Frolicking good fun

Painswick Rococo Garden, near Stroud, Gloucestershire

Tiffany Daneff visits one of the best examples of a Rococo garden in this country, a place of hidden pavilions and romantic copses watched over by the god of woodland revels

Photographs by Britt Willoughby Dyer

TO stand at the entrance of the Painswick Rococo Garden today, with the hanging beech wood glowing copper in the autumnal light and, below it, the crown of white finials of the 18th-century Exedra marking the boundary between the informal and the formal garden, is a thrilling experience.

In his painting of Painswick House and gardens, of about 1748, Thomas Robins the Elder (1716–70), of Charlton Kings, Cheltenham, positions himself further back and, applying a splash of artistic licence, renders the estate larger than it actually is. Happily, this only serves to increase the impression

Preceding pages: **The 18th-century Exedra in the kitchen garden. Its reconstruction in timber and lime plaster followed the 1748 painting of Painswick by Thomas Robins (*left*).** *Top:* **The stone pool at the centre of the kitchen garden had been hidden under a 1960s conifer farm, but is now restored**

Above: **The secluded 4ft 6in-deep plunge pool, fed by springs and kept at a constant 53°, would have been overlooked by John Van Nost's statue of Pan.** *Below left:* **A detail of the plunge-pool grotto.** *Below right:* **The Doric Seat, once the porch of the 18th-century Pigeon House, was moved here to replace a rustic structure visible in Robins' painting**

of being about to step into a painting—which is quite surreal and rather Mary Poppins.

Painswick is one of the best surviving Rococo gardens in the country and, although it underwent extensive restoration from 1984 onwards, the work was done sensitively and without too much of the deadening signage that screams 21st century at every turn. As a result, the past feels very present as one traverses the path to the famous Red House, so-called because of the colour-washed lime render that originally covered its walls.

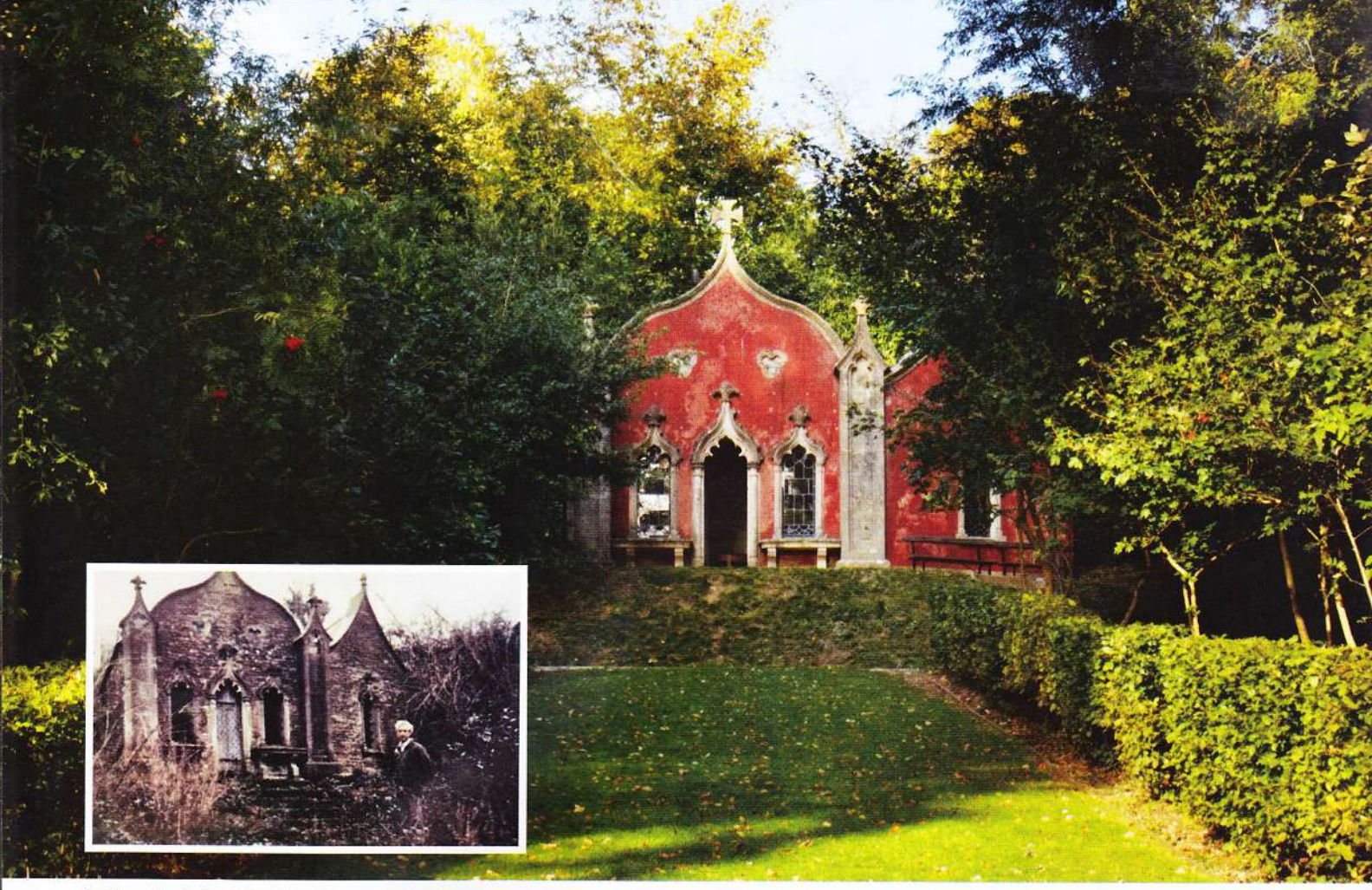
That this was a somewhat frisky past is hinted at by John Van Nost's lead statue of a suitably rakish Pan, the god of woodland revels, which originally stood on the Bowling Green overlooking the plunge pool. As Kate Felus says in *The Secret Life of the Georgian Garden*, cold baths were part of the 18th-century gentleman's fitness routine. Secluded settings—often reached via shrubberies or winding paths through wildernesses—were common places for them 'for obvious reasons'. As with many Rococo gardens, Painswick was intended to provide a setting for games as well as discreet frolics and flirtations, with little follies secreted about the woods where assignations could be held away from prying eyes in the main house.

