



Take me to the river

Llanover, Monmouthshire

A tributary of the River Usk feeds into and invigorates the gardens of a gentrified Monmouthshire farmhouse, bringing beauty, light and watery music right through the grounds, finds Helena Attlee

Photographs by Alex Ramsay

IT'S damp in South Wales. Not unpleasantly so, but enough to ensure that the stream in the garden of Llanover in Monmouthshire is generally full and fast moving. Rhyd-y-meirch, which translates from Welsh as a stallion's ford or crossing place, is its name and its bright water comes straight from two springs in the Brecon Beacons, just a few miles west of the garden.

Water has been a vital element of Llanover's garden ever since Benjamin Waddington, a clergyman's son from Nottinghamshire, bought the estate in 1792. He transformed Ty Uchaf, a simple stone farmhouse, into a much grander

In the heart of the gardens lies Ty Uchaf, formerly a simple stone farmhouse, which was transformed into a substantial Georgian-style house with a brick façade after it was acquired by Benjamin Waddington in 1792. It sits in a wondrously watery setting

building by adding a brick-built Georgian façade, creating both the park and garden that surround it today and planting vast quantities of trees on the estate.

The house is still home to Waddington's descendants, Elizabeth Murray and her children, who are the seventh and eighth generations of the family to live there. Mrs Murray remembers when fresh water from the stream was piped directly into the house and she drank it throughout her childhood. 'The water ran through old pipework,' she recalls, 'and, eventually, my father had it tested for lead, only to discover it was full of *E. coli*.' Although they were never ill as children, she

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attributes the extraordinary resilience of her digestion when travelling in India to this early training.

Today, the water is treated, but Rhyd-y-meirch still arrives as it always has, tumbling eagerly through a bridge under the road on the garden's northern boundary. The stream is a tributary of the River Usk and, although very tiny, it has attracted the attention of the Wye and Usk Foundation, a charity committed to conserving fish, animal and plant life on the two rivers.

Like so many tributaries of the Usk, Rhyd-y-meirch is channelled over a weir as it passes beneath the road bridge, an arrangement that protects the structure from water ➤



erosion. However, the steep weir presents an almost insurmountable obstacle to salmon migrating upstream to spawn. The foundation believes that barriers of this kind account for diminishing stocks of trout and salmon on the Usk, so, between 2012 and 2013, the charity built a fish ladder beside the weir, a narrow zigzag staircase designed to give fish an easy passage.

The stream is in a rush to join the river and, on the outskirts of the garden, it hurries along a shallow bed past swathes of gunnera and through the arboretum. Waddington planted many trees and some of his magnificent beeches and towering London planes still survive, but, in the arboretum, the trees were planted predominantly by Mrs Murray's father, Robin Herbert, who was president of the RHS.

Many were chosen for autumn colour and, in October, the stream becomes a blur of moving reds and golds, sometimes carrying a cargo of scarlet maple leaves, and sometimes the fox-bright needles from a golden larch (*Pseudolarix amabilis*).

The low curve of a stone bridge marks the end of freedom for the stream and the beginning of a more disciplined existence. Grassy banks are replaced by sturdy walls just

