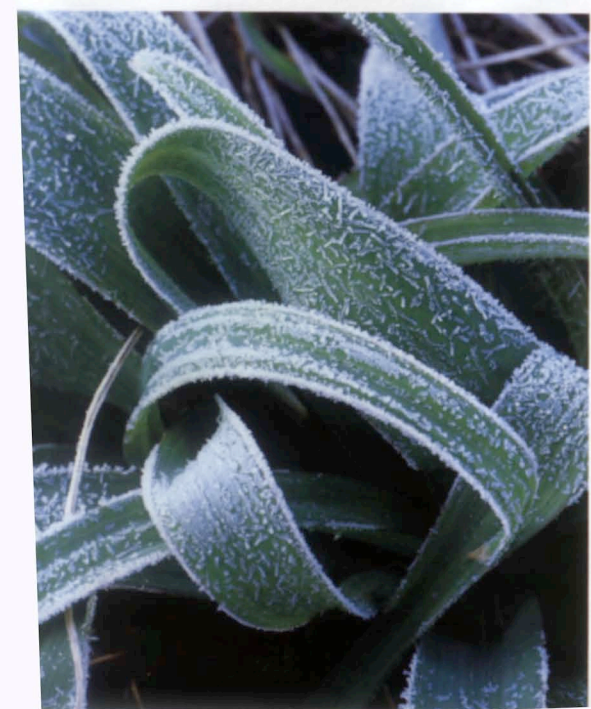
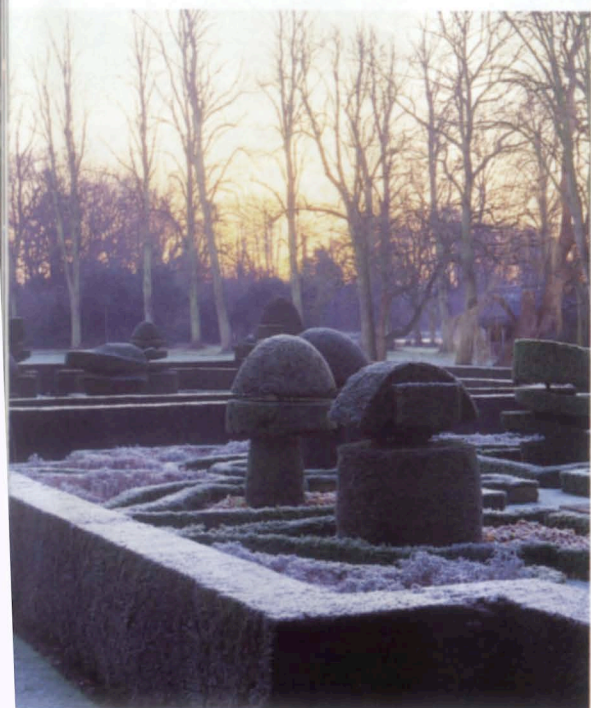


# Frozen *in* time

A dusting of frost picks out the shapes and silhouettes that characterise the formal gardens at Great Fosters in Surrey to glittering and bewitching effect

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To enter Great Fosters you must arrange yourself carefully. First you must duck your head, then lift your foot up and over the threshold of a narrow opening in the huge and ancient oak door. It is only then, through the mullion windows of this Tudor manor – now a luxury hotel – that you catch your first tantalising glimpse of the formal gardens beyond it; a view of clipped box and yew, of long vistas, and of a lime avenue leading to an intriguing grass amphitheatre.

On a winter morning, you can see the patterns of the knot garden at their best. The sun throws long shadows across the grass from the skeletal, bare-branched trees, sharpening the silhouettes of the immaculately primped hedges and topiary. Dusted with snow or frost, their effect is magical. Marking the entrances to the knot garden are four clipped peacocks. Elsewhere, the topiary shapes are more abstract – some seem to mimic chess pieces while others have an identity all of their own.

