

A GARDEN IN MILL STREET



as recounted to Eynsham Garden Club 14 November 2007

by
Don Chapman

with interjections & illustrations by

Sue Chapman



According to the surveyor who surveyed Millstone Cottage for me in 1968, the back garden was “pleasantly laid out with level lawn and shrubs”.. He clearly didn't know much about gardens. But after being so rude about the property itself maybe he thought he should conclude his report with a few more kindly words.

As I was to discover over the course of the next few years, my plot was part pre-war rubbish tip, part post-war builders' dump which somebody had grassed over to give an appearance of respectability.

The so-called “level” lawn sloped about two feet from the top of the garden to the bottom ending in a makeshift low wall cobbled together out of old stones and flags. The shrubs consisted of two cooking apple trees and a lilac tree ringed by stones to form primitive flower beds; a Queen Elizabeth rose that overhung the eight foot wide strip of concrete dividing the lawn from the house; two fir trees intended to stand sentry either side of the French window but rapidly threatening to make the pathway between them impenetrable; and a sapling eating apple dropped for no reason I could discover in a hole in the lawn.

Stone walls marked the northern and western boundaries. My first task was to replace the collapsing woven fence on the south side where our garden overlapped the Loves' cottage next door.



Then I started digging – though excavating would be a better word. Endless broken Codd's bottles from Blake's mineral factory, skeletons of family pets, even the remains of the occasional wireless.

HEALTH WARNING: I age rapidly in the next 20 minutes.



The roots of peonies and roses I must have left exposed for several months. But miraculously they survived and still grace our garden.

The restoration work on the cottage occupied most of my energies. But I did find time to start a fruit garden – raspberries, gooseberries, red currants and black currants – along the south-facing wall and a vegetable patch alongside the fence.

I also repaired the stone rings round the apple trees and the lilac tree, inserting a seat in one of them for our baby Katie – born 30/06/70 – which her bottom has long since outgrown, but which is now the right size for her children, our grandchildren.



I cannot remember when I first decided to redesign our garden. But two factors prompted the decision.

One was the eight feet wide concrete strip between house and garden, which was hardly big enough to park a pram or a deckchair. The other was the vegetable patch, which I soon discovered was too close to the north-facing fence.

In search of inspiration I consulted every authority from the 17th century onwards. But the paperback which became my bible was the Penguin Book of Garden Design. During the upheavals at Millstone Cottage I mislaid it and discovered to my dismay I could not buy a replacement. It was out of print. Six months later I rediscovered it under the base of Sue's photographic enlarger. I still cannot make up my mind whether it was an accident or sabotage.

The truth is Sue and I do not operate well as a planning partnership. Being a professional writer I tend to see things in my mind's eye – envisaging possibilities that may or may not materialise. Being a professional photographer, Sue's vision is governed by what she sees in front of her nose – sorry, lens.

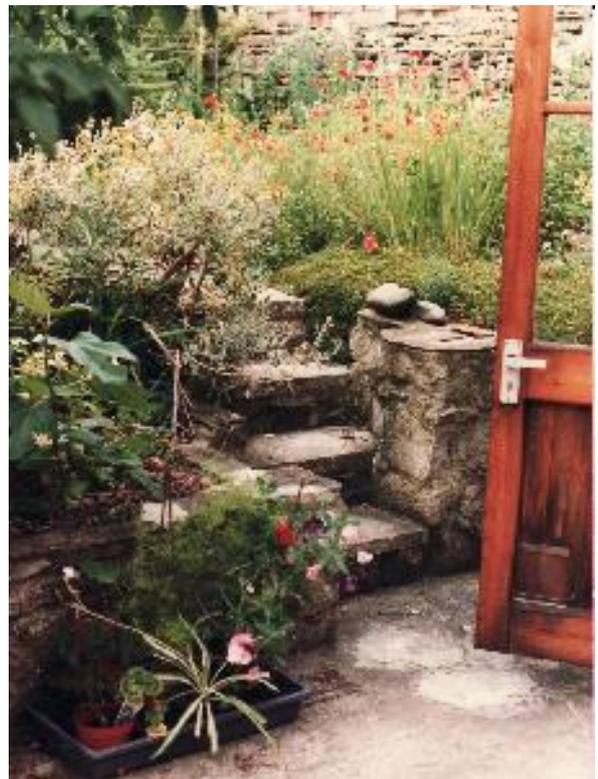
I did produce a sort of sketch plan on the back of a foolscap envelope after trying vainly to measure the garden with bean sticks and bits of string. There isn't a right angle anywhere. It's a bit difficult to convey your ideas to another person when you're not too sure of them yourself. And when you begin by digging a trench and building a stone wall inside it ... well, in retrospect I have to admit I cannot blame my partner for lack of faith.

