

TRAVEL EDITION

Gardens of Paris

2nd-7th June 2008



Introduction

St. Pancras was the rendez-vous point for the start of our journey and, having balked at champagne at £7.50 a glass from the champagne bar, we settled for a group photo with John Betjeman!

Having checked in, we met up with our Tour Manager, Joanna Dubois, and boarded our train. Eurostar whisked us efficiently and swiftly across Kent, under the Channel, and across Northern France. At Gare du Nord, we were soon settled on our coach and were delighted to be taken through the centre of Paris, out to our hotel at Meudon. This proved to be a modern 'box', which was adequate but not luxurious. Its main attraction was its location – close to most of the gardens that we were to visit.

Various members of the party have written up their impressions of the gardens and places that we visited and these are presented in the order that we visited them. We hope that this will bring happy memories to those who joined us and also give some impression of our holiday to our other members.

La Roserie du Val de Marne

If you love roses, this is for you. In rooms, surrounded by neat box edges, are 3,300 varieties of rose. The garden is a museum of delightful, mostly scented roses; pink, white, cream, lemon, two-toned and darkest crimson. They are strung in gentle loops from pillar to pillar. Some are standards, some small, they cluster together and fill the air with a gentle perfume. It is lovely. Sadly 80 % of them are no longer available although many of their descendants are still thriving.



You can take a walk which illustrates the history of the rose - revealing species, rugosas, burnet and the Malmaison collection. There are 13 collections. Other gardens within exhibit gallicas, roses from the Far East, old garden roses, modern foreign and French garden roses, tea roses and banksias varieties.

The garden is set in a park, and has 8 gardeners now, instead of 16 as in the past. It was established in 1894 by Jules Gravereaux, the greatest rose breeder of the Belle Epoque and designed by Edouard Frances, architect and landscape gardener. He created a number of rooms, each of which was to be devoted to a particular part of Gravereaux's collection. The formal triangular composition is in a horseshoe shape round a central pond. This area was an

extension made by the family in 1911 and is the layout that remains to this day. The garden covers almost 4 acres altogether.

Our amusing Italian guide, spoke to us in French, pointing out many interesting roses. He was aided by our tour manager's quick translations. We had different favourites. Despite the so-called blue, black and green roses, I fell in love with a small tree - La Mortola, a moschata hybrid rose.

We were interested to see that the branches of the roses were tied to supports by green willow. Pruning and training forms 70% of the work and this is done each year. The roses are untied, placed on the ground and pruned. There is virtually no spraying, and if it is required, natural products are used. The plants looked remarkably healthy.



If you are free in early June – ever – do go.

Irene Jones

Domaine de Saint-Jean de Beauregard



The afternoon was dry but overcast when we left the coach at the gates of the Domaine de St-Jean de Beauregard. We walked some quarter of a mile up the curving drive through the park. A strip of grass each side of the way was mown, but beyond that, it was tall and flowery with buttercups and daisies spreading between large mature trees: planes, chestnuts, cedars, pines and more exotic conifers. Half concealed among these was a small chapel, sadly unvisited, and what might have been an ice-house, half submerged in the undergrowth, long out of use.

We were led through a cobbled yard with stables, still with the horses' stalls in them, and coach houses, past the tower of the old dove-house to a gate in the high wall and we were shepherded into the walled garden. On this ancient site, this 'potager' has been restored and re-made by the owner, Mme. de Curel, over the last 23 years or so, and we were at once surrounded by the quiet and privacy of all walled gardens, and with the exuberant lavishness of this one.



It is far more than a 'potager', it is also a living museum for the nurturing and preserving of ancient varieties of fruits and vegetables, not for commercial sales but to save them from extinction, and hundreds of varieties that our ancestors had discovered, bred, and valued.

The garden is surrounded by 10' walls, tile-topped as so many French walls are, and orientated, north, south, east and west and appropriately planted with shade-loving plants on the north-facing wall and peaches and vines on the south. The wide beds in front are planted with great masses of flowers and shrubs and climbers. To make a formal structure in these beds, Mme. de Curel planted box and yew, trained and trimmed to form buttresses against the wall at regular intervals all round. Being early June, the time of greatest abundance, the perennials, all in luxuriant foliage, even if not yet in flower, were all of great size and health: foxgloves of many pink shades, delphiniums of sapphire blue all growing 5' tall and apparently requiring no staking.



The central part of the garden is mostly vegetables, long raised ridges with asparagus already 1' tall, rows of fat lettuces ready for eating, long rows of onions and peas and many more to me unknown, and then rows of red and black currant bushes. The broad paths that criss-cross the garden and edge the beds by the walls are here all soft short grass, so soothing to the eye and to the feet, unlike the walk-ways of most French gardens where they are of a hard pale gravel, impervious to weeds perhaps, but it crunches when walked

on and is glaring in sunlight. Here was all peace and quiet.

