

A visit to Folly Farm July 22nd 2021

On an early morning in the summer, we waited for our minibus pickups in anticipation of the long-awaited trip to Folly Farm. Such an early start was unexpected. Red Funnel had cancelled our planned sailing, so we had to get the 8:30 ferry across the Solent. However, as will be seen later, this was a blessing in disguise as it enabled us to have an unexpected stop on the way.

All onboard Red Funnel after the excellent logistical management of the various collection points across the island, (thank you again Susan Dobbs), and fuelled with much needed caffeine beverages, we enjoyed the calm crossing with the sunshine and temperature increasing as we sailed; promising a very warm July day to come.

Safely and comfortably driven by our two drivers (we had two minibuses), we travelled by main roads before turning off onto leafy minor roads through the beautiful countryside of north Hampshire. Because of the extra time we were able to call in to Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants, a real treat. We enjoyed choosing some gems to take home to our own plots and were amazed at the size of the storage on the minibuses. I'm sure if we had the time, we would have easily filled this with more choice perennials, depleting our bank balances in the process, so probably just as well that we had to move on.

We stopped for a sandwich lunch at The Spring Inn, Sulhamstead before our booked slot for the visit to Folly Farm. The small village of Sulhamstead is nestled in the Kennet Valley below the North Wessex Downs and close to the town of Reading. Folly Farm sits alongside Sulhamstead Lane behind a substantial brick wall and extends to approximately 3 hectares (7.4 acres) of gardens with an additional 8 hectares (22 acres) of fields, meadow and lake. Its grounds gently slope down from the south-east to the north-west towards the River Kennet offering views to surrounding agricultural land. The underlying soil type is alkaline with significant areas of riverbed gravels and a high water table. We accessed the property through gates off Sulhamstead Lane on its eastern boundary into an area alongside the walled kitchen garden.

An original C17th farmhouse is at the historic heart of this property which was extended twice in the early C20th for two new owners from designs by Sir Edwin Lutyens. The first extension is joined to the north-east timber framed wing of the original farmhouse via its south end. Two different colour bricks of vermillion and grey were used. It was completed in 1906 and is in a William and Mary style in a rectangular form. The west wing was then added in 1912 to the western end of the 1906 extension and is of red brick in the renowned Lutyens Arts and Crafts or 'Surrey' style. This includes a L shaped cloister with an associated tank water feature and low sweeping roof lines covering a brick pillared walkway. The Flower Parterre, Dutch Canal and sunken Rose Garden (now known as the Sunken Pool Garden) were all added at this stage. External paths close to the house are paved with herringbone brick.

The original 1912 Lutyens hard landscaping for the garden laid out a series of compartments or garden rooms interlinked and parallel to each other bounded by informal lawns to the south and west and connected by a cross walk which runs along the southern façade of the house connecting the 1906 and 1912 extensions. Lutyens worked closely with Gertrude Jekyll who provided the original planting scheme and Folly Farm was known as one of their finest collaborations.

We walked to the welcome building in the barn complex and received a needed cold drink followed by an orientation talk by Simon Goodenough who is now the Estate Manager for Folly Farm. We also met our guides for the day which were members of the small team of eight gardeners employed to look after the grounds and gardens. As Folly Farm is a private estate, we all agreed to abide by

the instruction to refrain from taking pictures. I must admit, that whilst this was an understandable restriction for a private garden, it was extremely difficult because of the beauty of the design and horticultural perfection we were presented with combined with being so used to snapping a shot as a memento of visit. I am pleased to say that despite this temptation we all were very well behaved and complied.

We heard from our guides as how over the years Folly Farm the original garden design concepts of Lutyens and Jekyll had been gradually neglected and changed. Thankfully the structure and bones of the design were always still there, sleeping, waiting to be re awakened. Just over ten years ago Jonathan and Jennifer Oppenheimer became the new owners acquiring it as their family home. With the help of The Lutyens Trust, Jennifer set about researching and then planning the sympathetic restoration of this important historic house and garden. To assist in realising their vision, the Oppenheimers built a new team at Folly Farm and commissioned Dan Pearson to help create a garden respecting, but not seeking to copy, the original planting concepts of Jekyll. Sadly, Jennifer passed away in May 2017. The family have continued with the work as a tribute to her vision and energy for this special place.

