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VISIT TO HISTORIC GARDENS :

10 september, 1975

DE WIERSSE, Graafschaap Zutphen, Gelderland

A garden of the first quarter of the 20th century, developed from and 18th
century pleasure ground

(ce texte n'existe qu'en version anglaise)

DE WIERSSE

A GARDEN OF THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20th CENTURY DEVELOPED FROM AN 18th CENTURY PLEASURE GROUND.

I - 17th century origins (sketch plans I and II)

Since the end of the 15th century, possibly earlier, there has been a small landowner's house at de Wiersse, an estate which has varied in size between about 100 and 400 hectares, according to the fortunes of the owner and the division of inheritance. The shape and material of construction of the first house is unknown. The earliest 17th century plans show the house in a wooded rectangular enclosure (the north western quarter of the present garden), in a similar position to the present house, but to the north of the stream (Baaksche Beek) - see sketch plan I. The eastern boundary of the enclosure was formed by a road, which survives in the present garden, as a broad walk, the principal, central, north-south axis - see sketch plan VI.

In the south-east corner of the enclosure was a water-powered corn mill. This appears to have ceased to work before 1833; but the miller's house survived until about 1920; its site is the mound close beside the bridge by which the broad walk now crosses the stream, in the very centre of the present garden. The mound is marked by a stone, commemorating W.E. Gatacre, the architect of the present garden.

Three of the tenant farms closest to de Wiersse are shown in their present position; Berenpas (which can now be glimpsed through the gate at the south end of the brick walk lined by Irish yews, beside the present kitchen garden); Darachter (now de Tragter); and de Bokhorst (not named on the map, but occurring in the Verpondingskohier of 1649 as Buckhorst, and perhaps named "Bockslagh" in a 1651 map (sketch plan II) - the coppice to the east of de Bokhorst is still known as 'de Bergslege')

From Darachter ran a tree lined road, eastward. This exists today as an avenue of Italian poplars visible in the middle distance of the north view from the present house. (The poplars' replacement with

a disease-free species of similar form is a current problem; *Populus Alba "Raket"* is not a perfect answer.)

If the map of 1651 in het Rijksarchief Gelderland (sketch plan I) and the copy made by the poet A.C.W. Staring, of a map bearing the same date (sketch plan II), are both accurate and correctly dated, then 1651 is the year in which the old house (which may only have been of wood) was pulled down and a new house built to the south of the stream, in a similar wooded rectangular enclosure which now forms the south western quarter of the present garden.

The mill and tenant farms remained in the positions they occupied at the beginning of the century; but new farm buildings for the use of the house ("Bouwerij") are shown in the south-east corner of the enclosure, on the site of the present sunk garden. Thatched rooves for storing corn survived in approximately this position until after 1832.

If the house did move south of the stream in 1651, it seems unlikely that any very substantial building was done until after 1678, when de Wiersse came into the possession of ten Broeck, a notable of the country town of Zutphen whose occupation closed a long period of legal battles and insolvencies. Ten Broeck's daughter married Adriaan Balthasar Valck, Burgomaster of Zutphen in 1724, whose heiress in turn married Ludolf van Heeckeren, who came from a widely spread family, holding land in Gelderland since the middle ages, and in particular at Ruurlo, the next village and mill upstream.

The 1678 building probably consisted of the Northernmost part of the present house, whose north east and north west wings perhaps then formed the gabled extremities of a one room deep, east-west rectangular brick building, whose centre, and east end stood on the present vaulted cellars, and whose north face rose (as it still does) with a slight batter, out of the moat.

The present moat, and the brick bridge of the main entrance, from the south, follow the lines of old foundations (the southern part of the moat had been filled, probably early in the 19th century, and was excavated again in about 1922, when a semi-circle of unexplained

oak piles, not older than the 17th century, were also revealed on the west side of the house). The house was probably extended southwards, by three windows in the 18th century when the character of the present fenestration was also established. The use of the first floor as a principal floor dates from the first building of the present house. This floor seems to have been entered by external sandstone steps, on the south side, from the time of the 18th century addition.

In the interior only a little, very simple, late 18th and early 19th century plasterwork survives (principally in the present dining room) and also an early 18th century flock-on-canvas chinoiserie wall covering (now in the entrance hall).