The history of these gardens is multi-layered and full of drama – disaster has threatened them more than once in recent decades, but happily there has always been someone there to rescue them. Most recently, their champion has been the visionary landscape architect, Kim Wilkie, who was brought in by the current owners, the Sutcliffe family, in 1990 to nurse this historic landscape back to life. It was once part of the Royal Windsor Forest and, although successive generations had done what they could to conserve it, the garden was steadily falling into decline. In the 1970s, the new M25 motorway had succeeded in lopping off a third of the historic lime avenue and, in the late 1980s, Great Fosters was hit by the terrible storms that afflicted southern England. With the support of English Heritage and the Surrey Gardens Trust, Kim and the owners embarked on a programme of restoration that has already taken 15 years and is set to continue.

Kim has both breathed new life into the original gardens and ensured their natural development by devising new features. The first of these is a terraced grass amphitheatre, six metres high, which now forms the centrepiece at the end of the lime avenue. Not only does it help to tempt guests out to explore the garden, it also forms part of a one-kilometre-long planted earth embankment, which screens the gardens from the drone of M25 traffic. This year, another two areas of land sculpting have taken shape either side of one of ▷

THIS PAGE Built of red brick and stone, the house dates back to the 16th century. The knot garden that lies just outside was laid out in 1918. OPPOSITE PAGE A broad avenue edged with lime trees leads from the Saxon moat to the grass amphitheatre











the main paths – a grassy hollowed-out dell on one side, interlinking with a four-metre high 'prospect mound' on the other that affords great views back over the formal gardens towards the hotel. A large lake has been created, edged with willows, alders and dogwoods, and the acquisition of another 14 hectares of land in 2000 has meant that many native trees, including oak, field maple, ash and birch, are being replanted to capture the original wooded spirit of the place.

The oldest feature at Great Fosters is the Saxon moat that borders the knot garden on three sides. This, along with the adjoining sunken rose garden and pergola walk, form part of the acclaimed Arts and Crafts garden created in 1918 by architect WH Romaine-Walker and his partner Gilbert Jenkins. Their brief then was "to design such a garden as would recreate the old-world charm of the place and be interesting year-round". They certainly succeeded and, even today, the gardens rely far more on structure than they do on colour. Foliage and form are vitally important and are brought into strong relief on frosty days. In the beds defined by the box hedging, there is a good mixture of silver-leaved foliage plants, including 'Hidcote' lavender, purple sage, and *Convolvulus cneorum*, all of which stand up well in the winter. In summer, they are backed up by Geranium 'Johnson's Blue', *Alchemilla mollis* and nepeta.

This area looks cared for now, but when head gardener Russell Dixon and his team arrived in 1991, recruited by Kim to get the restoration work underway, it was a different story. "The yew hedges were two metres high, and nearly as wide, so you could barely squeeze down the pathways," Russell says. "And the box hedge patterns had all but disappeared in two of the squares. We had to cut the yews back drastically, but we didn't want to stress them too much and risk losing them, so we did one side at a time, feeding and watering well until the first side was shooting, then cutting back the other side the following year."

Hotel guests present staff with other challenges, too, such as trying to persuade them not to push their empty glasses into the hedges when they have had a few drinks. "We pulled out hundreds when we were cutting back to the trunks, including some real antiques dating back years," Russell says. Just one of the more unexpected surprises associated with restoring an historic garden. 🐾  
Great Fosters, Stroude Road, Egham, Surrey TW20 9UR (01784 433822; [www.greatfosters.co.uk](http://www.greatfosters.co.uk)).

**BOTTOM LEFT** The archery pavilion at the edge of the moat was restored in English oak with a thatched roof. **ALL OTHER PICTURES** Striking topiary shapes are surrounded by neatly clipped box hedges filled with silver-leaved plants such as 'Hidcote' lavender







#### **SPECIAL OFFER**

From 10 November 2005 to 28 February 2006 inclusive, a two-night break at Great Fosters will cost only £99 per person per night (minimum two-night stay). This special rate includes a luxury double room, VAT, breakfast and *table d'hôte* dinner on both nights, plus a bottle of Champagne. To book, call 01784 433822 and quote CL offer. This offer is subject to availability, excludes Saturdays and public holidays, and is not to be used in conjunction with any other offer or event.