

SUMMER

Summer came early to the garden at the David Parr House, with a long spell of warm weather in May. Sadly, there were still no visitors but the plants put on a splendid performance all the same.

Having come through the security-coded street gate, settled my bike, pushed back the old iron gate to the garden itself, I always feel a surge of pleasure as I begin the walk down the path through the garden. It is a time to pause and take in the mood and murmur a quiet greeting.

The primroses, cyclamen and bulbs of spring have sagged away into the ground with the warmth. They have been overtaken by leafy geraniums, columbines and the slender purple spikes of perennial sage. It was too hot, too soon for the Caster Oil plant by the gate, making its new leaves crisp up round the edges; on the other hand, the exotic Crown Imperials responded by producing an extra-large ring of bright green seed heads with longitudinal ridges so precise they looked machine made.



All last season, a mysterious rosette of coarse leaves sat quietly under the apple tree. I eyed it warily but let it be as it was pleasingly symmetrical and, with its large and sculptural form, it was filling a difficult space. It remained unchanged through the winter and I was just beginning to take it for granted when it roused and with time-lapse speed became a huge, dazzling spire and side finials of white foxglove. I stand under it like Jack with the bean stalk, and marvel. But the real glory of the garden at the moment are the roses. The warm weather has encouraged them to unpack their blooms, their perfume mingling with honeysuckle and cologne-scented verberna.

With all this joy, come the weeds. Specially in the mosh pit, that part of the garden up against the iron fence where I have no control at all. Bindweed swarms up the railings, tendrils grabbing onto the nearest plant; bristly alkanet elbows shy plants aside and ground elder shoves in everywhere. Then in among the carefully tended salvias, lavender, poppies and pinks appears this rabble of roguish-looking greenery. It could be Golden Rod which will make a good show later in the summer. Or it could be Willow Herb. I am charmed by the story of how its fluffy wind-borne seeds were spread up the railway lines of Britain in the slip stream of the rushing trains. Although it looks grand, flowing past the carriage windows, its pink flowers are too scrappy to earn their place in a small garden. Besides, I don't think Alfred would have allowed it.

Any mention of the railway and gardening immediately brings to mind Elsie's husband Alfred Palmer. Visitors will see, hanging in the front bedroom, the uniform he

wore for his work as a goods guard at Cambridge station. He was originally from a Yorkshire mining family but got a job on the railway to escape a life down the pit. And indeed, he seems to have spent most of his life out of doors, in the light and air.

He was a great gardener; at one time he had two allotments and, during the post-war years of rationing, maintained a kitchen garden here at 186. He kept a diary in which he wrote down the times of the trains that he was working on and their destinations. Most days he made a note of the weather too and kept a careful record of the vegetables he'd sowed, including the number of rows of carrots, potatoes and whatever he'd planted that season. Alfred was very handy and built the metal shed at the bottom of the garden for his tools and bicycle. The dark green paint he used on the shed and on the outside furniture of the house is known as 'Railway Green'. This colour is also on the door of the coal bunker and the orange day lilies look splendid against it at the moment. He also made himself a trailer out of salvaged wood and bicycle wheels, using this to carry produce back from his allotments. This is where the David Parr House got the idea for the Museum on a Bike. Alfred cycled everywhere and was a well known figure on his black bike; at one time, he regularly travelled up to Ely and back to visit his daughter.



The present garden is not as he had it; it is a mixture of past and present. The basic layout is the same and many original features, like the iron railings and the gate, the laundry post, the shed and the splendid old Bramley apple tree remain. But the planting is recent; the design and the plants were chosen to reflect Elsie's love of scent and colour and all were put in after the renovation of the house and an archaeological dig of the garden was complete.

I never met Alfred Palmer but I feel his kindly presence everywhere in his garden. He is also recalled in the names of the roses; Generous Gardener is a soft pink rose climbing against the fence and Dad's Delight is a gorgeous apricot-coloured shrub rose nearer the house. Every Sunday Alfred made a note in his diary of a milestone in his daughters' lives: a new tooth cut, a new word said. He was a much loved father. And here, glowing bright red, even on the dullest day, is the most vivid rose in the garden: Best Dad.

Elizabeth McKellar