



The Great Edwardian Gardens of HAROLD PETO

FROM THE ARCHIVES
OF COUNTRY LIFE

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HIGH WALL, OXFORD

This was an entirely new development at Headington Hill on the outskirts of Oxford. The 20-acre site sloping to the west was acquired by an Edwardian lady, Miss Katherine Feilden, who employed the architect Walter Cave (1863–1939) to build a new house in a Tudor country-house style, from 1910–12. Walter Cave had trained under Sir Arthur Blomfield, and although he had a large urban practice, he was best known for his country houses. Lawrence Weaver, writing about High Wall in *Country Life* in 1917, said how rewarding it was to find a building on the outskirts of Oxford that was so successfully in line with the city's Tudor traditions. Cave chose to place the house at the extreme north-east end of the site, close to Pullen's Lane, with the principal elevations to the south and west. Although the land fell away to the west to give fine views over Oxford's spires and towers, to the south it rose to block out the distant landscape. Thus, when Harold Peto was called in to design the garden he was confronted with an unpromising location.

In front of the western façade, Peto was able to make good use of the falling ground with a series of terraces and steps to capitalise on the views, but planning the garden to the south to provide an interesting outlook from the house was harder. More difficult still was to design it so that both parts of the garden flowed easily together. The south front had been planned symmetrically, with an arcaded loggia at its centre and projecting bays at each end. It seems more than a coincidence that the simple appearance of the loggia at High Wall was like the one Peto had built at Iford Manor; perhaps there had been some degree of cooperation between Cave and Peto, because both planning and construction of the garden were well under way by 1912 when the house was finished.

From the loggia a stepped apron led down to a broad flagged path, which surrounded the house on two sides. Beyond the path and lawn to the south, Peto must have built the high brick retaining wall to the east, which by necessity ran diagonally across the garden and then turned through nearly 90 degrees to cross the southern view. He was therefore faced with an unfavourable triangular piece of ground into which to fit a garden.

The key feature he designed was an articulated pergola, which provided a shady walk around the central lawn, but chiefly it skilfully concealed the awkward angle and height of the wall. Given these constraints the central lawn was placed across the east-west axis; half the lawn therefore was opposite the south front and the other half joined the western terraces, thus uniting the two gardens. As the photograph taken from inside the house loggia shows (see page 68), the central arch frames the flagged path to the entrance of the pergola. A bank of lavender to the left stretches along the path against a low

A symmetrically planned house was sited opposite the high wall, which cut the space obliquely. Peto's balanced 'U'-shaped pergola lines up one of its arms with the loggia and the other with the terrace walk. The wellhead is placed at the centre between the two axes.



parapet wall and defines the boundary of this side of the lawn. It is matched by a boundary wall on the far side, which forms the parapet wall of the main west-facing terrace.

The pergola, which stands up against the high wall and surrounds the end of the lawn on three sides, differs from Peto's other pergolas in England, but was reminiscent of the wide use of pergolas in the Riviera gardens of the time. (In particular, the curving structure at Isola Bella near Cannes makes an interesting comparison). Through the arch on the right in the same photograph, the open-fronted garden house can be seen forming the central feature of the curving pergola, directly on the axis which splits the lawn, and runs along the west front. The garden house is a medley of stylistic details, quite unlike the elegant pavilions Peto designed for Hartham and elsewhere, and has Classical Tuscan columns supporting a tiled and faceted vernacular roof, similar to the roof on the garden house at Iford. Throughout the pergola he used Tuscan columns, echoing those of the loggia, with carved pads on top to support the running beams, which in turn supported the cross beams – a pergola construction similar to that at West Dean, where Peto was working at practically the same time. However, at High Wall Peto set the columns on a raised brick parapet, with stone copings to give a clear boundary to the edges of the lawn. The planting, at least in the photographs of 1917, shows an absence of roses in favour of deciduous climbers, such as wisteria and *Vitis coignetiae*, while herbaceous plants tumble out of the space at the foot of the walls.

The western terraces were the perfect complement to the view. This elevation, like the one on the south front, is also perfectly balanced with three bays: the two larger outside ones being made of brick with stone surrounds to the windows, while the central bay is

Above: The high terrace, with Peto's favourite balustrade, runs across the garden to the pergola, and is cut at right angles by the east-west axis. It crosses the south elevation, and a wide flight of steps descends to the lower garden.

Right: The house seen from the south west. The pergola, which began opposite the central loggia, opens out on the top terrace in line with the paved way that runs across the west elevation. The lower terrace, with espaliers trained along the retaining wall and a hedge on the other side, makes a long grassy bowling alley.





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smaller, recessed and of ashlar masonry. The main terrace wall has a central projection that duplicates the bay of the house, and a stone balustrade with mid-waisted balusters following the style of the balusters on the gabled parapet walls on the south side. This again suggests possible cooperation with Walter Cave as it is the same design as Peto used for the lily-pool balustrade at Easton Lodge. The retaining walls of the terraces, in keeping with the house, are brick. The key central path descends to the lower garden with a series of stone steps and terraces, crossing a bowling alley that straddled the garden, with a retaining wall along which fruit trees were espaliered. The flights of steps continued, framed with topiary and borders with a rose garden below.

Lawrence Weaver in *Country Life* alludes to the contemporary fashion for using 'old figures in new gardens' – a fashion which Peto apparently followed. However, the article continues by quoting from Vernon Lee's essay 'About Leisure' (1897), in which she is disparaging about such fashions. (Vernon Lee and Peto had met in Florence but there is no information about what they thought of each other.) Although there was a profusion of statuary at Petwood, mainly of the new kind based loosely on Classical originals, there was notably none to be seen at High Wall, and Weaver concludes: 'Today their employment has become so usual that the absence of a host of lead *amorini* at High Wall strike the eye almost as a novelty and as something of a relief.'

This view from the central loggia looks in with one arm of the pergola, as the high retaining wall to Pullen's Lane has forced the garden house off centre.