In the large area to the east side, I think, is the orchard, where apple, pear and cherry trees, all trained for easy picking of fruit, stand each in its patch of knee-deep flowery grass, with wide swathes of scythed grass between, and neat fences of low cordoned pears bordering the paths. Wandering about this peaceful abundance, I was reminded of the dancing teacher, many decades ago, saying to her class of little children, “Now, children, listen carefully to the music, and then let yourselves go”. I feel this advice could be a maxim for garden-makers; start with a thoughtful, solid plan, impose it, then let nature take over. This seems to be what has happened at Beauregard, to such beautiful effect.

Most of us, I fear, live in a world which is very short of Time and of Space, but this garden is redolent of the lavish use of both these rare elements, made when these commodities were unlimited. Look at the broad avenue of tall trees which make a mile of vista from the back of the Chateau, planned on a grand scale, planted in the knowledge that it would look more wonderful in 200 years; look at the ‘potager’ planned large for producing masses of fruits and vegetables for this year, and next year and on and on to an unknown posterity. Though the garden is by intention, a living museum of ancient valuable specimens, there is a feeling not necessarily of timelessness, but that all was made to last – and last, and to be wonderfully productive of food and beauty all the while.

Returning through the stable yard, we skirted the dove-house, the largest I have ever seen, a round, stone-built tower, with a conical slate roof, topped with a lantern for the pigeons (?) to fly into. The entrance is through a little low stone arch. Inside all round the walls, up some 40' (a guess) are thousands of little wooden pigeon holes (real not metaphorical). Doubtless pigeon pie made a good hot dinner in winter, pigeon eggs, by the dozen, made cake and custards, and pigeon manure a valuable fertiliser for the garden. But I wondered more, as I stood inside and looked up at the enormous vertical struts, the huge wooden beams, the mobile ladder (needed to collect eggs) none of this timber could have been got in through the little door. It



must all have been assembled and then the stone walls built round them, and then they must have made the thousands of little wooden nests. What skills, what assurance, what experience these people must have had, and what confidence in the future, in the permanent need of pigeons, and in themselves. These builders had plenty of Time and Space – and yet their lives were mostly much shorter than ours.

Ann Baer

Versailles

How to sum up the gardens of Versailles in a few words? This creation by Andre Le Notre for Louis XIV represents the summit of French formal gardens of the seventeenth century. The gardens were commenced in 1661 and were worked on until the death of Louis XIV.



The author takes notes

One is struck by the sheer volume of visitors to the site, which in high summer must be overwhelming. Even in Louis XIV's day so many people wished to visit that it had to be closed to the public, so that the King could walk round unobstructed. Louis XIV took a keen interest in the gardens and wrote a guidebook to them. In this, a tour of the gardens would take a whole day, so that one could enjoy the symbolism of the 286 statues, the symmetry of the parterres and groves and the majesty of the site. And this was before the creation of the Grand and Petit Trianons and the Queen's Hamlet in the eighteenth century.



As you walk around the grounds, you realise that, although the main plan with its magnificent axis sweeping down the slope to the Fountain of Apollo and the Grand Canal is as originally laid out, many of the groves that flank it have been remodelled at a later date.

One of the original features created by Le Notre is the grove known as the Ballroom. This was an arena in which dances could be performed if his Majesty held a celebration there. It is an amphitheatre,

which on one side has a low stepped cascade adorned with sea shells from the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. On the other side were grass covered steps on which spectators could watch the dancers performing. For those interested in how this would have appeared, I recommend

the French film: 'The King is Dancing' 2002, which explores the relationship between Louis XIV and the composer Lully. Louis XIV was a keen and talented dancer and one of the scenes is set in the Ballroom.

This grove appeared to have recently been restored with new plantings. Unfortunately access to this grove and a number of the more significant ones was blocked, doubtless to protect them from the pressure of visitors. This was frustrating as they could be seen only partially.



One feature of the gardens that appears to be overlooked by most visitors is The Orangery. This lies to the south of the palace, below the principal parterre. It is approached by two 100 step stairways, which flank the site. The present Orangery dates from 1681-88 and replaces an earlier one which was half the size of the present structure. It currently houses 1055 trees including citrus, palms, oleanders, pomegranate and Eugenias. These stand outside on the parterre from May to October. The scale of the Orangery is impressive and deserves more attention than it receives.



Versailles is undergoing a programme of restoration. Some of the groves, such as the Queen's Grove and the Star Grove looked rather shabby, whereas others have obviously been restored and replanting schemes have been undertaken. It was interesting to see the hornbeam hedges being cut by laser guided tractors to ensure straight lines. One regrets

that the only grove attributed to the English is the King's Garden, which was created in 1818 in the picturesque style including raised beds of highly coloured bedding plants which are very reminiscent of public park planting.

