

SPRING 2021

Spring arrived late in the David Parr House garden this year, then entered with a blast of primary colours: blaring red tulips on a ground of blue forget-me-nots and yellow primroses which, because of the cooler weather, have not receded yet. The apple tree is dressed in pink and white blossom and the wallflowers below are providing velvety shades of dark red and ochre.

I disciplined the roses rather severely before Christmas and I am relieved to see them sprouting and leafing up just as the pruning manual promised. The scars have faded now but 'Darcey Bussell' took exception to my treatment and lashed out when I wasn't sufficiently respectful. I counselled myself, as I picked thorn tips out of my hand, that one must expect temperament in the very beautiful. The early climbing rose Canary Bird (you've guessed, it's yellow) is now in flower, very prettily, all along its arching stems.

One of the jobs last year was dealing with a little piece of hard landscaping: this is the narrow, three-inch strip of single cobbles between the concrete path and the Victorian edgers bordering the lawn. The cobbles had been taken over by weeds and were no longer visible. It was a simple matter of taking them up, laying strips of liner and returning the cobbles to their original places. I felt quite the Land Artist, ruminating on those famous sculptors who make great art in remote places from dry-stone walling, slate and found materials. I laid the cobbles aside, did the job, put back the cobbles and ran out of them a foot before the end. Eh? How can stones shrink? Were the squirrels stealing them? So I had to relay and fill the gaps with 'found' gravel. I'm afraid the weeds have wriggled back in despite all my artistic labours.



A very strong presence in the garden is the shed that Alfred built. It is a masterpiece of recycled materials. The main material is corrugated metal, very likely recycled from a wartime air-raid shelter. It has an interior frame of random-sized pieces of timber offcuts and salvage. Alfred's design has glass panes at both ends of the roof apex to let in light and, most ingenious of all, a glass clerestory, a solution borrowed from church architecture. Unwanted house doors have been reclaimed, cut to size and repurposed. The shed is painted in 'Railway Green', appropriately, as Alfred worked as a goods guard for British Rail. The low part of the shed was used for keeping chickens and the little red door on the right hand side was

where the hens went in and out. The middle part of the shed was where the bikes were kept and then the section near to the back fence was Alfred's tool shed.

It is such a marvellous structure that looking at it gives as much pleasure as the apple tree Alfred planted. And one especially canny detail is the door catch which is an eight inch long screw slotted into a metal hoop. It is like a signature; looking at it I'm immediately in the presence of the handy person who devised it.

Working in the garden is a joy but flipping back through my diary reminds me of Alfred's diary where there were good days and where there were the other kind. Sigh. O the ages wasted scrabbling about in the compost or the green bin trying to find the trowel (dibber, scissors, secateurs) which has managed to get itself thrown out with the weeds and prunings. And then there are those times when, after some carefully considered activity with a plant, I step back to admire my efforts and have to admit that the plant and horticulture in general might be altogether better off without my interference.

There are two Spring plants in the garden whose names and legends come from classical mythology. The pale Narcissus brings to mind the well-known story of the beautiful lad who became enamoured of his own image and lay by the watery mirror of a lake so enraptured that he would do nothing but gaze upon himself. He pined away and at his death, in pity, the gods turned him into the flower that is synonymous with the perils of self obsession. I feel most for his sweetheart Echo who, through being ignored and unloved, lost her own sense of identity altogether.

Out now too, is the fragrant Daphne, a reminder of the story of the nymph who would not consent to the god Apollo's unwanted advances and to put herself out of reach transformed herself into a tree. It is easy to see why these stories are such a rich source of meaning and metaphor in art, literature and psychoanalysis.

And then there is the symbolism of the garden itself. The garden here feels very private with its high walls and fences, especially in the unvisited stillness of the last year.

Being aware of the deep religious feelings of David Parr and Elsie's family makes me associate this garden with those early paintings of the Annunciation where the artist has chosen to set Christianity's first moment in his own humble courtyard or cloister. In these paintings the artist has visualised the Virgin Mary sitting in solitude within a courtyard, the open door to her modest chamber sometimes visible behind her. This is her own place, a place of contemplation and retirement. She is reading. Inside the courtyard's high walls there may be trees, a lawn dotted with spring flowers, a parterre or a flower-bordered path leading to a locked gate. These are all references to the Virgin Mary's 'enclosed garden' (*hortus conclusus*) which is a symbol of her maiden purity. Here she sits, among the flowers, till her quiet and chaste seclusion is disturbed by a sudden rush of air and the rustle of wings.

