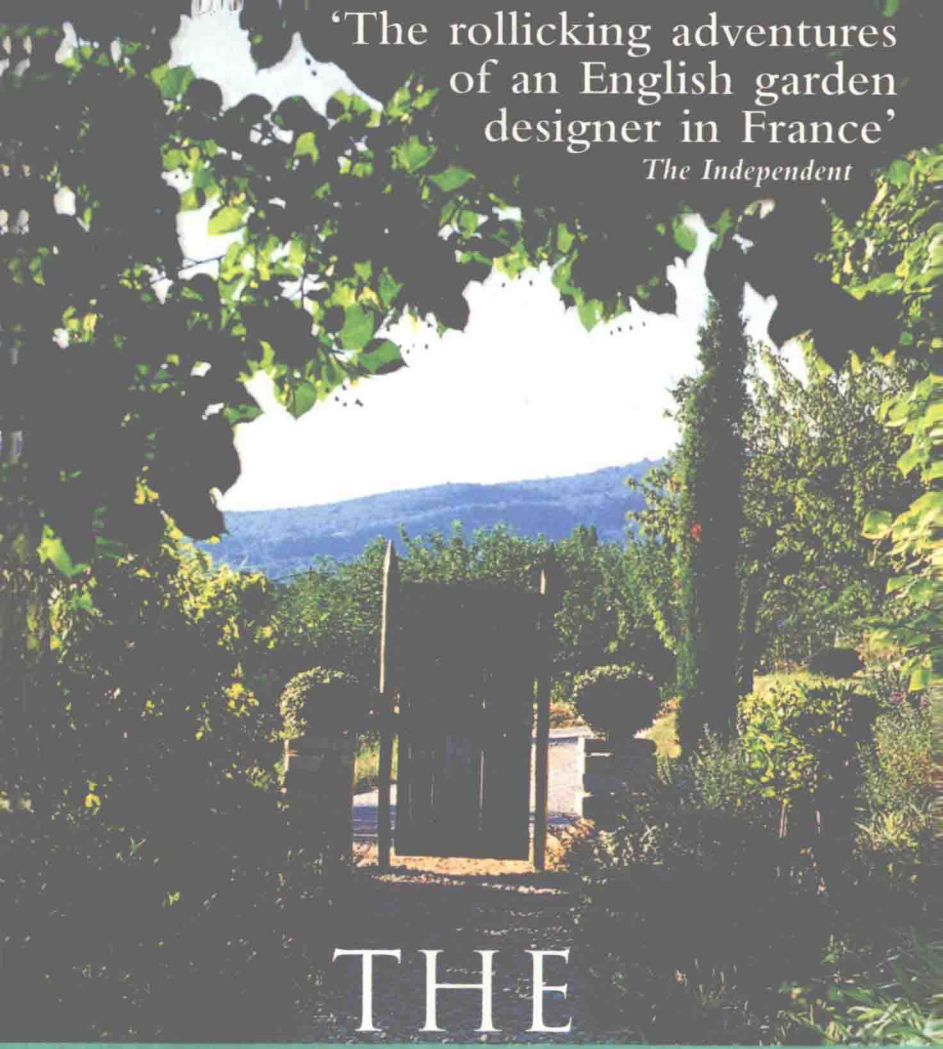

'The rollicking adventures of an English garden designer in France'
The Independent

