



The duchess in the castle gardens

Queen of the castle

The Duchess of Rutland loves the gardens of her magnificent home at Belvoir, and in a new book reveals how a ghostly message helped her to transform them, says Ciar Byrne

When Emma Manners, the Duchess of Rutland, became chatelaine of Belvoir Castle in 1999

she would never have guessed that one of her predecessors at the stately home in Leicestershire would try to communicate with her.

Manners was born Emma Watkins, a Welsh farmer's daughter. She married David Manners in 1992, and he became the 11th Duke of Rutland after the death of his father seven years later. She moved into the castle, which is surrounded by a 15,000-acre estate, and spent happy years with her husband and their five children until the marriage broke down in 2012, when he admitted to having an affair.

Despite this emotional turmoil they managed to patch things up: the couple are now legally separated but live in separate wings of the castle. The duchess says they are still 'the best of friends'.

Just before the duke's affair came to light a guide working at the castle, a Mr Jenkins, sent her a note which he said was a message from the 5th Duchess, Elizabeth (1780-1825). Since her first visit to Belvoir (pronounced Beaver), Manners had been drawn to a portrait of Elizabeth that hangs at the top of the main staircase.

Jenkins's note told the duchess to look in the estate's archive for some 'garden plans'. When she asked him what this meant he simply shrugged. Then, in 2013, Manners, who by then was running the business side of Belvoir, was touring the estate with ➤

Glorious gardens

an expert on historic landscapes. At one point the surveyor looked ahead of him and declared that what he saw was 'pure Capability Brown'.

It was known that the 4th Duke had commissioned Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-83), the most celebrated landscape gardener of his age, to draw up plans for Belvoir, but when the duke died at the age of 33 it was assumed nothing had come of them. Manners delved into the archives and discovered that Elizabeth had in fact paid a surveyor called Jonathan Spire to carry out Brown's scheme.

'I felt a shiver run through me,' she writes in her new book, *The Accidental Duchess*. 'This must have been what Elizabeth was referring to in the note I got from Mr Jenkins about the "garden plans". I know that many people find it hard to believe in a psychic connection between Elizabeth and me, but what can't be denied is that this was the most extraordinary discovery, and it was soon confirmed by other experts in the field.'

To mark the tercentenary of Brown's birth it was decided to complete the woodland he had intended for the estate, which involved the widespread clearing of trees to create a clean canvas, earning Manners the soubriquet 'Duchess with a Digger'.

The clearing began in a part of the garden known as Frog Hollow. It took three months to clear the undergrowth to reveal the original contours of two lakes, as well as an old boat shed that had been completely covered in rhododendrons.

They dredged old fishponds to create the Memorial Lake, in memory of both Elizabeth and the men from Belvoir who died in the First World War, and planted 15,000 saplings.

Growing up on a farm in the Welsh borders at Knighton, Powys, gardening had been low down on Emma Watkins's list of priorities. Riding ponies across the countryside was much more her thing. But during those pony rides, which took her through the grounds of nearby Stanage Castle, she learned to love woodland plants.

'My mum had an amazing vegetable garden that was always full of rhubarb and strawberries and vegetables,' the duchess recalls. 'I can remember we had a circular rose bed in the middle



The Memorial Lake. Above: one of lakes in Frog Hollow that had been obscured



PICTURE: JAKE DAVIS



The pavilion in the Rose Garden. Above: the rediscovered boat shed in Frog Hollow

'She thought her future husband must run a pub called the Marquis of Granby'

of the large lawn. But what I fell in love with, riding my pony through Stanage, was the woodland plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, and magnolias.'

When she was in her late 20s she met David Manners at a dinner party. When he gave her his card she initially thought he must run a pub called the Marquis of Granby, little suspecting that it was his hereditary title as the heir to the Duke of Rutland. They fell in love and became engaged, and it was her future mother-in-law, Frances, the 10th Duchess, who began her horticultural education. She showed Watkins around the extensive gardens at Belvoir, spelling out for her the botanical names of the plants, which weren't easy for her to read because she is dyslexic.



Daffodils in front of the castle. Below: the Moss House in the Spring Garden

'My mother-in-law could tell you what every plant was in Latin,' says the duchess. 'Bearing in mind how difficult I find English, Latin was impossible. Luckily I have a great head gardener, Tom Webster, and I know exactly what I want, but I'm not great at names.'

David proposed to Emma in the Moss House of the Spring Garden at Belvoir, so called because it is fed by a natural spring rather than for the season. 'The family traditionally came here for the hunting season, and by spring, after the gardens had started to bloom, they had gone,' she says.

Elizabeth installed pleasure gardens to Brown's designs, including several grottoes, as well as the three-mile Duke's Walk, which the duchess has now revived, planting plenty of her favourite woodland plants.

Soon after she moved to Belvoir, in May 2000 she visited the Chelsea Flower Show, where she came across a stand full of azaleas and rhododendrons that reminded her of Stange. When she suggested to its owner, Charles Williams, that he could supply plants to Belvoir for the public to see in situ, he replied: 'I've



met f***ing duchesses like you before, and you can go to hell.'

Despite that rebuff they became firm friends, and to this day he advises her and supplies plants for the gardens. She later found out that his family was related to the owners of Stange, and that years before, when it was illegal to import certain rare species from the Far East, they had hidden them with their cousins in Wales.

Violet, the 8th Duchess, also had an ill-fated marriage. After her eldest son, and heir to the dukedom, died aged nine her husband sought solace in the arms of a succession of actresses. Violet took up with Henry Cust of nearby Belton House, who fathered her last child, Lady Diana Cooper.

Just like Elizabeth, Violet made her mark on the gardens, in her case by bringing in Harold Peto, one of the



One of many statues on the vast estate. Above: the Rose Garden



best-known garden designers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to create the Italianate Rose Garden.

Elizabeth installed the original garden, bringing in huge amounts of topsoil to make a series of terraces cut out of the steep hillside leading down from the castle. In it she had placed seven statues commissioned by the 1st Duke from the sculptor Caius Gabriel Cibber. Peto left the statues in place but rethought the garden as the prow of a ship, adding decorative urns, busts and a Corinthian column.

When the current duchess was left reeling from the break-up of her marriage it was in the Rose Garden – now filled with plants from Peter Beales and David Austin – that she sought solace, letting the hum of the bees, the splashing of the fountain and the scent of the roses soothe her. 'Any outdoor space is incredibly healing in difficult times. It's very peaceful and

'It's very peaceful and tranquil and just gives you space to unfold your feelings'

tranquil and just gives you space to unfold your feelings,' she explains.

Looking to the future, the duchess has ensured the grounds at Belvoir are a hive of activity. She has overseen the redevelopment of old farm buildings as the Engine Yard retail village, where visitors can eat and shop for local produce and artisan crafts. As well as overseeing the running of shooting parties and weddings at the castle, the duchess has also introduced the annual Belvoir Castle Flower and Garden Show in July, with talks from expert horticulturists and gardening tools and plants for sale.

'We're going to grow and bring more people who love gardening to Belvoir to see what we have here – it is quite magical,' she says. ■

♦ *The Accidental Duchess: from Farmer's Daughter to Belvoir Castle* by Emma Manners, Duchess of Rutland, is published by Pan Macmillan, price £22. For more information about the gardens and castle visit belvoircastle.com