



Hidden TREASURE

The secret splendour of Watergate House is hidden behind ancient walls; inside, the garden is a delightful profusion of colour and fragrance

PHOTOGRAPHS SUZIE GIBBONS | WORDS SOPHIE DAVIES

Historic Watergate House is a Grade II*-listed manor on the corner of King Street and High Street in Fordwich, best known as Britain's smallest town. The house dates back to 1400 in parts, and stands on the site of what was once Canterbury's main port. It was here that the Caen stone used to build the city's cathedral was brought upriver and unloaded.

Today, Watergate House is home to interior and garden designer Fiona Cadwallader. The garden backs onto the River Stour and is surrounded by an 11th-century wall, which forms a *hortus conclusus* hidden from the road; though a crisp beech hedge, clipped box spirals and swathes of roses spilling over the wall and out onto the street hint at the perfect English country garden within.

Visitors to the garden must step through a pale-grey-painted gate in the wall and follow a path past the house, where roses and clematis frame Gothic-arched windows and doors. Peek around the ▶

GARDEN NOTES

Walled riverside garden covering half an acre

LEFT Peonies including 'Bowl of Beauty' and 'Buckeye Belle', and roses including *Rosa* Crocus Rose and *Rosa* Iceberg create an ebullient display with astrantias behind the house. **RIGHT** An elegant metal bench makes a scented spot to sit under tumbling masses of *Rosa* 'Phyllis Bide'.





corner, and the garden is revealed; at its centre, a striped rectangular lawn. This is edged with a smart York-stone terrace and billowing herbaceous borders. A romantic palette of sky-blue delphiniums, pale-pink peonies and phlox fills the beds alongside pea-flowered *Indigofera heterantha*, *Hibiscus syriacus* White Chiffon, and roses in full bloom. Ask Fiona for her favourites, and the names come thick and fast. ‘*Rosa x odorata* ‘Mutabilis’ and *R. x odorata* ‘Bengal Crimson’ for their summer-long flowers and standard Crocus Rose for its scent,’ she says, also naming dark-red *R. ‘Tuscany Superb’* and apricot *R. ‘Keith Maughan’*.

The garden sits neatly on a level half acre, is blessed with a light sandy loam and, although north east facing, is surprisingly sunny in its aspect. While shade-tolerant hostas, geraniums, alchemilla and spring-flowering perennials clad the soil at the foot of the house, these soon give way to sunnier planting. A green-oak pergola runs across the back of the garden, strewn with several varieties of clematis, roses and wisteria, which are cleverly orchestrated to flower in sequence. Beyond this, two arched gated doorways in the wall offer a glimpse of the river.

The garden looks so right here; sitting so comfortably in its setting that you could be forgiven for thinking it has looked much this way since the house was built. But when Fiona and her family first came here, it was a very different picture. ‘The garden lacked sightlines, as there was a greenhouse in front of the kitchen, and a hornbeam hedge at right angles to the house obscured the view,’ says Fiona. ‘It was heavy on evergreens, lacked climbers and had almost no herbaceous planting.’ Work on the garden began in 2006. A shaded concrete terrace came out, as did much of the existing planting, though specimen trees

TOP The Gothic-arched door is framed with *Rosa* ‘New Dawn’ and ‘Compassion’, and *Clematis* ‘Étoile Violette’ and ‘Minuet’. **CENTRE** Fiona has 60 terracotta pots on the terrace. Her recipes contain pelargoniums, marguerite daisies and bacopa.

LEFT The double borders contain *Delphinium* ‘Nimrod’, *Astrantia major* ‘Star of Billion’, and many roses, including ‘Tuscany Superb’, ‘Macmillan’ and ‘Dortmund’. **OPPOSITE** Fiona designed the pergola to match the style of the house.

including a 'fabulous' *Liquidambar styraciflua*, *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata' and *Catalpa bignonioides* remained.

The garden's new structure was determined by its most dominant feature: the walls. These taper towards the river, an irregularity Fiona has cleverly disguised with triangular planting beds at the garden's outer edges. 'It is so much easier to design for clients. When it's your own garden, you can tend to dither,' she says.

Nonetheless, in the spring and summer of 2006, Fiona worked

decisively. Paths leading out from the house towards the water's edge were laid with York-stone paving reclaimed from Accrington City Council. Stone arrived in three lorry loads and, in places, still bears faint traces of yellow paint from its urban past. Fiona designed and had built a sturdy pergola to reflect the monastic feel of the house. Borders were expertly planted and

an Alitex greenhouse installed. Here, plants are propagated and overwintered, ensuring a steady supply of colourful pots for the terrace each year. Fiona also grows annuals and delphiniums from seed.

