

Solving the riddle of Hampton Court

In gardening as in filmmaking, historical accuracy can sometimes be quite alienating. If it looks wrong, it must be right.



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ON GARDENING

Once again, I have given the Hampton Court Flower Show a miss. It is still enormously popular but it competes with prime time in my own garden and I hate the traffic the occasion provokes. Flower shows are inevitably artificial, whereas our own gardens are supposed to be "natural" while deploying artifices. Mine, like yours, is in good form at the moment and I am loath to be torn away.

I have to admit that when I first went to this show the RHS had not yet taken over, the occasion was less organised and I was shockingly unaware how grand the gardens of Hampton Court still are. I found myself walking down vast avenues, being lost in courts full of bedding plants that reminded me of gardens on my Oxford blacklist and losing my way along stretches of water.

This year we can make amends. The show will be over and we can go back to Hampton Court in an effort to understand the gardens. They now have an excellent up to date book by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan which makes me blush for my ignorance and habit of omitting these historic gardens from anything said or written about changing styles in Britain.

The author is gardens advisor to the vast business that is modern Hampton Court. He pays just tribute to Terry Gough, the gardens and estate manager, who manages the team of 38 gardeners and shows the greatest enthusiasm for yet more adventurous improvements. Even during my 10 years of show visiting, it was wonderfully evident the gardens were back on form.

Longstaffe-Gowan is very well informed but he includes one observation that is so delightful I must mention it straightaway because I have been unable to get it out of my head all week. He directs us to the most interesting behaviour of the Martians as they advance through the pages of HG Wells' *The War of the Worlds*, published in 1898. They begin by laying waste

to almost everything lying in their path. The woods beyond Ham and Petersham are attacked, Richmond town is burning briskly and Woking station is also wrecked. But the previously unnoticed fact is that Wells' monsters conspicuously spare Hampton Court. "At Hampton Court", he wrote, "our eyes were relieved to find a patch of green that had escaped the suffocating drift." As Longstaffe-Gowan deliciously remarks, while picking up the story, "the Martians showed greater respect for the park than the British and Allied armed forces". In the two world wars troops were billeted on this green space and made a distinctive mess of it. Some of the grassland became the site of planning for the Normandy invasion and the building sat there until 1963.

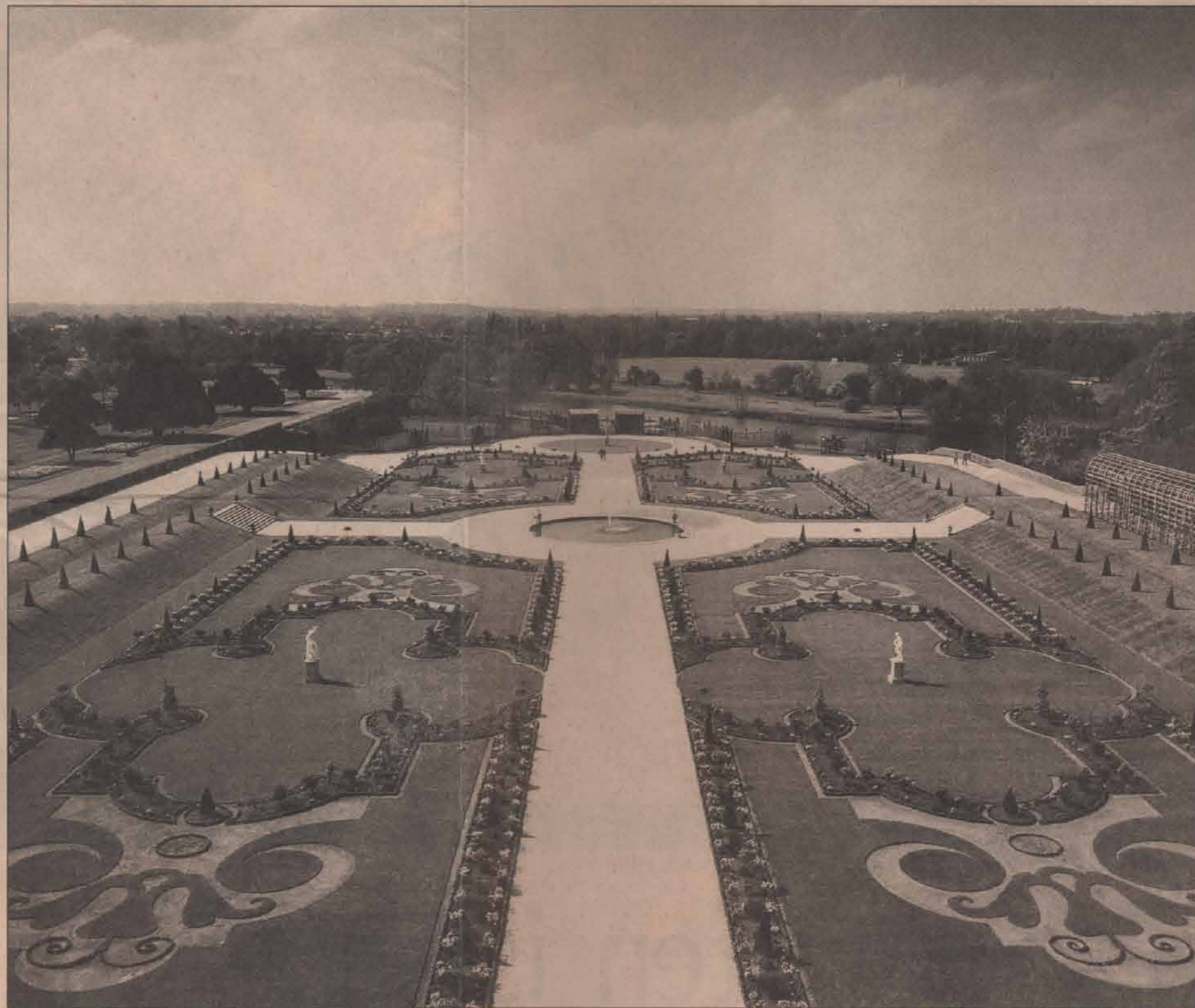
To my disgust, I have just read a review that dares to describe Steven Spielberg's new film based on *The War of the Worlds* as "unquestionably the finest

