

AUTUMN

This season in the David Parr House garden has been one of extreme weather. First, a heat wave, and appropriately the garden was full of hot colours: purple snapdragons, tall red gladioli with frilly white edges and varieties of scarlet cosmosia. The main bed was dominated by the dahlias, bright orange pompoms on long stalks that seemed to float in the air above large bushes of dark green leaves. But the heat was too fierce for some of the plants: hollyhocks rusted, golden rod mildewed and roses sulked. So there had to be a change in my timetable as I returned in the evenings to water the garden.



You would think this task would be made easier by the hose, a friend to the gardener in dry times. I have never found this to be the case. The hose is a most recalcitrant assistant, rather like an adolescent asked to do the hoovering. It uncoils itself unwillingly, remains stiff and unwieldy, drags itself over the plants, creates obstruction and more trip hazards than a field of tents at Glastonbury. Oh, and then, when all is going well at last and the cooling shower is freshening the fetid air and I have just begun to forget the fever and the fret, the cooling shower shuts off abruptly. The hose has taken my muttered imprecations literally and got knotted.



At last there was rain and the plants revived but after the rain came the great wind storm. The dahlias were smashed down but it really *is* an ill wind as the collapse of these huge plants revealed many shy patches of dainty autumn cyclamen. Other plants had felt obscured too. There is a rose bush that was salvaged from the original garden; we didn't have its name so we called it 'Elsie's Rose.' No longer overshadowed, she bloomed at last: a scorching scarlet with an amazing day-glo salmon-pink shimmer. Elsie liked a bit of colour and no mistake. And the poor Dahlias? Not knowing what to do with them, I did nothing. Yes, I know, this is not a good

solution to problems. But they got with the programme and were soon sending up flowers vertically from their gracefully recumbent position.

There are two Fuchias out now in the garden, the varieties chosen for their names: 'David' for David Parr of course, has flowers which hang like ballerinas in full skirts of red and purple while 'Mary' for his wife has slender, less flamboyant red flowers.

Mary Jane Wood was born in Tytherington, near Macclesfield in Cheshire and first met David when he was working at Hare Hill House and she was employed as a cotton carder or 'doubler' in one of the local mills. They were married in Rainow Church when Mary was 22 and David 27 years old. It was four years later in 1887 that they moved into 186 Gwydir Street where they brought up their three children and lived for the rest of their lives.



In early photographs Mary is carefully dressed, her hair pulled back and her face tense for the camera. But in my favourite photo of her she is more relaxed; age has refined her features, her deep set eyes are behind spectacles, her dark hair is swept up in soft waves. As ever, her figure and dress is elegant for Mary Jane was a fine seamstress. And is it fanciful? — there seems to me a livelier look, even a hint of amusement.

Mary is present when David records their children's teething, first steps, childhood illnesses and accidents. The intimacy of her person is evoked in the references to weaning and the end of breastfeeding. He notes that their daughter is "getting on nicely with talking" and that their son will sing when asked to and with a touch of humour adds, "in his way of singing". In David's words I hear Mary's voice, chatting, telling him her news by the fire at the end of the day or on his return from one of his long journeys away working.

As devout as her husband, one imagines that Mary was of one mind with David on the choice of texts for his wall paintings but looking through David's notebooks there is not a moment when some room or part of her house is not being worked on, painted, ornamented or improved. What Mary might have thought of it comes in a recording of Elsie reminiscing about her grandfather,

"...I should think his wife was muddled with him..." A phrase which neatly fuses the disruption and the exasperation. Let's hope all the domestic upheaval was offset by David's very forward-thinking installation of household mod cons: hot-air heating for their bedroom and as early as 1898 an indoor loo. Such a blessing would not be commonplace in the area till more than half a century later.



And it is in Mary's kitchen that David painted one of his loveliest designs. Adapted from a wallpaper printed by William Morris, sky-blue Michaelmas daisies and green leafy stems curve gracefully on a light and airy background. In the garden the Michaelmas daisies are out now, soft blue and mauve clusters in the dusty light of late summer. And for me, they will always bring to mind Mary Parr, Elsie's grandmother, whose home this was for 62 years. Occasionally, while weeding, I have turned up bits of Victorian china: a piece of gold-rimmed willow pattern, a chip of black-and-white

transfer ware. Did she serve vegetables from a willow pattern bowl? Does this shard in my hand come from her favourite tea cup? At those times I close my eyes for a moment and think of Mary Jane walking this way towards the garden gate, her neat button boots crunching on the cinder path, her long skirts rustling as she goes.

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