



## The Planting of a Hillside Garden

*Sue Finlay*

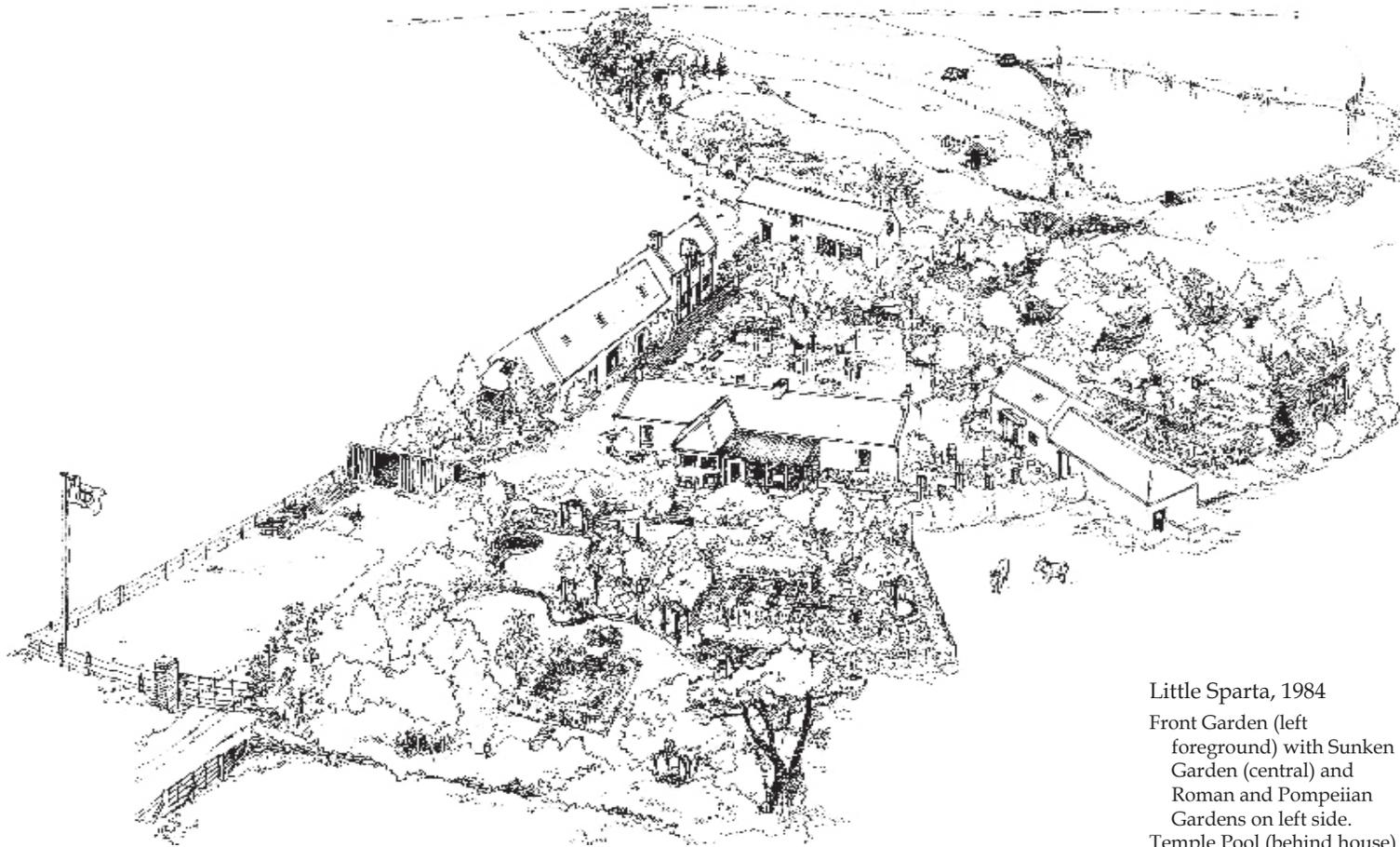
When we arrived at Stonypath the sheep were grazing at the door. You see the surrounding hills, the valley spread out below, the rough stoney track leading up to the small, isolated farm steading, the moors stretching out to the North behind with the old drove road leading over them. This old grassy road was not so ancient as the stone-age huts it passed by. All that remained of these were slightly raised circles of turf with doorways opening to the South-West looking towards Tinto, whose unmistakable form and solitary presence surely indicate a 'holy' hill. Moorland behind, green fields in front, no trees, no neighbours, a great deal of *weather*.