THE LUBERON GARDEN

ALEX DINGWALL-MAIN

The Luberon Garden

A Provençal Story of Apricot Blossom, Truffles and Thyme

ALEX DINGWALL-MAIN

Illustrations by Don Grant

EBURY PRESS
LONDON

This edition first published in 2002

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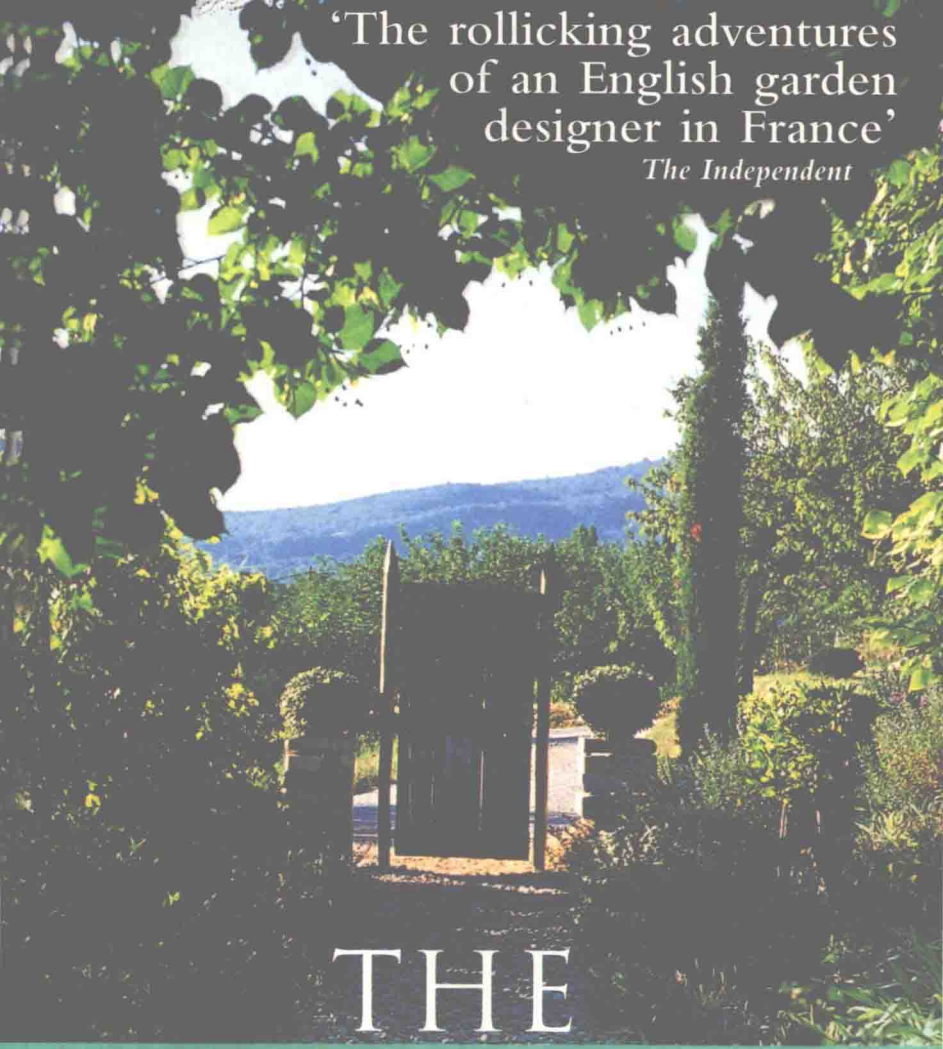

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THE LUBERON GARDEN

ALEX DINGWALL-MAIN

'Riveting stuff with plenty of horticultural detail'
Saturday Times

The bestselling adventures of a Provençal gardener.

Alex Dingwall-Main left London in the early nineties for the Luberon and a new way of gardening. Having established his business, started a new family and worked out the best way to eat a truffle, he thought he could take anything Provence could throw at him. Until he came acr énerbes...

A b extremely
fu bsession.

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Gardening/Travel

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Contents

Thank You

R. Archer-Baronio, R. Baronio, G. Clark, T. Dingwall-Main
P. Eddy, D. Goodwin, F. Goodwin, D. Grant, H. MacDonald
P. Micou, A. Ravenscroft, V. Souffron, S. Waldon

Author's Note: This is a true story. However, for the sake of a better narrative, events have sometimes been relayed out of order. The names and identifying characteristics of many people and places have been changed to protect privacy.

原书缺页

原书缺页

Introduction

There are enough books about Provence to make any self-respecting coffee table throw up its legs in submission. Quite apart from the library of travel books and best sellers, there are stacks of lavish photographic books loaded with sensational shots covering everything from the simple to the ornate. Large-format pages of medieval villages, lavender fields and olive orchards, of markets, churches and swooping countryside. There are books on interiors and books on cooking with local recipes, on truffles, and Provençal herbs, crafts and antiques, wines and wild boar. There are architectural books dissecting the vernacular of little cabins and chateaux, with farmhouses and manor houses in between, and there are, of course, gardening books. Lots of them. Usually accompanied by a barrow full of glossy pictures with quite-often questionable captions.

This particular gardening book is different. It has no photographs, and only a handful of drawings to help tell the tale. It is a story about how a wonderful little garden was restored and recreated, sometimes against the odds, on the slopes of the Luberon

valley, in the village of Ménerbes, deep in the heart of Provence. It is also the story of a garden designer and his family taking up the challenge of moving from London and setting up tools in this much-loved corner of the Mediterranean.

Despite the threat of overexposure, it remains a region of rare beauty, seducing most that visit to return time and time again and occasionally to put down roots. It is quite different from all other parts of France and has always held a fascination for outsiders. History shows evidence that the Greeks and Romans, the Moors and marauders of the north have all left their stamp. It is also a country of climatic extremes; fiery summer temperatures climb to a neck-sweating 40°C and in winter can whack down to a finger-numbing -15°.

I had been running a landscaping practice for some twenty-five years, and although my work was widespread, I was based in London. I had recently been magnetised by a beautiful English girl called Nicky. She was hundreds of years younger, but none the less it easily led to marriage, and I immediately set about lobbying her to move out of London.

'We could find something not too far away,' I promised, knowing that she wasn't ready to drop the high-fashioned, high-powered overdrive life of a girl about town and turn into a green Land Rover-driving, deep-Dorset country lass.

'Perhaps St Albans?' I suggested, knowing nothing of the area, other than it was close to London. Being from Scotland anything south of the border was a bit of a tragedy.

'St Tropez, more like,' she replied.

Thus started a chain of discussions that moved us from a

possible near-suburban existence just outside London, to an old farmhouse in the South of France.

The reasoning behind moving to this part of Europe was two-fold. First, we would be going to an area where it was on the cards I would find work. There was a lot of development of old properties going on, carried out by a cosmopolitan crowd, many of whom had spectacularly successful careers. Second, the weather was good. If you were going to move, why not move closer to the sun?

