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From the **Bottom** to the **Top**

PAT ASHWORTH visits a spectacular garden created from an overgrown rocky slope in the High Peak village of Chisworth

Photographs by David Keegan

David Keegan was the only landscape designer who didn't suck his teeth, scratch his head or vanish for ever in a cloud of dust when confronted by the unrelenting of John and Elizabeth Windsor's back garden at Chisworth, near Glossop.

In fact his Irish eyes lit up at the opportunity to create something truly spectacular out of the rocky, precipitous slope that toppled down to the stream at the side of the mill cottage. The Grade II listed farmhouse dates back to the 1780s, a

time when the hamlet was a busy flour milling centre and a staging post on the road to Marple. It feels well off the beaten track but in fact is only 20 minutes from Manchester city centre.

The Windsors moved here almost two decades ago, when they had more pressing priorities than tackling the garden. Looking at the glory of it now, it's hard to believe that this breathtaking view across meadow and pasture to the hills above Hattersley hasn't been visible for ever, or that the family didn't mow here for the sake of it. All the elements were here: the grassland, the grazing sheep, the

Left: A view through the *Shasta* daisies, 'Old Court' valley

Below: David Keegan and Elizabeth Windsor in front of the new wildflower meadow, which is pictured below right forming a formal and fluid boundary between the garden and the countryside beyond



unchanging valley. The garden just didn't work in harmony with them, and that's what David Keegan wanted to restore in the most natural way he could.

The garden appears to flow out into the countryside, the boundary obliterated and softened by a wildflower meadow that draws an 'Oh!' of ecstasy. Landscape designers in times gone by would have used a ha-ha for the same purpose, avoiding a fence or wall that would have interrupted the view. Bright ox-eye daisies, vivid purple lesser knapweed and cornflower-blue chicory flowers mingle with clouds of bright yellow



The garden before David began work



and red. Soon there will be pathways beaten through the meadow but now we wade in up to our knees in a rising dance of butterflies.

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The fruit trees aren't apparent at first, well saplings. But David has planted a Victoria plum, a damson and an apple, to make it as naturalistic as possible and to bene-

frame the view. 'I wanted fruit trees there because it reminded me of my childhood on a farm. We had an orchard that was actually a wildflower

meadow, and all the apples were inter-planted. It was the most amazing thing,' he says with pleasure.

He made a baseline selection of plug plants for the backdrop, but



random scattering comes into it too and the meadow will be a constantly changing picture. Enemies in the yellow rattle will help to control the grasses and inhibit their spread; the nettles on which the peacock butterfly depends will return. The boundary hedge to the right of the meadow is a tapestry of mixed native species like hawthorn and holly. An autumn

'I have a very strong feeling about the gardens I create. If I lose that, I'll give up, because I'll be doing it for all the wrong reasons'

flowering cherry will spread its small, delicate flowers in the hedge. 'I didn't expect the meadow to take off so well and happen so quickly. I'd actually told Elizabeth to wait between three and five years,' he remembers.

The meadow draws the eye so beautifully that I don't even notice there's a telegraph pole in this garden, a gas tank and even a cess pit. They were just some of the challenges presented by the scrubby site and solved in the most ingenious and environmentally friendly ways: the tank camouflaged with oak, the pit wholly invisible deep beneath the flags. And then there's the shed ...

quite the quirkiest shed you could imagine, and a non-negotiable as far as Elizabeth and John were concerned.

'Do you really need a shed? Are you sure you have to have a shed?' David kept asking them. Even when he'd obediently created the hard standing for it, close to the house and out of the sightline, he was still secretly hoping for a barbecue terrace, but Elizabeth remained adamant. The shed was staying.

Now, with its sunny paint and living, breathing roof, it's part of the

landscape too. The roof is made from cedar matting with a layer of soil beneath, a membrane for protection, and internal reinforcement to take the extra weight. 'I think that's the way forward for houses as well, a compulsory green roof,' David reflects. 'Not just for the wildlife issues but as an insulator as well. It's lovely when it's all out in flower, a beautiful lemon yellow.' An award-winning designer, he has come to love sheds so much that 21 of them feature in a futuristic design proposal for a London show.

