Paradises on Earth

As American writer Henry Mitchell once said: "Almost any garden, if you see it at just the right moment, can be confused with paradise." Velvet's Melanie Taylor invites you to explore some of the region's most sumptuous gardens this summer

Longstowe Hall

Hidden at the end of a tree-lined drive, in the Cambridgeshire countryside near Bourn, is the beautiful Grade II listed Longstowe Hall, the family home of William and Mercedes Bevan, set amongst their 1,000-hectare estate. Built in the 16th century, Longstowe is now a popular wedding venue and it's easy to see why. Its sweeping lawns, specimen trees, orangery and lakeside gazebo provide a spectacular backdrop to weddings and celebrations. My visit in May coincides with the rose garden and restored Edwardian borders both bursting into life.

Owner Mercedes says: "There is nothing low-maintenance about this garden – we dig up a section of the border every year in order to strengthen it – but what makes me happiest is how the self-seeders do their own thing and pop up wherever they like."

Using the original Edwardian planting plan, Mercedes and her small team of gardeners have rejuvenated the borders with what she describes as "somewhat old-fashioned" planting, in purples and white but with vibrant rudbeckia and goldenrod giving stunning colour into the autumn.

Mercedes suggests we cross the bridge to enjoy the vista back to the house from the tree-lined avenue in the parkland, and it's certainly worth the walk.

You can visit with pre-booked, timed tickets from 11am to 4pm on the following Sundays: June 29, July 13 and 27, August 10 and 24 and September 7 and 21.

See longstowehall.co.uk/gardens

Top, Longstowe peonies and roses; above, aquilegia a and peonies

David Parr House

If respite is needed from the hustle and bustle of Cambridge city centre, then a surprise awaits behind the doors of 184 and 186 Gwydir Street, where you'll find the charming gardens of David Parr House. This Arts and Crafts house and museum with its hand-painted interiors has a cottage garden at 186, while local cut-flower grower Anna Taylor has recently redesigned and newly planted the garden at number 184 for visitors to enjoy.

For opening times see davidparrhouse.org/visit

Elton Hall Millennium Orangery

Elton Hall

Elton Hall is about three miles off the A1 at Peterborough. Home to the Proby family since 1660, Elton Hall is a surprising find, with a garden that doesn't reveal itself all at once.

The walls of the estate office are cloaked in roses, and I especially like the tiny, double, lemon-yellow blooms of *Rosa banksiae* 'Lutea' and the underplanting of white, pink and yellow cistus. The sunken gardens and lilypond are surrounded by an abundant elegance of planting, which draws instant interest from visitors and pollinators alike.

On my visit, I'm captivated by a spiky purple firework, the *Buddleja alternifolia* (fountain butterfly bush) with its arching habit of tiny, scented lilac flowers covered in bees and