





# A play on contrasts

*The Old Rectory, Litton Cheney, Dorset*

With the help of Arne Maynard, the many and varying elements of this four-acre garden, once the home of engraver Reynolds Stone, have been beautifully drawn together, reveals Christopher Stocks

Photographs by Britt Willoughby Dyer









ONLY a couple of miles inland from Chesil Beach, Litton Cheney tucks into the southern slopes of the high escarpment that hangs above the verdant valley of the River Bride. It's a classic Dorset village, with its thatched cottages, spreading oak trees, gurgling streams and narrow lanes. At the bottom is the pub and right at the top is the 14th-century church. Immediately below, its roof on a level with the daisies in the churchyard, is a classic Georgian rectory, complete with latticework porch and a thatched summerhouse off to one side. The house, built in about 1780, perches on a long, narrow shelf cut into the side of the hill, which rises steeply above it on one side and falls away just as steeply on the other. The thickly wooded area below the house has a wild, romantic atmosphere, animated by crystal-clear springs that burst from fern-fringed hollows in the hillside and rush down narrow gullies into shady pools below.

From 1953 to 1979, the Old Rectory was the home of the engraver Reynolds Stone and his photographer wife, Janet, who between them welcomed many of the leading literary and artistic figures of their day, from Iris Murdoch and Kenneth Clark to Joyce Grenfell and Benjamin Britten. Since 2009, it has been owned by Richard and Emily Cave, who have refurbished the house and, with the help of Arne Maynard, considerably smartened up the four acres of woods and gardens that surround it.

## ‘The most magical area is the least conventionally gardened’

As it is for most new owners, their first focus was on the house, but they started talking to Mr Maynard in 2014, after Mrs Cave had attended a gardening course at Allt-y-bela, his home and garden in Monmouthshire. ‘I loved what he had done there,’ she says, ‘and we got on right away. We asked him to connect the house to the garden more solidly, and to impose a bit of order.’ By happy coincidence Mr Maynard had been brought up in Dorset, and although he hadn’t visited Litton Cheney before, its setting immediately struck a chord. ‘When I first visited, the garden was rather overgrown,’ he recalls, ‘but I remember being awestruck—all those springs, especially the one they call the grotto immediately below the house. The site is actually pretty constrained, but it feels much larger than it really is because of the way it shades off into wildness at the edges.’ The first stage of the project was also the biggest, but made the most obvious difference. For Mr Cave, an expert in 18th-century



*Previous pages:* The Georgian rectory was once home to the engraver Reynolds Stone. The grassed steps were put in by landscape gardener Arne Maynard who has created a gentle informality in the planting (*facing page*) and areas of quiet romanticism (*above*)

English furniture who set up on his own in Notting Hill after 25 years at Mallett, the most important thing was to place the house more successfully in the garden.

‘When we moved in, there was a turning circle right outside the front door,’ Mr Cave says, ‘and the lawn sloped down to the house.’ Mr Maynard moved the drive to the side and realigned the levels in front of the house, so that it now sits on a grassy plinth and you are able to step from the door straight out onto the lawn. ‘One of the things that struck me most was the view from the hall into the garden,’ the landscape gardener says. ‘It’s important that you look out into soft landscaping and can walk outside in bare feet if you want to, which is why we came up with

the idea of the grass steps.’ It’s a motif with local associations, too. Mr Maynard was brought up near Charlton Marshall, south of Blandford, and the garden of an old house there (since demolished) had a similar feature that lodged somewhere in his memory.

The planting, as befits a Georgian house in the country, is a studied mix of gentle informality with a few more formal elements closer to the house, although even these have been chosen for their slightly tousled, bucolic feel. Instead of pleached limes, for example, the drive is screened by a row of crab-apples that rise above a low hedge of loose-clipped box, which mirrors the existing box hedge on the other side of the lawn. As Mr Maynard explains, this open screen does several ➤





**Above:** Bluebells, ferns, magnolia, wild garlic and hellebores add to the natural charm of the newly stepped hillside. **Facing page:** Steps lead down through woodland below the house to the swimming pond, which was made by adapting the old pond

things: 'It hides cars and gives the front garden some privacy, as it's overlooked from the churchyard above. We could have planted a hedge along the churchyard boundary, but that felt disrespectful. The ground rises so steeply above the drive that it's almost a cliff, so the hedge also helps divide up the vertical height, like putting a comma in a paragraph.'

Beyond the house, the ledge of flatter land continues past the old tithe barn and coach house (formerly Stone's studio, now holiday accommodation) to a small kitchen garden. 'Again the challenge was to create something interesting on a narrow site,' Mr Maynard notes. 'We tried to keep it simple, with asymmetrical beds, which I think look rather charming.' Beyond the kitchen garden a gate leads into an open meadow, on whose upper slopes Mrs Cave has established a rose nursery

**‘The garden is a play on contrasts—the thread that pulls it all together,’**

for her new business, Rosa Cheney, which supplies cut roses for weddings and gifts.

Perhaps the most magical area is also the least conventionally gardened. The hillside below the house, with its gurgling springs and tall trees, is too steep and damp to be tamed, although the Caves have opened up the tree canopy and cleared the undergrowth to let in more light. The biggest change is the swimming pond. Overlooked by a newly stepped hillside, Mr Maynard designed it as a place

## Reynolds and Janet Stone

Born and schooled at Eton, where his father was assistant master, Reynolds Stone largely taught himself the art of wood-engraving. He went on to become the leading engraver of his generation, designing everything from the old £5 and £10 notes to the royal coat of arms that still appears on British passports.

Reynolds and Janet Stone found the Old Rectory by chance, when they were visiting the church at Litton Cheney. As Janet recalled in her 1988 memoir, *Thinking Faces*: 'We peered through the windows and thought it looked remarkably dim inside... but then we went round the garden. We knew at once that it was too incredible—nine acres of romantic ferns and rushing streams and ponds—and so we moved in.' Although things got off to a bad start, with Reynolds having a nervous breakdown and sitting with his head in his hands, moaning, 'I've made the most appalling mistake,' he lived there for the rest of his life. The couple were great entertainers, Janet often in eccentric dresses of her own design, and over the years they were visited by a remarkable mix of people, including Zoltán Kodály, James Lees-Milne, Henry Moore, Freya Stark and Murray Perahia.

to sit and warm up after a swim in its chilly waters. It adds formality in its wild surroundings. As he explains: 'The whole garden is a play on these contrasts: formality and informality, cut and uncut, clipped yew versus clipped field maple, the loose-clipped box at the front, the tumbling borders, the plants seeded out in the chippings—it's the thread that pulls the whole thing together.'

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