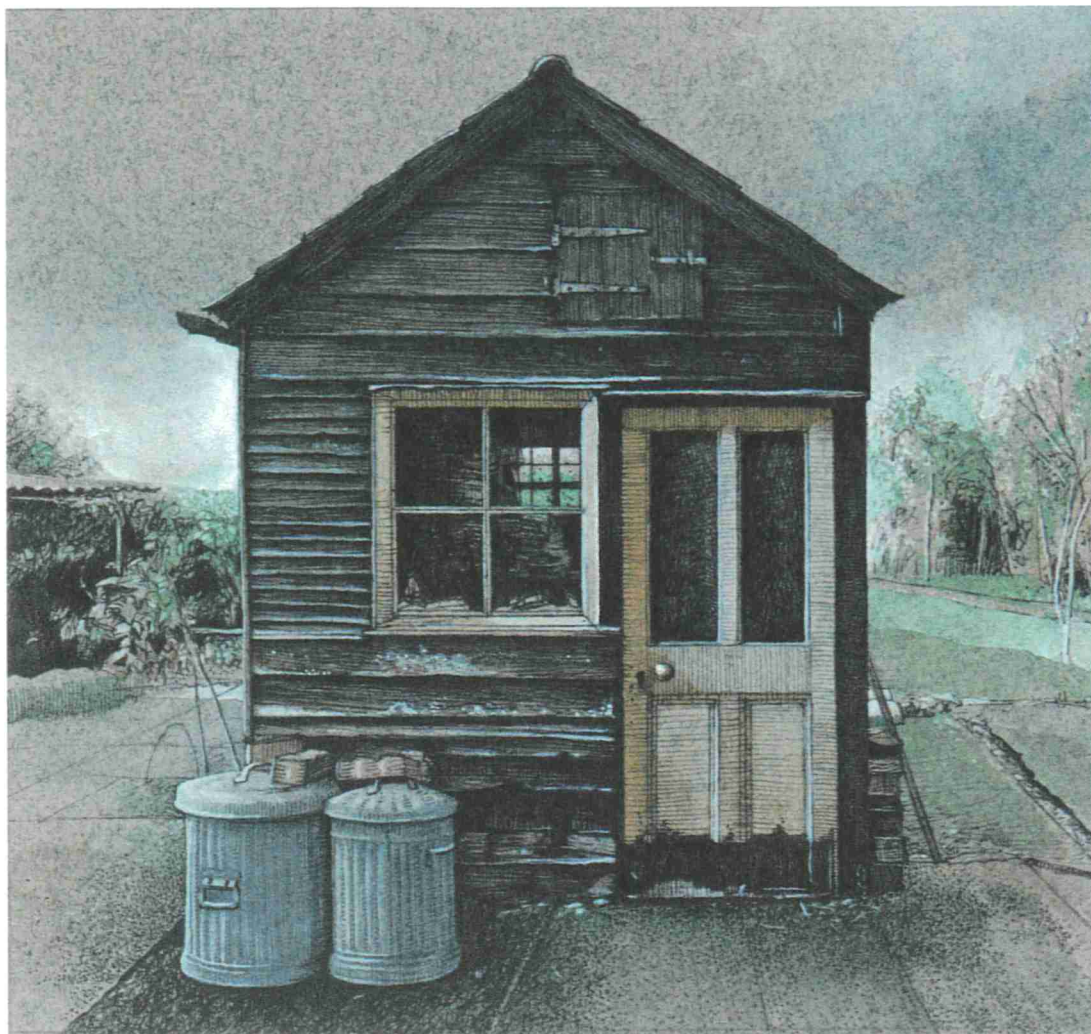


HORTUS

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Our Fortieth Anniversary Year

The Artist-Plantsmen and Writers at Bottengoms

BARBARA SEGALL



The names of prolific centenarian writer, editor, Church of England lay reader and, yes, gardener Ronald Blythe and his friends the artists John and Christine Nash have swirled around my life in East Anglia these past forty years. My first visit to Bottengoms – Blythe’s Tudor longhouse in the Stour Valley on the Essex/Suffolk border – was to see the garden surrounding the house, the titular building of his book, *At the Teoman’s House* (2011). Only on my second visit did I venture indoors. Bequeathed to the Essex Wildlife Trust on Blythe’s death in 2023, the property is ‘waking up’ again, although it still felt to me as if both house and garden were held in time and that all its former inhabitants remained nearby.

