



Up the Garden Path Rye to Cranbrook

Kent has long been known as the Garden of England, acknowledging the favourable soil and climate for agricultural production. These conditions equally suit the cultivation of domestic gardens and this part of Kent and Sussex contains a surprising variety of gardens to visit. Each garden reflects the idiosyncrasies of the individual characters who created them as well as the constraints of their distinctive locations.

If only one excuse was needed to leave Rye on a garden trail, it would doubtless be to see **Sissinghurst Castle** – a couple of miles from Cranbrook – the most visited gardens in the county. Now owned by the National Trust, the gardens were originally designed, laid out and planted by the poet and novelist Vita Sackville West and her husband the diplomat and diarist Harold Nicolson. Wreaking a magical synthesis of their contrasting styles Harold, a classicist, and Vita, a romantic, created a series of gardens reflecting differing moods. An ingenious blend of formality and spontaneity produced an unexpected harmony that mirrored their unconventional but enduring marriage.

An astonishing diversity of garden styles can be enjoyed with only a few diversions from the main roads that link Rye and Cranbrook. Perhaps the most unusual is a very special garden in the bleak wilderness of **Dungeness**. Under the brooding, looming presence of a nuclear power station, amongst the fishermen's cottages and converted railway carriages randomly scattered over a shingle desert, Derek Jarman, the film director, fashioned an extraordinary garden in a landscape where you would defy anything to grow. Pebbles, driftwood and other scavenged flotsam have been artfully placed amid the few peculiar plants – tough grasses, sea kale and poppies amongst them – that survive in this inhospitable environment. "There are no walls or fences," wrote Jarman "my garden's boundaries are the horizon." It is hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the haunting desolation of Dungeness and the ordered perfection and careful plantings at Sissinghurst.

Don't leave Rye without paying homage to E F Benson and his walled garden at **Lamb House**. Sadly, the Garden Room, scene of much bridge party intrigue in Tilling, was bombed during the War, and Lucia's "giardino segreto" was sold off many years ago but, like Miss Mapp, you can climb the Church Tower and try to catch a glimpse of the spot where Lucia performed her callisthenics "for those no longer young".

Another, perhaps better known Secret Garden is also in the vicinity. Frances Hodgson Burnett was inspired – presumably by a robin – at **Great Maytham Hall** in Rolvenden Layne. Also near Rolvenden is **Hole Park**, a garden that has benefited from being in the same family for many generations. Brilliantly conceived to capture seasonal delights such as acres of bluebells in the woods, wisteria trained to grow like giant umbrellas and banks of azaleas and rhododendrons in gorgeous vivid colours, Hole Park has the distinction of being the first major garden in Kent to join the National Garden Scheme.

Just down the road at Northiam is **Great Dixter** where the acclaimed horticulturist, Christopher Lloyd, took enormous pleasure in creating his personal paradise. The original 15th Century Wealden Hall House was extended and improved by Lutyens in 1910 and the garden was designed to encircle the house with a profusion of colour and ornament. Traditional notions of an English country garden with old-fashioned roses and neatly clipped topiary hedges are subverted by the injection of tropical flowers and shrubs. In a nice touch of symmetry, pebbles from Derek Jarman's garden have been used as the eyes and nose of Mr Lloyd's beloved dachshunds in a charming mosaic.

An innovative Garden Centre at **Merriments** in Hurst Green has become extremely popular in the area chiefly because of the way nursery plants are displayed within the context of a garden.

Just over the main A21 near Burwash is Rudyard Kipling's comfortable family home, **Bateman's**, where he lived from 1902 until his death in 1936. Several of his much-loved classics were written in the upstairs study overlooking the gardens, which contain a working watermill and a garage housing Kipling's splendid Rolls Royce motorcar. Many interesting artefacts from Kipling's travels can be seen along with portraits by his uncle, the pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne Jones.

Just up the road is Ticehurst and the tranquil gardens of **Pashley Manor**. The house, which is an exquisite mix of timbered Elizabethan and Georgian red brick, is not open to the public but the impressive setting and beautifully maintained grounds are well worth visiting. It is a garden that invites contemplation and an unhurried stroll amongst the trees and ponds where well placed sculptures delight and surprise in equal measure.

Across the A21 and a little further up is **Bedgebury Pinetum** with the largest collection of conifers in Europe and boasting Kent's tallest tree. A new Visitor Centre was opened in July 2006 by HRH the Countess of Wessex. Her godfather, Gerald Williams, is Chairman of the Friends of Bedgebury and owner, with his wife, Lindel, of **Marle Place** near Brenchley. Perfectly exemplifying the twin passions of art and gardening, Marle Place sets sculptural pieces and Gaudiesque mosaics in the sybaritic surroundings of a swimming pool, sunken pond, croquet lawn and wooded avenues.

Scotney Castle is the supreme fairytale incarnation of a moated castle, having been deliberately and cleverly ruined to create a magnificent folly in the garden of a handsome house. Within the Scotney Estate is **Finchcocks**, a fine Baroque-Georgian house containing an exceptional collection of keyboard instruments. Richard Burnett, the droll and multi-talented owner, wittily explains the evolution and provenance of the 104 instruments on show while illustrating his talk with examples of music for harpsichord, barrel organ and pianoforte. In her walled garden, Mrs Burnett has been inspired by London's lost pleasure gardens, to use only 18th century trees and plants to recreate a space suitable for al fresco musical entertainments.

Cranbrook is a great champion of gardening with an annual Safari celebrating local amateur gardens. The town has won several coveted awards from South East in Bloom including one for an imaginative roundabout at the junction between Cranbrook and its most celebrated garden, Sissinghurst.



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Itinerary Two

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