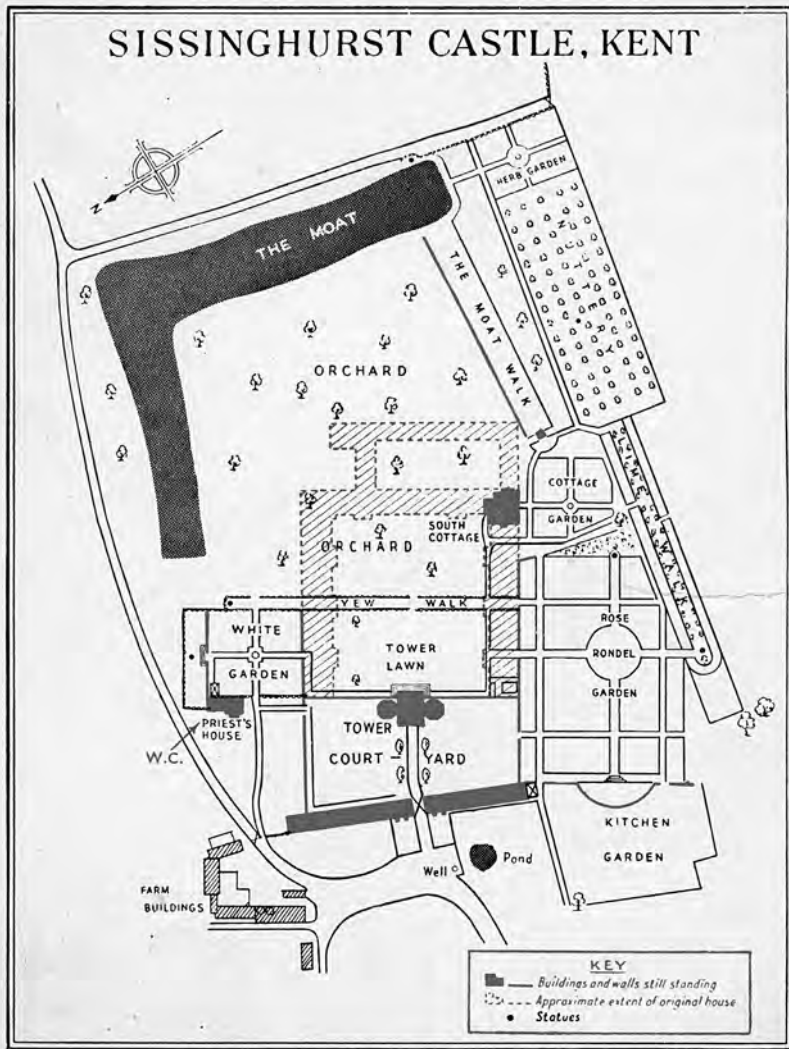


Part 1

THE PEOPLE AND THE PLACE



The map of the house and garden from a drawing by Harold; it was included in the first guide book, immediately after the war.

A BRIEF HISTORY

At night, our part of Sissinghurst – the southern arm of the front range – looks like a liner, only one room wide, with windows on both sides looking out east and west. It's long and narrow, and studded over its three floors with those small windows glowing with light. Five years ago the American garden-writer and photographer Stephen Orr came to stay for the night. He was over from New York for the Chelsea Flower Show and I put him up in what we call Juliet's – Adam's sister – room, the southernmost room on the attic floor.

We went to bed late, but Steve was woken in the night by loud voices in the Top Courtyard below his east window. He thought Adam and I were having a middle-of-the-night row and, embarrassed, buried his head under the pillow and went back to sleep. At half past four, he was woken again by the same voices shouting at each other across the courtyard. They continued as he stuck his head out of the window, but had moved to below the entrance arch; and they carried on, loud enough for him to hear them out of his window on the other side. But there was no one else staying at Sissinghurst then apart from the three of us – and

our children – and none of us was awake at that time of night, let alone shouting.

I love this story because it makes Sissinghurst so alive with its past. It's not a spooky place, but when it's quiet at night, it's easy to sense the atmosphere that was here in its short sixteenth-century heyday and feel Vita and Harold's presence from the 1930s, particularly in and around the South Cottage where they spent so much time.