For me, gardens created by artists and writers hold great depth and I find myself wishing I had been able to visit in the Nash heyday when many rare and special plants grew centre stage, and also when Blythe himself – inheriting Bottengoms from Nash in 1977

— was still alive as the garden moved into a more relaxed and natural, nature-embracing state, with badgers and muntjac welcomed, and overgrown borders and hedges tolerated.

Most gardens are many-layered creations. And the garden at Bottingoms is no exception. It has, if anything, a more densely layered texture and history than most and now finds itself at the start of a journey of renewal as a suitable retreat for artists, writers and gardeners.

Essex Wildlife Trust hopes to create access for those who are not solely professional creative people, a place where members of the public too can feel connected to nature and find creative inspiration, as well as keeping it as a sanctuary for wildlife.

The house has its layers too. The room that was Nash's studio, with its window looking out to the north-east through the ash tree that recently had to be freed from its ivy tentacles, became Blythe's bedroom, while the Nashes' bedroom was adopted as his writing room.

Blythe worked with his back to the window which looked out over the garden. In *Word from Wormingford* (1997) he wrote, 'Much of my writing is done on a rickety kitchen table under a fruit tree, although indoors I write with my back to the window as the view is distracting.'

In another quote he described his *modus operandi*: 'At the desk all morning with the sun hot on my back; in the garden all the afternoon, the sun fit for summer.'

As I looked at his kneehole desk, with green leather surface protector, and his manual Olympia Monica typewriter poised, it seemed, for action, I could only wonder what words might have next tripped out onto the page.

Before inheriting the house, the room with what I can only describe as a tumultuously sloping floor, became Blythe's bedroom, used during his regular visits and when house-sitting when Christine and John were away. For Blythe, an acclaimed rural writer, essayist and editor, this was the perfect home — a place where he could observe and sink into the horticulture mindset of his friends, as well as the nature around him.

Blythe was a subscriber to HORTUS from its start and, as a friend of its founder David Wheeler, he contributed to the first issue in 1987 and to several later numbers. In that first piece, 'The Ephemeral and the Perennial', Blythe explained clearly his own premiss of the layering of a garden. He seemed to absent himself totally from the garden (as time went on he gardened less formally and allowed nature in), declaring that 'it can only be John Nash's. It was this old artist friend who planted it just after the last war and who, as well as its maturity, left to me the hundred and one pointers to its conceptions, everything from a Six Hills Nursery catalogue to a pile of Sankey's garden-pots.'

Clarence Elliott, owner of the Six Hills Nursery in Stevenage, introduced Nash into the horticultural scene during the 1920s. Nash drew the plants that Elliott collected on his expeditions to the Andes and the Falkland Islands, as well as his finds in English gardens.

My visit in September 2025 took place just weeks before the furniture, paintings, books, papers, curtains, rugs, bedding, the fascinating contents of food cupboards and, indeed, garden pots, were to be photographed *in situ* and then packed up and sent off for safe storage. I felt as if I was stepping into rooms that Blythe had only just vacated.

Later, when I looked at the photographs I had taken of Ronald's bedroom, I realised that I had the selfsame 'dark' wooden chest of drawers. Here, the small mirror hanging above it was almost obscured by the books that covered its surface. Rugs, frayed and rucked, as they might look after decades of service, added to the poignancy I felt about the lives once lived in that room.

I was led through the house by Bottengoms' project manager Lucy Gallard – my outfit suitably enhanced by blue plastic shoe-gloves and an ill-fitting hardhat. For me, a total stop-and-gaze moment occurred when I was confronted by someone else's bookshelves, reading the spines to learn what they have read, half-read or read many times over. Blythe's library was no exception, resulting in a slightly slow progression, as there were books in many rooms. The former apple store on the ground floor, near the dining room

and kitchen, was a bit of a long stop, with shelves on three sides bearing such diverse works as Jean Malaurie's *The Last Kings of Thule*, Ronald Fraser's *Blood of Spain*, Robin Lane Fox's *Pagans and Christians* and Wheeler's own *Penguin Book of Garden Writing*, seemingly a clue to Blythe's width and breadth of interests.

