



Janet Reuter

April 2020

### Vita Sackville West and Sissinghurst Castle and Gardens

The ladies who were going to England in May (maybe next year now) expected a chance to visit **Sissinghurst Castle and Gardens** which is said to have the most beautiful gardens in England! Over **200.000** people visit Sissinghurst every year. It is one of the most visited properties owned by the **National Trust**. Some of these visitors have heard of **Vita Sackville-West** but how many know what this lady was really all about. She was not only a fine gardener, writer, poet, writer of essays and letters but she was extremely eccentric whose lifestyle in the **1920's** was highly controversial. **“There is nothing more lovely in life than the union of two people whose love for one another has grown through the years, from the small acorn of passion, into a great rooted tree”**  
Quote: Vita Sackville-West.



**Victoria Mary [Vita] Sackville- West (1892–1962)** was born on 9 March **1892** at **Knole** near Sevenoaks, Kent, the only child of Edward Sackville-West (1867–1928), and his wife and first cousin, Victoria Josefa Dolores Catalina Sackville-West (1862–1936), society hostess, and illegitimate daughter of Sir Lionel Sackville-West (1827-1908) and the internationally known Spanish dancer Josefa de la Oliva, known as **Pepita**. She was known throughout her life as Vita, a contraction of her mother's name. Her upbringing was privileged, growing up in such a rich family but solitary, and shaped above all by the romantic atmosphere and associations of Knole, the sprawling Tudor palace set in a spacious park in Kent, where she spent her childhood. Her literary taste and temperament were created substantially by this aristocratic and historical background and intensified both by the colourful and eccentric personality of her mother and by the gradual realization, with which she never entirely came to terms, that as a woman she could never inherit the Knole estate. Her cousin Edward, a man, inherited it in her place. This was normal at this time!

Vita loved her family home Knole and would tremendously enjoy taking visitors around the house. The house built in **1460** was more like a mediaeval village with **365** rooms and set in an enormous great park. **King James I** had stayed there, **the Prince and Princess of Wales** celebrated **Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee** there, and also many popes. She wrote endlessly about the house as a child and later in her book **The Edwardians**. She also found the background life of her mother very romantic, mysterious and had no problem with the fact that it was seen as disreputable in the eyes of late Victorian society. However, as a child Vita suffered a lot from her mother's quick temper and moodiness and there were many changes in the line of nurses and governesses as a result of this. This caused a lot of tension between mother and daughter and Vita found it difficult to build long lasting relationships of her own in the future which was seen by many at the time as scandalous.



**Knole House**, a gift in the **16<sup>th</sup> century** from **Queen Elizabeth I** was a very difficult place for an only child to grow up in. Vita sometimes did not see any of her family or anybody except the staff for weeks at a time. She spent most of her time alone in the **Great Library** which was full of thousands of ancient books. Here, however she was able to start writing her first poems and books which she started as a small child.

April 2020

## Vita Sackville-West continued

Vita began to write at an early age and she completed eight historical novels, five plays, and a number of poems before she was eighteen. Until she was thirteen she was educated by governesses at home before moving to **Miss Woolff's** day school in London. In her early teens her parents moved their affections to two new partners. This did not seem to be a great problem for her but widened her horizons. She was introduced to French culture from an early age through her mother's friendship with **Sir John Murray Scott**, who was fabulously rich and owner of the **Château de Bagatelle** in Paris. Before the **First World War** she also enjoyed the chance to travel to Italy, Russia, Poland, Austria, and Spain. Throughout her life these cosmopolitan early years meant that she was fluent in Italian and French. Vita, however felt a deep sense of rootedness within the Kent countryside where she preferred to live until her death.

Also in her teens she fell in love for the first time with a young woman of her own sex. Although also attracted to the male sex and later married she was often in a deep relationship with her own sex. Her most lasting love affair was with her school friend Violet Trifusis, the daughter of her school teacher. They travelled extensively together around Europe, exchanging clothes and playing different male-female roles. The most famous of these affairs with women was her relationship with the writer and member of the **Bloomsbury** group at **Charleston, Virginia Wolf**. The fame attached to Virginia Wolf brought Vita much more recognition than as a writer herself.