It's that history, the layering of the different eras in Sissinghurst's life, that fed Vita's imagination on her arrival – the foundation for her great love affair with the place. It's inconceivable that she would have responded in the same way to a collection of walls and buildings that did not have this history seeping out of them. More so than Harold, who would probably have made his neoclassical garden scheme wherever they lived, the remains at Sissinghurst gave the link to the past that Vita felt as soon as she came here. There are three eras, the Elizabethan high point, followed by a long period of dilapidation, and then a Victorian moment of the best farming there has ever been. Each of these phases made its contribution to what Vita created here.

She did not love the twentieth century, but looked back to Elizabethan romance. Her heroes were Shakespeare and Sir Philip Sidney, and Knole, the house she was brought up in, redolent of the great age of Elizabethan glory. The fact that Sissinghurst had experienced such a similar rich, flamboyant moment made it perfect for her. In the sixteenth century there was a grand house, large enough to hold thirty-eight fireplaces (recorded in the seventeenth-century hearth tax) and stretching over three adjoining courtyards. It was built through the 1560s as a hunting palace at the centre of a newly made seven-hundred-acre deer park. Its

creator was Richard Baker, son of Sir John Baker who had profited from the dissolution of the monasteries. When Sir John bought the place in 1530 there was a more modest medieval manor house (of unknown date). As a would-be courtier and Elizabethan gallant, Richard wanted something grander, fit for entertaining the queen. With his eye on a knighthood, he was aiming to lure Elizabeth and her court down from London.



A drawing by Francis Grose from the 1760s showing Sissinghurst at its fullest extent.

We have a drawing by Francis Grose (1731–91), which Vita had on her wall, showing the full extent of the house, sketched two hundred years after it was built. The view is from the east – from the back – beyond the corner of the moat. The new buildings were enclosed by a moat on three sides, with the Tower in their centre (you can just see the pair of round roofs above the main bulk of the house). The Tower is still there, almost exactly as it was, except for a change in the shape of the turret roofs. The main bulk of the Tower has one room filling the whole of the central section and extending out into the southern turret on each floor, the first of which Vita adopted as her writing room. There is a staircase running up in the north turret, with three

floors above the arch and a flat roof platform. At this top level there were two prospect towers, one on either side in each turret: these were viewing galleries, and the main reason for the Tower's construction. From here, the ladies could watch the hunt while the men pursued their deer. Its height is just right for viewing the whole newly formed park. These windowed rooms, decrepit by the end of the eighteenth century, were removed a few decades later to make the place safe.



An engraving by Richard Godfrey (*c.*1787) of the main court at Sissinghurst in its medieval heyday.

We have a print of another drawing, a copy of which is in Vita's photo album, probably dating from the middle of the eighteenth century and published in Edward Hasted's history of Kent, written in the 1780s. This shows the largest and grandest court of the Elizabethan mansion – the buildings you would have seen when you stood at the top of the steps at the base of the Tower. Reminiscent of an Oxford or Cambridge University quad,



The Elizabethan wall and window on the Tower Lawn.

the middle courtyard had three decorated doorways on each side and one main entrance at the end. This linked onto the next court and the garden beyond.

When I stand on the wide top step at the foot of the Tower, I can feel the scale of the sixteenth-century palace. It always impresses me how far away to the right the original Elizabethan walls are, with their characteristic fine

bricks, large windows and arched doors, and I imagine the rooms that would have stood behind them. Sissinghurst is now



South Cottage in 1930, before the extension was added to the northern side to house the flower room and Harold's bedroom above.

a relatively small house – or more a family of buildings – but the remnants of the original manor show how grand it once was.

What is now called the South Cottage contains the rooms that formed the right-hand far corner of this, the largest of the courtyards. There is one main room at ground level and another immediately above it. It has additions (built by Vita and Harold in the 1930s), but the original rooms give a clear idea of what the rest of the house would have looked and felt like. The downstairs is panelled now, with wide reclaimed-oak floorboards used for the walls as well as the floor, done when Vita and Harold's twentieth-century additions were made, so this room is more difficult to read, but the upstairs chamber is largely unchanged. This was Vita's bedroom, chosen by her for its bony Elizabethan grandeur; it has a large arched stone fireplace, covered over when Vita and Harold bought it, greying oak beams showing flecks of plaster, and wide oak floorboards.



Vita's bedroom in South Cottage, in the early 1960s (you can see a detail of the wooden settle and its cushions on p. 50). This room looks almost exactly the same today.

