

GRANGE GARDENS

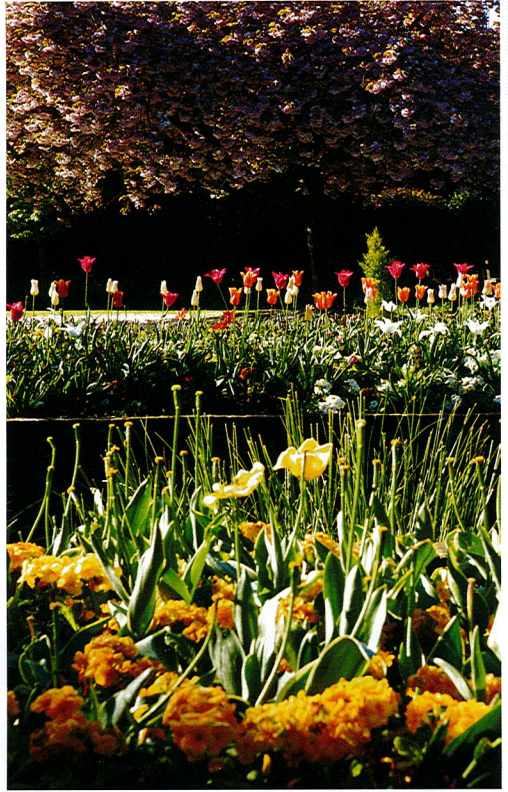
So nearly a public swimming pool

I think I can speak for most of us when I say that Grange Gardens provide exactly what the soul needs on a sunny day. But the fact that the gardens are open to all of us is a relatively recent thing. Because for most of their existence, the gardens were simply the sidekick to the rather grand house which rose, quite literally, from the ruins of the Priory when the stonework was carted off for new, less spiritual projects way back in the sixteenth century.

The house – and therefore the gardens – passed through quite a few hands over so many years of private ownership. There were, amongst others, five William Newtons (all related), a very mysterious William Laird Macgregor who after doing up the house took against it and never returned, and a certain Violet Gordon-Woodhouse who was an accomplished harpsichordist and lived there with her lover as well as her husband. And John Evelyn, the writer, gardener and diarist, lived there for a while as a boy. The house, in keeping with its grandeur, was originally surrounded by the garden on three sides – so west as well as south and east – but with the passing of the years, and the passing of the owners and their fortunes, the gardens gradually assumed the shape they are today.

It was the Second World War, though, that put an end to any real glamour. The house was requisitioned by the War Department in 1939 and housed Canadian troops and then Royal Engineers during the war. And, once the war was over, a welcome home party for POWs took place in the gardens. In terms of luxury and exclusivity, then, Southover Grange had certainly had its day.

And now it was the turn of Lewes Borough Council to step in. They stopped the house and gardens falling into the hands of a speculator – and one can just imagine how many houses might have been squeezed on to such a prime plot, which was not only in the heart of the town but was, notably for



Lewes, flat. It was the gardens' first reprieve. But, actually, the Borough Council had its own building plans. The National Health Service was just coming into being, and in the spirit of the age the Council planned to erect a health clinic and swimming baths on the site, together with a car park. But the Treasury issued an order curtailing public spending and – a second reprieve! – the plan was abandoned.

So next time you're trudging along the entire length of Mountfield Road and cursing the fact that the leisure centre had to be built at its very extremity, think what life might have been like if, instead, the swimming baths had been built where the Borough Council intended. Perhaps they would have been handier to get to, and there would have been less temptation to bring the car into the equation, but, in terms of nurturing our well-being and keeping us sane, the continued existence of the gardens is a blessing. There couldn't have been a better outcome. *Juliette Mitchell*

Photo by Catherine Benson