

Behind the 'green' door

SUE CADE meets a head gardener who has lovingly restored a Victorian walled garden - and discovers an environmental ethos to be much admired.

I've always loved the concept of a walled garden, and it's a true delight to visit one at Deer Park near Honiton in the company of gardener Olly Forster and his dog Fern. Walking through the innocuous wooden door, I'm greeted by the sight of a pretty plot filled with an abundance of fruit, vegetables and exquisite blooms.

Olly tells me that the garden was created in the early 19th century when Deer Park was a private residence with around 400 acres and four farms. It became a hotel after World War Two and much of the land was sold off, although the walled garden remained, abandoned and increasingly overrun with brambles.

Olly is largely responsible for re-establishing the garden after joining Deer Park in 2015. His brief from MD Mark Godfrey was to ensure that within 18 months there would be something fresh from the garden on every plate of food served up at the venue. Fortunately, a community group had already begun restoration work.

"They had been busily clearing brambles, which was a good start," Olly explains. "But most of the walls had fallen down and were shrouded with ivy. In my first year, there were no walls - but lots of rabbits!"



Photo: Venetia Norrington

Olly Forster and Fern



Photo: Minkhook-Photography

A greenhouse in the walled garden at Deer Park

There was much to do. "It was a case of landscaping, rebuilding the walls, laying hard paths - turning the shell of a garden into a workable space." One of the first things Olly did was to train fruit on every wall using traditional methods including espalier apples and pears, fan trained and cordon stone fruit. There's even stepover, where fruit is grown so close to the ground that you have to step

over it (there's a clue in the name). In the first year of what Olly calls 'proper production' the garden harvest included broad beans, French runners, root veg including beetroot, carrots and garlic, squash and perennials such as rhubarb and Jerusalem artichoke.

There are now three greenhouses; one is used for propagation of houseplants, micro herbs and garnishes whilst



ABOVE: An attractive seating area
Photo: MrNickHook-Photography

another is home to a variety of mouth-watering tomatoes; Caspian Pink, Black Russian and Olly's favourite, Harry's Italian Plum - "Great big plum tomatoes that make fabulous bruschetta," he says. There's also a sunken greenhouse, the 'pineapple house' which stands on the site of what Olly thinks was originally a melon house. It retains heat well, and in here are chillies, peppers and an actual pineapple plant, as well as melons and cucumbers growing up over the roof.

Olly works on good, organic principles. "The garden is ringed

with herbaceous planting, encouraging beneficial insects and pollinators to thrive." Besides the ingredients grown for use by the chefs there's a profusion of flowers, some edible, some for the house - but others grown for the sheer joy of it; stunning roses, dark purple Queen of the Night tulips and glorious Meconopsis, blue Himalayan poppies.

When Prince Charles and Camilla visited Honiton in the summer of 2018 for the town's Plate to Gate street market, Deer Park produce took pride of place. The couple received a box of mixed vegetables and salad from one of the horticultural apprentices - who Charles allegedly tried to poach for Highgrove. Olly has two apprentices working with him and says he's proud to be bringing on the next generation of horticultural experts.

At only about one acre, the walled garden will never make Deer Park self-sufficient. "We



RIGHT: Chillies in the Deer Park walled garden
Photo: Russell Brown

OLLY'S TIPS

Olly's top tips for restoring a walled garden

Expect the unexpected, you never know what you will find.

Trust what the Victorians did and how they laid gardens

out... they knew their stuff, so try and work the new in with that.

At the same time, don't be afraid to innovate and try new ideas.

Use scented plants like roses

around gateways and areas of high pedestrian traffic, it is the most evocative sense.

Make it pretty!

It helps to have someone who is willing to back you as it's not a cheap endeavour.



Produce from the Deer Park walled garden

HOME GROWN

How Deer Park uses its own produce

- Cucamelons added to G&T
- Yellow chilli Ajilemon used for chilli vodka
- Chutneys
- Beetroot pickle
- Blackcurrant cordial
- Strawberry and apricot jam
- Homemade rhubarb cordial
- Gooseberry macarons
- Rustic apple juice

knew from the start it would never supply everything for a professional kitchen," explains Mark Godfrey. "But it does have a positive impact on our food miles and the freshness and variety of our food." Mark is keen to enlighten me on the compelling green ethos of Deer Park which reaches beyond the walls of the garden and includes an apple orchard, a cider barn under construction, and beehives. Deer Park also plays a leading role in water quality in the Otter River, along which it has three miles of fishing rights.

Back in the garden, I'm shown the pond with its resident ducks. A seating area, lawn and funky Braai woodburning oven provide a stunning space for visitors to Deer Park that include wedding parties and conference delegates. Olly says that such events mean that more and more people have the chance to experience the garden. "Everyone who comes to Deer Park is interested in what we're doing; it's great fun showing people around and I think seeing the garden encourages people to try growing something themselves." ♦