In the intervening years since the Trust inherited Bottengoms, Lucy Gallard and horticulturist Jonathan Zerr have approached the history, nature, horticulture and stories of the place with sensitivity, which stands the project in good stead:

What we want to build on are three things: what it was like when Christine and John Nash lived here, as well as the transition from John Nash's artist-garden to the wilder, less gardened place that Ronald Blythe facilitated, which supported so much diversity. And we want Ronnie's unique character to shine through. And thirdly, we want to celebrate Essex Wildlife Trust and its concerns for wildlife and gardening.

One of the main things about this place nestled in the lee of tall ash trees, engulfed by ivy, at the end of a quarter-mile, bumpy, unmarked track, is that it is relatable in scale as a domestic property. The whole site is two acres in total, with the garden filling just half an acre.

Zerr sets out the difference between Blythe's and Nash's characteristics: 'Ronald Blythe was an observer, who liked to bask in the beauty of the place, with little or no intervention. This was in contrast to how John Nash interacted with the place, introducing ornamental horticultural gifts from friends, including irises bred by his celebrated Hadleigh neighbour, the artist and plantsman, Cedric Morris, to shine in the garden.'

For Blythe, wild plants were paramount and he kept a wildflower record published in *At the Yeoman's House*, which he described as being 'the desirable and undesirable, and often hated plants . . . found in the cart-track, the stream, the orchard, the horsepond, field, pastures, footpaths, woodland and garden faithfully most years. The Glory and "the Rubbish".'

According to Zerr, 'The big issue we have is with three invasive plants for which we have John Nash to thank. These would have been introduced as ornamentals and include giant knotweed *Reynoutria sachalinensis*, *Petasites japonicus* (giant butterbur) and *Equisetum telmateia* (giant horsetail). We need to clear a great deal of vegetation – both on ground level and in the canopy – to reduce competition for light and reveal views once appreciated by Blythe and Christine and John Nash.'

The Trust wants to keep alive the characteristics of both sets of owners but is not planning to take the garden 'back to Nash', although surviving plants will nod to the Nash era. On my first visit to the garden we stopped by a pile of bricks – the remains of an alpine table – which Zerr has converted into a scree garden in homage.

Rather than restoring the garden, the approach is to accept and celebrate changes that come with the passing of time and the ephemeral nature of gardens.

The aim is to record and propagate the plants that have endured and then ensure their continued survival; to make safe the trees and paths and, as Zerr says, 'to open up some of the views that have been lost through overgrowth'. Any clearing that Zerr does has to be balanced: he has to bear in mind the need for Bottengoms' historic seclusion, as well as the opening up of vistas that have been hidden. He notes, too, that any work will have to abide over the years with the resulting impact of muntjac and badgers.

Blythe famously cherished the constant rustle and activity of wildlife in his garden, viewing it as a sanctuary for all of nature's gifts. True, he kept to some of Nash's prescripts, but his approach was more relaxed and welcoming of wild species to complement the space.

On my first garden-only visit, Zerr explained that he hoped the 'restored' garden might one day recapture some elements of Nash's influence while maintaining some of Blythe's beloved native plants.

In recent months Gallard and Zerr have built up a team of volunteers who work with them regularly in the garden: maintaining, reducing and planting, as well as propagating. One of the projects

successfully completed by the team has been the re-routing and restoration of the stream that once ran through the kitchen, providing fresh water. Now the stream has a new channel *around* the house, deflecting floods and eliminating potentially boggy ground.

Gallard explains that, 'One of the challenges is how to keep these hints of its past and yet keep the story alive as we look forward to welcoming people back to Bottengoms. We have to be conscious of Bottengoms' place in the landscape, as well as the history of its recent inhabitants.'

But for the moment the emphasis is on the house and health-and-safety concerns for when visitors can be welcomed. Although it is work in progress and the hope is that Bottengoms will once more become an artist's house, the plan is for it to also be used as a teaching resource and a dynamic space where people can come to reflect upon its history and former inhabitants – or simply to *enjoy* it.

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Blythe Spirit: The Remarkable Life of Ronald Blythe by Ian Collins
was published by John Murray in 2024.

Essex Wildlife Trust will eventually announce the opening of Bottengoms to the public on its website (essexwt.org.uk) where already it is possible to sign up for its newsletters.

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Drawing by Simon Dorrell.