October 1966: Snow-blizzards arrive early, the days seem as dark as the nights. A small son to be tended, a new house to turn into a home. As I work in the kitchen I look out of the window and see shadowy figures digging a great wide muddy hole where the old midden used to be. I argue with the chief digger. "You can't make a pond there - all the water will come into the kitchen!"

Spring came [1967] and I can see myself digging the borders, sod by sod, in the weak March sunshine, with the baby in the pram nearby. There was no wheelbarrow so I made a great heap of stones and weeds. (This heap remained for some years a feature of the garden - until finally it was barrowed away.) I couldn't work for long at a time, there was always some other urgent task - but I realised that by just plodding on, sod by sod, eventually there would be something to show. I worked away like this till I was too big with our second baby to bend over the spade. I don't *remember* doing any planting. I only see the endless digging, but plants there must have been, probably annuals, grown from seed, and thrown-out off-cuts from friends and relations.

Ian meantime had made the pond that in my faithless eyes was to inundate the kitchen - it never did! He had by now dug another hole in the centre of the front garden. This time it was the makings of the sunken garden. I remember ordering the Spring Beauty Pinks that were to clothe its walls for many years to come. When the parcel containing them arrived I was away with the children and was terribly grieved that I missed their planting. Our first 'grown-up' plant order! For by this time plants had been procured, seeds had been sown, cuttings were donated, bits and pieces of herbaceous thinnings were coming our way and some idea of making two 'herbaceous borders' had taken root in my mind.

For a long time the garden at Stonypath consisted only in the area at the front of the house. For many years this area was a patch-work of cultivated



beds, mown paths, and uncultivated, wild places not yet tackled by fork or spade. Difficulties – Chiefly our relative poverty and my lack of time. The potential of ‘ground’ – Ian’s desire to make works for the ‘outdoors’, for gardens. Our ignorance of gardening,<sup>1</sup> of siting these works. The learning process. The love involved in this process. That loving absorption – the day to day tending of the poems. Their immediate surrounding areas, whether paved, grassy or covered with plants, always needed a lot of individual attention in the summer. When the marble sundial arrived, Ian proposed to place it in a central position.<sup>2</sup> It was surrounded by Rhubarb leaves! Again the sceptic raised her voice: “You can’t put a thing like that in a place like this!” (but you did, and eventually the place began to live up to *your* dreams).

Looking back on the infancy of a garden is like looking back on

infancy itself. Can everything really have been so small and tentative? Was there so little solidity? Was so much embodied in a dream of the future? The little trees we planted were to form a wind-break – for all those years that we looked *down* on them, how did we live with pure potential, so little actual? In any case we did plant: Spruce and Fir for shelter, Geans, Sycamores, Rowans, for sturdiness against the gales. Later we invested in Lawson’s Cypress to add an evergreen density. The first trees we planted had to be hauled up by ropes after the gales and lashed to the fence to keep them upright!

When we arrived at Stonypath there were two rows of Currant bushes on either side of the main path down the front garden: Black on the right and Red on the left. The Redcurrants still remain and crop prolifically nearly every year. The Black were not in such good condition. They remained many years, but finally they were uprooted and thrown out. That is, I attempted to throw them out and Ian rescued them and planted them in the wild hillside garden! Also bordering the original front garden were Lilac and Cotoneaster bushes. We could not bear to uproot them. They were the sign for ‘Garden’.

Two milestones in our early garden days: the day Stuart Mills came to visit with a year’s supply of old copies of *Amateur Gardening*; the day Gillian Johnstone brought us ten, yes ten, Rambler Roses. Some of those Roses are flourishing yet. What riches were embodied in those Roses. What dreams! Trellises were made for them, dung was carted for them, secateurs were procured for them.

Devouring the pages of *Amateur Gardening* I began to learn about how to

#### Little Sparta, 1984

- Front Garden (left foreground) with Sunken Garden (central) and Roman and Pompeian Gardens on left side.
- Temple Pool (behind house) in former midden.
- Temple of Apollo ((left of pool, with chimney).
- Temple of Philemon and Baucis (right of pool) with allotment at rear.
- Woodland Garden (beyond buildings).
- Note grotto, ‘present order’, goose hut and column to left of lochan (column later relocated as a ruin); ‘nuclear sail’ to right.