### The Long Barn



Vita's great love for gardening started when she got married to Harold Nicolson who was at this stage in his career a junior diplomat, and they began their married life in Constantinople. They returned to Britain in 1914 and their first son, **Lionel**, was born in August that year. They lived both in London and at **Long Barn**, a house near Knole, which was their country home between **1915** and **1930**, where Vita wrote most of her early books and developed her first garden.

**“My garden all is overblown with roses, My spirit all is overblown with rhyme”.**

**Vita Sackville-West**

The name **Long Barn** refers to the **16th-century** barn that was bought from a local farm and added on to the original house, the oldest part of the house dates back to the **14th century** and when Vita and Harold arrived in **1915**, they began by sculpting terraces on the south-sloping site, creating distinct areas with lawns, borders and retaining walls. The soil is almost solid Kentish clay, a fact made worse by its position on a slope at the outskirts of the village. Vita and Harold soon realized that many plants would not survive if they planted straight into the ground and most planting was done in raised beds. These beds were thought to have been designed by the architect **Edwin Lutyens**, who designed the famous garden bench at **Sissinghurst**. Vita's planting philosophy was **“Cram, cram, cram”** while Harold was more for the geometric formal structure. The main idea was to create individual garden rooms each with its own distinct character. For Vita this was a garden vision of many rooms representing her childhood home Knole which had so many unique rooms. This was also the basis followed through on a larger scale at Sissinghurst. Vita and Harold spent fifteen years living between their homes in London and the Long Barn. They were very happy together but still had affairs with other partners, both were in same sex relationships with others throughout their lives together..

**“She walks in the loveliness she made,  
Between the apple-blossom and the water--  
She walks among the patterned pied brocade,  
Each flower her son, and every tree her daughter.”**

## April 2020

When Vita and Harold bought and moved to **Sissinghurst** in **1930** they kept Long Barn, letting it out, first to a London-based entertainment mogul Sidney Bernstein, and the house played host to a stream of Hollywood stars including **Charlie Chaplin**. It is still today privately owned.

### A poem for Long Barn

We owned a garden on a hill,  
We planted rose and daffodil,  
Flowers that English poets sing,  
And hoped for glory in the Spring.  
We planted yellow hollyhocks,  
And humble sweetly-smelling stocks,  
And columbine for carnival,  
And dreamt of Summer's festival.  
And Autumn not to be outdone  
As heiress of the summer sun,  
Should doubly wreath her tawny head  
With poppies and with creepers red.  
We waited then for all to grow,  
We planted wallflowers in a row,  
And lavender and borage blue, -  
Alas! we waited, I and you,  
But love was all that ever grew."



"The more one gardens, the more one learns, the more one realizes how little one knows".

**Vita Sackville-West**



**Sissinghurst Castle and Gardens** was another great challenge for Vita and Harold .The site of the gardens at Sissinghurst Castle was a moated **Elizabeth** manor house built in the late **12<sup>TH</sup> century**. Of that manor house only the moat survives. In **1533 Sir John Baker** bought Sissinghurst Manor. Baker was a high-flying courtier under a succession of Tudor monarchs, including **Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Queen Mary**. He served as Attorney General, Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Speaker of the House of Commons. Money was poured into Sissinghurst, transforming it from a simple manor to an opulent showpiece home. He built the great tower as an observation point for hunting, and to serve as a grand entrance gatehouse to a huge courtyard house. He created **Priest's House** as a sort of grand summer house, a place to hold outdoor picnics. Sissinghurst became so grand that Baker entertained **Queen Elizabeth I** here for three days in **1573**. Elizabeth responded by making Baker a knight. After the glorious Elizabethan period Sissinghurst went into decline. In **1661** the last male heir died and rooms in the house were eventually let as flats. The decline continued, and in **1749 Horace Walpole** described Sissinghurst as ' a park in ruins and a house in ten times greater ruins.' It was even used as a prison for French sea men from **1756 to 1763**.

