



THE RURAL idyll, celebrated in art, literature and music, has been, for many centuries, a powerful imaginative force and there is probably no village in England, which so completely exemplifies it as Selborne in Hampshire. More than 200 years ago, it was home to the Rev Gilbert White, who could be called the father of English nature study, and this beautifully set village has retained much of its outward appearance ever since, even if the character of the inhabitants has inevitably changed with the times.

Best known for *The Natural History of Selborne*, a collection of letters to two naturalist friends published in 1788, White was also an accomplished and very curious gardener. He lived from the age of nine in 1730 until his death in 1793 at The Wakes, a house on the main street, and it was here that he made a garden. It looks out to the west across parkland to the famous Selborne Hanger, a wonderful steep-sloped beech woodland. This was, and is, owned by Magdalen College, Oxford but that did not deter White, an Oriel man, from cutting a zigzag path through it, and another, called The Bostal, along its flank. By building two ha-has at the end of the garden, he made a landscape park in miniature, which included a wooden cut-out figure of Hercules, as well as a revolving wine pipe (wooden port barrel) on a mound, which was made with earth from the ha-ha diggings. In the garden, there was a small wooden classical "alcove" and a number of other popular 18th-century features, including a "quincunx" (that is five set out as on a dice) of firs, a number of circular "basons" in which he grew flowers, a serpentine path through newly introduced American shrubs, and a fruit

wall. He grew masses of vegetables in the ground called Turners, such as potatoes, which were just becoming popular for human consumption. Most innovative was his "melonry", about which he often wrote, which consisted of "hot beds" of new manure under glass frames, the only way in those days of cultivating these frost-tender fruits. In front of the house he planted "Six Quarters" – six rectangular beds full of cottage flowers.

The Wakes has been owned for some years by a charitable trust, which opened it as a museum dedicated to Gilbert White as well as to Frank Oates, the explorer botanist. It is also dedicated to Capt Lawrence Oates, who accompanied Capt Scott to the South Pole, and uttered one of the most heroic one-liners in history: "I am just going outside and may be some time." The reason for this is that the house was bought in 1953 and endowed as a memorial to White with money from a trust fund set up by an Oates descendant.

In the early Nineties, under the direction of Kim Wilkie, the garden historian and landscape architect, a masterplan was drawn up for the renovation of park and garden. Begun in 1995 and 70 per cent funded by Lottery money, this included reinstating a wood-like fibreglass Hercules and a Portuguese wine barrel in the park. The 18th-century garden inside the ha-has was also restored by removing its Edwardian features and using planting lists and precise information gleaned from White's *Journals* and his *Garden Kalendar* by David Standing, the head gardener. The Six Quarters have been reinstated, though not in front of the house as in White's time, but beyond the fruit wall on

ground acquired in Victorian times. These are full of his favourite hollyhocks, gallica roses, lychnis, sparges, bellflowers, pinks, sweet rocket, clary and love-in-a-mist, and are charmingly cottagey in atmosphere. Turners is looked after by another erudite enthusiast, Laurie Woods, who cultivates vegetables such as skirret and Good King Henry which White grew, and has even erected the oiled "paper house" which was used to shelter seedlings in cold springs. Much of the work in the garden (for even the head gardener is part-time) is done by a team of volunteers, the so-called "Wakes Weeders".

The restoration of the garden was Phase One. Phase Two consisted of equipping a 16th-century Hampshire barn, moved to the park some years before from nearby Weston Patrick, as a field studies centre for students of all ages. This was officially opened by the Prince of Wales last month. Phase Three will be the restoration of The Wakes next winter.

The care and faithfulness to the spirit of White, with which the garden at The Wakes has been restored, is a clear sign of the esteem in which Gilbert, this poor, modest, but endlessly curious and humorous curate, is held even now. On a sunny summer's day, it is a place of immemorial serenity and great charm. *

The Wakes at Selborne is open daily 11am-5pm, 1 January-24 December; admission £4.50, concessions £4, children £1. Unusual, traditional plants are for sale. Parking is limited, so avoid busy times if possible; there is free parking behind the Selborne Arms. For further information call 01420 511275. Selborne is on the B3006, south-east of Alton.

Time warp: The Wakes in Selborne, Hampshire, below

As nature intended

The rural idyll of yesteryear still exists, says **Ursula Buchan**. Just look at The Wakes garden in Selborne