Overview. *Jack Sloan.*

grow plants, how to plant them, how to divide and take cuttings, how to sow seeds, to prune, and to feed. A lot of this knowledge had only to be brought to the surface. My mother and father's families were both gardening families and I had grown up with a large walled garden surrounded by the policies of what had previously been a Scottish shooting lodge. I was given a corner of the walled garden for my own as a child. Later at school at Duncombe Park on the edge of the Yorkshire moors I absorbed, by osmosis, at ground level you might say, at the level of a ten year old child, a beautiful classical garden with its terraces, woods and temples.

These heritages now emerged and while the babies grew into toddlers my energies were absorbed in digging, dunging, planting, dividing. I wanted vegetables and fruit as well as a flower garden. Once the two borders at the top were made we cleared an area for strawberries and greens. Then we proceeded on down the left-hand side of the plot, gradually clearing the weed-infested turf. Ian had been ill, and had begun making model boats in his little workshop, so there was a time when I worked away by myself and became more and more absorbed in the idea of creating a complete garden.

At around this time I acquired a book called *Plants for Ground Cover* by Graham Stewart Thomas. From this I learnt a new way of planting. I devoured this book again and again. Here was a way of using plants to keep the garden rather than being obliged to keep the garden for the plants. So, let's turn to the plants: We now have a backbone of hardy shrubs - Ribes, Cotoneaster, Potentilla, Spirea, Philadelphus - all growing well and strongly in the front garden. We tried planting evergreens but the biting frosty winds of winter scorched and seared them so that they could not survive. Around the shrubs are clumps of herbaceous plants - Aruncus, Shasta Daisies, Phlox, Geranium, Montbretia - and we began to purchase and acquire through friends samples of 'ground-cover' such as Lamium, Vinca, Geum, and we set these in small broken-up portions among the original planting.

In some ways this method of planting is a continuation of much that has already been done, but it introduces for me the concept of multi-layered carpet planting. I remember reading in that ferocious book, *The English Flower Garden* by William Robinson (an inscribed copy of which Ian's mother gave to me), this kind of inspirational text:

The presence of tree and shrub life is a great advantage to those who know how to use it. Here is a group of shrubs over which we can throw a delicate veil of some pretty creeper that would look stiff and wretched against a wall; there is a shady recess beneath a flowering tree: instead of planting it up with shrubs in the common way, cover the ground with Woodruff, which



will form a pretty carpet and flower very early in the year, and through the Woodruff a few British Ferns; in front of this use only low plants, and we shall thus get a pretty little vista, with shade and a pleasant relief. Next we come to a bare patch on the margin. Cover it with a strong evergreen Candytuft, and let this form the edge. Then allow a group of Japan Quince to come right into the grass edge and break the margin; then a large group of broad-leaved Saxifrage, receding under the near bushes and trees; and so proceed making groups and colonies, considering every aid from shrub or tree, and never using a plant of which we do not know and enjoy the effect.

Perhaps you have to see the situation of the garden and the gardeners to understand the way that was followed.

I discovered that if you buy one plant you can very often get about five or six rooted pieces from it and these, planted a matter of inches apart (depending on the final size of the plant) will quickly spread and knit to form a weed-proof carpet. Indeed after various experiments with relatively tender species that could not survive at 1000 feet [300 metres] I found that most plants when happily sited will increase themselves prodigiously and can therefore be lifted and split to be used in other parts of the garden as it expands. The main expense remains in the trees and shrubs and some of these can be rooted from cuttings.

At this time there was a little pool at the bottom of the front garden. However as the pond at the back of the house grew and demonstrated its vigour ~ it was on the site of the old midden - this little pool seemed rather puny by comparison and it was removed. When we lifted the plastic lining a vast network of mole runs was revealed, reminiscent of the Parisian sewers in their extent and complexity. This area was subsequently paved and planted round with Lawson's Cypress to form in due course the

Little Sparta: Stonypath farmhouse. Gary Hincks.

Roman Garden.

Moving up the other side of the garden we were gradually shaping the beginnings of what became the Pompeiian Garden. At this time it was a simple grassed square with trellises part way round it supporting the Rambler Roses. One of the last areas to be 'cleared' was the border where the Blackcurrants had been. A mass of Bishop's Weed had to be forked out before this could be planted. Trellises were eventually erected down the centre of this border and Honeysuckle grown up them, so that the central path retains its narrow 'enclosed' feeling while the Pompeiian Garden is also defined by these trellises.

