

IN A NORTHAMPTONSHIRE village on the River Nene sits a garden that harks back at least 600 years. A reconstructed medieval garden, it belongs, fittingly, to one of England's longest continually-inhabited houses, the Prebendal Manor in Nassington.

What was once an uncultivated 6-acre plot, with a semi-derelict farmhouse and agricultural buildings, is now a beautifully maintained historic building and home. In the garden are the plants, colours, scents, birdsong and insect life that would have been familiar to the residents six centuries ago.

The work of restoration was carried out by owner Jane Baile, who bought the property in 1968. "It was terribly rundown and dilapidated," she says. "There was no garden at all, so it's particularly satisfying to see it now. I love it when the roses are out and there's colour everywhere."

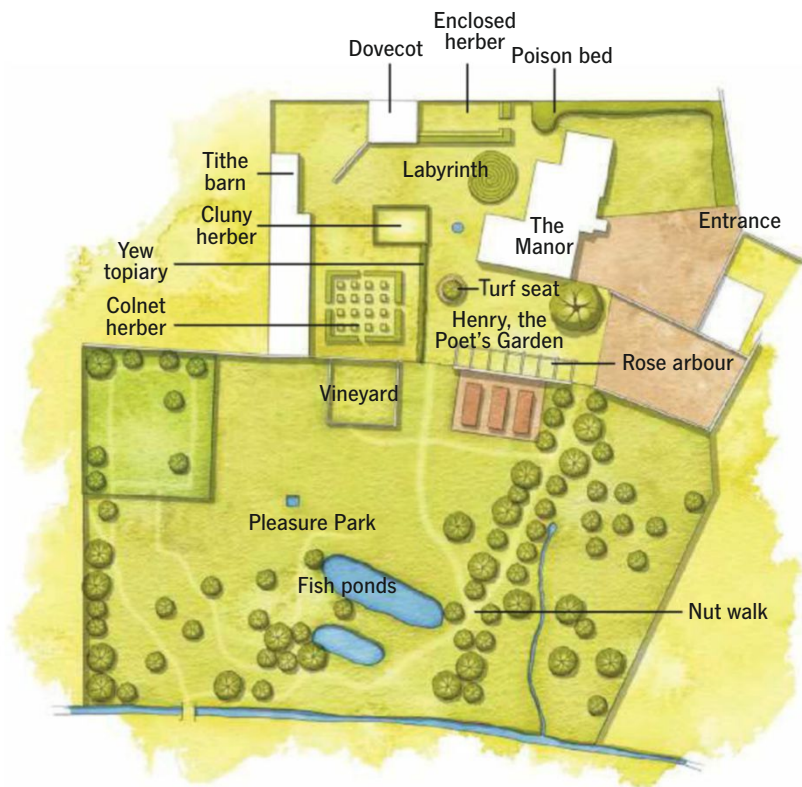
Today, an elegant, tiered yew topiary leads towards the substantial Tithe Barn. Lightly fenced small gardens are set in and around a large lawn. There is a circular labyrinth, 33ft (10m) in diameter, near a 16th century dovecot. Across an abundance of flowering plants, there are extensive views over the adjacent 4-acre Pleasure Park to the empty farmland beyond.

Royal connections

The Grade I listed Manor is the oldest surviving dwelling house in Northamptonshire. "It was a Royal Manor for centuries, even before Henry I presented it to the Bishops of Lincoln in the early 12th century," explains Jane. "King Cnut stopped here in 1017. He complained about the accommodation, and the timber hall was improved soon after."

"The building had been turned into a farmhouse, but was derelict when we arrived," she says. "It was easy to see it had enormous potential. We had no planning constraints, so were able to do extensive archaeological investigations over the years." Her first investigation was in 1984, with further ones conducted in 2003. "Outside, we had to do a huge amount of clearing,

Owner and restorer of the Prebendal Manor, Jane Baile, admiring *Rosa gallica*, the apothecary's rose. In recognition of her restoration and research into the origins of the manor, Jane was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries in 2012.



There were nettles everywhere. Trees needed to be cut down, stumps and animal enclosures removed.

"I'd met Michael Brown, the garden historian, designer and horticulturalist," she continues. "I was inspired by his enthusiasm and knowledge. I decided I'd like to create a garden suitable for the Manor in its heyday, from the 13th to 15th centuries, so asked him to design for me. He's researched extensively to ensure the designs and plantings are authentic. There's little topsoil here, so the small raised beds, typical of the period, were ideal. Where necessary, we imported soil."

European medieval gardens were influenced by the opulence of the Moorish and Byzantine gardens knights saw during the Crusades of 1095-1291. Returning home, they sought to emulate them. Stylised representations of these gardens are shown in paintings and tapestries, and described in manuscripts. "Michael drew on these widely," explains Jane.

"Once we'd agreed the structure, the first priority was clearing and cleaning the ground, making paths and fences, then planting trees and vines. That took about a year. Then we began planting in earnest, using only plants introduced before 1485. Some were easy to obtain. Others, such as *Peony mascula*, were more difficult, and came from friends or specialist nurseries."

Pleasure and practicality

The medieval garden, which measures approximately 2 acres, is typical of the sort that would have been attached to a wealthy establishment such as the Prebendal Manor. It is designed to combine the practical and the aesthetically pleasing. The south-facing site, on a slight slope towards open country, is ideal. Nearby rivers and streams provide plentiful water, in addition to the ponds and several wells in the garden. The well near the >