Our interest piqued, we were divided into two groups and taken through the orchard, surrounding meadow, lawns, and then the amazing formal gardens closer to the house to end in the exquisitely managed walled kitchen garden.

Starting in the flower rich meadows of the orchard and continuing along the new main access drive to the house flanked by continuing meadows, we admired the beautiful native species wildflowers. We were told that this is sown with EM3 mix on a three-year rotation to maintain consistency. We were fortunate to visit when we did as the next week (end of July) the meadows were due to be cut for hay and we would have missed the spectacle.

As the drive curved, we approached the recently created artificial lake which had been dug and planted in a naturalistic style. Spoil from this has been used to create banks on the edge of the estate boundary to the south and south east which has been then planted with tree and scrub species. This clever planting technique allowed screening of neighbouring buildings and gave a sense that the estate continues beyond its boundaries 'borrowing' the surrounding landscape. This visitor journey, offering gradual glimpses of the house and more expansive views to the countryside was remarked upon by myself and others in our party as being very 'Repton-esque' in its design approach.

Turning off the access drive we crossed a small stream with a series of shallow weirs fed by the lake and part of the Dan Pearson design. These introduce the additional element of slow running water for its contribution to the soundscape and tranquillity of the less formal gardens. Although the naturalistic planting here had passed its best, we did note how clear the water was. Interestingly, this was the result of the use of mesh bags full of previously dried lavender stems bundled and submerged within the running water. In a similar way to barley straw, these seem to be able to combat the development of algal bloom and blanket weed and are certainly something I plan to try in my own pond. Water is important to Folly Farm. They have an extraction licence to take water from the stream for irrigation, use the lake for this purpose too and collect rainwater in two 100,000 litre tanks. In the summer, they can use 30,000 litres a day.

The guides then took us through grasslands with large ornamental trees some including a majestic *Tilia tomentosa* Petiolaris predate the Lutyens and Jekyll designs. These areas are underplanted with bulbs and fritillaries and must be a sight to behold in the spring. Gradually the longer grasses and

more naturalistic areas became more mown as we near the more formal gardens with a standard of lawn close to the house that many bowling green keepers would only dream of. A series of new paths have been installed edged in Corten steel and topped with self-binding gravel from South Cerney in Gloucestershire. These link the informal lawned areas with the more formal gardens and are raked by hand. At key locations, new benches have been installed. These are made of green Oak to add to the character as they warp and bend with age. We had the 'Folly' of Folly Farm pointed out to us. This large tree is in the middle of one of the new paths maintaining the linear approach rather than having a new sinuous path around it. Walking through the Copper Beech Garden with its grand specimens and views of the house we approached the Wind Garden.

The modern planting here is on a 4 x 5 grid pattern consisting of ornamental grass species underplanted with carpeting species and with some of the grids paved creating a tension in the formal potentially symmetrical design. The grasses move in the breeze creating a dynamic feeling in an open and loosely formal planting. Planting included *Stipa barbata*, *Ophiopogon planiscapus*, *Stipa lessingiana*, *Acaena microphylla*, *Eurybia divaricata*.

Carrying on past the Spring Garden with its planting inspired by Munstead Wood including spring flowering plants such as Geraniums, Martagon lilies and wood anemones stopping briefly to admire the long view through the Flower Parterre to the south façade of the 1912 extension, we arrived at the restored White Garden. Here a series of gradually stepping down platforms reflect the shape of a small restored pool with a bubbling fountain. These are complemented by raised beds and a semi-circular arbour with a Lutyens designed bench. The planting includes whites and creams with a weeping pear lending its grey foliage as a foil. The gardeners are careful to remove any 'stray' self-seeded non-white flowering plants encouraging the ferns and other green foliage which softens the hard landscaping. A beautiful tranquil space, with a sense of enclosure and calmness, ideal for contemplation whilst listening to sound of the gentle water feature.