In fact that wall was the first step in my efforts to terrace the garden. Eventually it would become the retaining wall of my new vegetable plot and the back wall to the main flower bed. Before that flower bed could take shape, however, I had to start digging and disposing of the lower lawn.

If you think of terracing your back garden, I suggest you make sure you have rear access to your property first. Every bucket of surplus earth had to be transported out through Millstone Cottage and every bucket of sand back in the same way. The nearest I've come to tears as an adult was when I was confronted by half-a-tonne of sand.

After I had excavated the rubble, Sue spent hours sifting the soil before tipping it over the wall into our neighbours' garden. But John and Jackie Harris who were lower than us and on clay soon cried enough and from then on its disposal was a logistical nightmare.

The flower bed and the steps leading to the shed meanwhile took shape. The sapling eating apple liked its new home beside the concrete coal bunker, which now that we had central heating became a compost holder.



Breaking all the rules of gardening, I dug up my raspberry canes and red currants and replanted them in a fruit cage at the north-west corner of the garden. I moved my gooseberries and black currants to a strip beside the fence, planted two Morello cherry fans against the fence itself and two compatible espalier pears in the new raised flower bed.



Their first summer was 1976 – the year of the heatwave and drought – and one of them has never really recovered but I can't bear to part with it.

Other walls appeared in other trenches, followed by other flower beds constructed out of stones I had found lying about the garden or dug up. Pete Hayes and his son dug out the foundations for a conservatory at the west end of the kitchen.



In 1973, while the rest of the country was being exhorted to PLANT A TREE IN '73, I cut down two fir trees, made a bonfire of their branches and kept their trunks ... of which more anon.

By now the top half of the garden was a grassy mess, the bottom half a muddy morass. Sue was beginning to wonder whether she would have anywhere to hang the washing, Katie and Anna if they would ever be allowed to play in the back garden again.



I started work on the arbour and steps: a back-breaking process involving the humping of numerous flags and concrete slabs; laid a path to the fruit cage and lined the top flower beds with more slabs. Then I dug up the lawn.



Another major excavation. I had often wondered what people did with their rubbish in the days before refuse collection. I found out the hard way. I also learned what builders did with anything from old window frames to rusting screws and bolts in the days before skips.

The only consolation was that the less durable of yesterday's cast-offs had rotted down into a fine tilth and after I had removed the stones and other solids produced a generous 3-4 foot depth of top-soil.

The question was how to level it. Sue did not wait for an answer. She started ringing round the turf contractors. Fortune sometimes favours the desperate. She found a chap who had just laid some college tennis courts and had just enough turf left over to cover our patch. Not only did he level and lay our lawn in a couple of hours, he demolished the mound of weed-infested turves I had removed and carted them and a lorry-load of surplus top-soil in wicker baskets through the house.

The living room floor was a mess. The top lawn looked lovely and I planted and started training the fan-shaped plum to form a roof to the arbour.

What was to become the patio or lower terrace remained and in due course Sue was to find another chap removing flags from a kitchen in Queen's Lane and persuade him to hump them round to Millstone Cottage in a wheel-barrow for a modest fee.

To make way for them, I moved the Queen Elizabeth rose to the top garden ... where I am happy to say it is now thriving.