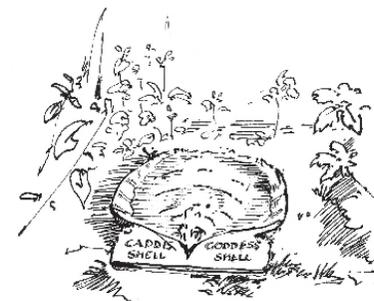
We planted apple trees to form a little orchard. These were the same apple trees that got eaten by the rabbits in the year of the great snow. The snow was so deep the rabbits sat among the branches of the trees and nibbled off all the bark. This was the orchard for 'An Orchard of Russets'<sup>3</sup> and later for the 'Midway' stone<sup>4</sup> – but it was also the orchard that echoed all the orchards of our past and our dreams. Never mind that we were too high for apples to flourish! Some years we did harvest a few small and bitter ones!

At the back of the house we have at this stage a flourishing pond, mown grass on one side and wild grass, nettles and dockens on the other banks. We had planted Rowans and Geans in this rough area and now they were beginning to trace out the faint blueprint of a wood. We slowly began the laborious task of clearing the grass and weeds from under these trees. Removing couch grass from the intricacies of Rowan and Gean roots is a desperate enterprise. I found that a top dressing of compost helped to loosen the clinging tentacles of couch grass roots, but it took years to clear the last of them.

The summer evenings were the best time; domestic duties over for the day, children either in bed or playing at 'stalking' me as I worked on into the gloaming. The changing of the clocks in March was always a time of great excitement for me! I have indicated the burgeoning growth of my own enthusiasm, the absorption in the *process*. Two paragraphs from *Don't Push the River* by Barry Stevens seem to summarise the way things were then:

When I make things outside me – whether a cabinet, a dinner, a dress, or a rock garden – with awareness, there is no separation, no distance between me and what I am doing, and no deadness. There is inter-action. I am involved. I don't have a plan which I carry out step by step. I move step by step and the design takes shape, with no image of the final form.

How I shall cook potatoes may change as I peel them and discover more about these potatoes and their potential. Or, how



I cook them may change because of some other change – the oven isn't working, or someone comes home for dinner wanting to go off again right after. This is not difficult when I am free, moving with awareness. I am not 'put out' by changes. They are incorporated. Co-operation. I enjoy the changes, without making a thing of them or me, and 'dull routine' is impossible. This is the way of co-operation with people, too – and the way that the warm and lively co-operative society that so many of us want can come about.

Maybe the quote's relevance to the garden at Stonypath stops part way through the second paragraph, and maybe there was an "image" of some sort "of the final form", but the ideal expressed in the whole thought pleases me so I have let it all stand.

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N.B. These endnotes were compiled in 2007 for publication in this edition.

1. Sue Finlay has noted that Ian, self-deprecatingly, "always did say of himself: 'A primrose at the river's brim / A nodding daffy was to him'". In this email (to Patrick Eyres, 23 May 2007), she condensed her experience of gardening at Little Sparta into a pithy sentence. Apart from "the pond at the back door, the sunken garden, a part of the orchard, and the detailed trimming" of the paths and lawn, she had undertaken "all other digging, clearing, planting, cultivation, choosing, ordering, growing from seed and cuttings etc of plants, upkeep of plants – including mowing".

2. Ian Hamilton Finlay, with Maxwell Allen (1968), *The Four Seasons in Sail*; see illustration in Yves Abrioux, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer* (London: Reaktion Books, 2nd ed. 1992), with introductions by Stephen Bann, p. 236, and Jessie Sheeler, *Little Sparta: the Garden of Ian Hamilton Finlay* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2003), with photographs by Andrew Lawson, pp. 52, 53.

3. For *An Orchard of Russets*, see illustration in Sheeler (at n. 2), *Little Sparta*, p. 58.

4. Ian Hamilton Finlay, with Michael Harvey, *Midway* (1974); see illustration in Abrioux (at n. 2), *A Visual Primer*, p. 57, and Sheeler (at n. 2), *Little Sparta*, p. 85.

Little Sparta: 'Caddis Shell' waterwork. Gary Hincks.