Turning towards the 1906 house we walked through a vertiginously high avenue of Lime trees in the Lime Walk. Personally, I have never seen such tall and narrow lime trees used in this way and it was a dramatic contrast from the previous sunken space encouraging dynamic travel towards the next 'room' and a sense of decreased personal scale against these magnificent trees. We then entered the Holm Oak Walk with its central path and two beds planted alternately planted with *Hakonechola macra* (Japanese Hakone Grass) and *Epimedium* with a series of large wooden planters each side containing *Hydrangea arborescens* Annabelle. Simple yet dramatic planting backed by the Holm Oak hedge which had been recently cut back hard to rejuvenate and control its height. We were told that Biochar had been used around the roots of the hedge to help stimulate regrowth.

Passing through an archway in a large brickwall we entered the original Entrance Court on the east façade of the 1906 extension. Planting here used a palette of reds and dark foliage, including *Sambucus*, *Angelica gigas*, and dark flowered *Dianthus barbatus*. Climbers had been carefully wired along the brick walls with a spectacular *Itea ilicifolia* with its pendulous racemes of sweet fragrance trained to the wall as we entered. Further to north we passed through a second archway to enter the Barn Court with its dramatic large South African urn on a plinth. We were asked not to touch this as it is not securely attached being taken in for winter as not frost hardy. Gently negotiating our way around this stunning sculptural feature, we admired the low cottage garden planting. This was a more casual planting style and mix of pinks, whites, and purples interspersed with roses and Clematis trained to walls and with views to the east side of the original C17th farmhouse. Planting had a greater emphasis on a white and green palette in front of the original farmhouse in a courtyard area which we were unable to enter but could admire. *Astrantias* were particular evident in planting here.

Turning back and retracing our steps we arrive at the south side of the William and Mary style 1906 Lutyens extension. Two deep beds are located between the cross path and the house which has a small, paved area between its two symmetrical wings. These have rich planting using a palette of pink, white, purple and light blue. In front of this is the Dutch Canal, a long rectangular pond enclosed by yew hedges and flanking lawns and planted areas. This open body of water is aligned with the centre of the 1906 extension and is now clear of water lilies, restored to its original purpose to provide a reflection of the building and the sky.

Continuing westward we walk down a flight of shallow steps to the next 'room', the Flower Parterre. This herbaceous garden is laid out in a traditional parterre design and has been restored faithfully to reflect its original design, having been at one stage changed to lawn. Inspired by the original planting design by Gertrude Jekyll, Dan Pearson and the owners selected more modern cultivars and more recently discovered favourites but within the same soft colour pallet of pale misty pastels with an emphasis on blues and purples. The informality of this planting belies its complexity. It is based on a detailed matrix design with initial planting from 9cm plant pots of with a planting list of over four pages of perennial species to create 'organised chaos'. Planting includes *Dierama*, *Echiops*, *Verbena bonariensis*, *Potentilla*, *Linaria purpurea alba*, *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, *Calamintha*, *Astrantia*, *Eryngium*, *Gaura*, *Amsonia* and too many more to mention. Most of these self-seed and require regular judicious thinning and re siting to maintain the intentions of the Dan Pearson design.

Admiring the parallel clipped yew hedges all cut to the same level meaning that they increase in height as we pass westwards down the slope in front of the south façade we also look at the strong architectural feature of the cloister and the Tank Garden.

Walking down steps we enter the Sunken Pool Garden. A very elaborate design based on the Indian game of Pachisi (later marketed in the west from the late C19th as 'Ludo'), this complex design is backed on all sides by tall, clipped yew hedges and has a symmetrical form with four sets of semi-circular steps rising to a semicircular platform creating thus creating four corner circles. These provide access to entrance/exits from this garden room or seating areas. A central octagonal sunken pool has within it a four-sided incised scalloped island and there are a series of planting beds between the pool and the steps. Originally designed as a rose garden and formerly known as the Sunken Rose Garden, planting here is exotic with a riot of colours including reds, yellows, and oranges. We were told of the discussions that took place between the designer and the owner to convince them to take this approach rather than continue the softer muted pallet of the rest of the gardens. The sunken nature, the shelter this affords and the sense of drama of the revelation of exotic/tropical planting was a major and to my mind an exciting, unexpected contrast. I think it is fair to say that not all in our party were convinced although we all enjoyed seeing the strong hard landscaping design concept of this space. Planting here included *Genista*, *Yarrow*, *Polygonum*, *Hemerocallis*, *Tetrapanax*, *Euphorbia mellifera*, *Eryngium pandanifolium* and *Baptisia* 'Chocolate Chip'.