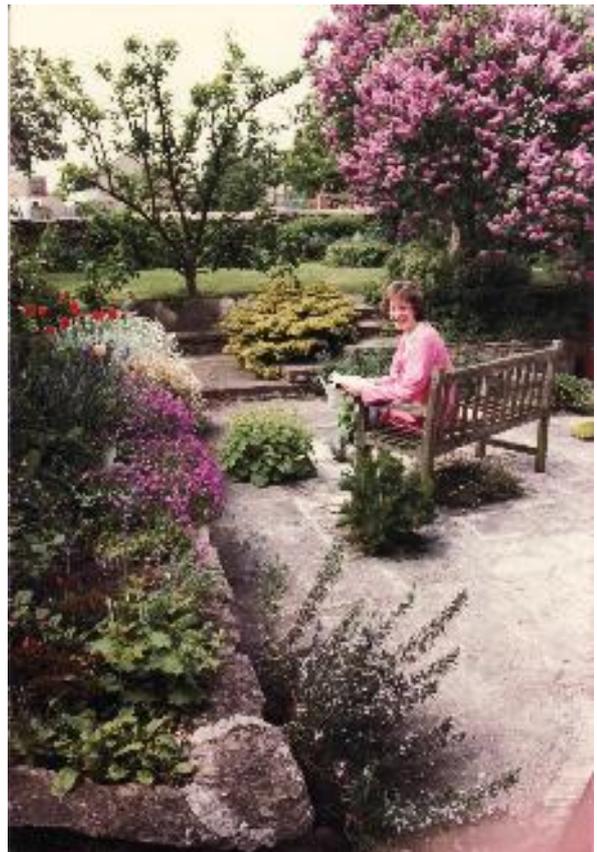
But first a little diversion. Millstone Cottage used to be a terrace of 3 one-up, one-down cottages and half the residents of old Eynsham claim to have been born in them. They also stoutly maintain that in the garden in their youth there was a well.

I should have left well alone. Instead I persuaded Bill Sawyer to come round one day with his hazel twigs and where they twitched I dug a hole.

I dug and I dug and soon hit a seam of gravel that Amey Roadstone would not have turned up their noses at. But no water did I find.

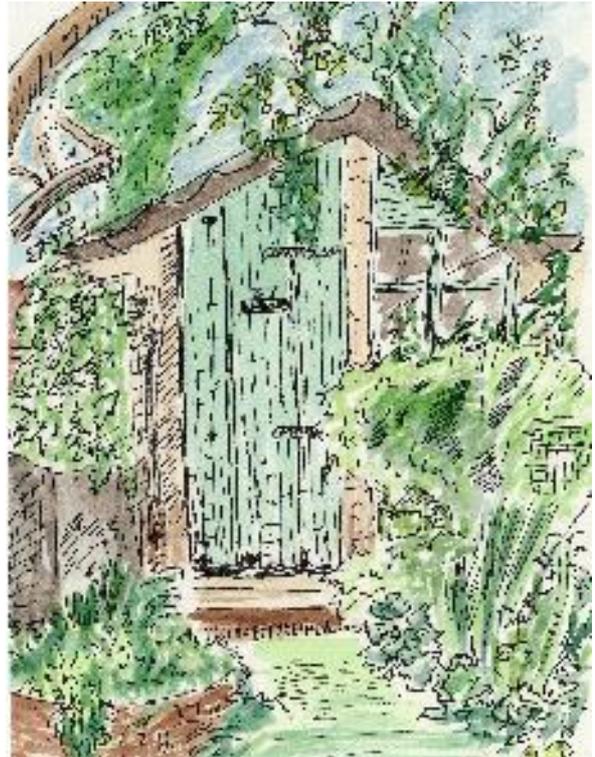
Eight feet down I gave up, filled the hole with rubbish and used the gravel to bed the flagstones into a terrace, leaving little pockets for herbs.

Some ten years after the redesign operation began it was at last nearing completion. Well, at least the main concept was.



In fact we are jumping ahead of ourselves. Heaps of unwanted stone littered the garden. The sawn-down fir tree trunks rested like masts against the wall. The inhospitable south-west corner of the garden where nothing would grow filled up with rubbish.

I know, I said one day, let's build a summer-house. I laid a screeded concrete base, planted the fir tree trunks like tent-poles at either end, found an old piece of three-by-four to use as a ridge and round this makeshift timber framework, which I added to as I went along, I built my summer-house.

