

# VARIETY OF VISTAS IN GELDERLAND

DE WIERSSE, ZUTPHEN

By E. V. GATACRE

ON the eastern border of the Netherlands in the County of Zutphen (the remotest quarter of Gelderland between the river Ijssel and the Westphalian border) lies a cluster of small country houses, each in the wooded centre of a modest estate, on light and generally acid soil.

De Wiersse is in many respects a typical member of the constellation, with a history traceable from the end of the 13th century and with continuity of ownership since the peace which followed Louis XIV's 1672 campaign. The moated house, rebuilt in 1651, was then one room deep and seven bays wide. Its vaulted cellars and battered walls, rising from the moat, are incorporated in the northern range of the present building. The estate included a corn and an oil mill (driven by the stream which feeds the moat) and six or more farms with long, high-pitched Saxon roofs, carried on oak trusses, sheltering man, beast and hay, as they do today. The higher ground between the water courses grew flax,



1—DE WIERSSE, LOOKING ACROSS THE STREAM TO THE EAST SIDE. The northern range (in shadow) is the oldest part of the house, and the recessed central section was added in the early 18th century. In the distance can be seen the surviving *bowhuis*



2—THE ENTRANCE FRONT. Clumps of oak were planted when the gardens were landscaped in the 1830s

rye and oats which have recently given way to maize. Timber grew in the vicinity of the house where double rows of oak or beech marked the banks of the outer moats; the moats have survived almost complete, the rows of trees (or their successors) are now barely discernible among subsequent planting.

Early in the 18th century, the centre section of the present house—five bays square, the first floor being the principal one—was added; the style of the extension was also imposed on the older part. An axial avenue to approach the house from the south and a number of secondary avenues were planted in an extension of the rectangular pattern dictated by the moats. A formal garden was laid out to the east of the house. From it, two Baumberger stone children carrying sheaves of corn and cornucopia of fruit survived to be incorporated in the present *parterre* on the same site.

At the beginning of the 19th century a pleasure ground, with winding paths leading over accentuated hillocks and beside irregular pools, among oak and beech, was landscaped out of the earlier rectangular fishponds, clean-banked millstreams and home woods. The pleasure ground ran for 400 metres behind the house and along the bank of the stream; it forms the basis of the present wild garden. Not long after, landscaping was also applied to the approach avenue which was replaced by three large irregular clumps of oak, red oak and beech which straddle the drive today.

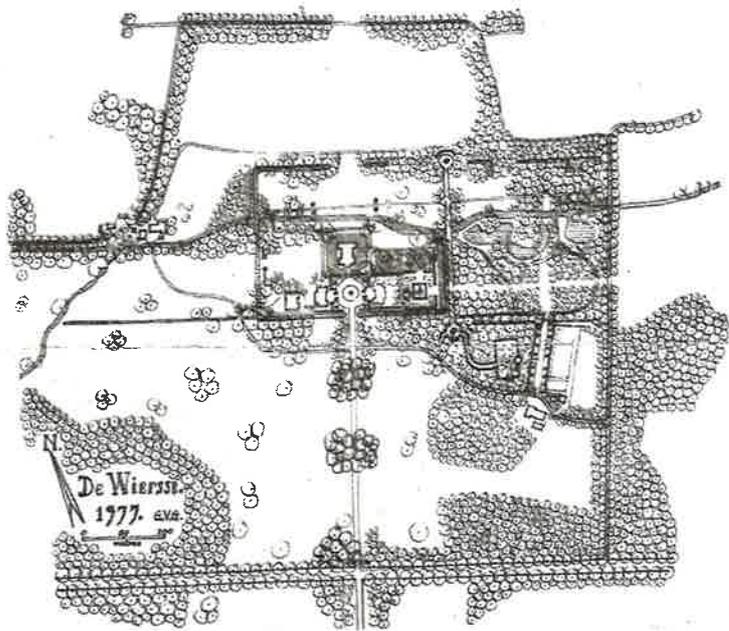
The gentle decay which followed the romanticisation of the first half of the 19th century was first arrested by Victor de Stuers, who married a daughter of the house. His pugnacious initiative had been responsible for the establishment in 1875 of a government department for Monuments, Museums and Archives, of which he was the first head, and after election to Parliament in 1900, its outspoken monitor. He lived and worked in the Hague and visited de Wiersse for brief periods in the summer; but in the decade before his death in 1916, he, a widower, and his only child, Alice (born in 1895), restored the house.

Outdoors, the first changes they made were to straighten and extend the drive (instinctively following the line of the late-17th-century avenue). They removed the flower and vegetable beds, which had replaced the 18th-century formal gardens on the east side of the house, to a new kitchen garden beyond the old pleasure ground. In their place, Alice de Stuers, then aged 15, designed a small parterre of box, the beds filled with roses. The success of the design (in fact a free adaptation of an early-18th-century plan for a "bois de haute futaie percé en étoile") was such that Victor de Stuers had Alice's plan repeated to fill the whole space between the house and the outer moat, from which it was separated by a yew hedge. When first laid out narrow strips of grass and a narrow path of tiles divided the box. Before 1924 some of the tile paths were removed, others were doubled, replacing the grass and conforming to the width of two metres common to most paths in the garden—the size necessary for two people to walk comfortably side by side. The process of simplification of the original design continued until the 1960s.

