black-spot, its proneness to mildew and every other ill that the contemporary rose-flesh appears to be heir to.

He nevertheless permits himself the pleasures of a few cooler creatures, notably the pure white Iceberg, which I myself find as miffy as all the rest, splendidly true to its name though it is, and Blue Moon, which in fact hasn't a breath of blue in it, though its subtle French-grey/mauve tones are completely enchanting.

Courteous, charming, highly sensitive and distinguished of appearance though Beaton is, it is important to say here that he is by no means a reclusive dreamer, cocooned in a remote Ed-



GARDENER Jack Smallpeice keeps the estate, at Broadchalke, in trim. His wife looks after the potted plants

wardian corner, equally out of touch and out of sympathy with contemporary trends, especially those of the young. He is intensely interested in, and sensitive to, people. Having heard that Modern Poland and Czechoslovakia were countries of fascinating interest, he decided to go and see for himself—not in luxury, chauffeur-driven, or by air, first class, but because he wanted the contact of people about him by an economy coach tour, travelling sometimes 15 hours a day.

If there were scales covering his eyes they promptly fell away, revealing what he calls "The dreadful sword of Damocles of Communism" evilly poised over the two unhappy countries, its dark shadow poisoning all, scourging and depressing the spirit. Eventually his sensitive mind could endure it no longer and he turned for home, a sadder, disillusioned and wiser man.

Perhaps his depression will lift as he sits in the little Greek temple he has just built for himself at one end of the garden, so that he can look down on the entire cool long vista of it in meditative seclusion. I don't doubt, however, that even there he will be long haunted by the fact that the young and brilliant poet who was his guide in Prague was purged a few days later.

I MUST here confess that my own predilection is for rather more drama in the garden than I fancy Cecil Beaton would allow. Someone once said that you cannot live forever on quince jelly. In the same way I find I cannot live, month by month, with colours of a nature over-subdued, much though I love silver leaves, the subtleties of things like that infinitely valuable biennial *Salvia turkestanica*, the long enduring parma violet of *Verbena venosa*, the green-pink, red-bronze of

that marvellous autumn confection, *Sedum Autumn Joy*, which Beaton grows in great quantity, and the green winter magic of *Hellebores corsicus* and the equally enchanting summer green of *Alchemilla mollis*. I welcome the autumn drama of scarlet dahlias and the almost torrid red of *Verbena Lawrence Johnston* not merely for themselves but for the fact that their fires in turn set light to the silvers of that most elegant of creatures, the ferny *Centaurea gymnocarpa* and the equally lovely *Artemisia ludoviciana*, which delights in the swanky velvet company of dahlia Doris Day, on which incidentally my own gardener dotes with such affection that his wife once testily suggested that if he liked Miss Day all that much why didn't he run off with the girl?

Nevertheless Beaton and I find ourselves on common horticultural ground in that we are both consistent experimenters. I seek to change some part of my garden, however small, every year and to at least a dozen subjects I have never grown before; and so, I discovered, does Beaton.

A path is suddenly offensive to the eye and out it must go; a summer-house retreat looks wrong and must be replaced by something architecturally more pleasing; a flight of steps also displeases and is remoulded in sea-shore pebbles; not surprisingly in sea-greys, sea-mauves, and so on. The mid-way line of the toboggan slope clearly needs something to break it yet without distracting the eye too sharply, and so long pendant swags of rose The New Dawn are put in to light up the dark green tree-background with shell-pink lamps that recall that old Edwardian favourite, Dr van Fleet, born as long ago as 1910.

A garden is, of course, a key to its owner, and I confess that I had fully expected the garden of so brilliant a theatrical designer, painter and photographer—a man whose hallmark is assuredly above all expressed in the word style, to be a formal one, an affair of much statuary, urns, nymphs, pools and fountains, in perhaps a kind of French mode. In this I was wrong. Beaton, again rather as I do, clearly feels that a garden here and there needs "a sweet disorder in the dress" and so instead of the French formality, a certain carpet-bed tightness that I had expected, there is a looseness that is above all very English, as indeed it should be.

Nor is there any evidence of great luxuriance, since the soil is chalky and poor, so that the battle with nature is a hard and continuous one.