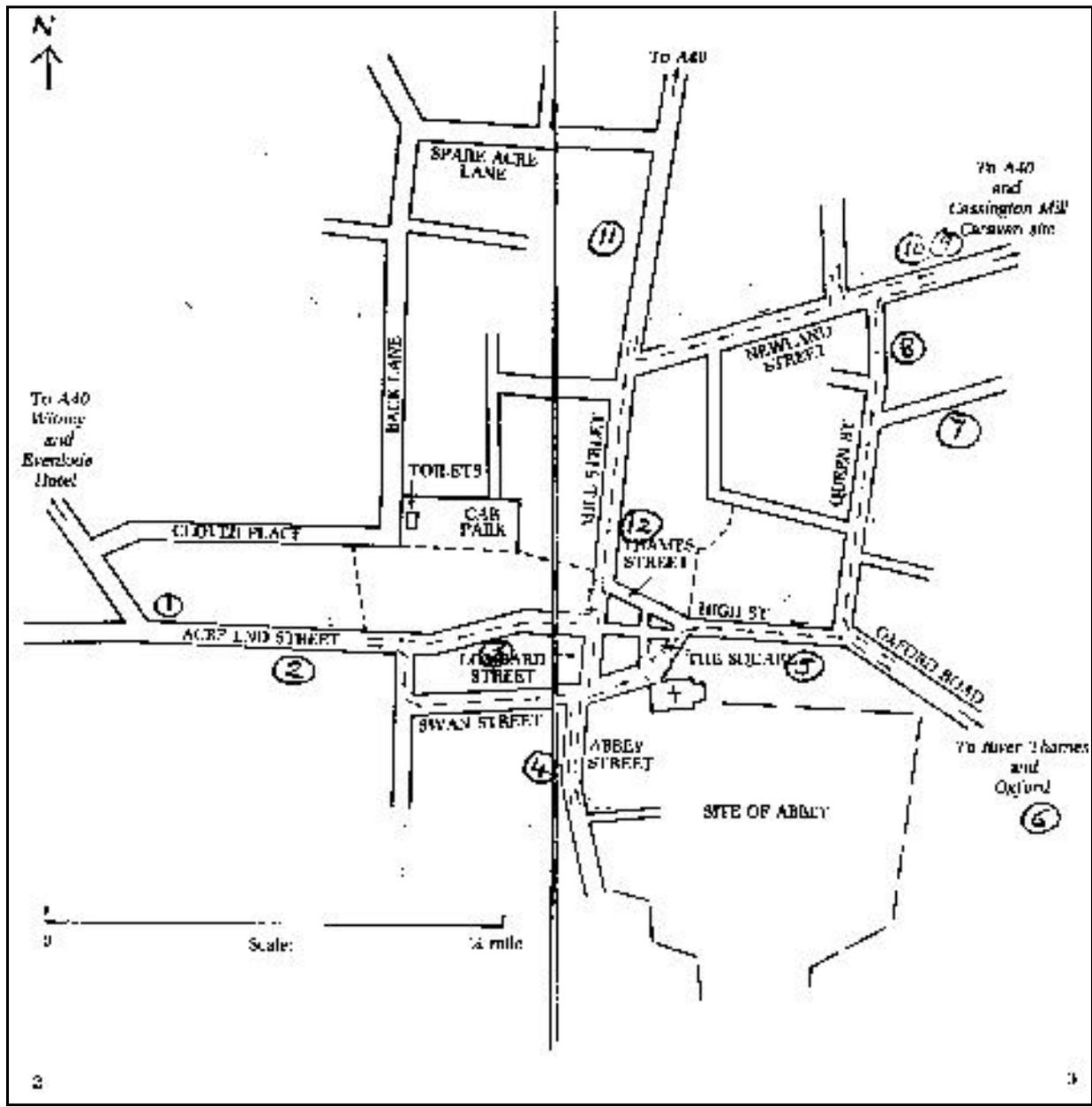


The piles of stones became walls. Two old window frames let in the daylight and an old door I cadged from John Caunt who then lived in what is now Beech Court – which still bears the number 37 – provided an entrance.

Everybody who wandered round the garden said “I didn't know you had an old privy”. Much to our delight they assumed my piece of jerry-building had been there for years. The children looked forward eagerly to the day when they could sleep there in the summer months. To my shame I have to confess my grandchildren are still looking forward to that day. The attractions of the summer-house as a place to dry onions, store wood, pile junk etc etc have proved irresistible.



