

# COUNTRY LIFE®

NOVEMBER 3, 2005

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## LONDON

Lucinda Lambton on the capital's hidden great houses, and an unexpected urban garden

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# TROPIC OF STEPNEY

KATHRYN BRADLEY-HOLE steps off the busy Mile End Road and enters the verdant, tropical garden that has been created at Malplaquet House



TEAMING through the East End of London, the broad Mile End Road thunders with freight and commuters as it is the frantic A11, linking the capital with Essex and East Anglia. There is hardly a tree, or even a leaf, to be seen, so it seems an unlikely location for any sort of garden, until you slow down somewhere near Stepney Green station. But there, sandwiched between a huge retail park, a machinery hire shop and countless kebab shops and curry houses, is the lovely front elevation of Malplaquet House (Fig 4), one of a pair of elegant, four-story merchant houses built in 1741–2.

You might not have noticed it before, even if you are a regular on the A11. You certainly would not have noticed it seven years ago, when the house and its neighbour were buried behind a warren of scruffy shops (Fig 2). In the late 1990s, these buildings were condemned and awaiting demolition, but something wonderful happened: the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust rescued them, had the houses listed and found sympathetic owners prepared to treasure them and bring them back to life. The remarkable story of the buildings' rescue will be the subject of another article, but my interest is chiefly in the tiny front and back gardens of Malplaquet House, for they will give hope and inspiration to many other city dwellers. Malplaquet House has overcome difficult things, such as deep shade coupled with a lack of space. Sheer walls of great height. Lack of soil and, worse, tons of rubble to be excavated before any thought could be given to planting a garden.

'I had nightmares at first because I thought nothing would grow,' recalls Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (Fig 1), who lives at Malplaquet House with the architectural historian and curator Tim Knox. Dr Longstaffe-Gowan is a garden designer who specialises in historic sites, particularly historical London gardens (his own authoritative book, *The London Town Garden 1700–1840*, surely helped him get to grips with Malplaquet). Yet one thing this garden does not attempt to be is a slavish historical pastiche. It is much more interesting than that, for although Dr Longstaffe-Gowan >

1—Time for tea: Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, surrounded by luxuriant tree ferns in the shaded north-facing courtyard





was inspired by the 18th-century Grand Tourists, he has increased its 'exotic' content in a very cool, 21st-century way.

'It's very much in the Italian flavour. In the 18th century, people were drawing inspiration for their London gardens from those they found in Rome. Even Benjamin West [the second president of the Royal Academy] was calling his garden a *cortile*, and a number of other people were writing about their courtyard gardens,' he explains. The front courtyard of Malplaquet, 35ft wide, 25ft deep and south-facing, is a jungly suntrap, filled with strong plants that shield the house from the road and give it an unexpectedly verdant, protected outlook from inside. It is a medley of tough evergreenery—olives, myrtles, bay, phillyrea and box; and then among them, rising out of either side of the central path, is a pair of glossy palm trees, *Trachycarpus fortunei* (Fig 5), which have special significance for the owners. 'Tim and I had exotic childhoods, we both grew up in the tropics—Tim was in Africa and the South Seas, and I was in South America and the West Indies. So the Chusan palms are emblematic of our childhoods—and we like the idea of them towering over the garden in a hundred years' time.'

These plants are exotic in a restful way. There are no camp cannas or gaudy gaillardias; no flashy variegations of foliage, but instead a calm and understated exoticism which does not try too hard and does not demand the constant attention of its busy owners. Seasonal colour, confined to pots lining the steps to the front door, is a gentle medley of lilies, fragrant nicotianas and spring bulbs.

Now that the gardens are in place (although not yet finished—there are the paths and steps to be refurbished, and a shell wall to be made at the rear), it is difficult for the visitor to comprehend what a daunting project it was at the start. When the shops at the front and sheds at the rear were demolished, there were 150 tons of rubble and waste to be removed. The owners rebuilt an imposing pair of gate piers and low brick walls on the front boundary and had wrought-iron railings and a new gate made (the iron was hammered out from the salvaged chains of an old warship) (Fig 4). The eagles that glower over the street were cast from originals at Knightshayes Court, in Devon, and the gate is modelled on a design of about 1760.

