INSPIRING STYLE

PARED-BACK HOMES FOR MODERN LIVING

DREAM SCHEMES
CHIC LONDON BEDROOM
ON-TREND BATHROOM
COUNTRY CONSERVATORY

ELEGANT BUYS
DOOR FURNITURE
NEW SOFAS
DRESSING TABLES

DECORATIVE FLOORING
IDEAS FOR CARPETS, TILES & WOOD

Colour confidence
BOLD LOOKS FOR EVERY SPACE
Hidden behind an aerodrome and aviation museum in Bedfordshire is one of Britain’s most unusual gardens, the Swiss Garden of Old Warden. It was created during the 1820s when Robert Henley Ongley, 3rd Baron Ongley, transformed nine acres of boggy ground into a magical garden, inspired by the new craze for holidaying in the Swiss Alps, which was then sweeping the nation.

During construction, Lord Ongley demolished cottages and rehoused workers in a village orné. His attention to detail was such that on occasion he asked his tenants to dress in a Swiss-style costume of top hats and red cloaks. The garden was entered through a subterranean passage. To emerge from the tunnel was to enter Ongley’s vision of Switzerland: gently undulating hills and mounds and valleys of lush green grass interspersed with pools of water criss-crossed by picturesque bridges. The landscape is composed of vistas, framed by wrought-iron arbours or sometimes shrubs and trees. Sprinkled across this Alpine scene are rustic thatched follies. The largest, almost in the centre of the garden, is the Swiss Cottage. Other features included an aviary, the Indian Kiosk, with its stained glass, and the magnificent Grotto, featuring a glazed dome.

Today the aviary is gone and the garden is entered through a gift shop, but the Terrace, Broadwalk and Pulhamite rock work, added by the wealthy industrialist Joseph Shuttleworth, who bought the estate in the 1872, remain. Now, thanks to a £2.8 million Heritage Lottery Fund donation, the restoration of the magnificent vistas and follies is complete and this Swiss Garden, believed to be the only surviving British example of its type with most of its features intact, is open for all to enjoy.
THE PLANTING
WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Three Champion trees (examples that are the largest of their species in the British Isles), including an unusual *Ilex aquifolium* ‘Argentea Marginata Pendula’ (weeping variegated holly).
- In spring, the garden is a riot of colour, courtesy of Kevin Hilditch, craftsman gardener. He spent October planting more than 4,000 bulbs to add to the existing stock of snowdrops, daffodils and narcissi (there are 2,000 daffodil bulbs alone), and for the first time introduced fritillaries, tulips and bluebells.
- From late spring through to summer, there are numerous varieties of rhododendron with azalea, staphylea (bladdernut trees), deutzia and kalmia.
- Newly planted dahlias, heleniums, rudbeckias, penstemons and astilbas, which will be in full swing from late summer to early autumn.
- Stunning autumnal colours on the east lawn, with the glorious *Acer palmatum* ‘Atropurpureum’ (purple Japanese maple), which contrasts beautifully with the golden robinia beside it.
- The large cast-iron arches that span the Broadwalk support the delicately scented *Rosa ‘Adélaïde d’Orléans’*, with its semi-double flowers, and the late-flowering *R. ‘Félicité-Perpétue’*, with its creamy white pom-pom blooms.

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP
- Bridges criss-cross tranquil pools of water throughout the garden; the Indian Kiosk was a later addition by Joseph Shuttleworth; the Grotto and Fernery with its distinctive glazed dome and porches.

1830s
Peter Frederick Robinson (architect of London’s Swiss Cottage) publishes his *Village Architecture*.

1872
Joseph Shuttleworth (1819–83), iron founder and industrialist, buys the Old Warden estate, which has fallen into disrepair.

1870s
Shuttleworth renovates the garden and makes several additions, including the Terrace and the Broadwalk.

1876
Pulhamite rock work is added to the garden, including in the Grotto, which was transformed into a Fernery with porches attached.
THE SWISS COTTAGE

This two-storey building, on top of a grassy mound, is the focal point of the garden. It was designed as a teahouse, with a hidden lower floor where food was prepared, and proved quite a hit with guests. In 1832, one visitor wrote: “We are all enchanted with the Swiss Cottage, which is quite fairyland.”

The Cottage was most likely inspired by the conservatories and summerhouses of Regency architect John Buonarotti Papworth, as illustrated in his *Hints on Ornamental Gardening*. He was employed at several houses in the vicinity during the 1820s. The building was possibly designed by Peter Frederick Robinson, who was the architect of London’s Swiss Cottage and one of the first to realise the picturesque potential of Alpine architecture.

The building has been rethatched using water reed from Norfolk, with finials gilded in 23 carat gold leaf, and copies of the original 1870s Shuttleworth chimney pots made to complete the roof. The thatch and golden finials of the Swiss Cottage can be seen replicated on the water pump in Old Warden village.

The underside of the chalet’s canopy is ornamented with a twig-work arrangement of dried seed heads, split teasels and Monterey pine cones in geometric patterns. This type of decoration is most usually found applied to rustic furniture and picture frames of this period, rather than as an architectural feature.

Conservation consultants Crick Smith and a specialist team of conservators from the University of Lincoln used locally sourced materials and only tools available in the Regency period to restore the Swiss Cottage’s intricate decoration to its former state. When they began exploring the origins of some of its decorative panels, the team was able to prove that some had been taken from the London Coliseum in Regent’s Park before it was demolished in 1874.

The Swiss Garden, The Shuttleworth Collection, Old Warden Aerodrome, Nr Biggleswade, Bedfordshire SG18 9EP, 01767 627933, shuttleworth.org. Adults, £10; children, free.

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1875-1880
Architect Henry Clutton replaces the earlier Ongley house with a building in Jacobean style.

1976
By now the garden is in a perilous state. Bedfordshire County Council leases it from the Shuttleworth Trust and begins to restore the gardens.

1981
On 27 April, the gardens are opened to the public for the first time.

2014
The gardens are reopened following a £3.5 million restoration, paid for by the Heritage Lottery Fund, Central Bedfordshire Council and the Shuttleworth Trust.