Passing through the Yew Walk we entered a new lawned area, the site of the former swimming pool. This modern design included dramatic shallow step platforms at either end and an open view across the stream/rill which is wider at this point and includes a series of strong square paved steppingstones to the field and landscape beyond.

Having now seen all the formal garden rooms we were guided to the Walled Garden via its north east corner entrance. Passing by an arrangement of pots dedicated to Jennifer and one of a series of 'Pot landscapes' in this area – arrangements of planted containers with choice varieties (such as *Amicia zygomeris*) and seasonal favourites.

The large former walled kitchen garden (1 acre in size) now acts as a cutting garden for the cut flowers and dried flower arrangements for the main house. At least three vases are prepared each day and at weekends when the family are home or entertaining many more. Laid out in a series of beds the Walled Garden can be considered to have four main areas of cultivation. The first quarter of the site is dedicated to growing *Lavandula grosso* with large stone benches to allow you to sit and enjoy the aroma. The lavender is cut and dried with the stems being used in the stream as mentioned earlier and the flower heads kept being used to fill small monogrammed linen bags. The second quarter has the rose beds for cutting and includes alpine beds set out at right angles to the other beds in the area. In the northwest corner a small building is used for drying flowers accessed via a 'bubble gum' scented chamomile lawn. The third quarter of the walled garden has Lupins and flowers grown for drying. The final quarter is the vegetable patch including some soft fruit and interplanted with dramatic hot coloured plants and flowers and already sizeable pumpkins. In the centre is a large dipping pool to help with access to water. The walls around the space were used for trained fruit trees. The dramatic Vine Pergola with its large dining table underneath provided some much-needed shade and was the ideal location for an amazing afternoon tea which was most welcome at the end of our visit. Served in china on pressed tablecloths with small flower arrangements we were treated to pots of tea or coffee and a selection of cakes and sweet pastries. A wonderful way to end our tour. Each of us was then given a commemorative scroll of an illustrated map of the gardens and drawings of some of the key 'rooms' and views and also a monogrammed bag of dried lavender as a memory of our day.