There was going to be a steep and slippery learning curve. Not only about language, culture and being without old friends, but about plants as well. It is a difficult and challenging place to get a hold on horticulture.

Gardening, generally speaking, tends to catch up with people a bit later in life. It struggles to fit into youth culture much beyond an occasional crop of marijuana being furtively grown in the allotments of leisure, unless of course it has been chosen as a profession. However, as first homes are acquired, and children born, the benefits of this pastime become increasingly apparent. Therapeutic and educational, gardening is deeply instilled in the human condition. There are people who, denied the luxury of space, will grow a runner bean plant out of an old baked bean tin just for the brilliant scarlet flower it brings to a window sill.

I believe that those who bemoan not having green fingers have simply not opened the doors of plant perception. Having green fingers, surely, is nothing more or less than a simple understanding that plants, in all their manifestations, are a living entity, and as such require care and attention in much the same way as humans and

animals. By looking after them, giving what is needed, removing what is harmful, they respond and reward the gardener, amateur and professional alike. Speaking to plants, however dotty it may sound to the uninitiated, is good practice. Plants probably have some kind of nervous system that reacts to the ether of thought, perhaps more than the literal spoken word. So if you are shy of being heard discussing the traumas of young buds leaving home, go telepathic.

It was exciting when the first commission came through. It put the first bolt into place, and gave us a glimmer of hope that we might be on the right track.

That dull distillery, which bottles up insecurity and sells it wholesale to the self employed, lingers deep in one's psyche. In my time I've been sucked up by success, and spat out by failure. I have spent lots of money I had and even more I didn't have, I've surfed on the wave of recognition and slumped behind the soulless folds of obscurity. Now, more balanced in my middle age, I play the game a little more wisely, my judgements are more considered and my awareness more consistent, but it never stops me from being flattered when someone invites me to step into the work arena with them.

New jobs or projects arrive by various channels: sometimes it might be a bit of editorial somebody has read, or a well-placed card in the palm of a conversation, but more probably it comes by word of mouth. Someone who knows what I do, or has heard about it, passes on the information to a friend, who in turn calls the office, activating the first round of what might turn into a commission. The initial conversation is best kept to the point, a quick outline of requirements given, a time and date for the inaugural meeting, telephone and fax numbers exchanged and that's it. No need to

discuss parenting problems or how unexpectedly small the world is or, come to that, money. It is ill advised to give a fee quote over the telephone having not even seen the site, and anyway the first meeting is free. Client and designer need to sniff each other out, need to find a common link in some way. If you're going to work together, develop ideas and cash cheques, it is important to like one another's attitudes at least and, if a mutual sense of humour emerges, so much the better. First impressions may count, but it's the portfolio that either inspires confidence or brings the meeting rather haltingly to a close.

Not all designer/client relationships are made in heaven and, despite reputations being intact, and character references as good as any dating agency could produce, things can still go wrong. I once met an Indian gentleman who asked me to help him with his garden. He lived in a part of north London where the streets are paved with gold Rolls Royces, where the architects manage to juggle Spanish Inquisition, Indian Empire and neo-Georgian influences with some success, and the planning departments have rubber-stamped the development of expensive lots of land with dubious global taste.

The first meeting was a little bizarre. I was ushered into the front of his brand new limousine, apparently to be taken round the corner to see another of his houses, or gardens. Unfortunately because I am very tall and the Indian's wife very small, I was caught by cramp as I tried to bend my legs into the foot well of the passenger side. Fumbling for the adjustment lever, I quickly realised that everything was electrical and the pre-set positions of the seat were logged in with an unbreakable code. My prospective client, who had not yet fully acquainted himself with the upgrades and

mechanical assets of his new machine, was equally busy. He was jiggling the master switches on the other side in the vain hope of helping me. In fact he was cancelling out all my promising work, pushing me inexorably towards the dashboard like the villain in a Bond movie. My mounting distress evidently changed his mind about going anywhere and, hauling me from the wreckage, blissfully releasing my legs back towards a more dignified position, he guided me through his palatial abode and out onto the terrace.

There, pressed up close to the industrial-sized sliding glass doors of his deep-piled sitting room, skulked a dying swimming pool. Like many old pools in Britain it had suffered badly from unkind winters and was in need of a total overhaul. 'As it obviously needs to be virtually rebuilt, why don't we relocate it further away from the house and perhaps screen it from view a bit?' I suggested.

'What!' he was incredulous. 'How will people know I have a swimming pool if they can't see it?'

His logic was faultless and my commission was rapidly heading down the malfunctioning filtering system. However with a little side-stepping, a few artful remarks about my fondness for alabaster and precious metal fountains, a leaning towards Buddhism and my absolute ease in the company of a briefcase full of cash, we progressed cautiously into a commission.

It was easier with The Owners in Ménerbes.

Richard Owner, an American Italian and his Scottish-born wife, Ros, live mostly in New York, but for some twelve years they have also owned a small house in the medieval town of Ménerbes, about 40 kilometres south-east of Avignon.

This ancient ridge-top, stone-built village with a population of