II - 18th and early 19th Century Pleasure Grounds (sketch plan III)

The first accurate plan to show the house and its surroundings dates from 1833 (see sketch plan III).

The position of the house, the miller's house, and the immediately adjacent farms are unchanged - one new farm, just downstream - 'het Nijhof' - is shown. It was then (and still is) tenanted by the Kok family, who had moved from another farm (demolished in the last century) on the northern edge of de Wiersse. The Kok family for three generations, perhaps longer, have acted as bailiffs to de Wiersse (their shrewdness and devotion to the place have been responsible for de Wiersse's continuity through some very difficult years).

The two 17th century wooded rectangular enclosures, straddling the stream, have now been doubled by a further two to the east, and the shape of the whole defined by planted allées.

The old main road (Wiersser Allée, superseded in the middle of the 19th century by the present metalled road some 300 metres further south) was also lined by trees, as were the drive leading to the house and a parallel avenue to the east. The three last roads continue in the same form to the present day; but the inner drive, rather than being a continuous avenue, has, since the beginning of this century, been straddled by four major groups of trees.

In the North-east rectangle appears a circular field surrounded by water- of this only one corner (of the water) survives today. It is in shape related to a surviving field and moat at het Medler (the neighbouring estate downstream), which is now believed to have been used as a place of safe refuge for cattle in troubled times.

The two rectangles south of the stream are designated "pleasure grounds" - 'grond van vermaak', garden - 'tuin', orchard - 'boomgaard' and kitchen garden - 'moestuin'.

The immediate surroundings show a changing landscape of oak (eiken), oak coppice (akkerbosch), arable (bouwland) and meadows (wei).

From 1869 de Wiersse was lived in by J.B. van Limburg Stirum, who married a van Heeckeren.

They had plans drawn up (which survive in the archives of de Wiersse) to reface the house in the neo-Renaissance manner then fashionable and to romanticise the surroundings of the house by changing the shape of the moats and even the stream (as well as the planting) into one of total, curved, asymmetry.

Fortunately van Limburg Stirum's funds did not allow him to implement his scheme - or perhaps wiser thoughts prevailed.

III - Early 20th century - Restoration and Embellishment - Victor de Stuers and his daughter Alice - sketch plans IV and V

Van Limburg Stirum's daughter married Victor de Stuers, who bought de Wiersse from his parents-in-law's executors in 1893. From about this time changes in both house and garden can be followed in photographs in the archives at de Wiersse.

De Stuers' initiative had been largely responsible for the establishment of a National department concerned with Monuments, Museums and Archives, of which he had become the first head. He lived and worked principally in the Hague and only visited de Wiersse for brief periods in the summer; but in 1904 (age 61) he found time to record the shape of the house and its surroundings (see sketch plan IV) with characteristic care, and insight.

Between that date and his death in 1916 (but for the greater part

before 1913 - see 'Buiten' p. 502, 18 October 1913 and p. 514, 25 October 1913) he, a widower, and his only child, Alice (born 1895), carried out a number of changes to the house and to the garden.

The 18th century glazing bars and small panes (surviving in only a few windows) replaced the larger scale 19th century glazing, and the house was renovated inside.

Outdoors, the principal changes were the extension of the drive (1906) across the old main road (Wiersser Allée) to the new main road and the removal of the kitchen garden (moestuin) in about 1908, to the arable northeast of the Berenpas (see sketch plan V). The kitchen garden was surrounded by a high solid boarded fence, lined on the inside with treillage.

In the place of the old kitchen garden, immediately to the east of the house, Alice de Stuers designed a classical parterre of box, the beds filled with roses, the whole surrounded by the former kitchen garden's solid fence to the north, and by yew hedges on the other sides. The success of the design was such that Victor de Stuers had the plan repeated after 1913 (see plans in the archives of de Wiersse), to fill the whole length of the old kitchen garden. The varieties of roses used in 1913 were : Laurent Carle, Lady Hillingdon, General MacArthur, Dr. Page Roberts, Madame Jules Grotez, Lady Ashton, Mrs. Cynthia Forde, Madame Caroline Testout, Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, Madame Abel Chasenay, Madame Ravary, and Sunburst. In 1975 they consist of : Gertrude Westphal, Katie Duvigneau, Fashion, Tantar's Triumph, Irish Elegance, Moonlight, Tom Tom and Rodeo.

