

Visiting Dexter

In October 2016, Great Dexter hosted an exhibition of works by Louis Turpin, painter of gardens and landscapes



Across the Garden

Late in 1973, I received a phone call from my father Digby asking if I would join him in making a series of short animated films. We produced a film for the World Health Organisation and a series for Yorkshire Television. My parents had moved to the Isle of Oxney

earlier that year and whilst working on these films I found myself in thrall to the area. I was offered a run-down cottage with standpipe and land enough for chickens and vegetables in Peasmarsch. I took up residence in the spring, swifts nesting in the master bedroom destined,



once they had flown, to become my studio. I decided this was the moment to concentrate on my own work. I set myself a regime and a challenge, to produce a painting a day and followed this faithfully for three months. They could take 10 minutes or ten hours, either was acceptable. My work at this time was abstract but, courtesy of the hop garden outside my studio window and to my surprise, transformed into figurative.

The long hot summer of 1976 and I was playing music on the green outside the Six Bells Northiam, a seemingly endless succession of dry, hot Sundays, and painting family portraits during

the weekdays. My partner, soon to be my wife, Davida and I took seriously the task of growing vegetables, making homemade wine and tending chickens. It was the chickens that first led me to Great Dixter as their home, a grand wooden structure tall enough to stand in, with external egg access, a pitched roof and steps, came from Great Dixter farm. I met Romke, then head gardener to Christopher Lloyd, and we discussed *Fritillaria meleagris*, which he was introducing into the orchard. I walked through the enchanting peacock topiary and explored the garden rooms that structured this magical place. My very first garden painting featured



these elements with the addition of a wall hanging purportedly from Henri Matisse's studio laid on the grass.

By 1983, gardens had become a much more important part of my work. I travelled around the country, Cornwall, Cumbria, the Cotswolds, but always on my return I would call in to Great Dixter. I visited it through all the seasons. From the bare earth of the early spring garden, dusted in a delicate veil of new growth, to the hoar frost coated gardens in winter, the white cloak melting before my eyes. Romke's legacy, the fritillaries, continued to break through the orchard meadow, a marker to the rolling seasons.

With the arrival of Fergus, the gardens at Dixter began increasingly to evolve and surprise. Stuff grew, higher and denser, and seemed to burst from the garden rooms that still remain the underlying structure to Great Dixter. The higher garden once again began to support vegetables, last seen when the gnarled espaliered pear trees were young. The Rose Garden was transformed into a tropical garden and as we speak is transmuting once more with conifers taking root amongst the banana palms. The energy and exuberance that is Great Dixter catches my breath as I walk once more through these unique gardens. ■