

IN THE GARDEN

Francesca Greenoak
visits Chenies,
whose streams and
green pastures have
been tended since
the Domesday survey

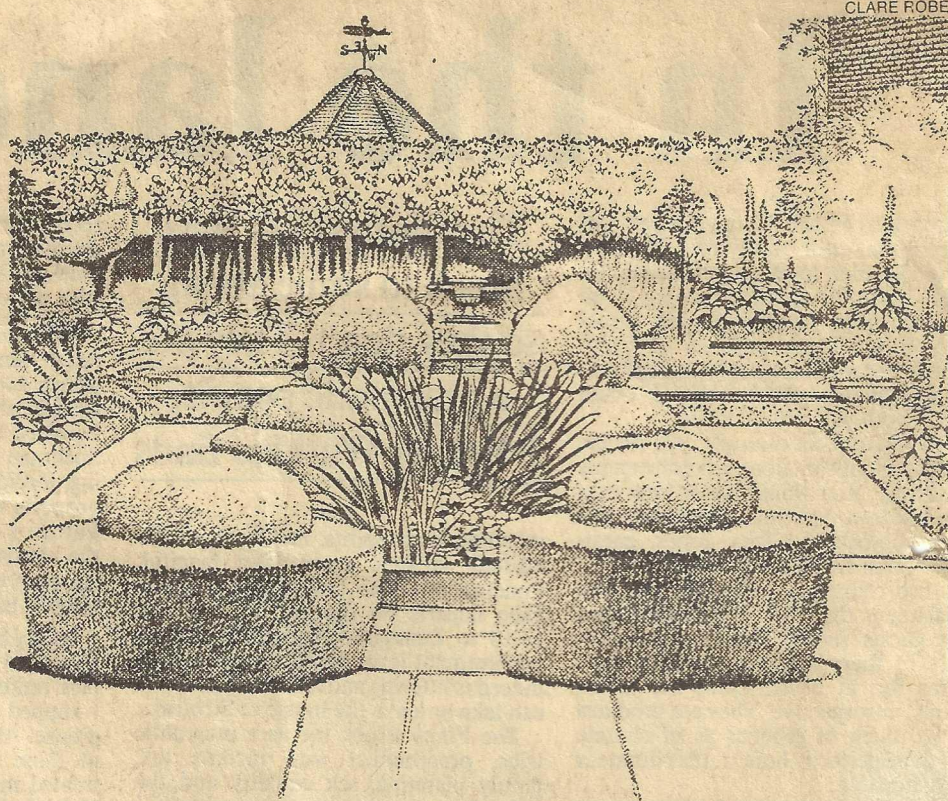
The valley of the River Chess is one of the most beautiful places in England in mid-summer with the little river bubbling through green pastures. On a wooded hill above is Chenies, an ancient manor which has kept its rural character from the Domesday survey. The Cheynes who gave Chenies its name were in possession of the house at least since 1180 and the line of descent can be traced through to the present, through a Cheyne heiress who passed the manor on to the Russells: Earls and later Dukes of Bedford.

After the Civil War, they moved their principal home to Woburn Park, but Chenies remained under their ownership until purchased in 1957 by Alistair Macleod Matthews and his wife Elizabeth. She herself is distantly related to the Cheynes.

Ahead of the Macleod Matthews lay the task not only of putting the house in order but of making some sense of the garden. "Nobody had cared for it since the 1720s, but remnants of an Elizabethan design survived under literally centuries of growth." The gardens are small in relation to the grandeur of the house but are neatly subdivided by walls, hedges and screens. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was written for the marriage of Lucy Harrington and the third Earl of Bedford when they lived at Chenies, and it is easy to picture the play in this setting.

Elizabeth Macleod Matthew gardens "for an overall effect rather than a showcase for rare plants". She has a good eye for planting associations. Alongside the tall Tudor bays to the south side of the house lies an awkward narrow strip of land which is softened by a simple lawn, and by planting with bushy hardy geraniums right up to the house. Fragrant daphnes, viburnums and roses languidly enjoy the warm shelter of the walls.

In the green and white garden, pretty at this time of year, the herbaceous planting, with its generous arching sprays of Solomon's seal, contrast with the formal shapes of



CLARE ROBERT

Cutting a dash for yew

shapes growing out of a cross of box. A magnificent 8ft angelica dominates one corner, given an interesting counterpoint by a dense group of creamy-flowered smilacina, with their strongly creased fine hosta-like leaves. This area has Lawson cypress hedging on one side, and a lime and vine tunnel on the other, arranged so that the bunches of grapes hang down to be picked as you walk along it.

Dropping down a few steps into the physic garden, you find a simple arrangement of beds. Each features different periods or groups of herbs in an enclosure which marks the

garden's limit. By autumn, walls will replace the fences.

After the muted colours of the physic garden, the sunken garden — which is the heart of the Chenies grounds — comes as a joyful surprise. Excavated from the past it has been reworked with long borders and beds and paths with a symmetrically balanced but dense planting.

This is a garden which changes colour with the seasons. It has "clear light blues and whites in early summer", says Elizabeth Macleod Matthews, with dramatic clumps of cream-streaked hosta, columbines and forgetmenots,

bugle and campanulas. For high summer, she turns to "bright reds, followed by fiery oranges".

Chenies soil is "generally very good, well-drained, helped by masses of soil brought up from the river long ago". In the sunken garden, though, there are problem places which are "the result of secret underground passages. The soil is thin over them and plants have to be kept well fed and watered".

No less romantic, the kitchen garden and orchard are intensively planted with pear cordons, "gooseberries espaliered like toasting forks" and a chequerboard pattern of vegetables, herbs and flowers for cutting and drying.

Chenies is open to the public on Wednesdays and Thursdays 2-5pm, April to October. For details of garden and cookery day courses, which include a tour of the house and gardens, write or telephone: Mrs E Macleod Matthews, The Manor House, Chenies, Bucks HP8 4NR.

WEEKEND TIPS

● Mow areas where naturalized bulbs have had six weeks to replenish themselves or foliage has died back completely.

● Sow chicories such as Crystal Head and Sugar Loaf.

● Watch for the June drop of tiny fruitlets on apple and pear trees but if fruits are still

one or two per cluster, looking for those which are damaged or distorted.

● Peg down healthy runners from strawberries in pots of compost sunk into the soil.

● Mow lawns frequently, keeping blades 1-1½in (3-4cm) for a reliably green