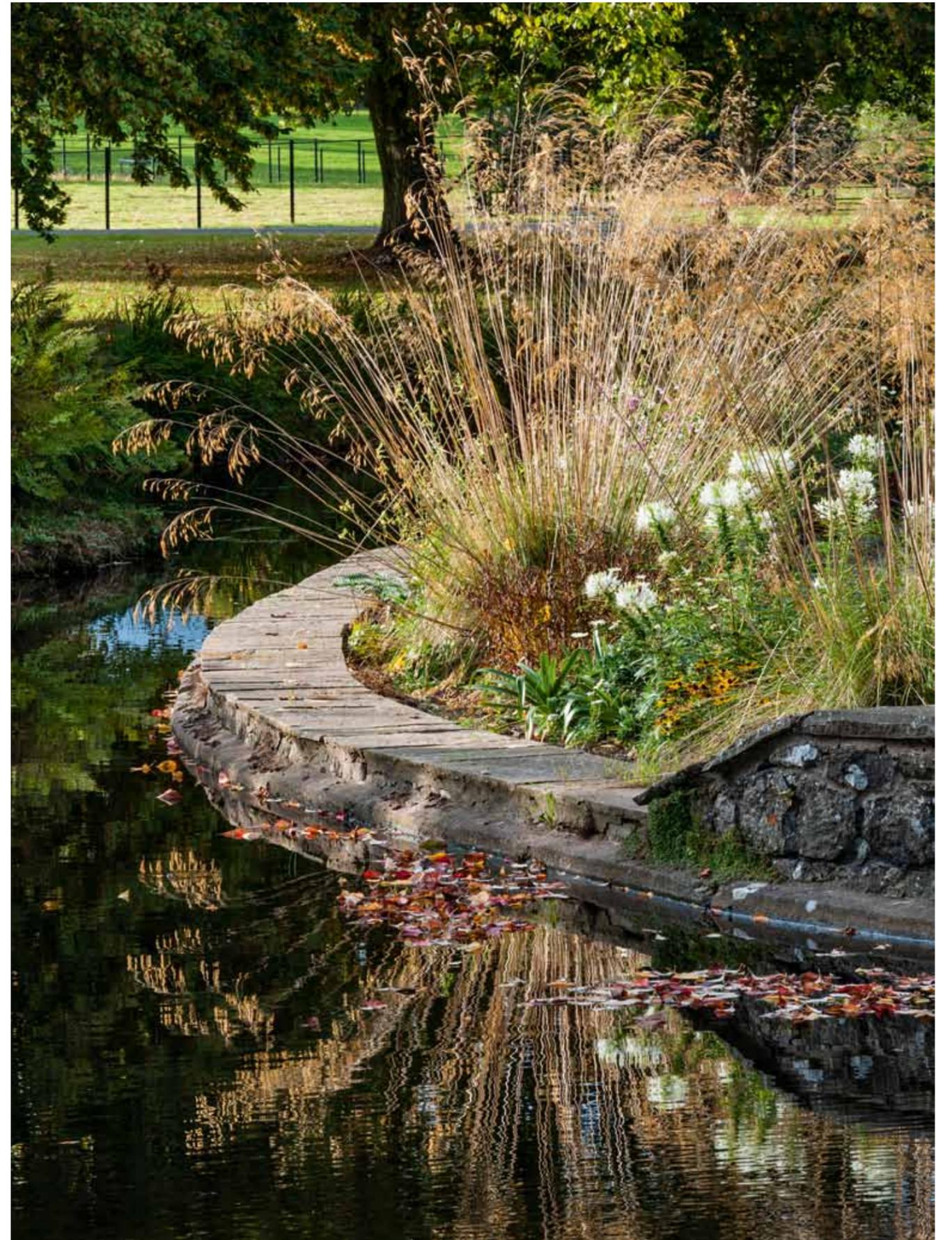
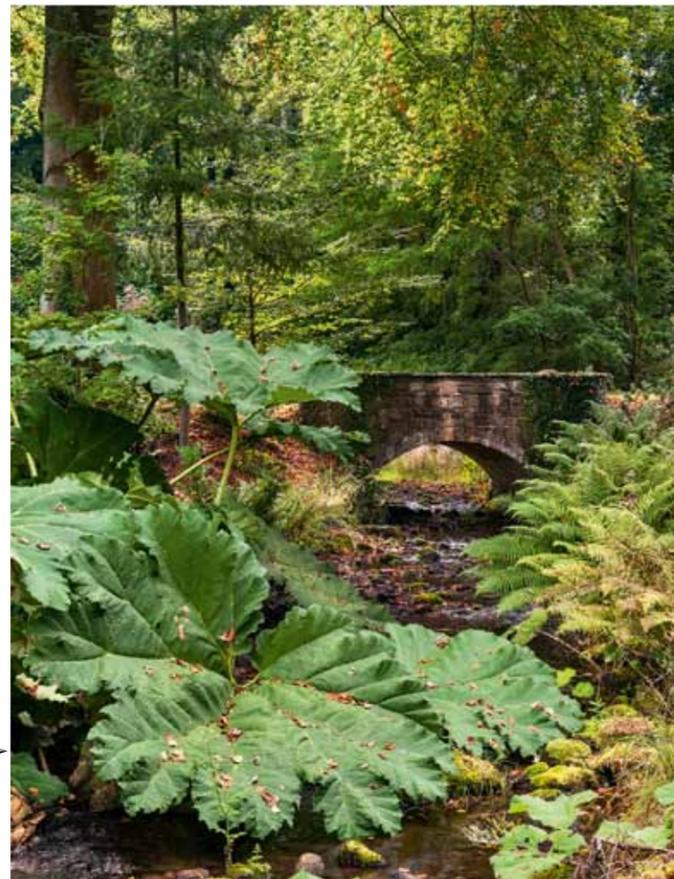
6 In October, the stream becomes a blur of moving reds and golds 9

