



Chelsworth is considered by many to be Suffolk's most beautiful village. Set in a peaceful river valley it has a wealth of fine timbered houses, some of which are colour-washed in the traditional West Suffolk style. The River Brett, flowing through the village, is bordered by the grounds of the Hall and 14th-century church, while on either side of the narrow bridge the river has grazing meadows and majestic arches of chestnut and beech.

In summer, especially, Chelsworth is a poet's and painter's dream of all that a traditional English village should be, but although tranquillity prevails for most of the time, on the last Sunday in June the village braces its collective self for a welcome and gentle invasion...

Back in the 1960s the churchwarden suggested that as a way of increasing church funds, a few villagers might try opening their gardens on the same day, charging visitors a combined "admission fee" to see them. From this modest but successful beginning has developed a communal enterprise that is most commendable bearing in mind the size and population of

▽ The cross of St. George flutters in the summer breeze atop the tower of Chelsworth's village church.

the village. Usually at least twenty gardens are open between 2pm and 6pm, with many of the thousands of visitors travelling from well beyond the county boundary on what has become for some an annual pilgrimage. It is a venture now much duplicated across England, but in the words of Mr. Pemberton, whose house The Grange was one of the original participants, Chelsworth was "the daddy of them all".

CHELSWORTH

A summer surprise in sleepy Suffolk

Before the "opening time" the village appears to be virtually unchanged. Youngsters cycle casually down the quiet and almost deserted village street and swallows skim low over wide and empty fields of mown grass. An hour later these same fields are full with morris dancers in action outside the Peacock Inn and a brass band

tuning up close to the river. Already hundreds of visitors have arrived.

By mid-afternoon the village gives the impression of almost bursting at the seams and the very peace and beauty that all have come to enjoy appear to be in danger of being lost. Yet it never happens. The length of the village, combined with the number of gardens open, effectively disperses visitors so that there is never a great press of people at any one point.

Everywhere you go there are surprises. One relatively new garden is slowly being transformed into a water world of willows, bridges and lilies, and you walk from the back gate of one garden into a poppy field bordered by poplars like a Monet painting. Another garden has recently been extended by the addition of a whole field. This is resplendent with wild flowers: pink and white clover, ox-eye daisy and mouse-ear hawkweed, yellow rattle and delicately striated flowers of sainfoin.

On a hot afternoon there is the welcome coolness of small, secluded garden ponds, fringed with irises or hart's tongue ferns, whilst high up on the chequered roofs of

▽ The glorious garden at The Grange gives visitors inspiration and ideas for their own floral displays back home.



△ Pretty geraniums above the door complement perfectly the pink-washed walls of one little cottage.

Suffolk tiles the fantailed pigeons look as if they have come out of a Helen Allingham painting. On the river side of the village the gardens are particularly deceptive. At first they appear to be an almost manicured mixture of neat lawns, pampas grass and silver birches, but as you walk down they gradually revert to a wilder state, full of giant hogweed and weeping willows as they reach the banks of the lily-covered River Brett.

One of these larger gardens follows the river's contours with several bridges leading the walker past a weir, a carp pond, and finally across a field to the church of All Saints.

Other gardens across the village street extend the variety. The small and intimate garden at Old Forge complements the black



△ Friendly conversation and the gentle chink of china cups are heard as delicious cream teas are served on one of the larger lawns.

beams and beige walls of the old house, while others, seemingly on the same scale, have surprises in depth. First comes the formal lawn with conservatory, where cream teas can be enjoyed, then a far gateway leads to less formal bushes and borders. Beyond are large vegetable plots, some with herb gardens, then paddocks of longer grass or old orchards garlanded with carpets of wild flowers.

The flowers dominate in their profusion and variety: yellow of stonecrop on weathered brown roofs, purple thyme spilling across herringboned brick paths, tall stately delphiniums of azure blue, richly patterned lilies and sentinel rows of hollyhocks on either side of ancient dark stained front doors. Honey-suckle and dog-rose climb in profusion over rustic arches and a vivid memory from one year was a long stretch of mellowed brick wall, lined with roses in bright colours of yellow,

△ A garden where the tranquil waters and gentle shades of green create a refreshing mood of quiet and calm.

▷ Colourful flowers are found in every corner of Chelsworth and not an inch of garden, wall or fence is wasted.



pink, orange and red, with at one point the tops of flowering foxgloves visible from the other side of the wall.

As Richard Jefferies remarked of Kew Gardens, "the peace of green things reigns", and on a fine summer's afternoon this is Suffolk at its most precious. Since this is just one afternoon each year there is the understandable temptation to try in four hours to cram everything in and look at each garden in detail. This is a mistake. It has taken many hundreds of years for Chelsworth to reach its present beauty, a process not only slow and gradual but often imperceptible. Besides, there is a certain comfort and expectation in leaving some of this "open village" to explore next year. The essence of this gentle invasion is that of sampling and savouring at a leisurely and receptive pace that fully complements Chelsworth's summer splendour.

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