When the railings were fitted, it was felt that the house and garden were too open and exposed to the street, so wattle fences were fixed up, but the gate is left unscreened, except for a floor-to-knee-high section, 'to stop the rubbish blowing in'. Needless to say, passers-by are fascinated. It is amazing how many people stop and peer in, says Dr Longstaffe-Gowan, 'whenever I'm working in the garden, they tend to ask who lives here—I often say it's a monastery. They're so curious because it is one of only a few gardens in the high street.' Clearly, it is also treasured by many, some of whom have been seen



2—The house was masked by a row of scruffy shops, now demolished

*'When you close the gate, you just feel you are in your own little paradise'*

delicately picking the jasmine flowers which hang in a languorous tangle over the front railings.

The rear garden posed different problems, being a north-facing, tiny backyard extending just 20ft (the Trust had to sell off the original back gardens for social housing), and enclosed by very high walls. Most of us would not have known where to start, but Dr Longstaffe-Gowan has given this backyard a robust, sylvan personality that easily stands up to the imposing brick elevations of the house. Here, the soil is very shallow—just 18in deep before it meets the foundations. 'I put in a pair of robinia trees, because I wanted a light tree canopy that would grow up to 50ft,' he explains. *Robinia pseudo-acacia*, a very fast-growing deciduous tree that does well in London and succeeds on poor and thin soils, was an inspired choice and, forming a lower canopy, suggestive of a rainforest, is a fine collection of tree ferns, which can also thrive on a shallow layer of soil. Here, we return to the South Seas theme, this time as far as Tasmania and New Zealand, which are the native homes of these ferns (Fig 6). The largest specimen is *Dicksonia antarctica*, whose fronds peer in at the first-floor windows, with a *Cyathea australis* not far behind (see box below). Then at ground level, the garden is still interestingly green with woodwardia ferns, shiny box, and strange artefacts, such as a sheep's skull (Fig 3).

Malplaquet House garden is also a sanctuary for living wildlife, too. 'We have lots of birds—they come into our garden to nest in all that verdure.' It is, says Dr Longstaffe-Gowan, the antithesis of the East End garden, 'lush and over the top. The intention was always to keep it very jungly; we love the forlorn feel, and when you come home and close the gate, you just feel you are in your own little paradise.'

Photographs: Fig 1, 3–6, Andrew Lawson; Fig 2, Todd Longstaffe-Gowan.