The next Open Gardens was in 1982 in aid of the church restoration appeal. 12 gardens opened just from 12 to 5pm.



Eynsham in Bloom 1982

OPEN GARDENS AFTERNOON

Saturday, June 26th, 2-5pm

GARDENS OPEN

- (1) Acre End House, 98 Acre End St. (Dr. & Mrs. T. Tinsley)
- (2) The Grange, 31 Acre End St. (Mrs. S. Noyes)
- (3) 17 Acre End St. (Mr. & Mrs. D.J. Walsh)
- (4) The Cottage, 6 Abbey St. (Mr. & Mrs. D.S. Richards) TEAS AVAILABLE
- (5) The Shrubbery, 26 High St. (Dr. & Mrs. G.D. Bolsover)
- (6) Park Cottage, Oxford Road (Dr. & Mrs. J. Loken)
- (7) Myrtle Cottage, Tanners Lane (Air-Cdre & Mrs. F.J. Manning)
- (8) The Gables, 36 Newland St. (Dr. & Mrs. J.F. Ferrier)
(entrance from Queen St.)
- (9) The Coach House, Newland St. (Prof. & Mrs. G. Adams)
- (10) The Old Barn, 65 Newland St. (Dr. & Mrs. B.J. Hyde) TEAS until 6pm.
- (11) Mill Stone Cottage, 61 Mill St. (Mr. & Mrs. D. Chapman)
- (12) Myrtle House, 12 Mill St. (Dame Helen Gardner)

Organised by the Eynsham in Bloom Committee with the assistance of the Parochial Church Council. After deduction of committee expenses, all proceeds will be donated to the St. Leonard's Restoration Appeal.

In 1984 we opened again and had 127 people on Saturday and 197 on Sunday – a total of 324 passing through our sitting room. Later on that year 3 or 4 of us opened again one evening so that Abingdon Garden Club members could look around.

Actually I think gardening is all about sharing. We are constantly reminded of the kindness of friends and family – the buddleia, the honeysuckle, roses to mark birthdays, little miniature roses that Sara gave us to mark the passing of 3 beloved cats – she also gave me a camellia for my 70th birthday – I got a garden fork from Sally for my 65th! Ginger's Rose, when Mollie Harris's husband had a fatal heart attack. We gave her a pretty pink rambler and planted another in our own garden – hers didn't survive because she had planted it in the same place as another rose that had died. Ours is still beautiful despite being moved three times. Our hyacinth bulb presents all seem to revert to pink, our escholzia to orange, but they produced a beautiful painting from Lilian Buchan: we had given her various posies over the years as she didn't seem to be able to grow them herself.

Before I was married I had a carnation named after me by a grower in Freeland – Mr Stroud. It was proved at Wisley and in the seed catalogues as Sweet Sue.

Various plants came from other people's gardens – alpen strawberries, marigolds, Mexican daisies, valerian, white snow, loosestrife – all the sort of stuff that when they threaten to take over you dig up and pass on. But our English bluebells are very precious: they are far bluer and hang their heads more than their Spanish counterparts. In our garden we destroy the Spanish variety in the hope that there is no cross-fertilisation.



In 1985, the year I went deaf in my right ear – Sue says the reason I went deaf in my right ear – I attacked the concrete in the north-east corner of the garden with a pick-axe, built another raised L-shaped flower bed and in the corner of it facing the sun planted and trained the fan-shaped peach against the wall of our cottage.



The peach thrived. I wilted, with what a kindly consultant eventually diagnosed as ME. When we first came to Millstone Cottage I used to look enviously over our western wall and covet what was then John and Jacky Harris's five-pole kitchen garden. Now there were years when I hadn't the energy to dig my 20ft by 12ft plot.



Younger friends, one year a daughter's besotted boyfriend, did it for me.

Even so, the building work continued. In 1989 Peter and Paul Hayes replaced the collapsing wooden fence on the south side of the garden with a 5ft high brick wall against which I planted two new cherry trees – a Morello and a compact Stella eating cherry – and two new black currant bushes.

But the next really major operation was in 1994 when I took early retirement after 35 years with the Oxford Mail. Colleagues asked what I would like as a retirement gift and among the suggestions I offered them was an apricot tree.