Recycled materials are also his trademark. Virtually all the stone used for the terraces in John and Elizabeth's garden has come from collapsed drystone walling in the surrounding area. The garden bench is constructed from an original fireplace mantel in the house. 'It ties it in with the local vernacular instead of being in materials from outside that have no relationship with the landscape,' he says. 'What's so wonderful is that you don't see the design, as if it's been here for years and years. The whole lot just blends in with the environment. I love that.'

The famous shed once stood in a corner of the garden that is now a small terrace with an elegant apple tree at its centre, ringed with pebbles. The deep red Dublin Bay roses here are climbers and will eventually be



Small sheltered terrace with apple tree and climbing plants including climber and a deep red Dublin Bay rose



trained over the sheltering wall. In another raised bed, the lilies and red hot poker of late summer have succeeded the flowers of spring, majestic 'Queen of Night' tulips and tall 'Patty's Plum' poppies.

A further bed is based on reds and purples, colours so vibrant they look like embroidery silks on a Tudor tapestry. It is perfected by a carpet of stugs, which will eventually colonise the ground completely, and will turn a darker purple bronze shade in winter. 'Then you have the cupborbias, same colour tone; then, over time, the scanthus will get bigger and bigger,' David says, warning to his theme. 'It'll be a kind of daisish green but then you get the purple and white flowers on the scanthus too. Then there's the *Saxifraga spiza*, when that's in flower, it's like lace sitting over the top. And afterwards the black berries ...'

This bed too is underplanted with bulbs, hundreds of crocus in purple and white and then mauve-coloured tulips. 'I'm seeing this garden in five years' time, in my head. Every time I come, I take more pictures,' David confesses. He reflects, 'Even though you're doing gardens for other people, you do feel a sense of ownership. You're not supposed to, but I have a very strong feeling about the gardens

'On a nice evening, I come out at 10 or 11 o'clock at night and just gaze. I've never done that with a garden'

I create. If I lose that, I'll give up, because I'll be doing it for all the wrong reasons.'

Elizabeth can't quite believe that the vision has become a reality. 'I'm still amazed, the more I look at it,' she says. 'On a nice evening, I come out at ten or 11 o'clock at night and just gaze. I've never done that with a garden.'

When the contractors moved in last year with the digger, she owns that her heart was in her mouth and stayed there for six months. Watching the digger negotiate the steep slope was nerve-racking, and there were times, when the couple wished they had never embarked on such an upheaval.

Is she a gardener, I ask, impressed by the blood, fish, bonemeal and organic seaweed with which she has enriched the soil of a bed on another terrace, closer to the house. 'Neither of us knows anything, only what David tells us we have to do,' she says cheerfully. He confirms, 'They didn't want to end up being gardeners. Low maintenance was a real consideration. It's trying to get a happy balance between that and something that is still quite stunning.' But John's workmates do tease him about his propensity for rushing off home to weed, Elizabeth confides.

The low growing, evergreen plant, *acacna*, will ensure that there's little weeding to be done eventually in the particular bed we're looking at, edging a long and lovely pathway closer to the house. Clipping won't be a problem either: there is little that is formal in the garden and David chose pine balls rather than box for this bed - 'I wanted something looser and less formal, sympathetic to the location. These are fantastic, won't grow much bigger and have a fluid shape.' They came from Italy: the French had none left, he says, admitting to being 'a bit obsessive about getting the plants I want.'

There is fruit as well as flowers: a sunny wall that retains heat at night-time hosts mixed fruit trees of apple and pear, with a fig tree in the centre. Even the tiny basement windows of this sloping cottage frame a garden cameo. 'Wherever you look out, there





is a view,' Elizabeth concludes with satisfaction. David, who lives in the centre of Manchester and has an allotment (with a wildflower mead), pays it the ultimate tribute. 'Of all the gardens I've done, this is without doubt the one I would like myself.' □

Further details of David Keegan's garden designs can be seen on www.dkgardendesign.co.uk