Initially every box border was separated from the next by narrow strips of grass and a narrow path of cement tiles. Before 1924 the tile paths were doubled to occupy the whole space between the borders, and in some cases removed altogether to give place to grass. This process of simplification, as the scale of box and yew increased continued until the 1960s, when the limit of simplification, within the spirit of the original character, was reached.

About 1913 Alice de Stuers added a sunk garden in the south-east quarter of the old kitchen garden. This followed the then universally illustrated ideas of Gertrude Jekyll and others. The combi-

nation of foliage, funkias and ferns for example; a small formal pool in the centre, surrounded by bergenias ; a dry brick wall containing rock plants around the edge ; italian oil jars placed at the corners ; and the old kitchen garden hut, thatched, slightly off axis, backed by a pergola carrying honeysuckle and roses.

The house remained shut in by high trees - some growing even inside the moat. 'Views' were few, and except for the drive, running south from the house, confined to the immediate area of the 'pleasure grounds' marked on the 1832 Kadaester (see sketch plan III).

The landscape outside the garden was that of the Geldersche Achterhoek : small scale alternation of oak coppice, alder and birch; arable on the high ground growing rye, oats or roots, meadows on the lower, on the higher sand, patches of pine with junipers, and heather (cut for cattle bedding until the beginning of the 20th century); in the low places pools and marshes ; some good oak and beech, a few ash and willow. Almost the only naturalised exotics being Robinia Pseudoacacia. The farms ranging in size from 3-15 hectare on the Saxon model (cattle behind, the family in front, hay above) ,but with brick and tile replacing wattle and daub and thatch, and, since the beginning of the 19th century developing out of subsistence farming (in which each farm even grew, bleached and wove its own linen) by means of artificial fertiliser, and the co-operative marketing of milk and butter - the co-operatives being small and locally established ;the district covered by de Wiersse having its own steam dairy.

IV - Landscaping of the whole ; W.E.Gatacre and Alice de Stuers

Sketch plan V

From 1918 another, more directly English influence, began to work on the surroundings of de Wiersse ; W.E.Gatacre who in 1926 married Alice de Stuers. She continued to be concerned with the smaller scale of the enclosed gardens and with the choice of plants, he with the landscaping. Gatacre, born in 1878, had been brought up in England and Ireland in a landowning family of soldiers, sportsmen and amateur artists. He had an instinctive understanding of the shape

of terrain and developed great vision in giving shape to existing planting and to the development of new.

In outlying woods, he followed the current forestry practice (on a very small scale and with an eye to the shooting ; douglas, larch, norway spruce, mixed or interspersed with american oak or poplar) but in the garden and park he kept, with a very few exceptions, to indigenous species. There are some American oak (for rapid results) and the avenue of Italian poplars, north of the house, already referred to. Other wise only a dozen or so exotic specimens.

The exceptions perhaps are the rhododendrons (already introduced in the 19th century by J.B. Limburg Stirum) but these Gatacre used only as fast growing, all-year screens, to separate the character of each part of the garden and park from the next, and to ensure the element of surprise, which he applied so skilfully.

Despite Gatacre's sensitivity to the existing topography, some foreign influences introduced by him in the garden and park are still noticeable, if in diminished form. These include the 18th and 19th century English landscapers' avoidance of any sight of functional buildings - including farms; the banishment of arable- or indeed any activity not essential for garden or landscapes purposes. Hence also the diversion of roads to the new boundaries of the park, and the planting of screens along these boundaries. Most obvious of all is an evident indifference to getting straight timber out of all park trees, that is particularly jarring to the continental forester.

More positively, Gatacre overcame the restrictions of the small scale of the Achterhoek with amazing skill.

He produced effects in a few hundred metres that usually require several kilometres. The view, across the big lawn and over the meadows to the west of the house, for example, is no more than 700 metres long- but this is only evident if milk cows, rather than calves, are pastured in the furthest fields. The whole of the old garden - the four rectangles which straddle the stream, with their various sequences and unexpected changes of character - is only 400 metres x 200 metres.

Victor de Stuers had already extended south from the old rectangle with his new kitchen garden. Gatacre, primarily in the years 1918-1924, (but continuing to embellish until his death in 1959) developed an extraordinary variety of vistas, romantic views and formal axes, defined by gates, statues, benches, formally shaped yew and linked across water by bridges. The different mood of each of Alice de Stuers' private gardens was kept a surprise by screens of rhododendrons or yew or beech scrub (see sketch plan V and also the illustrated article by Alice de Stuers, 'Floralia', Assen, 26 September 1924, p. 615).