'The Martians showed greater respect for the park than the British and Allied armed forces'

epic of modern times". There are not even any cavalry, let alone any war elephants. I will now have to see it on the off chance the revered Californian has read Wells attentively and allowed his digital creatures to annihilate one of the old Network South-East stations. Has he also caught the Royalist message and allowed them to by-pass Hampton Court?

I doubt if anything will be recognisable but it leaves me thinking there might be some hope if discriminating Martians came back to London for a second attack. Surely they would rescue Knightsbridge by devastating the modern barracks, setting fire to the Sheraton Hotel and blasting out those dreadful Queen Mother gates. I assume they would leave Apsley House alone, spare Hyde Park and leave the lovely Catalpa, which is flowering at the edge of Marble Arch.

Until they return, we all ought to attend to the Hampton Court they spared.



Shock of the old: the Privy Garden at Hampton Court was researched and re-planted with an eye on historical authenticity

GPL

So much has happened here over the years and the gardens' history raises fascinating questions.

Much of the site is a dream territory for garden archeologists. Since the days of Cardinal Wolsey so many designs have been superimposed one on another and the plans for "restoration" were able to make an unparalleled use of archeological evidence.

After the tragic fire at the south of the palace in March 1986, plans were laid for a big restoration in the visible gardens. The past 19 years have seen tremendous projects, summed up in the restoration of the Privy Garden, which was opened 10 years ago in July 1995.

The blueprint here went back to the years of William and Mary and enlisted help from the Netherlands to grow the necessary plants. As many as 33,000 box plants were grown from cuttings to edge

10,000 feet of geometrically presented flower beds.

We all know about the shock of the new but I remember the "shock of the old" when I first walked into it. It had been admirably researched and re-planted but to my post-Sissinghurst eye, it looked awful. I later learnt that Julian Bannerman, one of our most sharp-eyed designers, replied to a similarly startled visitor: "If it is wrong, it is right." I am sure the restorers would welcome this thought-provoking comment.

Our eyes become used to one particular way of gardening and when we are suddenly confronted with an accurate restoration from the past, our assumptions are brutally upset. It looks wrong but the point is that, historically, it is right.

Again and again, I ponder this acute comment. On film sets, this argument is

consciously turned around - designers have told me how they cannot afford to be totally faithful to historical detail because the results will look "wrong" and fail to carry an audience with them.

We all have our expectations of ancient Rome, Babylon and maybe

even Ridley Scott's Jerusalem. It remains to be seen if Spielberg has done justice to my image of Woking station.

As the gardens advisor would be the first to agree, the further question is whether or not the Privy Garden is really accurate. I am sure they have done a

wonderful job tracing the lines of the beds and following pictorial and archeological evidence. The difficulty comes in knowing how to plant them. Many of the plants that grew in the gardens in the 1690s can be known but nobody is sure exactly how they were laid out. Probably, they were

widely spaced, which is already a bit of a shock to those of us who like a crowded profusion.

Did they really have clipped bushes of holly on semi-standard stems? How comprehensive is our documentary record? If we are not sure, how faithful should we be to what may be only a fragment of the evidence? I do notice many more plants in pots have been coming out for the summer on to the Orangery Terrace where they are very welcome.

Longstaffe-Gowan observes: "There are also plans to enhance the floral interest of the garden beds by adopting a double rotation scheme." I rather suspect the Privy Garden is beginning to be planted in accordance with our image of what a 17th-century garden should look like. I entirely agree if it is, because it seems a pity to make it odd and austere simply because we are uncertain what went where.

At every turn, Longstaffe-Gowan's book adds to one's wish to go carefully around Hampton Court with an open mind and try to understand why much of it looks as it does. In 2002 one of the long borders was significantly replanted following the style of the 1920s that was imposed by the articulate Ernest Law. It is plainly a sight for late August when the deliberately chosen dahlias and sunflowers are at their best.

I did wonder why it was stuck in a time warp when I saw it too soon in the summer of 2003. I now understand, and those Martians were right to spare it. The Long Border is about half a mile long. I am happy to wait for August, rather than hurrying past it too early in pursuit of yet another flower show.

The Gardens and Parks at Hampton Court Palace, by Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (Frances Lincoln, £25)