In 1913 Alice de Stuers added a sunken garden which followed the then universally illustrated ideas of Gertrude Jekyll and others (though for practical advice she



3—THE SUNK GARDEN, FROM THE PARTERRE



4—LAYOUT PLAN OF THE GARDEN.  
(Right) 5—LOOKING FROM THE HOUSE  
TOWARDS THE PARTERRE

preferred to read H. H. Thomas): a small formal pool in the centre, surrounded by bergenias; a dry wall of mossy paving bricks containing rock plants and a combination of foliage around the edge; Italian oil jars placed at the corners; to one side, slightly off axis, the old thatched kitchen garden tool shed; behind this a pergola carrying honeysuckle, rambler roses and old man's beard. The whole was framed by a herbaceous border consisting principally of delphiniums, phlox, gypsophila, verbascum and michaelmas daisies and backed by a hedge.

The house and Alice de Stuers's gardens remained shut in by high trees, some growing even inside the inner moat, within two metres of the walls. Views were confined to the drive with its three clumps, or to the early-19th-century pleasure grounds until, in 1918, another influence began to work on the landscaping of de Wiersse: W. E. Gatacre. Alice de Stuers, whom he married, continued to be concerned with the smaller scale of the enclosed gardens, but their attitude to the choice of plants was the same: she wrote of it in an article on the garden in *Floralia* of September 26, 1924: "Avoid the trap of making a 'museum of plants', not too many varieties,

too many colours, go for strong groups, simple combinations, repetition in a loose but regular pattern . . ."

Gatacre, born in 1878, was the son of a younger son of a Shropshire family of sportsmen and soldiers, to whom topographic drawing was a necessary accomplishment. Brought up in Ireland he had an instinctive understanding of the shape of terrain, and a remarkable vision in giving strong form to existing woodland and new planting. Perhaps his memories of demesnes in Waterford and Wexford had been intensified while serving in South Africa and Ashanti and during three years in prison camps in Germany. And the isolation of his and Alice de Stuers's achievement made them especially able to concentrate on the inherent qualities of the place. In the garden and park he kept, with a very few exceptions, to forestry trees. He planted only a dozen or so exotic specimens, but used large numbers of rhododendrons in combination with deciduous planting, as fast growing, all-year screens, to separate the character of one part of the garden and park from the next and to achieve the element of surprise in a flat country. Despite Gatacre's sensitivity to the place, some very un-Dutch elements were imposed by him: sand roads were rebuilt and screened beyond the park boundary; farm buildings and arable were hidden from sight and he was noticeably indifferent to getting straight timber out of his park trees.

Within the pleasure grounds he developed an extraordinary variety of vistas—both romantic views and formal axes—linked across water by bridges, and punctuated by benches, shaped yew figures and statues. He turned the old tree-lined road, bisecting the pleasure grounds from south



to north beyond the outer moat, into a broad walk, terminated at one end by a statue, at the other by a fountain in an enclosure of beech hedges. A new long walk, the full extent of the garden to the north of the stream, crossed the broad walk at right angles. The 19th-century landscaped form of ponds and wooded mound was incorporated into a romantic wild garden.

The meadow in the south-east quarter of the pleasure grounds became a grove of silver birch (underplanted with daffodils and bracken) and was bisected by broad glades, one opening a view from the sunk garden across the outer moat, the other continuing through a double gate to traverse the kitchen garden by a herringbone brick road, lined with Irish yews. A tile tennis court was hidden among the trees beside the kitchen garden, south of the pleasure grounds. It was enclosed by beech hedges and pleached limes, its boundary netting covered by wisteria, rising from an edging of iris sibirica and ferns.

While the work was being done on the garden, the house was extended southwards in the manner of Victor de Stuer's restoration by two bays and a pavilion-like entrance, reached by semi-circular sandstone steps and a *stoep*, as it had been since the 18th century. New *bouwhuizen* (garage and stables—the last destroyed by Germans in 1945) were symmetrically positioned around a forecourt in the Dutch manner.

The outer drive was planted with a double avenue, and the fields and woods on either side of the whole drive, and to the west of the house, were developed into a network of vistas and cross vistas, planned to be viewed from the perimeter as well as from the centre. The restrictions of the small scale of the existing landscape were overcome with skill, producing effects in a few hundred metres that usually require several kilometres.

*The garden is open to visitors on a number of days between May and October.*

*Illustrations: Alex Starkey.*



6—THE BROAD WALK, WHICH BISECTS THE PLEASURE GARDEN