Needless to say, they fell for it, revelling in the chance to present me with a handsome fan-trained specimen 6ft by 8ft in our open-plan office. I brought it home and belatedly realised I hadn't got any south-facing wall space left big enough to accommodate it.

For the next six months the apricot remained heeled in in a corner of the vegetable patch while I considered the problem. Then one day I said to Shaun Spillane "You know, Shaun, I think I've found the answer: dig out the base of the wall on the north side of the garden and create a pond. If we make it deep enough there will be ample room on the wall behind it for my apricot."

When I say we, I meant he. For the next few weeks Shaun excavated a mound of earth – enough to fill a skip – and eventually we created a pond big enough for four small goldfish with a bed to the rear for my apricot tree and as a change from raised flower beds, four sunken ones each bordering two stone garden seats.



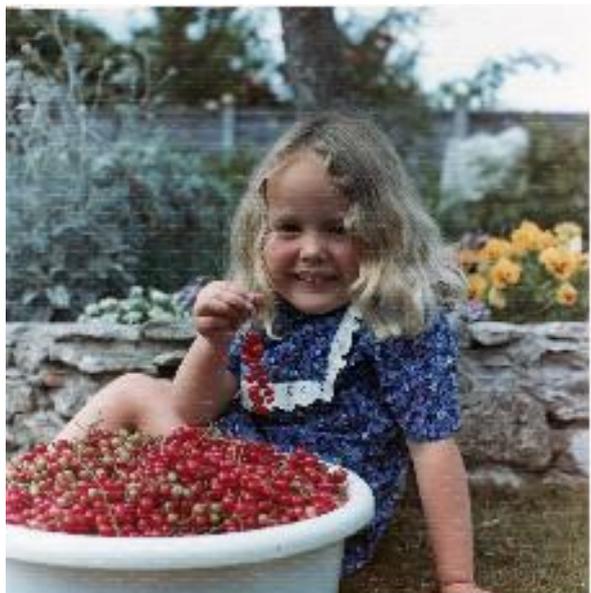
Though I say it myself, once the water lilies bloomed and the nasturtiums rioted over the retaining walls it looked a picture.



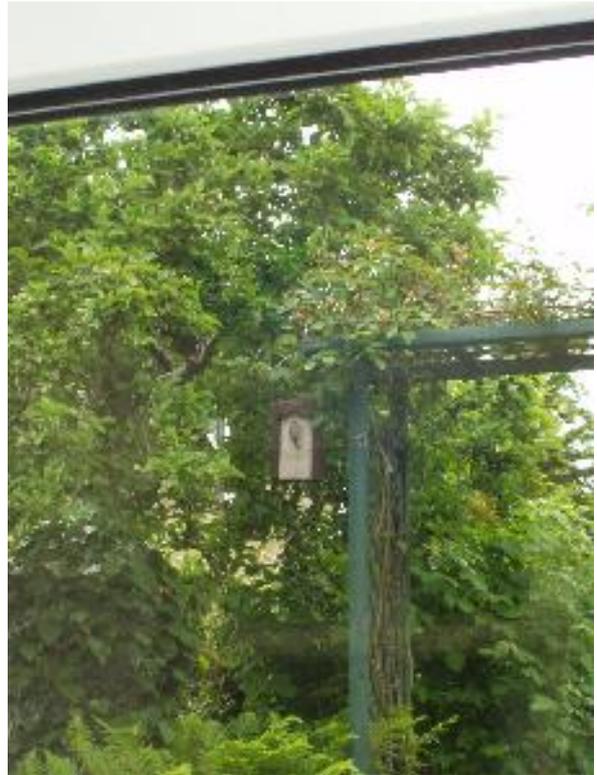
What I hadn't bargained for was that apricots like to spread their roots laterally not vertically. After valiantly producing one perfect apricot my retirement tree died, as did the two I got from the Spalding Bulb Company to replace it. I will return to apricots later.

In 1998 I marked my 65th birthday by creating pensioner's arch with a Madame Alfred Carrière rose climbing up one side of it, an Albertine rose the other. I solemnly opened it by snipping a ribbon with a pair of scissors and introduced friends and family to the latest addition to our garden.