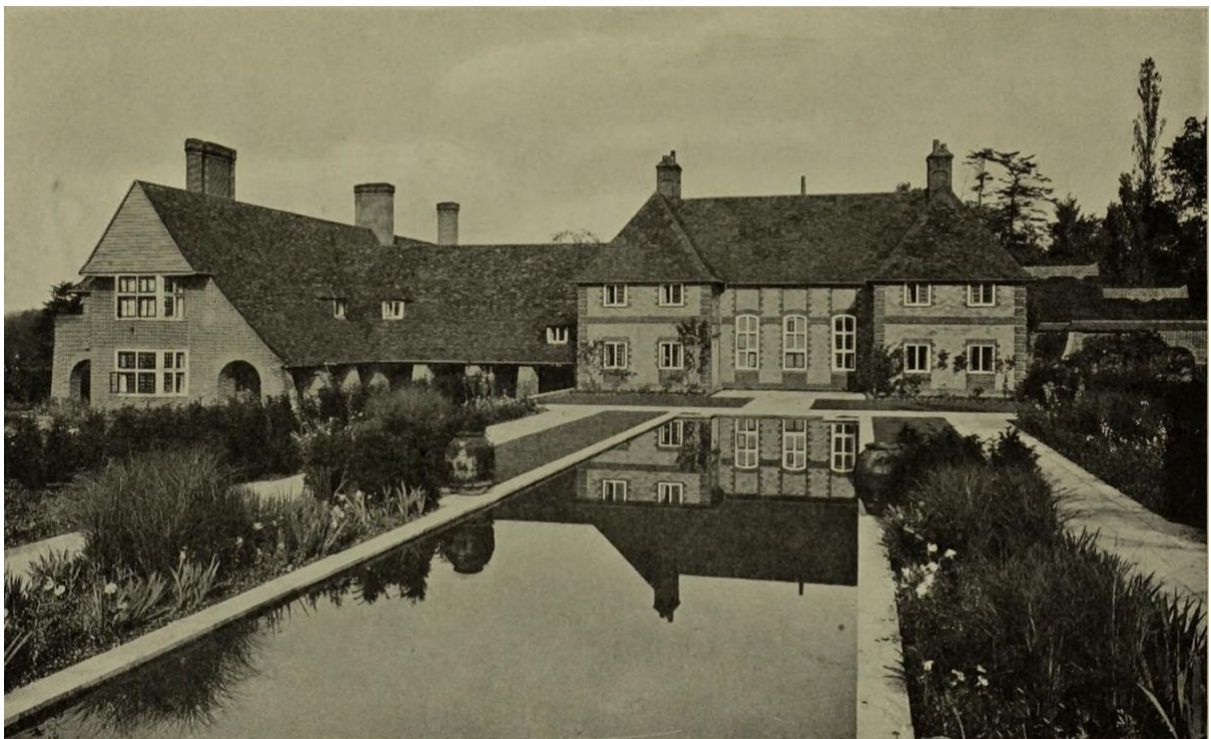
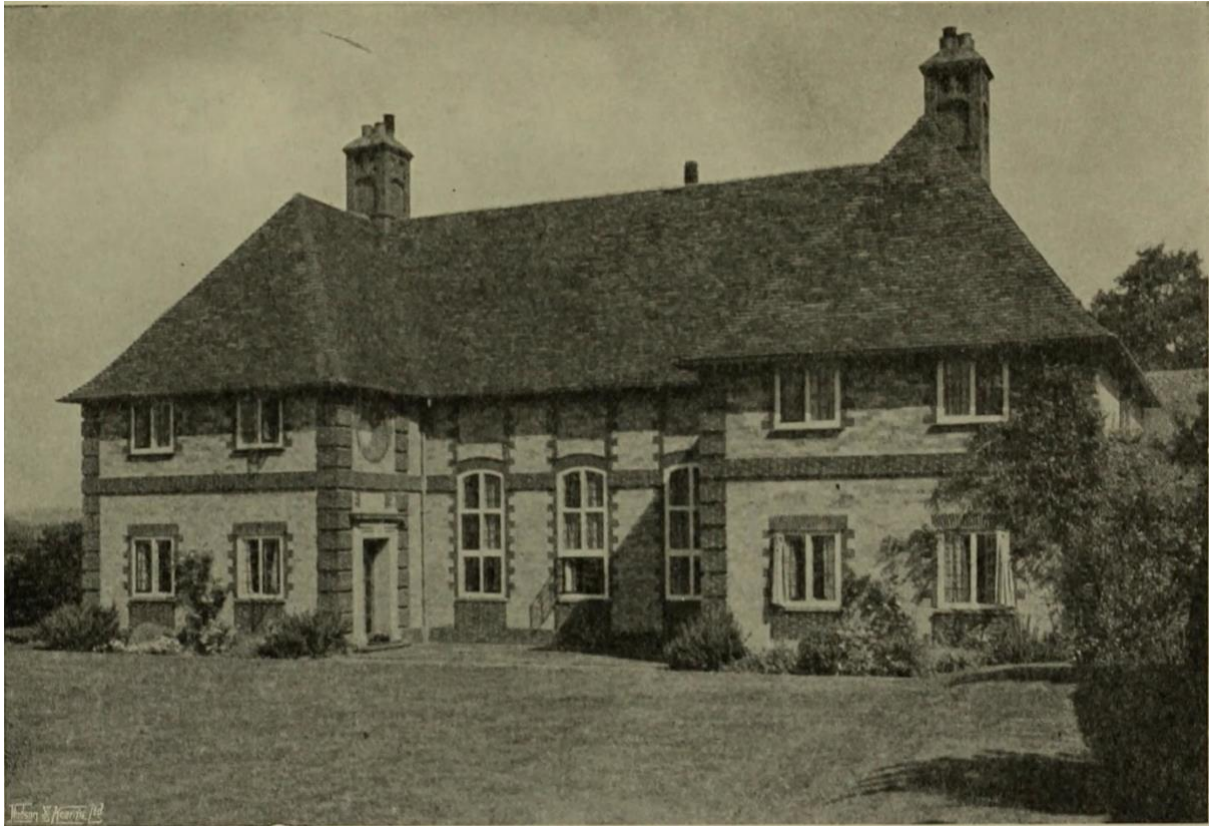
A final quick optional visit to the palatial potting shed and then it was all back on board the minibuses for our journey back to Southampton. I know I wasn't the only one who took advantage of this to close my eyes and visualise again the wonders of the day. Folly Farm is truly breath taking and an example of the apex of traditional C20th British garden design evolving for modern tastes whilst maintaining at its heart the essence of the Arts and Crafts style. It is not an understatement to say that I believe it to be the best garden that I have visited in England.

