Celebrating the Great Dixter legacy

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One hundred years ago Nathaniel and Daisy Lloyd and their family moved into Great Dixter in Northiam, East Sussex. Their son, Christopher Lloyd, was to become one of the 20th century's most inspiring and original plantsmen and garden writers. His tradition of experimenting, innovating and constantly changing Great Dixter's world famous garden is being carried on today by his head gardener, Fergus Garrett and his team.

To celebrate this anniversary, two of the estate's most important historic buildings will open to the public for the first time on Tuesday 4 September.

The 500 year-old Great Barn at Great Dixter, one of the largest and most significant surviving medieval timber frame barns in the South East, and the adjoining three 19th-century brick built Oast Houses have been rarely seen by other than the farm workers and agricultural historians.

Their restoration is the culmination of the £8million four-year conservation project which has enabled the Great Dixter Charitable Trust to secure for today's gardeners - and horticulturists of the future- the extraordinary legacy atmosphere of Great Dixter, created by Christopher Lloyd, without compromising any of its character.

Dixter has long been a place of pilgrimage and a training ground for gardeners. The Dixter estate has been reunited with its early 20th-century model farm buildings, now converted into a teaching space, an outdoor study area, student accommodation and offices.

The conservation project has been funded by a £3.79m grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), substantial contributions from the Monument Trust, the Garfield Weston Foundation, Wolfson Foundation, Foyle Foundation, Royal Oak Foundation, Tanner Trust and the EU Rural Development Programme and alsosubstantial gifts from individual donors and the Friends of Great Dixter.

Fergus Garrett, Head Gardener and Chief Executive of the Great Dixter Charitable Trust, said: "The restoration of the Great Barn and Dixter Farm buildings has significantly enlarged Great Dixter for everyone to enjoy. When visitors come down the front path it will be to the Lloyd family's country estate as well as a much loved house and garden. The hugely generous funding, achieved through much hard work, has meant that we have been able to stop the front of Dixter House falling down and keep everyone who lives, works and visits it warm and dry throughout the year."

Great Dixter is famed for its meadow gardening and alluring combination of wildness, native flora and introduced species. The conservation of these atmospheric farm buildings re-enforces the crossover between garden and countryside and this now rivals the architecture and history of the internationally famed Grade I listed timber-frame house.

The fragile North Front of Great Dixter house has been repaired and the gable over the room which was Daisy's bedroom and later, Christopher Lloyd's, has been rebuilt. Removing defective plaster revealed that Sir Edward Lutyens, the architect, had used lead lining for insulation during his early 20th-century restoration of the medieval house.

The Great Dixter archive records correspondence between Nathaniel Lloyd and Lutyens about the extension of the

house in 1910. The archive is a rich and practically unknown architectural and horticulture resource including extensive family notebooks, letters and photographs that chronicle the development of the garden during the 20th century.

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of HLF, said: “Great Dixter is quintessentially English and an inspiration to gardeners, whatever their level of expertise. The estate is revitalised, with the garden looking as beautiful as ever, particularly as the summer draws to a close. The Heritage Lottery Fund is pleased to have funded the renovation of the Great Barn and Oast House which gives the site a much greater coherence and in so doing enables many more people to visit and learn about Christopher Lloyd’s enduring passion for our horticultural heritage.”

The barn still plays an essential role in the working of the estate and is used for making hurdles and fences for the garden. An outbuilding adjacent to the barn houses the new state-of-the-art biomass boiler fuelled by localwood to heat the house.

Fergus Garrett continues, “Christopher was one of the most inspirational figures of his generation. A brilliant gardener, a great friend to all us who shared his passion for Dixter, plants and life. Even though Dixter has now developed and moved forward it has not changed. He would have been proud.”

A curatorial project will continue to catalogue and conserve Great Dixter’s range of 17th and 18th-century furniture, textiles and ceramics acquired by Nathanial and Daisy Lloyd as well as Christopher’s collection of contemporary furniture and ceramics.

Fascinating material from the archive covering the development of the house and garden will be on show in an old charcoal store next to The Great Barn, and a film tour of the house showing areas not normally open to the public will be on display in The White Barn, a Grade II listed weatherboard building close to the entrance to the garden. Another short film will show footage of Christopher Lloyd.

Notes to editors

House and Gardens open until 28 October, Tuesday to Sunday. Gardens 11 am – 5 pm (last admission), House 2 - 5pm. Admission charges with Gift Aid (Standard charges in brackets) House and Gardens: Adult £10.45 (£9.50) Child £5.50 (£5) Gardens only: Adult £8.25 (£7.50), child £4.40 (£4).

In 1910 Nathaniel Lloyd, a retired business man with a fascination for old English timber and brickwork, bought the Dixter Estate, (not then Great Dixter) for £6,000. On the estate was a wreck of a timber framed 15th century house with no garden and a small farm on the edge of Northiam village. Nathaniel chose the great 20th-century architect Edward Lutyens to turn it into a house 'worthy of his ambitions'.

The old house was stripped of its internal additions. A ruined yeoman's hall house dating from the 16th century was found in the nearby village of Beneden was bought as scrap for its timber value of £75. It was dismantled, thetimbers numbered and re-erected at Dixter and the two buildings joined together with a new service wing and bedroom wing designed by Lutyens. Dixter became an architectural complex - essentially three houses in one.

To replace the cattle and cart sheds around the house to allow Lutyens to develop what has become the world famous Dixter gardens, Nathaniel Lloyd designed and built Dixter Farm.

The Grade II* listed Great Barn’s desolate and dusty atmospheric feel has not been lost by the sensitive repairs by local craftsmen to its rotting timbers, decaying joists and original wattle and daub. Its long high skyline still dominates the

north side of the garden with a steep catslide roof nearly sweeping down to nearly the ground and its distinctive oast cowls.

Inside, there is evidence of how the barn built by local noble Robert De Etchingham, was used to house livestock and store and process crops and how it was adapted to farming methods right through to the early 20th century.

Today the barn has seven bays and a two wagon ways, a medieval lean-to house for cattle was removed in the 19th century to make way for the oast house.

As visitors clamber over the barn's many thresholds they will see parts of the original medieval feeding trough, remnants of the original threshing floor, and the 18th C grain store which was built on blocks to protect the corn from rats. On the ground floor, the ceiling joists are inscribed with the date that hop picking began from the 1890s to the 1930s.

Christopher Lloyd formed the Great Dixter Charitable Trust in 2003, to inherit his estate and to carry on managing it in the same spirit of innovation. Following Christopher's death in 2006, Fergus's Garrett became Chief Executive of the Trust.

For the latter part of his life, the late Christopher Lloyd shared ownership of the Dixter estate with his niece. When he died in 2006, he left his share to the Great Dixter Charitable Trust.

Further information

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