The old North-South Road, bisecting the pleasure grounds, was turned into a broad walk, terminated in the north by a statue, in the south by a fountain in an enclosure of beech hedges. A new long walk to the north of the stream crossed the broad walk at right angles. Beside it, to the north of the house, was an over-ambitious and short-lived parterre (1924-1928 - its hollowed out form became waterlogged too easily).

The existing form of the mill ponds and mounds was accentuated. The meadow in the south east quarter of the old garden was turned into a grove of silver birch (underplanted with daffodils and bracken) and bisected by glades running east-west (giving a view from the sunk garden) and north-south (extending the line of Alice de Stuers' Irish yew walk northwards, from alongside the kitchen garden, to end in the high oak, north of the stream).

On the west side of the kitchen garden was built a tile tennis court, lined with beech hedges and pleached limes, its netting covered with wisteria and with iris sibirica and ferns at its base. Beside the tennis court an enclosed orchard, both reached by a beech tunnel. (In 1975 the tennis court and netting had become delapidated and were removed; and its site is now traversed by a continuation of the beech tunnel. The orchard is being replanted, but on a larger scale, with fewer trees, and the tile paths have been replaced by the sand common to the rest of the 'wild' garden. The extra height of the pleached limes will be less necessary in enclosing the smaller orchard, and so the enormously time-consuming task of annual pruning by hand will be dispensed with.)

way that is more typical of Gelderland than of an English park.

At the same time that the greater part of the work was being done to give the garden its present form, the house was also enlarged by the width of two windows, southward; the moat re-excavated where it had been partly filled, and two new, externally identical, 'bouwhuizen' (coach house and stables) built. The character was that of the 1913 restoration by Victor de Stuers, and the work was completed by 1924 under supervision of the architect Slothouwer (the eastern bouwhuis was blown up at the end of the war, in 1945).

Outside the garden, the main drive, already extended southwards in 1906 to the new main road, was planted with a double avenue of beech in about 1920, and the fields on either side developed with a series of vistas and cross vistas, between groups formed from a combination of existing timber and new planted trees. This landscaping was extended over farmland (but without altering the traditional character) in views north from the house, and east from the mound at the end of the birch glade. The same eye, indeed, was applied to the whole of the 300 hectares (of which 100 woodland) now comprising de Wiersse.

V - 1963 to the present - Consolidation and Continuity- sketch plan VI

W.E. Gatacre and Alice Gatacre's son, E.V. Gatacre, assumed responsibility for de Wiersse in 1963.

Some simplifications have been made since 1963 (see sketch plan VI): the subsidiary paths north of the stream have been allowed to become overgrown; the parterres on and around the circle of the drive to the south of the house (introduced about 1948) have been removed (except for 4 box 'corkscrews' in the corners). The pergola, to the west of the sunk garden has been simplified. The removal of the tennis court has already been referred to. The size of the kitchen garden has been halved (and most of it allocated to the gardeners' private use).

The massive line of rhododendrons to the north of the house (forming the north boundary of the garden) has been cut, to open a north view from the house -exposing ploughland to view from the garden in a way that is more typical of Gelderland than of an English park.

The north east corner of the north east rectangle was also opened up in 1974 and denuded of rhododendrons, partly to clear a number of over ripe and fallen beeches, and partly to provide mechanical access to clean the outer moat ; but primarily as a preparation to replanting this corner.

An organic object, like a garden, requires the regular taking of decisions, even if these are dictated by the intentions of previous generations and by the spirit of the place : growth induces changes of scale. The unchecked formation of a canopy, as trees become larger, kills underplanting, some cycles are short (rhododendrons, planted close, for screening, on sandy soil, will become leggy and blow over if not cut back every 15 years or so - fortunately the tops burn instantly and in all weathers). Others, like that of beech, are long, and in their first renewal, inevitably bare.

During the last ten years particular care has been taken to plant oak, beech and robinia pseudoacacia in places where the young trees can eventually replace old, and will meanwhile not disturb the pattern of the garden and park.

Limited mechanisation (a broader lawn mower, a leaf blower and electric hedge cutter) and the use of weed killer on paths, has enabled the number of gardeners occupied all the year round to be cut to two, without noticeably altering the character of the garden.