If one strays away from the central axis it is possible to find some peace away from the crowds. I will have to go at least once more to see the gardens with the fountains working, which will enhance the whole site. Even though the gardens are familiar from photographs there is no substitute to walking around to understand the plan and layout of the grounds.

Bibliography

Gardens in France. Edited by Angelika Taschen, text Marie- Francoise Valery. Taschen. 2008.
The Sun King's Garden. Ian Thompson. Bloomsbury. 2008.

Note

The exterior of the chateau of Courances is featured in the film 'Moliere' of 2006 and the gardens of Vaux le Vicomte also feature briefly

Stephen Barker

Vaux Le Vicomte

Vaux le Vicomte is an exquisite jewel. I had seen many pictures and had wanted to visit for a long time. I was not disappointed.



The beautifully-proportioned chateau, surrounded by a moat, is built from a warm honey-coloured stone and has a steeply-sloping grey mansard roof; it couldn't be anything other than French! The formal gardens are to either side and behind the chateau and stretch away into the distance with a gigantic statue of Hercules as an "eye catcher". Although the site is predominantly flat, the ground rises up toward Hercules. Clever use of subtle changes of level creates "surprises" as you walk through the gardens and further away



from the house. Scrolling "parterres de broderie" (looking like Turkish-carpet patterns), pools, fountains, grottos with river gods and fine statuary are all gradually revealed to you. If you look back, the chateau is reflected in a great water mirror.



You cannot write about Vaux without explaining a little of its history. Its creator, Nicolas Fouquet, was Louis XIV's Financial Secretary and a man of exquisite taste. He discovered André Le Notre, and employed him to design the gardens at Vaux. Unfortunately, Fouquet fell prey to political machinations and the King's paranoia. The grand opening of the chateau and gardens proved to be his downfall. He was arrested, falsely accused of embezzlement and spent the rest of his life in prison.

Fouquet and Le Notre understood that "less is more". It could not be said that Louis XIV followed this principle when he commissioned Le Notre to create the gardens at Versailles. However, you can see quite clearly how Vaux provided the inspiration for the King's ambitious schemes.

Courances

Having driven from the splendours of Vaux Le Vicomte through a rather gloomy French landscape, the village of Courances was a welcome relief with warm coloured stone houses. It was a pretty, well-kept place. The stone houses, with well-tended bright flower gardens, looked as though they probably belonged to the estate at one time. Maybe still did!

Joanna's advice to 'think positive' to keep away the rain, was still working as we pulled up outside the delicate wrought iron gateway. Our entrance, however, was through an arched side gate with a glimpse of the chateau through the avenue of plane trees, which lined the road.

There were canals at either side, which reflected the trees and chain-linked bollards decorating the edges. The party of lively schoolchildren having their photograph taken, with the chateau as a backdrop, suggested they would be a useful safety feature.



The courtyard fences were covered with roses and these were reflected in the moat surrounding the chateau. Water was the prevailing theme here. Water gardens were invented in France in the 17th century and with fourteen springs feeding seventeen ornamental ponds and pools, the garden at Courances definitely fits the description. These are fed naturally without pumps or any other hydraulics, which is no mean feat given the large area they cover. There are seven 'loudmouths', one dragon dating back to 1552, spitting water into the different channels. The quality of the water was so special that Louis XI sent his people to collect drinking water when he stayed at Fontainebleau. Unfortunately, modern health and safety regulations meant that it could no longer be drunk. There had recently been problems with algae clogging the waterways, but imports of large carp had solved this problem.



The chateau was a charming family home with photos on the piano and side tables, and needlepoint cushions of dogs in various human costumes. Each window looked out onto the gardens. The views showed box parterres de broderie with gravel and more canals reflecting the grey sky.

On the dining room table were four rather charming planters, in the shape of frogs, holding African violets. They were very similar to the frogs we had seen in the fountains both at Versailles and at Vaux Le Vicomte.

The house was full of family treasures. One room housed the three fifteenth century 'Monkey Tapestries', parodying the state of life at the chateau, sports of the times and the judiciary. The images were very amusing and I spotted one monkey playing a wind instrument – but not by conventional means!



Outside, it was rather damp and misty, and very green. There was some colour in the honeysuckle and roses at the bottom of the steps and a rather startling pot of daturas in an alcove, but it was predominantly a misty green, which I quite like, but you can have too much of it!

However, we were pointed in the direction of the Anglo-Japanese garden created by Berthe, the Marquise de Ganay in conjunction with Achille Duchene (1866-1947). He worked on the estate before the First World War, where, with the help of an English designer, they created the garden. We were told it was to act as a contrast to the 'simplicity of the park'. I reckon she was fed up with green!