#### MAKE FRIENDS WITH FRONDS

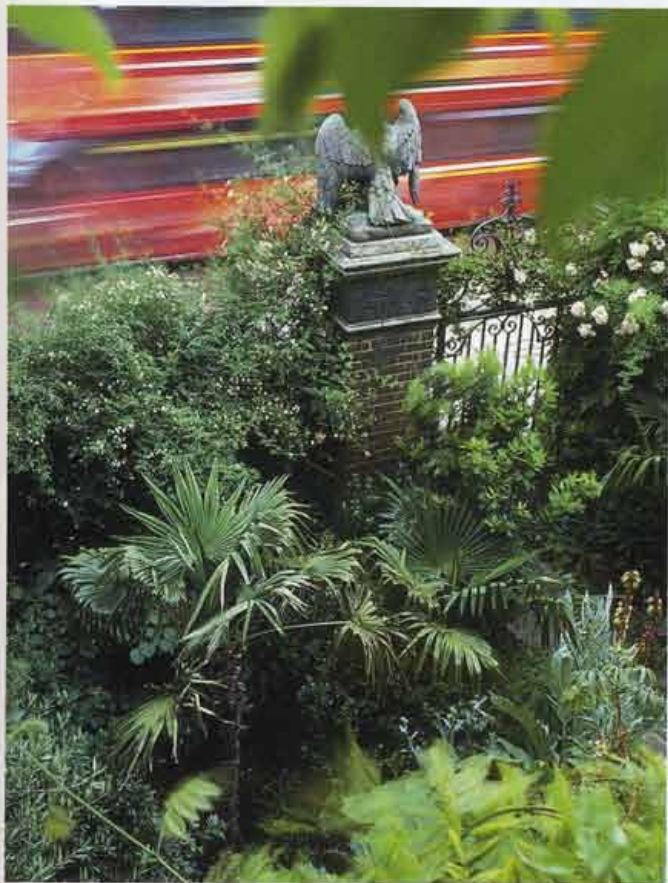
Beloved of Victorian gardeners, ferns are classic plants for shady gardens. Tree ferns imported into the UK include *Dicksonia antarctica*, the 'soft' tree fern, *Dicksonia squarrosa* (wheki), *Dicksonia fibrosa* (Wheki ponga), *Cyathea australis* (rough tree fern), *Cyathea dealbata* (silver tree fern), *Cyathea medullaris* (black tree fern), *Cyathea cunninghamii* (gully tree fern) and *Cyathea smithii* (Katote). Because tree fern habitats are under threat in some areas, they should always be bought from reputable suppliers who can produce authentic plant passports. Large specimens may have been rescued from sites earmarked for development. Tree ferns thrive in the shelter of southern city locations, but they like humidity. Todd Longstaffe-Gowan gives his ferns regular misting via a fine sprayer on a long wand, for 'about 10 minutes each day'.



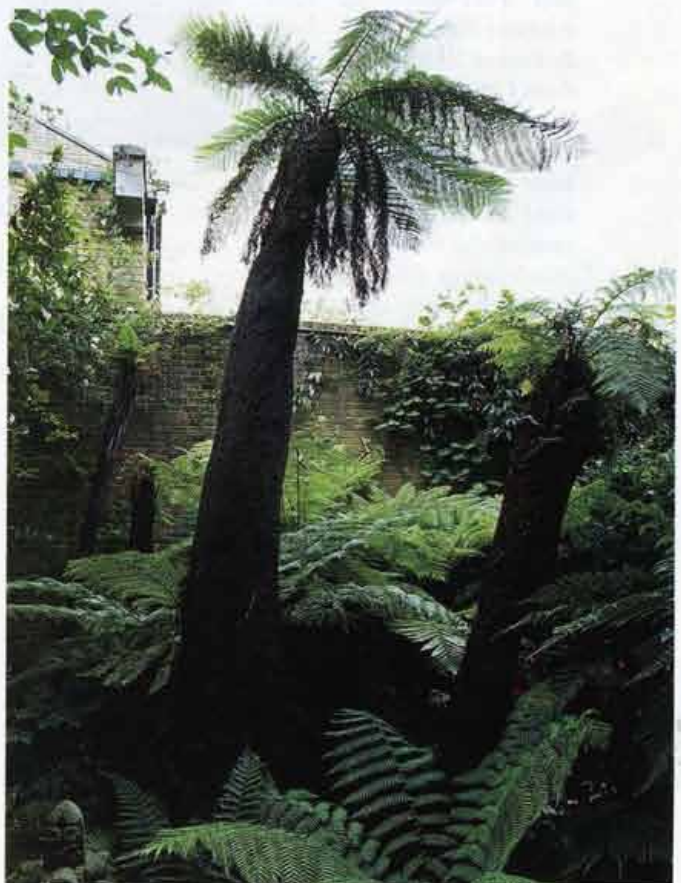
3—A sheep's skull, found in the Cotswolds, is one of many unusual ornaments dotted through the gardens



4—Restoring the frontage included making new front walls and ironwork. *Rosa Kew Rambler* cascades over the gate



5—The front garden is a luxuriant haven of foliage, which screens out the traffic on the busy Mile End Road



6—Large tree ferns rescued from pending development sites in Australasia have settled well into their new urban home