Of all the rooms in Sissinghurst, this room connects most immediately with its Elizabethan past. The original red bricks are a gentle colour, with lots of smoky pink-purple as a coating over the harsher terracotta, revealed in the odd brick that is softer and has worn away; and there's the occasional end-on tile shoved in. All the original walls have a creamy ancient lime mortar – soft and crumbly, wavering up and down and going broader then narrower along each seam. The bricks are fine, long, but narrow, their faces less than two-thirds the size of a modern brick, and many of them are pockmarked and irregular, cracked and holed over their entire surface. The 1930s changes tried to mimic the



The Priest's House seen from the Tower with the rambler rose 'Flora' tumbling out of the prunus tree by the front door – a Vita addition in the 1950s.

look of the older walls – and it was done well – but they don't have the same irregularities and soft dustiness of the Elizabethan.

The Priest's House and the barn are other bits of the Elizabethan house that remain. The so-called Priest's House was built to the north of the main buildings as a banqueting house for guests to look out over the garden and park. One theory for its name is



June 1930. The Elizabethan barn and Victorian piggyery, now the National Trust shop.

that because the Bakers were high-class crypto-Catholics in a part of Kent that was fiercely Protestant, the name Priest's House was given to this isolated building as a sort of sneer by the locals about 'them up there not being like us'.

The Elizabethan barn is a handsome, hugely tall building, just one great space for storing the hay cut from the meadows around it, a landmark you can see from the north and east several miles away. It's a building on a magnificent scale, yet its bricks are the same narrow ones that form the Priest's House, the Tower, the South Cottage and the ruined palace walls.

Queen Elizabeth and her entire court did indeed come to stay, in August 1573, soon after the palace had been completed. They stayed only three days, but Richard Baker's ambitions were fulfilled and he was awarded a knighthood.

But the Bakers' moment of glory – and Sissinghurst's fortunes – were both short-lived. The family ended up on the wrong side in the Civil War. In 1644, Parliament found Sir Richard Baker's grandson guilty of treachery. Things had already started

to slide before that, his wife producing four daughters and no sons and each of them marrying people miles away – in Gloucestershire and Sussex. Within eighty years of its building, the palace at Sissinghurst was essentially deserted. Each daughter had inherited a quarter of the estate and it no longer belonged to one family, but became an asset to be exploited or ignored. Sissinghurst had been a sort of fantasy of beauty and delight – a perfect house in a perfect landscape – used for short visits and entertaining, but as family loyalties moved elsewhere even that use dropped away.



Sissinghurst in 1760. An engraving by James Peak made from a drawing by one of the English officers.

Parliament had imposed a huge fine on the royalist Bakers, and a mortgage was arranged on the whole fifteen-thousand-acre Sissinghurst estate to try and raise the funds. By 1756, the debts were still mounting. The family's solicitors decided to pay some of the mortgage by letting Sissinghurst to the government to house French naval prisoners during the Seven Years War. From 1756 to

1763 there was a huge shifting population living in the *château*, and with the French word came the origins of the name, Sissinghurst Castle. There are no exact records for how many, but between one and three thousand prisoners were housed here at any one time.



Dated 1760, French prisoners-of-war are seen going about their daily chores on what is now the Tower Lawn. The Elizabethan palace is shown, enclosing the yard.

Given that number of people, the place must have been packed to the rafters, with the prisoners in appallingly crowded dormitories and cells. To distract themselves during the months and years of incarceration, some of them created objects they could sell to their guards, or to local people. There are still households around Sissinghurst that have these artefacts. Vita and Harold bought and collected a few. We have these now on our sitting-room windowsill – some dominoes and a decorated wood-veneered vanity box made from mutton bone, some beautifully carved