If you would like to see some wonderful photographs of the gardens at Folly Farm then take a look at the following websites:

<https://www.houseandgarden.co.uk/gallery/folly-farm>

<http://danpearsonstudio.com/folly-farm/>

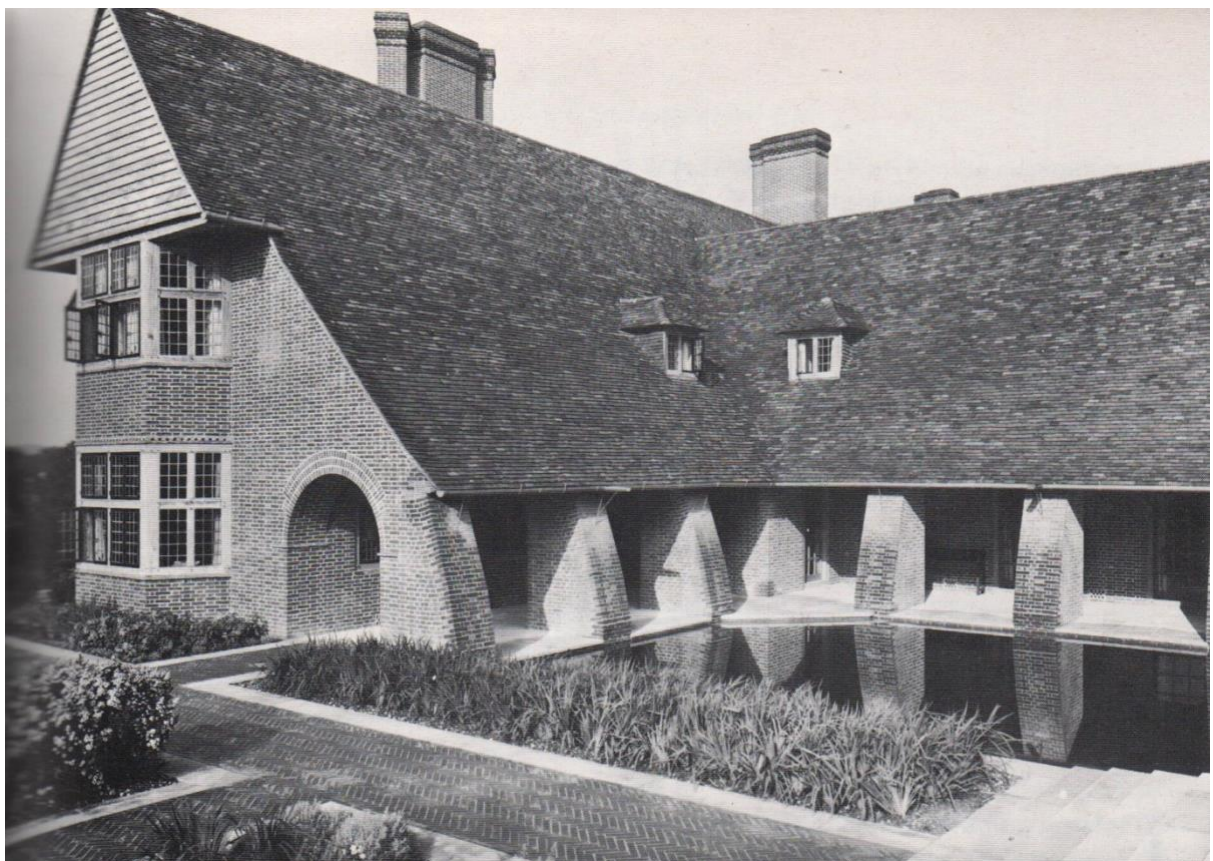
These two from 'Lutyens house and gardens' published 1921 written by Lawrence Weaver. Showing original 1906 extension and then added 1912 extension.