Even the mist could not subdue the beautiful colours, which were hidden behind the tall hedges. Through two archways in the hedge there was a beautifully laid out garden set around water with bridges and waterfalls. A Japanese style house and a watermill acted as backdrop. This was a total contrast to anything we had seen so far. The variety of textures, colours and foliage were stunning. When these are all reflected in the water populated by a variety of ducks and waterfowl it makes for a magical experience.



Annie Bainbridge-Ayling

Parc Andre Citroen

Friday morning – fountains, granite and glass, elements of the contemporary Parc André Citroën I remembered from the press coverage of its opening in 1992. This was the visit I'd looked forward to all week.

We entered via the Jardin Noir, through a tunnel of trees, not as I'd expected into a wide open space, but an enclosed plaza shaded by cut-leaved oaks, ideal for boules perhaps, but not a fountain in sight. Here was a central sunken garden where broad walls to the beds would give workers from the surrounding offices ample seating to enjoy lunch; children's play areas including a 2CV slide - nice touch that - and an elevated pathway, obviously a well used route for joggers, that criss-crossed the walk below, through sunken themed rooms, with its ivy festooned bridges.



Sue and Joanna take in the Jardin Noir

A long straight path, passing between tall regimented columns of *Magnolia grandiflora* led out to the Great Lawn. What a contrast: this was more like it. The contemporary take on the classic French gardens we have been looking at all week was now apparent. To the right the two impressive glass houses, between them a plaza with 120 computer controlled fountains that rhythmically sent up jets of water of varying heights and as a bonus an exhibition of large coloured sculptures by Andre Courreges to brighten a rather dull day.

To the left, stretching down to the Seine, lay the Great Lawn, bounded on the far side by great clipped cubes of green reminiscent of Versailles, behind which were more themed gardens. Opposite them, across the lawn, in front of towering, mirrored office buildings, stood correspondingly stark geometric towers of granite. Conscious of the time, it was difficult to take it all in.

The Great Lawn was in fact moated but as bemused ducks padded on the ripped liner, it was obvious why there was no water. Even more disappointing, was the discovery that a grand raised canal, and its fountains, running



behind the towers, were also dry. These were the fountains I'd come to see. There was, however, just one stunning set of cascades at the far end to give a tantalising glimpse of what there might be once again, if restoration took place.

The park is on the site occupied by the Citroen works before they were relocated in the 1970s. Sadly, it was all too obvious that as for so many public parks maintenance is the key issue here. The original innovative design features and planting that promised so much are now looking tired and desperately in need of some TLC. Despite this, the visit was still a highlight for me. Perhaps one day I will return, see those fountains working and treat myself to a ride in the giant balloon tethered on the Great Lawn – what a novel way to record a park that would be.



Deborah Martin

Walk round the Marais

Finishing our week of gardens in Paris could so easily have been an anti-climax, but it was quite a different experience. We were more like ordinary tourists following our guide, Malcolm, an Englishman from Chichester, round the Marais. No one following the delectable Joanna would have had an easy task, and we missed the succinct, audible and interesting commentary she would have given us. However, Malcolm gave us some lively anecdotes and



pointed out things we would otherwise have missed, like the bronze statue of Louis XIV, erected in the courtyard of the Carnavalet museum, exactly a hundred years before the fall of the Bastille, and below it, a cartoon of the Damnation of Protestants, like



Wycliffe and Luther. There was a rare survival from the 14th century looking a bit too well-preserved. We were told that its half-timbering would have been covered in plaster in the 18th century. Apparently, the French saw the Fire of London in 1666, and were anxious not to see Paris suffer a similar fate, so they covered all their timber-framed buildings with 'plaster of Paris'.



The Marais was once the Jewish quarter of the city till Jews were evicted by royal decree of Philip the Fair. They returned with the Revolution and we saw several men in the typical garb of orthodox Jewry. There was a fine synagogue of 1913, by Hector Guimard, in a sort of perpendicular arts and crafts style. Sadly we also saw a plaque recording the deaths of 70,000 Jews, transported to the death camps in 1940 and 1941

History seemed embedded on all sides, literally so in the case of a cannon-ball preserved in the façade of a house, dating from the revolution of 1830.



We even saw some formal gardens, like the one belonging to the Hotel de Sens. Typical of the changing fortunes of the Marais, the mansion was once the home of the Archbishop, then of a queen, and turned into a coaching station in the 19th century before becoming a jam factory and it is now a library.



Some of us found a delightful Algerian restaurant and finished our holiday with a leisurely meal with wine, and still had time to enjoy the boutiques with intriguing objects d'art and stylish bling.



Malcolm Elliott