The finished effect is wonderful. Structured yet soft, manicured yet abundant, with painstaking attention to detail, from the pale-grey Dulux 'Goosewing' painted garden bench and

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gates to the well-weeded borders and thoughtfully chosen plants and pots. Here, you'll find many of the elements you might expect of a grand country garden - formal lawn, pergola walkway, elegant borders, spring and winter gardens, veg beds - all condensed into a half-acre plot. 'I suppose it is traditional in many ways,' says Fiona, 'and it's high maintenance.'

In summer, she is out here after work in the evenings and at weekends, armed with buckets, sharp Felco Model No. 2 secateurs and the radio; feeding, spraying, staking, deadheading and cutting back. 'There is no messing about. I cut to a node, and excise any messy growth while I'm there,' she says.

When Fiona and her family moved out of London, her one stipulation was that they find a garden with a view. 'We didn't find

that, but the river here more than compensates,' she says. It certainly does. Standing here on a warm sunny day, with

the River Stour meandering along the back, this romantic garden is simply perfection.

Watergate House, King Street, Fordwich, Canterbury, Kent CT2 0DB. Tel: +44 (0)1227 719584. Open for the NGS on Sat 14 June, 2-6pm. For more, see www.cadwallader.co.uk

Fiona's tips on growing roses ►



WATERGATE HOUSE NOTEBOOK



A SECRET GARDEN

The walls around the garden at Watergate House conceal the wonder of the garden within, but tantalising glimpses can be seen over the top, and scrambling roses, making a beautiful bid for freedom, hint at floral abundance just a stone's throw away.

GARDEN CHALLENGES

FLAT: The garden here is completely flat, which means changes in level must be achieved through tall (staked) planting, as well as garden features such as the pergola and enormous Tuscan urn, which was bought by a friend, but deemed too large, and shipped down to Watergate to provide a focal point.



SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

The custom-made pergola has been fashioned out of large curved trunks of green oak, producing a somewhat irregular shape, in keeping with the age of the garden walls and the house. The whole structure, save concrete footings, is made of wood.

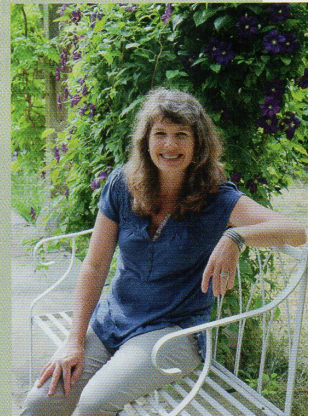
WITHIN THESE WALLS

The Grade II*-listed walls at Watergate House are a mixture of Caen stone, flint and so-called 'puddingstone'. The Gothic archways to the river are original, though Fiona designed the wrought-iron gates and had them built by a local craftsman.



TIPS ON GROWING ROSES FROM FIONA CADWALLADER

- **Buy bareroot plants** from Peter Beales Roses and David Austin Roses in winter, and plant with mycorrhizal fungi such as Rootgrow to give plants a good start. It's cheaper than buying containerised plants, and there is a much wider range available.
- **Delphiniums and hardy geraniums**, alchemilla, peonies, nepeta and sweet William are all good companion plants for roses, but there is always a lull in August. For this time of year, plant *Strobilanthes wallichii*, *Gillenia trifoliata*, rudbeckia and cosmos.
- **Mulch in mild spells** over the winter with three inches of Levington Soil Conditioner plus home-made compost every second year. This suppresses weeds and gives good soil texture. Feed roses with Toprose in spring.
- **Prune your roses in autumn** to prevent wind rock, and then do a tidy-up prune in spring. Taking a scalpel blade, I cut into the bark above a node to promote new growth lower down.
- **Go outside every day**, observe the planting and make notes, to plan changes for the following year.



ALSO IN THE AREA

If you are visiting the garden at Watergate House, Fiona suggests you also try:

- **GARDEN Goodnestone Park Gardens** Historic 15-acre plot eight miles from Fordwich. Fiona's favourite garden in the area to visit. Goodnestone, Kent CT3 1PL. Tel: +44 (0)1304 840107. www.goodnestoneparkgardens.co.uk
- **NURSERY Madrona Nursery** Original plants beautifully looked after, and unusual choices. Pluckley Road, Bethersden, Kent TN26 3DD. Tel: +44 (0)1233 820100. www.madrona.co.uk
- **FOOD The Fordwich Arms** Visible from Watergate House. Serves home-cooked, local food and comes highly recommended. King Street, Fordwich, Kent CT2 0DB. Tel: +44 (0)1227 710444. www.fordwicharms.co.uk