April 2020

**“No gardener would be a gardener if he did not live in hope”.**

**Vita Sackville-West**

Vita and her husband Harold Nicolson bought Sissinghurst in **1930** for the sum of **12,375** pounds from a local farmer. There was no running water, no electricity, and no heating. But the romantic ruins of the Elizabethan house appealed to Vita. Almost immediately the pair began to pour their energies into transforming the site into a garden to remember. It took all of her considerable fortune, which she topped up by writing gardening articles, but the effects of her work are stunning. Out of the old ruins of the house and grounds, Vita created a garden composed of individual 'rooms' set off by hedges, following on the theme from the Long Barn and Knole. The linked but individual sections of the garden were distinguished by predominant colour themes such as the most loved influential white garden, or by concentration on the flowers of a certain season, and at the same time keeping the characteristic English and Kentish garden style while also assimilating more exotic Mediterranean touches. The gardens are **465** acres in size.

There is a large, informal **orchard** leading down to the old moat, and a **Moat Walk** beside the water which is a shallow stream leading into the **River Beult** and the **North Downs**.



The **Top Courtyard** leads to the tower through a lawn bordered with urns. Here there is a **Purple Border**, which in fact is made of a mix of blues, pink, lilac, and purple.

The **Rose Garden** leads off the Top Courtyard. This area is at its best in late May, June and early July.

From here there is the **Spring Garden**, or **Lime Walk**. This area was designed by Harold and though Vita described it as resembling Platform 5 at Charing Cross station, she loved it, too.

By the Spring Garden is the **Cottage Garden**, composed mostly of yellows, reds, and oranges surrounding **South Cottage**, a remnant of the Elizabethan house.

Beside the **Tower** on the other side is a **White Garden**, around a weeping pear tree. All these separate garden areas are set off by tall clipped hedges, and are further divided by paths, some formal, some winding and sinuous.



The famous **Tower** looms over the entire garden. You can climb to the top for superb views over the entire estate. Within the tower are two floors of exhibitions about Sissinghurst, and a third floor with Vita Sackville-West's study, looking almost exactly as she left it after her death in **1962**.

The **National Trust** took over in **1967** but Vita and Harold's grandchildren still live there today

**“For the past 40 years of my life, I have broken my fingernails, my back and sometimes my heart in the practical pursuit of my favourite occupation, gardening!”**



April 2020

## [News about and for the English ladies](#)

### **FANTASTIC WOMEN.**

### **SURREAL WORLDS FROM MERET OPPENHEIM TO FRIDA KAHLO**

THIS EXHIBITION HAS BEEN POSTPONED.

Goddess, she-devil, doll, fetish, nymph, or wonderful dream creature. Women were the central subject matter of Surrealist male fantasies. Female artists were mostly only accepted as models or partners of the male painters.

This exhibition shows 360 works of 34 women artists who were producing their own response to the Surrealist art movement of the 1930's.

It is however possible to view this exhibition in detail on the internet. There is a 30 minute multimedia presentation with art work, text and short films. Also there is a 13 minute Podcast about the artists and the social aspects of their lives at the time when they were working.

Other Frankfurt Art galleries are also using this form of information to bridge the gap until they can open again. For this we must thank Max Hollein the former director of these galleries who sent up this system before leaving for a post in the USA.

[www.schirn.de](http://www.schirn.de); [www.liebieghaus.de](http://www.liebieghaus.de); [www.staedelmuseum.de](http://www.staedelmuseum.de),



**Frida Kahlo 1907 to 1954**



**„At the end of the day we can endure much more than we thought we could“  
Quote from Frida Kahlo. This I find very appropriate in the crisis we have today!**

### **Birthdays in April**

Heidrun Niederschuh

Doris Bühner

Anke Rübsamen-Schon

**Happy Birthday Ladies !!**

