



The charm of Chelsworth

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Chelsworth Open Gardens Day and villagers are as proud to show visitors their gardens as they ever were

FIFTY years ago, in the tiny Suffolk village of Chelsworth, an unlikely group of villagers got together to raise much needed funds to repair the church.

They included one of General Montgomery's commanders, a housewife, a specialist in alpine plants, and two maiden sisters. And their idea? To become the first village to open its gardens to the public. Admission was half-a-crown (12.5p), and a total of £150 was raised – equal to about £1,690 today – helped by the sale of plants and teas. And in 1967, water for the teas served in the village Victory Hall was drawn from a standpipe, and the washing-up was done in bowls on trestle tables.

Over the last 50 years, Chelsworth's Open Gardens Day – always the last Sunday in June – has raised many thousands of pounds to keep the church wind and water tight. As well as wandering through up to 25 gardens, with several tea stops to choose from, visitors can buy from specialist nurserymen such as Cants of Colchester Roses, local food specialists, artisan crafts and French brocante.

The setting is picture-book English. Chelsworth in the Brett valley between Constable country and Lavenham, was first recorded in 962 by King Edgar, and with its centuries old pub, thatched colour washed



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timber framed houses, and a humped back 18th century bridge, it has a timeless quality. But over the last half-century the gardens have changed in subtle ways. There used to be more vegetable gardens, their proud owners as proficient as Chelsea exhibitors. In 1967 some of them were still farmworkers.

An art-school principal showed her students' work in an outhouse, and an Old Etonian potter produced hefty bowls and dishes, singing hymns as the potter's wheel turned. He also made a mean Cullen Skink (a Scottish soup made of smoked haddock, potatoes and onions). Formal garden design is now more noticeable than in the days of fruit and veg. There are ▶



gardens with beautiful statues and Monet type bridges to cross, to watch the swans.

The gardens may have evolved, but the enthusiasm that comes from a population of around 150 residents, remains. For those greeting visitors in the carpark or handing out cream teas, there are sometimes surprises. Like the family from Darlington who came for the day – 200 miles each way. Or the rally of VW Beetles who happened to pass by, dozens of them. Tons of cakes and jams are made, honey and beeswax jarred, vital components of what nowadays might be termed an ‘experience’, completely environmentally friendly and publicly convenient, right down to the gleaming Karzee portalooos. No chance of a repeat of the trauma suffered by one visitor in the early years, when a sudden gust of wind took the tarpaulin surrounding the make-shift chemical loos behind the Victory Hall.

It is still a good day out, certainly for those who return year after year to visit favourite gardens. And after they have heard the organ playing in the church, they have a pot of tea and slice of cake where they always do.

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Unchanging as Chelsworth appears, the 50th anniversary of the open gardens is a reminder that the village is part of a much bigger world. This year also marks the 100th anniversary of the death of Charles Peck, the only Chelsworth resident to fall in the Great War at the age of 19. While in the churchyard lies Jo Woodgate, the son of an old local farming family, who grew up in a 15th century house in the village and who fell in Afghanistan in 2010. ♦



CHELSWORTH OPEN GARDENS DAY

**Sunday, June 25,
11am – 5pm**

<http://www.chelsworthopengardens.org.uk>
www.chelsworth.org.uk

Directions:

Chelsworth on the B1115 midway between Sudbury and Stowmarket.

Postcode for Sat Nav:
IP7 7HU



Five gardeners . . . & an unsung hero

The enthusiastic gardeners who started it all.

Mrs Dodgson, who lived at Hill House, up the hill towards Bildeston, was regarded as an extremely knowledgeable gardener.

Major-General Sir John Drummond and Lady Inglis lived at The Manor. Sir John appointed KBE (1945), OBE (1939), MC (1916), was one of Montgomery's commanders in the Second World War. He was the Chief Royal Engineer of the 21st Army Group, responsible for the planning and execution of the D-Day landings.

Mr and Mrs Guy Powell (always pronounced 'Pole') lived at The Grange. Mr Powell was regarded as the village squire and was a relative of Lord Baden-Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts movement.

Miss Diana Grimwade and Miss Molly Grimwade. Daughters of a Hadleigh solicitor, they lived at The Old Hall, which was rented by them from the de la Mare family. It was Diana Grimwade, as treasurer of the PCC, who suggested the open gardens fundraising idea.

Chelsworth gardeners were not merely enthusiastic amateurs. A cousin of the Grimwade sisters, Richard Britten, was a highly respected and well known landscape architect and plantsman. A member of the Alpine Garden Society, he regularly exhibited alpinas at Vincent Square in London, and the small yellow *Fritillaria pudica* 'Richard Britten' is named after him. He was awarded the Reginald Farrer Memorial Award in 1976, and his garden at The Old Forge was full of glass houses filled with alpinas.

An unsung hero of the early years of Chelsworth Open Gardens was *Bob Lister*, who was the gardener of at least three gardens mentioned. Bob's own garden was one of immaculate rows of healthy vegetables. He was born in Chelsworth and lived there all his life. A bench is dedicated to him in the village playing fields.