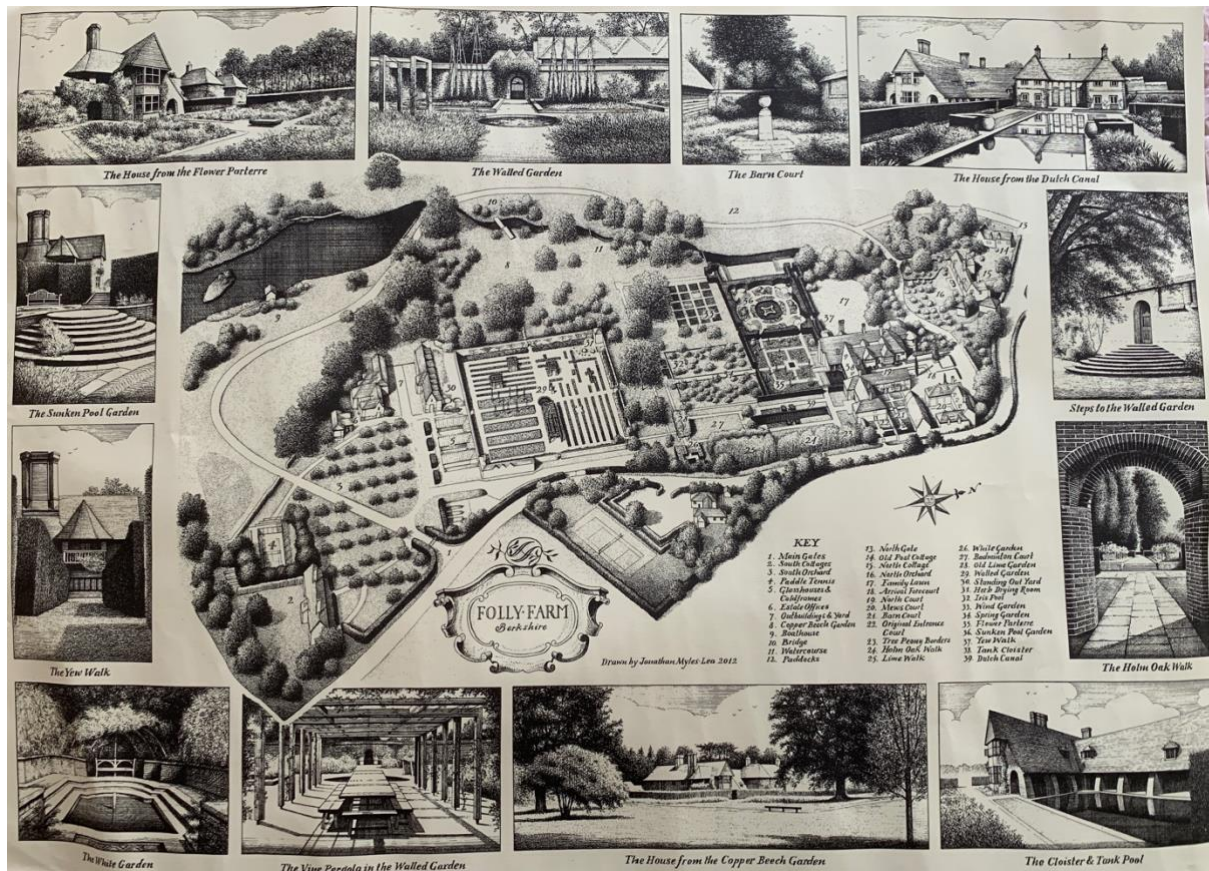
These from 'Gardens of a Golden Afternoon' Published 1982 written by Jane Brown. Showing Folly Farm before recent renovations and planting.







Photograph of scroll given to us at visit.



Pictures Hardy's Cottage Garden Plant Nursery

