

SPRING 2022

The garden dozed rather than slept through the mild winter and now the bulbs, daffodils, tulips and the shaggy crown imperials are pushing up through plants that never quite died back. The sturdy hellebores too, are having to use their elbows. There were bees on the Fatsia by the gate as late as Christmas and constellations of pale yellow primroses have been scattered across the garden since January. The globose- cluster flowers of the Fatsia, like Ivy flowers, are not particularly winsome; they look like the sort of thing you might find sprouting out of the heads of the little green men from Mars but we love them for the sake of the bees. And the bees are back and I've seen the first butterfly, a bright yellow Brimstone dancing round a blue Hyacinth. But best of all, the other day, I spotted some smiling visitors with their house guide. Like Spring, they have been so looked forward to and are here at last!



The season may have been mild, but those days of ferocious wind caused the loss of two perennial wallflower plants. They had got a bit leggy, as they do, and being whipped around caused them both to uproot; they will be replaced come the warmer weather. Planting up new shrubs will be especially satisfying as I will be using our very own David Parr House compost! This has been maturing for nearly three years in the wooden bin by Alfred's shed. A second bin has been assembled. This means, pay attention, that the top layer of compost from bin one must be moved to the new bin. This most-recent layer of compost is made up of (the squeamish can look away) half-rotted vegetation and slimy, deliquescent apples full of pink wiggly worms. A true gardener thinks this is spiffing. So the old bin was dug out, its top layer removed and transferred till we got down to the crumbly, fully composted material. I am always impressed by the way the compost bin manages to make this, all by itself.

Warning: more about compost. Now comes the backbreaking and messy task of distributing the stuff over the garden. This is absolutely guaranteed to coincide with wet weather. My advice is: never garden in the rain. It doesn't matter how urgent the task is, forget it, go indoors and tidy your sock drawer. I ignored my own advice of course and by the time I'd finished, though the garden looked rather smart under it's layer of humus, I looked like Quagmire, a character from the (unlikely-to-be-staged) *Mud*, the musical.

Weeding round the Irises under the laundry post, I remembered finding a button here and being told that many buttons had been turned up all along the path of the old washing line. It made me think of Elsie hanging out her washing on a breezy day and pausing to enjoy her garden as she did so. There is a recording of Janet, Elsie's neighbour and friend,

saying that Elsie 'loved her garden so much and every year you saw the result of her devotion to it.' Janet, who came from India, remembers that



when she first moved in, she had stepped out into her garden and seen Elsie looking her way and a short time later had gone down to her gate and found a bunch of blue cornflowers from Elsie with a little note saying, 'Welcome'. Also in the recording, Janet lists the cottage-garden flowers she remembers: 'primroses, hollyhocks, tulips, roses, hyacinths, daffodils, bluebells, daisies, foxgloves, ferns...' I am glad to tell you that they are all here in the garden and with them Elsie's kind spirit.

Mill Road Cemetery, where David Parr and wife Mary Jane are buried, is only a few streets away from the David Parr House. Mill Road Cemetery is like a Victorian park full of huge mature trees and large shrubs but beneath them are tilting gravestones and monuments, some still upright, some broken and some left overgrown and hidden in thickets of ivy, brambles and honeysuckle. There are areas which have been judiciously cleared and mown to create romantic vistas and open space. In early spring, in one glade, there is a ground mist of pale mauve crocus, lit by the sun slanting through the, as yet, leafless canopy. Later in the year I look forward to walking under the gigantic Kiftsgate rose that scrambles up through the trees creating a dense shadowy grove as if for Sleeping Beauty. A good balance is kept between the unruly and the managed. In a more open part of the cemetery is David and Mary's grave. There is no showy headstone, just a modest rectangle of kerbstones. The carved lettering has eroded but a rubbing with wax crayon along the four sides reveals the words: 'In loving memory' and their names and dates in a simple font.



As the gardener at David and Mary's house, I cherish the opportunity to tend their grave from time to time. I am moved by how intimate this feels. I cut back the long grass and chop down the bramble that has invaded one corner, to uncover the kerbstones and leave within them a peaceful bed of grasses and the humble wildflowers that have made their own way there: violet, celandine, clover and daisy. A meadow in miniature. Or perhaps a fragment of the 'green pastures' from the lovely 23rd psalm 'The Lord is my shepherd...' that David and Mary would have known so well.

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