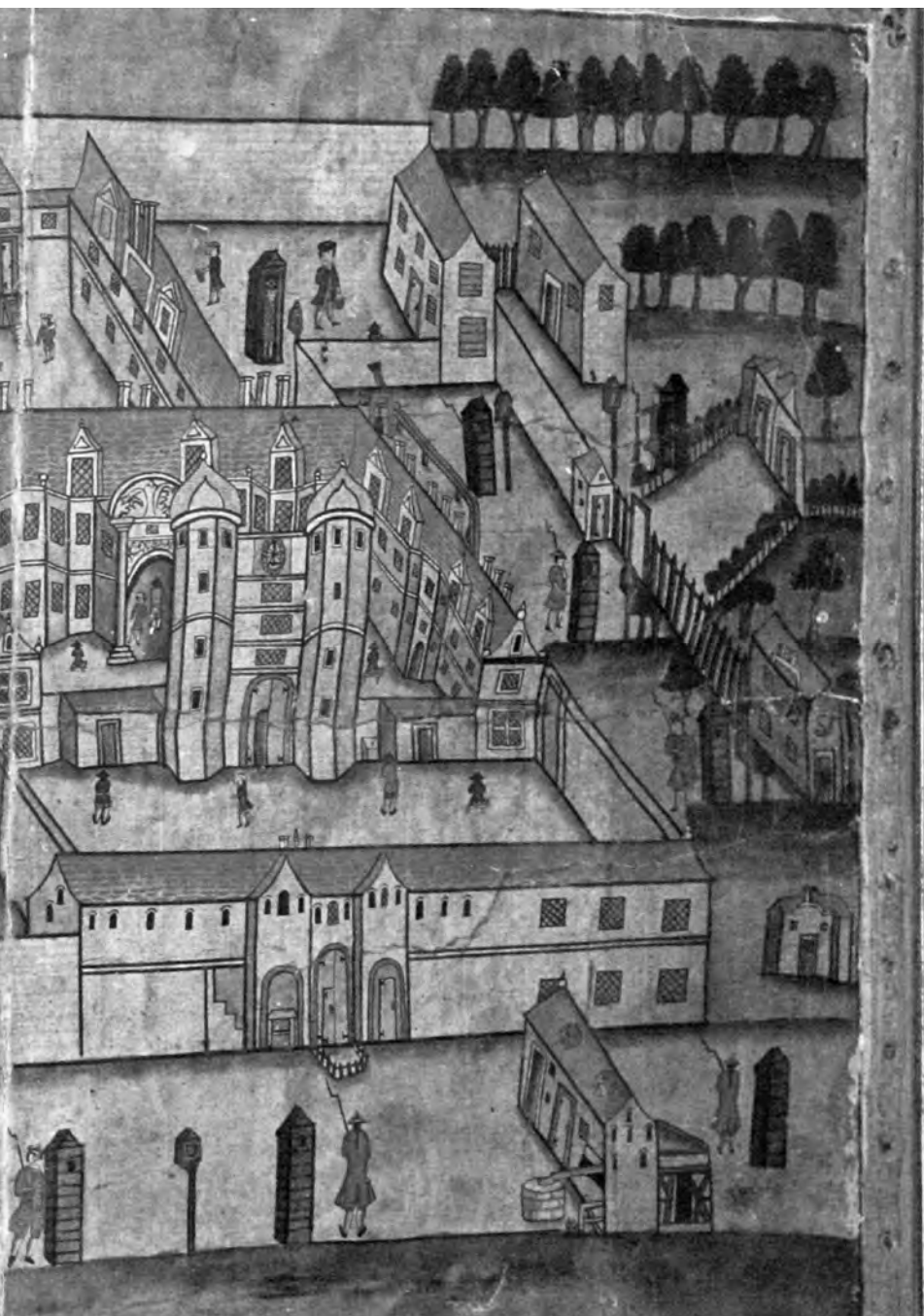
wooden dogs, a wine-bottle stopper and a primitive ship in full sail. The box is made with precise and careful craftsmanship, but from materials that cost nothing – here was someone trying to while away the days until he could go home, or make something of maximum value from minimal materials that he could sell. On the base of one of the dogs there's a label – 'Carved by the French prisoners at Sissinghurst Castle in Kent in the 18th cen[*tury*]'. All of this would have been thrilling to Vita; so many lives led within the walls of the place she now inhabited.

The most invaluable and accurate portrayal of this moment – almost certainly by one of the French prisoners – is a naive watercolour of Sissinghurst, painted in 1761 in ink and dye. The National Trust bought the painting recently and it now sits in the Big Room, on the ground floor of the north range of the house. It has a childlike perspective, the figures in it much bigger than true scale, but it is a brilliantly detailed depiction of the whole place at the time. There is the entrance range, with its main arch at its centre and two subsidiary arches to left and right, all still here. There's even the same pair of large oak doors in the entrance and the Tower arch, with a small wicket gate in the left-hand side, just as you see now. The Priest's House and three courtyards are here too, opening up beyond, and the Tower with its three floors and flat roof, extending above its grand entrance arch. You can see all three arms of the moat and the paths of the Elizabethan garden to the northwest of the house. This was the typical place to site a garden at the time. The plants and the design would then be seen in the most flattering soft light from the house windows, with no southern glare.

