

# The roots of a gardening celebrity

Bramley House's artistic connection influenced Jekyll's sense of colour

Words by Penelope Parkin



Left: A blooming legacy, the Gertrude Jekyll rose



**G**ERTRUDE JEKYLL is widely known as an expert plantswoman and garden designer who left an indelible mark on the concept of an English country garden and a legacy of beautiful gardens designed to complement architect Sir Edwin Lutyens houses, many of them in Surrey.

Her roots in Bramley are less well known, despite the fact that she lived in the village throughout her childhood and returned later in her life.

*Jekyll developed a love of nature wandering the countryside*

The fifth of seven children, Jekyll's parents moved to Bramley, four miles south of Guildford, in 1848 when she was four-and-a-half years old. The family rented Bramley House. "It was a typical country house of the late Georgian period, with classical porticoes and colonnades," explains





Jekyll's great grandson, Francis.

The impressive house had been built in the early 1800s by Lord Egremont of Petworth, JWM Turner's patron, and that connection was to prove influential in Jekyll's artistic development. As she grew up at Bramley House, Jekyll developed a love of nature wandering the countryside and learning many of the local country crafts the area had to offer, often accompanied by her pony and her dog. She was fascinated by flowers or plants, the lanes, heaths and woods around Surrey, which she painted.

In 1861 she studied art – and in particular Turner's work – at Kensington School of Art, later attributing the sense of colour she used in her gardens to his work.

The family left Bramley in 1868 – but not for good – settling in Berkshire at Wargrave. Jekyll was travelling and accumulating artistic acquaintances such as John Ruskin, William Morris, GF Watts and Hercules Brabazon Brabazon. But when her father died in 1878 she returned with her family to Bramley, living in a Georgian house called Sommerpool.

The family stayed at Sommerpool while Munstead House was built nearby. There Jekyll designed the garden for her mother and made friends with GF Wilson, the owner of Wisley Gardens and creator of the experimental wild planting there.

## *They explored the countryside in Jekyll's pony cart analysing architecture and scenery*

In 1889 she met Lutyens, introduced by friend Harry Mangles, a pioneer rhododendron grower for whom Lutyens had designed a house. The pair quickly established a rapport that developed into a 44-year friendship and collaboration. Of their meeting, Lutyens writes: "We met at a tea-table, the silver kettle and the conversation reflecting rhododendrons." At their second meeting Lutyens said she was "genial and communicative".

Jekyll subsequently asked Lutyens to

design a cottage for her garden and they explored the Surrey countryside in Jekyll's pony cart analysing the area's architecture and scenery.

In 1894 Lutyens designed Munstead Wood Hut for Jekyll to live in until his early masterpiece Munstead Wood

**Above:** A pony cart drives up Bramley High Street just like Jekyll and Lutyens used to explore the countryside

was completed. The pair continued to collaborate on many garden designs with Jekyll advising the planting plans and materials, including Millmead House in Snowdenham Lane, Bramley, initiated in 1904 as a speculative development. The pair also collaborated on Orchards in Munstead, built entirely of local material, Tigbourne Court in Witley and Goddards in Abinger where the Lutyens Trust is based.

During this period and for the rest of her life, Jekyll wrote for several magazines ►





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**Above:** The family plot, Busbridge Church  
**Left:** Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932)

and newspapers, contributing more than 1,000 articles to publications such as *The Garden*, *Gardening Illustrated* and *Country Life* as well as writing 15 books including 'Old West Surrey' in 1904 in which she records an array of country ways, curios and traditions: 'The old pitcher has, alas! almost gone out of use. It is a very rare thing to see the pitcher going to the well.'

An early homes and gardens pioneer, her writing embraced both outdoor gardening, featuring colour grouping and the principles of planting which influenced garden design throughout the UK, France and in the US as well as garden ornaments and flower decoration for the home.

Jekyll died in 1932 having designed more than 400 gardens in Britain, Europe and the US. She is buried in Busbridge churchyard, Godalming. ■

### A pioneer spirit

"Gertrude Jekyll was a pioneer spirit. Long before women had claimed their present independence in the arts and professions, in trade, in travel, in sport, and in many difficult crafts, she had quietly and firmly established her right to self-expression ... her press contributions, books and letters, all record ceaseless activities in many varied directions, bearing witness to exceptional powers of hand and brain united to an outlook in advance of her contemporaries." Agnes Jekyll, Gertrude's sister-in-law