I had scrapped the fruit cage, though the raspberry canes remained – lace curtains are just as effective a method of keeping the birds at bay as plastic netting – planted a new red currant and black currant and managed to squeeze in a fan-trained Egremont Russet and a grape-vine into the south-west facing corner.



On the arch you will notice the blue-tit box. **Sue** is the bird expert:



Sadly, our bird population has really gone down. This year's bluetits deserted, leaving 7 beautiful eggs: it was too wet and cold.

No sign of the wren that produced a family one year from a nest in the ivy round the trunk of the apple tree. We saw 5 being fed on the trellis behind the apricot tree.

In the past, young blackbirds and thrushes skulked in the borders but sadly new cats to the neighbourhood make this very unsafe for them. One year our thrush reared three separate families through the year. The sparrows no longer use the nest in the eaves above the garage and the swift holes that we left after being re-roofed are not being used to the extent they were.

I marked my 70th birthday by creating another arch festooned with jasmine and honeysuckle – Afghanistan Arch leading to Bin Laden's bunker (alias my compost bin).

But the main additions to the garden came in the form of birthday presents from my daughters – a lovely red patio rose: “I hope you don't mind the name”, Katie apologised, “It's called Remembrance” – and a Jaffa orange tree. Sadly the grafted orange failed but the rootstock sprouted and I persevere with it in the hope that one day it may surprise me with fruit. However, I have invested in a lemon tree which being more amenable to our globally-warmed climate has already produced ripe lemons and bears the promise of several more.



As for the apricot, well, where my retirement present failed one of Helen Peacocke's Peace roses is now doing rather better than Britain and America's attempts to end hostilities in Iraq.

But I haven't given up on apricots. Oh no. Our dear friend Peggy Robb-Smith insisted I could grow one, sought the advice of the Royal Horticultural Society and offered to buy me one as a belated 2004 Christmas present.

Sadly, before she could place the order in 2005, she died. Never mind, I said, I'll plant one in her memory and placed the order myself. Five weeks later two apricot trees arrived, though I'd only ordered and paid for one.

Jonathan Ferrier gladly accepted the other and I planted mine in my vegetable patch. Five weeks later, a third apricot tree arrived from another of the RHS nurseries. Wherever Peggy looks down from, she clearly intended me to have two. So I capitulated, planted it too and this summer am happy to inform you both trees produced their first crops in her memory.

Conscious that I am no longer as young as I was I have made some concessions to advancing years. I have lowered the height of both cooking apple trees to reduce the risk of falling out of them when picking or pruning. I have to admit though, they are still not low enough to meet Sue's health and safety regulations.

I have promised faithfully not to dig more than three rows in any session when I turn over the soil of my vegetable patch and enrich it with compost in January and February.

And I have made a solemn vow not to introduce any more shrubs and trees to the patio, though as I water them all from the rain butts dotted around the garden I can't really see why Sue should complain.

There are one or two ongoing projects. I need to introduce a trellis to train the apricot trees against and later this winter Richard Gibbons is to build me a new container for my fig tree, which has outlived its oak half-barrel container.

It's nice sharing the produce from the garden with family and friends. We also get nice things in return. The fruit I bottle and freeze – Mollie Harris next door always said that bottling retained more flavour. We tried to make wine from her little book "A Drop of Wine" but weren't very successful.



We store the apples carefully and make jam and chutney. Some of our onions are strung up to hang in the kitchen, where they are still edible when the next crop is harvested.

The peaches are delicious and we managed to give one to each of our guests when we had a party last summer to celebrate Don's doctorate.

In all we have 18 different varieties of fruit and 28 specimens.



I continue to experiment with new varieties of vegetable. The butternut squash (originally bought from Tesco's on the A40) seems just as happy in Eynsham as it was in Argentina and each year produces a fresh supply of succulent gourds and seeds.

The okra or lady's fingers last year couldn't stand the dry summer and went to seed. This year it wilted in the wet and gave up altogether. I shall try again in 2008.

An increasingly grumpy old man, I am sure I shall continue to curse Sue's beloved alchemilla mollis and forget-me-nots which I am convinced seed themselves everywhere they are not wanted simply to annoy me.

But if I am truthful, after my children, the garden at Millstone Cottage has given me the most pleasure of my various achievements and as I decline into my dotage I console myself with the thought that old gardeners never die. They just fray gently at the edges!

