

Langham's Letter Extracts

Extracts from Robert Langham's letter describing 'The Magnificent Pageants presented before Queen Elizabeth at Kenilworth Castle in 1575'



A drawing of the Elizabethan Garden at Kenilworth

...Unto this, his Honour's exquisite appointment of a beautiful garden, an acre or more in quantity, that lieth on the north there: Wherein hard all along by the Castle wall, is reared a pleasant terrace, ten feet high, and twelve feet broad, even under foot, and fresh of fine grass; as is also the side thereof towards the garden: In which, by sundry equal distances, with obelisks, and spheres, and white bears, all of stone upon their curious bases, by goodly shew were set; To these, two fine arbours redolent by sweet trees and flowers, at each end one, the garden plot under that, with fair alleys, green by grass, even voided from the borders on both sides, and some (for change) with sand, not light, or too soft, or soily by dust, but smooth and firm, pleasant to walk on, as a sea-shore when the water is availed. Then, much gracified by due proportion of four even quarters : in the midst of each, upon a base of two feet square, and high, seemly bordered of itself, a square pilaster rising pyramidically fifteen feet high. Symmetrically pierced through from a foot beneath to two feet of the top : whereupon, for a capital, an orb of ten inches thick; every of these, with its base, from the ground to the top, of one whole piece; hewn out of hard porphyry, and with great art and heed (think me) thither conveyed and there erected. Where, further also, by great cast and cost, the sweetness of savour on all sides, made so respirant from the redolent plants and fragrant herbs and flowers, in form, colour, and quantity so deliciously variant; and fruit-trees bedecked with apples, pears, and ripe cherries.

'With great art and heed'

And unto these, in the midst, against the terrace, a square cage, sumptuous and beautiful, joined hard to the north wall, (that on that side guards the garden, as the garden the Castle) of a rare form and excellency was raised : in height twenty feet, thirty long, and fourteen broad. From the ground, strong and close, reared breast-high, whereat a framing of a fair moulding was couched all about : from that upward, four great windows, in front, and two at each end, every one five feet wide, as many more even above them divided on all parts by a transom and architrave, so likewise ranging about the cage. Each window arched at the top, and parted from the other at even distances, by flat fair bolted columns, all in form and beauty alike; these supported a comely cornice couched all along upon the bole square. Which with a wire net, finely knit, of meshes six square, an inch wide (as it were for a flat roof) and likewise the space of every window with great cunning and comeliness, even and tight was all overstrained. Under the cornice again, every part beautified with great diamonds, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires : pointed, tabled, rock and round, and garnish'd with gold; by skilful head and hand, and by toil and pencil so lively expressed as it might be great marvel and pleasure to consider how near excellency of Art could approach unto perfection of Nature.

Bear with me, good countryman, though things be not showed here as well as I would, or as well as they should. For indeed I can better imagine and conceive that which I see, than well utter, or duly declare it. Holes were there also and caverns in orderly distances and fashion, voided into the wall, as well as for heat, for coolness, for roost at nights and refuge in weather, as also for breeding when time is. More, fair even, and fresh holly trees for perching and pruning, set within, toward each end one.

Here too, their diversity of meats, their fine several vessels for their water and sundry grains; and a man skilful and diligent to look to them and tend them.

"Harmony to the ear"

But, shall I tell you, of the silver sounded lute, without the sweet touch of hand; the glorious golden cup, without the fresh fragrant wine; or the rich ring with gem, without the fair featured finger; is nothing, indeed, in his proper grace and use : even so his Honor accounted of this mansion 'till he had placed there tenants according. Had it, therefore, replenished with lively Birds, English, French, Spanish, Canarian, and I am deceived if I saw not some African. Whereby, whether it became more delightsome in change of tunes, and harmony to the ear; or else in difference of colours, kinds, and properties to the eye, I'll tell you, if I can, when I have better bethought me.

"Excellency of art"

In the centre, as it were, of this goodly garden, was there placed a very fair fountain, cast into an eight-square, reared four feet high; from the midst whereof, a column

upright, in shape of two Atlants, joined together a back half; the one looking east, the other west, with their hands upholding a fair-formed boll of three feet over; from whence sun-dry fine pipes did lively distil continual streams into the reservoir of the fountain, maintained still two feet deep by the same fresh falling water; wherein pleasantly playing to and fro, and round about, carp, tench, bream, and for variety, perch and eel, fish fair-liking all, and large : In the top, the ragged staff; which, with the bowl, the pillar, and eight sides beneath, were all hewn out of rich and hard white marble. One one side, Neptune with his trident fusk in triumphing in his throne, trailed into the deep by his marine horses. On another, Thetis in her chariot drawn by her dolphins. Then Triton by his fishes. Here Proteus herding his sea-bulls. There Doris and her daughters solacing on sea and sands. The waves surging with froth and foam, intermingled in place, with whales, whirlpools, sturgeons, tunneys, conches, and wealks, all engraven by exquisite device and skill, so as I may think this not much inferior unto Phoebus' gates, which Ovid says, and per-adventure a pattern to this, that Vulcan himself did cut : whereof such was the excellency of art, that the work in value surmounted the stuff, and yet were the gates all of clean massy silver.

"Delectable variety, order, and dignity"

Here were things, ye see, might inflame any mind to long after looking : but whoso was found so hot in desire, with the wrest of a cock was sure of a cooler : water spurting upward with such vehemency, as they should, by and by, be moistened from top to toe; the he's to come laughing, but the she's to more sport : this sometime was occupied to very good pastime.

A garden then so appointed, as wherein aloft upon sweet shadowed walk of terrace, in heat of summer, to feel the pleasant whisking wind above, or delectable coolness of the fountain-spring beneath, to taste of delicious strawberries, cherries, and other fruits, even from their stalks, to smell such fragrancy of sweet odours, breathing from the plants, herbs, and flowers, to hear such natural melodious music and tunes of birds, to have in eye for mirth sometime these underspringing streams, then, the woods, the waters (for both pool and chase were hard at hand in sight), the deer, the people (that out of the east arbour in the base Court, also at hand in view), the fruit-trees, the plants, the herbs, the flowers, the change in colours, the birds flittering, the fountain streaming, the fish swimming, all in such delectable variety, order, and dignity; whereby, at one moment, in one place, at hand, without travel, to have so full fruition of so many God's blessings, by entire delight unto all senses (if all can take) at once.