Again, inside the house. / continued

ELEGANCE is the keynote of Cecil Beaton's carefully kept tiled conservatory, which recalls Edwardian days

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the word that at once leaps to mind is style. Elegant furnishings, etchings of girls by that most talented if eventually misguided artist Helleu, ruined by over-success in the society of Edwardian duchesses, an enchanting garden scene picked up in the Paris flea-market, a dreamy piece by that minor Impressionist Henri la Sidaner, whose *motif* is almost always that of twilight, with the gold of newly-lighted lamps illuminating the blue-greys of falling day.

Style everywhere, but a style never stiff, aloof, snobby, cold or overdone, so that the house is, like the garden, an expression of the man: a man of great taste, much sensitivity, perhaps in the matter of criticism over-sensitivity ("I confess," he said, "I suffer hell"; to which I replied that he should always remember and comfort himself with the words of that wise old bird Ibsen, who once pointed out that there had never yet been a memorial to a critic), above all a gentle, very civilised, very kindly man. I noted, for instance, that he didn't address his two gardeners either by plain Christian or surname, but always with the inclusion of "Mr".

Inevitably, before we said goodbye after an excellent lunch at which he himself burtled with gracious efficiency, I felt that I must ask him about the theatre, in which so much of his triumph as a designer had been achieved.

Was I right in thinking that, like me, he was wholly disenchanting with it?

"Not wholly," he confessed, "but one's individuality gets lost in it." I commented that it had long seemed to me remarkable that the individual writer or painter could achieve with the simplest of tools, whether pen, pencil or brush, what in television, theatre or films required a positive legion of technical and other mercenaries to bring about. "That is exactly it," he said.

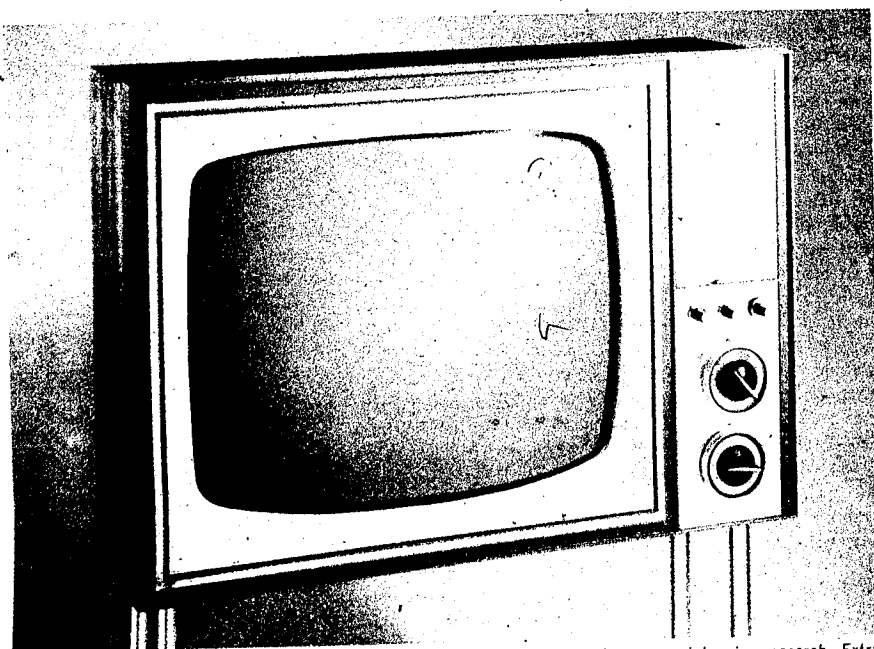
Finally he confessed to the necessity of living two lives: the one in London, keeping vast numbers of appointments, photographing Royalty and so on and so forth, the other among the birds' nest thatch of the Wiltshire Downs. To my question as to what he found most wholly satisfying in the country he replied simply: "Timelessness. In London time is everything. Here it never matters."

As I left I took a last look at the Gloire de Dijon on the house wall. It is a rose that always flowers a second time. Beautiful though its spring blossoming always is, its late summer performance is still more exquisite. The pure crimped and quartered flowers of May become blushed with a rare combination of peach and tenderest orange in August and September. So flushed against the wall of the house in the afternoon sun it seemed to me to be more Beatonesque than anything else in the garden. It too had its own timelessness.

April 10: H. E. Bates visits species- and orchid-lover Maurice Mason's 30-acre garden in Norfolk

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