De Wiersse has been very fortunate in having had E.J.Vrugink, the son of a tenant, with wide gardening experience, as head gardener between 1938 and his retirement in 1970. He still lives at de Wiersse. The garden, his very able young successor, A.Dimmendaal, and the owner, E.V.Gatacre, continue to benefit from Vrugink's experience, his eye and his extraordinary and forward-looking understanding of the character of the place.

The garden is not normally open to the public, but parties which are not organised with a commercial purpose can visit if their organisers apply beforehand ; several hundred people see the garden in this way every year. Several thousand participants of the well known '8 castles tour', arranged every Wednesday during the summer from Vorden, under the guidance of the former Burgomaster, see part of the garden - or all, if numbers and time allow.

Outside the garden and park, changes are more noticeable than within. Government policy to encourage larger farm units has put an intolerable pressure on tenant farmers, either to retire, or to overinvest and overstock. The result is a minimum unit of 20 hectares often supporting 50 milk cows and worked by a hard pressed farmer and his wife. Much arable has become grassland, and what is left, as often as not is carrying maize. The cooperatives have amalgamated and local control has become nominal.

The old pattern of three generations living on, and working a small farm together, went out in the '50s. A depleted farming population (who have willy-nilly had to assume the anxieties of the urban entrepreneur) has not the time, and in another generation, will not have the skill, to give the countryside the extraordinarily cared-for appearance it has had for so long. But this is a situation common to much of Europe.

VI - Some Unanswered Problems of the Garden

The single fountain jet surrounded by beech hedges at the south end of the broad walk depends for its effect largely on the mingling against the sky of drops of water and acacia and oak foliage - yet the shadow and drip of the trees has a bad effect on the hedges. For this reason also, there is a break, where a beech and an oak are close to the path, between the beech hedges around the fountain, and the beech tunnel.

This break may actually enhance the whole? The garden is full of broken rules - particularly of alignment and symmetry (cp the view east from the sunk garden hut (itself out of centre) and from or to the Irish yew walk by the kitchen garden, through the birch glade and across the stream).

The box parterre is a greedy feeder and means that only the toughest roses can survive within it. There do not seem to be any currently grown pale yellow varieties that will do, nor any with scent - the roses must not be too high. The combination of roses and box is of course not a classical one - but it suits this particular garden -

the colour of the roses particularly helps link the parterre to the bricks of the house. The box is specially necessary to give form in winter.

The high beech (noted by Victor de Stuers in 1904) in the view east from the sunk garden, are nearing the end of their life. At a certain moment they will have all to be felled and replanted - with beech (heavy shadow, drip and liability to scorching of bare trunk). There can seldom be gradual replacement. Related to these beech is another problem; leaves are no longer needed for potato clamps, so it is not practical to clear them. The series of mild winters means that the leaves remain.

Waterboard improvements have reduced the flow of water in the stream. This, with the discharge of treated sewage by two villages upstream (Ruurlo and Lichtenvoorde) and the seepage of artificial fertilisers (nitrogen) from farms on either side of the stream, has produced an invasive growth of ugly water plants on a scale impossible to deal with by a restricted labour force, and probably undesirable and self-defeating to try to control by weed killer.

Mechanical hedge cutters do not produce a satisfactory result on box hedges which are not stiff enough to resist the cutting edge. On beech and yew, mechanical cutters do not cut in hard enough - as a result the hedge's breadth and height increases gradually and eventually it will have to be cut in very hard by hand, or its dimensions will become vulnerable to snow and too big for easy cutting - apart from upsetting the scale of the whole.

The worst problem for the private owner is cost, and of these costs wages is by far the worst. By mechanisation, some use of other part-time estate workers in the busiest season, and by using the second gardener on other estate work in the winter, the labour force has been reduced to an average of 2.

This alone, without any allowance for administration or other supervision, involves, at present rates, an expenditure of approximately Netherlands fl. 40,000 per annum.

There is now some discussion of state aid for the restoration of long neglected gardens, but gardens which until now have been maintained in a good state by private owners (and therefore involve no capital cost) are now - with present wage rates, in grave need of help; the extent of the help needed can be accurately calculated and the result of such help is already there to see.

E.V Gatacre

August 1975

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DE WITTE, Graafland, Delft, Holland

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