> 'It was like a jungle. We had to hack our way through'

The garden was originally laid out in 1748 in the hidden coombe tucked behind the big house by Benjamin Hyett (1708–62), who had inherited Painswick from his father, Charles, a successful Gloucester attorney. That same year, he commissioned Robins's painting. What is not known is who designed the garden. Robins, who had by then painted other contemporary gardens, may have played a part, but it is very likely that Hyett himself contributed to the plans. As garden historian Timothy Mowl wrote in COUNTRY LIFE (*'In the Realm of the Great God Pan', October 17, 1996*), there could well have been a rumbustious drinking society in Painswick dedicated to Pan of which Hyett was a part.

When Bishop Pococke, 'the Rococo Bishop', visited in 1757, he only commented on the walks through 'wood and adorn'd with water and buildings', but take the steps up to the exquisite Red House, where the ashlar stone outer room leads to an inner sanctum that has the Hyett coat of arms above the fireplace and niches for cutlery and crockery. One can almost hear the whispered conversations locked within its walls. In typical Rococo fashion, the main building and its single wing stand at the meeting point of two converging paths. This playful assymmetry is further enhanced by giving one gable an ogee arch and the other being concave.

It was in 1984, after visiting an exhibition of Robins paintings, that the garden ➤



In the playful spirit of the Rococo, the Red House, the focal point of the garden, was built so that its two parts are asymmetrical. It has two rooms; Benjamin Hyett would have entertained in the inner sanctum. *Inset:* **Lord Dickinson by the Red House, before restoration**

historian Prof Mowl and the architectural historian Roger White published an article 'Thomas Robins at Painswick' in the journal *Garden History*. This inspired the then owners of Painswick House, Lord and Lady Dickinson, to embark on the great task of restoring the garden.

'The valley had been full of Christmas trees and a lot of brambles,' Prof Mowl recalls today. (The conifers dated from 1965 when the site had been used for commercial growing.) 'You could only just see the apex of the pediment of the Doric Seat.' This provided the first clue as to how much of the original had survived. To find more they had to first clear a path to the interior using bulldozers. 'It was like a jungle,' he continues. 'We had to hack our way through.' In the centre they found the remains of the stonework surrounding the small circular pool at the heart of the kitchen garden and were able to reinstate the main axes and paths.

Thanks to the work of John and Eileen Harris—*Gardens of Delight: The Rococo English Landscape of Thomas Robins the Elder* (1978) and *The Artist and the Country House* (1979)—Prof Mowl knew that these paintings were of real, not imagined, places. This enabled reconstruction to take place of other buildings such as the top floor of the Eagle House, which had completely disappeared, and the timber and lime plaster Exedra which, too, had been lost.

By 1988 it was obvious that the work was going to be more expensive than had originally been estimated and the Painswick Rococo Garden Trust was set up, which has enabled further archeological investigation. Over the years, all the buildings have been repaired and the original kitchen garden mentioned by Bishop Pococke has been re-created and planted.

> 'Cold baths were part of a gentleman's fitness routine, in secluded settings "for obvious reasons"'

Once the historic areas had been restored, the trust has quite rightly turned its attentions to keeping alive the playful spirit of Hyett's garden. The trust celebrated the 250th centenary of Robins's painting with a maze and there are biennial sculpture exhibitions. Today, however, it is children who love to play hide and seek in the bushes.

Rococo gardens: a brief history

It was Nikolaus Pevsner who first used 'rococo' to describe gardens, noting how the paths that wound through formal landscapes in Switzer's *Ichnographia Rustica* (1718) echoed the decorative motifs of French Rococo. In the 1970s, John and Eileen Harris's articles used the term to describe the garden paintings of Thomas Robins the Elder.

In the haphazard chronology of garden design, the Rococo sits between Palladio and Adam, but was never a recognised style, except in Bristol and Dublin. Nevertheless, the 'playful, experimental and graciously civilised' Rococo mood spread across the country and was popular with the middle classes who had neither the acres nor the inheritance for major landscaping work. Exotic Chinese or Gothic garden pavilions, often from timber and plaster, were cheap to build, but, inevitably, most did not last long.

Painswick Rococo Garden, Stroud, Gloucestershire, is open at weekends and some weekdays until the end of November. Visits must be booked in advance (www.rococogarden.org.uk)