This painting was not found until well after Vita's death, but would have been a great thing for her to see, showing how



An ink and dye watercolour from 1761 of Sissinghurst, when it was used to house French prisoners during the Seven Years War. It shows, in faint outline, the Elizabethan garden layout, where Vita found her rose (see p. 16). Also shown are four 'night soil' carts, and the English guards in their sentry boxes with rifles and fixed bayonets.



unchanged many things are here since the eighteenth century and confirming what she suspected was the site of the Elizabethan garden, within the moat in Sissinghurst's northeast corner. When Vita arrived in 1930 the place was overgrown, with few plants remaining, but she did find one thing that excited her – a rich, dark, velvety rose with a magnificent scent. The rose was where the Elizabethan garden had been – now the Orchard. Vita hoped and believed it had been growing there ever since the garden's great sixteenth-century heyday. She named it the 'Sissinghurst Castle Rose' and took lots of cuttings to give away. It has since emerged that it is indeed a rose that may well have been grown in Elizabethan gardens – a Gallica variety, 'Rose des Maures'.

When the Seven Years War was over and the French prisoners were allowed to return home in 1763, Sissinghurst entered its next chapter. Accommodating so many people in such a confined space for those seven years had taken its toll, and by the end of this time the buildings were in a bad state. There is an inventory of the dilapidations of the house that record the buildings as '2/3 destroyed'.

Worse was to come. The drawing we have by Francis Grose, mentioned earlier (see p. 5), has two inscriptions on its reverse, the first where it came from – the Thomas Pennant and Earl of Denbigh Collection – the second, 'Sisinghurst [*sic*] House, near Cranbrook, Kent, now burnt'.

The fire probably happened towards the end of the eighteenth century, but no one knows exactly when, and this explains why so little of the Elizabethan palace remains by the time we see it again in a painting from the 1820s. This shows the Tower – its roofs now pointy, not round – with only the thatched South Cottage just visible behind it. How the South Cottage rooms survived the fire is



Sissinghurst in the mid-1820s. In 1796 the parish leased what remained of the building to use as a workhouse.

not clear, but the Tower, the front range and the Priest's House were all separate from the grand courtyards. If fire romped through these vandalised parts of the hunting palace, it would be possible for the separate buildings to escape.

Sissinghurst's disintegration, its melancholic dereliction, were part of its romance and beauty for Vita. If the palace had still been intact when she found it, it would have lacked the

sense of lost glory and partial ruination she had been drawn to since she was a girl.

In 1796 the land at Sissinghurst and its remaining buildings were let to Cranbrook parish. It became the parish farm – the workhouse – where the unemployed were given work and housing. The farm did well – the land here is fertile – and it made a lot of money. We know that the parish hall of Cranbrook was built from the proceeds of Sissinghurst farm, nicknamed at the time the 'old cow' because you could always milk her.

The Cranbrook parish tenancy lasted until 1855, when the landlords (descended from the Bakers, but now called Cornwallis) decided to let it out to a gentry farmer, George Neve. Neve built a smart new farmhouse as soon as he arrived, while staying at Sissinghurst and renting the farm and buildings

until 1903. He ran a good farm here, with a dairy herd, corn-fields, hop gardens and fruit orchards. The growing and drying of hops was very profitable at the time, so he built the large oast houses and the new dairy (which is now the coffee shop) to the west of the main buildings. He housed his workers in the remains of the castle and grew vegetables in among the ruins, but he himself moved into his newly built farmhouse, now the Sissinghurst B and B.

This set the seal on the importance of Sissinghurst for Vita: land that had been beautifully managed and productive in the era of high-Victorian farming. She loved nothing more than the burgeoning land, the animals, the men, the Virgilian landscape where human life and enterprise were bound in with the soil.



The entrance gateway in the 1820s, when Sissinghurst was rented by Cranbrook parish.

In 1903, having been in the family for nearly four hundred years, the Cornwallises finally sold Sissinghurst. It was first bought by a family called Cheeseman, who farmed here until 1926. They then sold it to the Wilmshursts. Old Mr Wilmshurst died and his son put the house and the estate on the market, but this was at the pit of the agricultural depression when vast acreages of England were for sale. It sat unsold for two years, and it is then – in 1930 – that Vita and Harold enter the Sissinghurst story. The



The well-appointed Victorian farmhouse built by the Cornwallises' tenant, George Neve.

three phases of its history – the resplendent Elizabethan palace; the period of decline and abandonment; then a resurgence in the value of the land and the work done on it – were all key to Vita's connection with the place. Together these made the almost perfect conditions for her vision of a garden.