

Introduction

Christopher Woodward, 2018

This journal records the artist Charlotte Verity's visits to the garden of Ronald Blythe, between September 2016 and July 2017. It is a garden planted by the painter John Nash, and inherited by Blythe, a writer. In 1943 Nash came to live at Bottengoms, an old farmhouse under the edge of Wormingford, a village in the valley of the River Stour between Sudbury and the muddy flats of its estuary. This Journal, and exhibition, are a portrait of Blythe at 96 – and a record, for one purpose of the Garden Museum is to preserve memories and images of the precious gardens of now, as in time they will change or vanish.

Nash first painted the Stour on a holiday in 1929. Like his elder brother Paul, he fought on the Western Front; *Over The Top* (Imperial War Museum) depicts the 1st Battalion of the Artists' Rifles at Cambrai on 30 December 1917 advancing as slowly as the snow muffles their death. 68 of Nash's 80 comrades were killed or wounded that day, and later when, snowed in, he painted at the windowsill it is hard not to imagine the ponds and dips echoing that sacrificed landscape. In the summer of 1919, he painted *The Cornfield* (Tate) which Blythe sees as a 'thankful relief' at living again.

Christine, his wife, was half-German and studied at The Slade School of Art, like Charlotte. In 1943 she discovered Bottengoms, empty for eight years. The hedges beside the track from the village had become a tunnel overhead, and nettles grew up above the ground-floor windows. 'There is little more daunting than a ruined farm', writes Blythe in his memoir, *The Time by the Sea*, and this wreck was jettisoned of its cargo of fields and woods. Christine made the rooms; John declared the soil would do for 'the garden of his dreams'.

Later, John declared that he wished he'd been a musician first, a gardener second, painter third. This was a garden of plants, not design, many from Clarence Elliott of the Six Hills Nursery at Stevenage, whose catalogues he illustrated. But it was also enthused by visits to his neighbour Cedric Morris's garden of rare bulbs and intoxicating exotic plants; the two artists taught botanical art at Flatford Mill, with a flower picked from the garden and placed in a jam jar. The flower was given as the class prize.

The Nashes lost their only child and it was Blythe who read to a half-blind Christine in the winters and dug for John in the summer. Christine, then John died in 1977. Bottengoms was bequeathed to Blythe but he still talks of 'John's garden' as if it has been lent while the owner is away.

I first visited with Andrew Lambirth, the curator of the Cedric Morris retrospective, with which *In Their Garden* coincides. Blythe was Morris's executor, composed his epitaph 'Artist Plantsman', and wrote of the intoxication of Benton End ('a dangerous whiff of garlic') to a Suffolk boy. 'Those are Cedric's' he said, pointing to the geraniums on John's painting table, beside a Christmas-fresh panettone, a new push-button telephone, a cat, and apples from the garden of the Rolfes, 'who live in the same house', he says, cheeks a russet glow, 'from which an ancestor who sailed to Virginia and married Pocahontas.'

No one I've ever met has lived so much in other people as Blythe; every object contains a story and

when he talks of friends, the dead are as close as the living. But you also know that if no one ever came down the lane again days would continue in exactly the same routine.

Blythe is most widely known for *Akenfield* (1969), a book in which he put into words the memories of a Suffolk village. A new generation has discovered Blythe through his column in *The Church Times*. Line for line, no writer alive catches the countryside as beautifully as Blythe. I say 'discovered' because he appears to have no interest in where his books are on sale, or not (and you have to spot for yourself *The Benson Medal*, which is as grand as a writer gets) but once his voice has come into your life you must have the books beside you.

The only qualification for admission to Blythe's world is to be impressionable, uninterested in any achievement that can be put on a CV, and to be 'nice', a word which in Blythe's voice reverberates with evaluation. You'd never know that the photographer, Kurt Hutton, referred to here was a German cavalryman decorated at Verdun, a Jewish emigrée in the 1930s and a pioneering star of *The Picture Post*, took photographs you would certainly recognise. He is just there, in the room.

Collecting the milk bottles on gate piers at the top of the track, the curator in me awakes and worries: 'what will happen in the afterlife?' The house and site have been bequeathed to *The Essex Wildlife Trust*. Safe, in one sense. But how do you pass on the atmosphere of a garden, and the stories and friendships embedded in the seed-heads of plants? How do you preserve a voice straying between the ash tree and the spring? It requires an artist who is also a gardener and writer, who would understand the nature of Bottengoms as a place sacred to the pact by which gardeners share, give and pass on. No one can own a flower, as Nash and Blythe understood in giving away the art class flower. Verity understands too, what an artist cannot own.

Charlotte was the first Artist in Residence in the Museum's garden over 12 months in 2010, a story told in an earlier journal. (At the time, we had no idea that the design of our new extension would take such a shape that the knot garden would need to be replaced, so that work is all the more precious a record). She painted at Bottengoms for three intense periods in September 2016 and April and July 2017 - a total of three or four weeks staying nearby. The watercolours are close to monochromatic, and on heavy sheets of paper. Some days Blythe appears to talk with her, and some days he is just glimpsed on a path.

Blythe remembers a last conversation with Nash:

'As I stood with John on the autumn grass, he murmured "The garden is going. I am going". Then, "what will you do down here when I am gone?" Prevent the garden from going. Write. Continue. What else?'

Blythe continued with the same tools. And as a writer he made it his life's speciality to record the people to whom he listened, from friends such as Benjamin Britten and E. M. Forster by whom he was elected a favourite protégé, to John and Christine, to the labourers and widows of *Akenfield* and the bell-ringers who bring through *The Church Times* columns.

Cedric Morris once wrote 'only a modest man can paint a flower'. This work is a gift by Charlotte as an artist, a writer, and a person, through which this precious, obscure garden will continue after Ronnie has put away his old friend's tools.