beyond the bridge, where it divides. The main body continues along the garden boundary in a deep stone-lined canal and a lesser flow is lured off to the left, where a sluice gate controls the head of a tiny tributary. And from now on, the sound of water in the garden is subtly modulated by different arrangements of stones on the streambeds.

'Most people like to play around with water,' admits Peter Hall as he opens the sluice, augmenting the water that hurtles down the narrow tributary and over a series of weirs to a circular pool. Formerly head gardener for the National Trust at Powis Castle, Mr Hall was not intending to take on another garden, yet the lure of this 18th-century system of streams, pools and cascades was irresistible, as was the potential for planting in their damp hinterland.

Autumn is already well under way, but, in summer, the pool creates ideal

Above: Water hurtles over a series of weirs before it reaches a circular pool further into the garden. Elsewhere, a narrow zig-zag staircase 'fish ladder' helps returning salmon find an easier passage. Below: On the outskirts, the stream hurries under beeches, past Gunnera manicata. Facing page: Narcissistic grasses and Cleome spinosa





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conditions for algae that threaten to transform the limpid spring water into opaque slurry, disrupt its flow and block sluices and filters. The problem was quickly resolved this year by a couple of bales of barley straw dropped into the water below the sluice gate. As it decomposes, the straw releases hydrogen peroxide. Water passing through it carries tiny quantities of the chemical into the pool, where it inhibits the growth of algae. Mr Hall is delighted by the practicality of a system that allowed them to isolate the pool, supplying it only with water passing through the straw.

Water from the upper pool rushes down an artificial cascade, its sparkling flow made noisier and more dramatic by mossy boulders inserted to interrupt it. A sickle-shaped pool below forms the southern boundary of Waddington's walled garden, an unusual elliptical space at the heart of the design. The



stream hurries across it, leaving again through a handsome arch in the brick wall and disappearing down a narrow rill, crossed and crossed again by simple flagstone bridges. It makes an island of the lawn beside the house, dividing yet again before a final reunion of all three strands at the far end of the garden.

Mrs Murray's grandparents built a concrete swimming pool between the house and the curved garden wall. Next year, she plans to clear it and replant with a rich palette of water-loving plants such as astilbes, filipendulas, irises, hostas, primulas and meconopsis. A sluice gate in the lower pool will make it possible to send water rushing into this new

bog garden or provide a trickle to keep it damp throughout the year.

No designer has ever been associated with the garden that lies beyond the bridge and perhaps Waddington himself sent Rhyd-y-meirch darting and cascading among his newly planted trees. The landscape created by this combination of manipulated water and tranquil groves seems to encapsulate the intentions of Humphry Repton, that hero of 18th-century landscape architecture, who always tried to find 'the happy medium betwixt the wilderness of nature and the stiffness of art.'

Group visits, lunches and talks by appointment—email elizabeth@llanover.com or visit www.llanovergarden.co.uk

Above and left: Among the many interesting treatments of the stream is an artificial cascade that fizzles and sparkles; its flow is made noisier and more dramatic by the arrangement of mossy boulders, inserted to interrupt the water's course.

Facing page: There are numerous convenient footbridges throughout the garden as the water flows through much of it via two fast-running channels

