



THE
BLOOMSBURY
SET AT

CHARLESTON

*We explore the rural English outpost that became both sanctuary
and hub of activity for a freewheeling group of creative intellectuals*

By COURTNEY BARNES

OPPOSITE: Vanessa Bell snapped this photo of friends and family at Charleston in the '20s. Standing left to right are Frances Marshall, Vanessa's sons Quentin and Julian, Duncan Grant, Clive Bell, Beatrice Mayor, and seated in front, Roger Fry and Raymond Mortimer. Both Vanessa Bell and Grant collected art school casts, which often popped up in the garden.

THIS PAGE: Bell painted the decorations surrounding the window while Grant painted the ceramic tiles set into the tabletop.

PHOTO BY ALLEN MACWENNEY; OPPOSITE: COPYRIGHT PENELOPE FEWSTER, COURTESY OF THE CHARLESTON TRUST; OPPOSITE, FAR LEFT: © TATE LONDON, 2015



"IT'S SO DIVINE HERE

now one can't bear leaving... The garden is full of dahlias and red admirals and one can sit out all day if one likes," wrote painter Vanessa Bell, describing to her close friend art critic Roger Fry the scene at Charleston farmhouse in September 1926. But a decade earlier, when she first laid eyes on the ramshackle country digs and its mostly mud-filled walled garden in Sussex, England, the picture was less rosy. Bell hadn't planned to remain long-term and certainly would never have imagined that a century later throngs of design enthusiasts would continue to trek to Charleston to take inspiration from the rooms and gardens she created with her companion, artist Duncan Grant.

Bell, sister of writer Virginia Woolf, was part of the Bloomsbury group, an informal association of intellectuals and artists that formed in London in the early 20th century, rebelling against those stifling Edwardian mores oft portrayed today in period dramas. Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster, and Lytton Strachey were among the freethinking set who became known for their unconventional personal lives as well as their artistic and scholarly output. In 1916, during the dark days of World War I, Bell was looking not for a holiday house but for quarters adjacent to a farm on which her lover Grant could work. As a conscientious objector he would be required to do manual labor for the duration.

"Of course they did not know how long the war would last, but only expected to be in the country temporarily," explains Darren Clarke, head curator at Charleston. However, when Bell walked around the 16th-century property that had become available to lease, she looked beyond the previous tenant's habit of stabling animals in rooms throughout the house, the lack of hot water, and the mud, and focused instead on the natural light, the reflections off the large pond, and the fruit trees. Soon Bell and Grant, accompanied by Bell's two young sons from her marriage to art critic Clive Bell, Henry the dog, Grant's then-companion David "Bunny" Garnett, and a small entourage of household help, moved in. (Today the Bloomsbury group's relationship status would inevitably be labeled, "It's complicated.")

"Vanessa and Duncan couldn't resist putting their own artistic touches on any house, regardless of how long or short their stay might be," says Clarke. They covered doors, cabinets and headboards with their abstract flowers and colorful geometrics—no surface was off limits. Both avant-garde painters, they were in tune with the revolutionary work being done across the Channel by Matisse and Picasso, and the duo also liked to blur boundaries between fine art and the decorative, merging beauty with utility. Even when it was at its most desolate, the garden's existing plants and trees continually provided inspiration for Bell and Grant's interior paintings. Eventually the pair would unleash their creativity outdoors, too, transforming the grounds into a true painter's garden.

By 1917 they were able to go beyond growing vegetables and fruit for sustenance. Initially Bell consulted with Fry on a new design for the walled garden and he suggested a grid of paths and box hedges framing a lawn inset with a rectangular pool. Clarke says that within Fry's structure Bell and Grant explored their passion for color and form. They chose flowers that



Vanessa Bell in 1925
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE:
As painters, Grant and Bell were attracted to Charleston's pond for its reflective qualities. • A glazed terra-cotta bust by Bell's son Quentin, a prolific potter, sits on a windowsill. • In the mid-'20s Bell committed to a long-term lease of Charleston enabling the construction of proper studios, including Grant's.



she read aloud *Alice in Wonderland*. So on they all stayed, and in the '20s and '30s, Charleston became the summertime hub of Bloomsbury activity. An avid photographer, Bell used her camera to capture her friends and family enjoying themselves outdoors during what historians often refer to as Charleston's golden era. Looking at the photos one not only can see frolicking Bloomsberries in sun hats, but also tiny creative details, like the ceramic pool tiles Bell decorated. These vintage images continue to fuel the public's fascination with Charleston, as well as inspire filmmakers and designers.

Tragedy struck in the late '30s when Bell's son Julian was killed serving as a volunteer ambulance driver in the Spanish Civil War. Charleston again became her sanctuary and she and Grant remained there together full-time, painting still lifes and living quietly in rooms that opened directly onto the garden.

Bell died at Charleston in 1961 and Grant lived on until 1978. By then the gardens were in dire need of attention. When the decision was made to restore the property and open it to the public, noted landscape architect Sir Peter Shepherd was tasked with rejuvenating the gardens. Aided considerably by Mark Divall (who still tends Charleston's borders, vines, and trees today as head gardener), the team managed to save original perennials and shrubs.

Now with the Centenary Project, a fundraising effort celebrating 100 years since the Bloomsberries first wandered Charleston's halls and garden paths, the house will continue to thrive. From restoring historic barns to building a space to host workshops and exhibitions to reinstating beehives akin to those once kept, each endeavor carries on the ethos of Charleston's most artistic and unorthodox occupants: that home isn't meant to impress; it's where you express yourself, indoors and out. 🌸

appealed to their senses, spontaneously positioning plants as if they were brushing strokes on canvas, and were unconcerned with conventional garden aesthetics.

With its secluded pond, orchard, front lawn, and myriad nooks and crannies, Charleston proved to be a magical environment for Bell's sons, Julian and Quentin, and her daughter with Grant, Angelica, who was born at Charleston. The children could run wild during the day and sit with their mother in the walled garden at night as



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“It has a charming garden with a pond, fruit trees, and vegetables, all now rather run wild, but you could make it lovely.” -VIRGINIA WOOLF TO VANESSA BELL, 1916



TOP, BOTTOM LEFT, AND OPPOSITE: COPYRIGHT PENELOPE FEWSTER, COURTESY OF THE CHARLESTON TRUST; BOTTOM RIGHT: PHOTO BY ALLEN MACWEEENEY



The garden provided abundant flowers, which were often cut for arrangements to be painted. Dark walls served as a foil for Grant and Bell's vividly colored paintings in a studio that doubled as Grant's sitting room. At lower right is the wallpaper in the garden room designed by Bell at the end of World War II. She and Grant stenciled the paisley motif and overlaid it with flowers painted freehand.

“Duncan is painting, I am sitting in my room with the door open between us. The garden is full of red admirals, and birds and apples.”

—VANESSA BELL TO HER DAUGHTER, ANGELICA, 1960

Bell's bedroom with French doors open to the garden
OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The walled garden in bloom • In Grant's bedroom Bell painted flowers and her signature marbled circles onto doors and a fireplace. • In the '50s Quentin created a small circular pool with spouting head for the piazza.

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