In brief

Name: Long Barn.

What: South-facing Edwardian flower garden.

Where: Sevenoaks Weald, Kent.

Points of interest: Herbaceous borders, roses, yew topiary, hedges and a new spring garden. The first English garden created by Vita Sackville-West and husband Harold Nicolson.

Size: Three acres.

Climate: Open to the wind.

Soil: 'Solid clay', according to the owner.

Hardiness rating: USDA 8.

First love

Sissinghurst may scoop all the accolades but Long Barn, the first English garden created by Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, is wonderfully romantic and flourishes in the loving hands of owners Rebecca and Lars Lemonius.

WORDS TIM RICHARDSON PHOTOGRAPHS CLAIRE TAKACS
Always the bridesmaid, never the bride – that has been the fate of Long Barn, the garden in the Kentish Weald that Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson made before they came across a certain semi-derelict castle and created what is probably the most famous garden of the 20th century. But Long Barn has its own magic. It would certainly be more celebrated were it not perpetually in the shadow of its more glamorous sister.

Harold and Vita bought the gloriously misshapen 14th-century house in 1915 and lived there for 15 years, honing both their gardening and design skills. Remembering the house, Vita and Harold’s son Nigel Nicolson wrote: ‘The floors sloped crazily, so that every piece of furniture appeared crippled, and the roof was held together less by construction than by natural angles of repose. In place of a garden there was a chute of rubble and a tangle of brambles and nettles.’

The 16th-century ‘long barn’ was moved up the hill to its current position next to the house and transformed into a sitting room. From here, the garden gently falls away to the south, with fields and woodland beyond. Its most striking element is the avenue of 20 mature, clipped Irish yews that creates a dynamic east-west axis, but lawns on the wide terraces mean that overall the impression is not of a garden made up of different garden ‘rooms’, despite an underlying cellular structure.

Vita later reminisced, ‘I myself took to gardening quite late in life. I must have been at least 22.’ In fact she was 23 when she arrived at Long Barn.
Waiting for copy from Tim

Five features
That add to Long Barn’s unique charm

1 Avenue of Irish yews
These are the most striking element of the garden, creating both a strong east-west axis and an underlying feeling of dynamism.

2 Rose Walk
This fragrant arcade at the top of the garden opens out on to a lawn and steps leading down to the Dutch Garden. The north-south pathway is an effective counterpoint to the main east-to-west direction of the garden.

3 Classical Grove
Harold and Vita created an informal, ‘Georgian’ atmosphere in this area, one of several different styles with which they experimented at Long Barn.

4 Dutch Garden
Raised redbrick beds – possibly laid out by Edwin Lutyens – provide a formal structure from which romantic herbaceous plantings explode.

5 Secret Garden
Down the area that seems to foreshadow Sissinghurst – in this case, because of the mysterious room-like atmosphere and the use of sculpture.
Vita’s garden

The silver-grey spikes of verbascum – a constant note of the planting scheme – grow around the stone steps leading up to the Rose Walk. Erigeron karvinskianus adorns walls and paths. Rosa ‘The Fairy’ flowers for months, bringing colour to the top of the wall by the house. The garnet-coloured Penstemon ‘Andenken an Friedrich Hahn’ grows in profusion. Rebecca underplants Iris ‘Jane Philips’ with Cerinthe major ‘Purpurascens’.

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Long Barn has its own character, then – something Nigel Nicolson dubbed an atmosphere of 14th-century rusticated innocence – and this has been revealed and enhanced since 2007 by the current owners, Rebecca and Lars Lemonius, who employ two gardeners (one full-time). The style is romantically soft and effervescent, with Rebecca stating: “It’s loose – but I don’t want it too loose. I want to keep it looking natural without it becoming a mess.”

The key to this tone lies with self-seeding or spreading plants, including the white umbellifer Armo majus, daisy-like cornflower, feverfew, yellow santolina and helichrysum, vivid purple Campanula portenschlagiana (in the walls), glaucous Artemisia ‘Powis Castle’ and an un-named plum-coloured poppy sourced from a Dutch garden. Roses are another staple, with cultivars including ‘Tuscany Superb’, ‘Madame Alfred Carrière’, ‘Prospero (= ‘Auspero’)’, ‘Munstead Wood (= ‘Ausbernard’).
Earlier in the season irises, such as ‘Jane Phillips’ and ‘Black Swan’, take centre stage, while dark penstemons (notably ‘Raven’ and ‘Andenken an Friedrich Hahn’) also play their part.

The brickwork terrace is a classic suntrap and has been a favourite sitting place for generations of owners, today enlivened by a large Fremontodendron ‘California Glory’ that grows against the barn wall. A path extends outwards above the lawn, accompanied by clipped balls of box and hebe, and masses of purple verbascum. At the far end of the barn is a box parterre and then, leading north and upwards, a scented rose walk with twisted-hazel arches.

Just below the main lawn, on another wide terrace, is the Pleasaunce Lawn, with a small formal pool enclosed by hedges at its western end. As Rebecca reflects: “If you terrace you naturally start to create garden rooms.” The herbaceous beds here contain one or two more unusual plants, including Tritelia ‘Ocean Queen’.

The Dutch Garden, occupying the largest and lowest terrace, was reputedly laid out by Edwin Lutyens – and it does express a certain spatial confidence. To the compartmented areas the garden dissolves into more informal spaces. There is, for example, a former tennis court, which is now the Rose Lawn, an old orchard – with more roses, and snakeshead fritillaries and orchids in spring – and the Classical Grove, with statuary set amid trees and long grass and a small pond, which was once the swimming pool. Immediately south of the house are two small gardens: a white garden and a new sloping spring garden, which has been designed by a student from KLC College of Garden Design.

There is much to appreciate at Long Barn and yes, one can play the game of looking for features that seem to anticipate Sissinghurst – but the garden here deserves so much more than that. Pocketed in the Wealden countryside, it creates its own psychological micro-climate.

USEFUL INFORMATION

Open for pre-arranged private group tours only. Please email lemoniul@mac.com for further information.