



YORKSHIRE GARDENS TRUST

Tudor Croft

Report by Mike Heagney [January 2023]

1. CORE DATA

1.1 Name of site:

Tudor Croft

1.2 Grid reference:

NZ 599 155

1.3 Administrative area:

Guisborough Civil Parish, Redcar and Cleveland (modern), North Riding of Yorkshire (historic)

1.4 Current site designation:

Not on the Historic England's *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England*

2. SUMMARY OF HISTORIC INTEREST

Tudor Croft was built by the well-known brick manufacturer, Ron Crossley, in 1934 in the Arts and Crafts style. The garden was laid out to complement the house and covers an area of c.2ha. Its significance is such that it has featured in a long article in 'Country Life' (August 30th 2007) in which the author wrote:

The result is a richly harmonious Arts-and-Crafts garden in keeping with Crossley's house, and containing a number of facets after the style of Lutyens and Jekyll...Tudor Croft is perhaps the only large private garden built in Teesside during the 20th century and it is a fine example of a garden of its time.

This is a unique house and associated garden in our region, is much visited for the many 'Open Days' and other charitable events that are held in the gardens, raising in the region of £250,000 for charity. The garden is very artfully laid out along a shallow valley with the Hutton Beck flowing through it.

3. HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITE

1934 - 1952

John Crossley ran a brickworks in Commondale, near Guisborough with his son Alfred. When it closed down in 1885, Alfred emigrated to America, where his son Ronald (known as Ron) was born in 1891. The family returned to England and bought the brickworks back, plus the whole village of Commondale. By the 1930s Ron was very wealthy.

He decided to build himself a house on open land on the edge of the market town of Guisborough, North Yorkshire. A wood on a corner of the land had been part of a small private estate and the remainder was a shallow valley through which flowed the Hutton Beck. It had views due south to Highcliffe which towers over the town, and also a view, now lost, south-west to Roseberry Topping.

Ron and his wife Lilian built a beautiful house in the Arts and Crafts style using his company's special hand-made sand-faced 'Tudor' bricks, and therefore named their home 'Tudor Croft'. He employed his friend Robert 'Mouseman' Thompson to panel the entire living and dining room with oak panelling including an inglenook fireplace, front door and beams. All of these have carvings of Mr Thompson's famous trademark mouse. The south face of the house features a loggia beneath a balcony which is supported by a large Thompson oak beam engraved 'RGC 1934'. During the building of the house whilst a gas pipe was being laid, the prehistoric bones of an Auroch, a wild ox, were discovered.

Having built his house, Ron set about creating a beautiful garden. He engaged Backhouses of York to design and build the garden. It is known that Mr Everard, who later set up a nursery of his own at Melsonby, worked for Backhouses at Tudor Croft. It is also clear that Ron influenced the design because Crossley bricks and many ornaments feature in different parts of the garden.

He was in a very good position to create a garden. He would have known the best craftsmen and could obtain the materials through his business and his contacts. Literally thousands of tons of stone were used in the construction of the garden. Much of this stone had previously been the walls of Gisborough Priory. After the Priory was dissolved in 1540 most of the buildings were demolished and the stone re-used locally. It is assumed that Ron bought many cottages which had been built from Priory stone and this was then re-used at Tudor Croft. Along with all this dressed stone he collected many carved Priory stones. The garden is now home to dozens of these, particularly carved heads and flowers. English Heritage have catalogued them all. Some date back to the Priory's founding in 1119.

A Fernery was constructed near the house to the southwest. These were popular in the 19th century in Britain's great gardens. Most were open to the elements, particularly in rocky places such as quarries. However some were covered over with glass set in iron frames and a few of these still survive. This one was built from sandstone which, like most of the other stones from the Priory, is dressed in the local traditional 'herringbone' pattern. The roof was framed with wood and glazed. The interior space within the walls was built up vertically with water-worn Westmorland Limestone.

The cavities between these rocks were filled with soil, ferns and other plants. Finally a paved floor, a fountain, water dripping down the limestone and small pond made it complete.

A large rock garden was created near to the fernery but the stone used is very unusual. It looks a little like coral, consisting of a myriad of beautiful, fragile stone patterns. It is magnesium limestone and occurs along the North East coast between Sunderland and South Shields, some forty miles north of Guisborough. It is about 240 million years old.

Next to the rock garden, on high ground along the west side of the garden is a long rose pergola (**Figure 1**). This showcases the products which created the wealth that built the garden. It is built of forty-eight brick pillars. Almost every one is made from a different Crossley brick and is planted with a different climbing rose. Western Red Cedar beams span the full length. The majority of these are original from the 1930s and have never been treated. The whole pergola is swathed in roses during the summer.

At the northern end of the rose pergola is a small walled garden. As with the house it is very much in the 'Arts and Crafts' style. Crossley bricks and inset millstones form the floor. In total there are nine old millstones in the garden, some from Derbyshire and some from the Marne Valley in Northern France. A study of the bricks used reveals that different types and sizes of bricks have been used. It may well have been built by Ron himself and has a Rose Window on the east side. Planted inside is an old fig, a grape vine and many flowers that enjoy shelter.

The rest of the garden continues in a similar style. Many paths, flagged with York stone or gravelled, are edged with stone (**Figure 2**). Around almost every corner there's another small garden cleverly using stone to frame a bed or a border, each planted with a different range of plants according to the aspect and conditions. There are also ponds, fountains, waterfalls and surprises everywhere.

Crossleys employed Walter Scott, a skilled potter and sculptor who used the clay at the company's Comondale Brickworks to create garden ornaments for sale. He made urns, planters, elves, gnomes, pixies, fairies and animals. Each is unique, numbered and made by hand. There is a fine collection of these in the Elf Garden.

The Hutton Beck flows through the garden on its way from its source near Roseberry Topping to Saltburn (**Figure 3**). This is fast flowing, so more waterfalls, an island, three bridges including a charming stone 'humpback' bridge (**Figure 4**) and a watersplash were built. At the centre of the garden are the water gardens, with a fountain, a cascade, another large pond fed with water from the beck and a bog garden filled with plants which thrive in the wet conditions (**Figure 5**). All this is overlooked by a peaceful stone arbour and seat.

In addition, a large glasshouse and potting shed, vegetable gardens, an orchard, a tennis court, stables, rose gardens, expansive lawns and summerhouses were built plus an aviary and air raid shelter. At the bottom of the garden a house was built for the gardener, with another air raid shelter and glasshouse nearby. Both air raid shelters are dry and very useful today. One has trees growing on top of it. The large glasshouse has not survived.

Having achieved so much in business and having built such a beautiful garden it is particularly sad that Mr Crossley only had a dozen or so years to enjoy it all. He died in 1949 and even though the full time gardener remained, the garden soon went into sharp decline. Eventually Mrs Crossley put the property on the market.

1952 - date

Anthony Heagney, known as Tony, had built up a successful local grocery business. With his wife Edna and five children, Anthea, Mike, Gel (Geraldine) Fluff (Elizabeth) and John, he needed a bigger home. He bought Tudor Croft and the family moved in on December 12th 1952. The next morning they woke up joyfully to a garden covered with snow.

The garden had become overgrown. The rose pergola was impassable and a path had been worn across the lawn between the house and the gardener's house. It took ten years of hard work by two full time gardeners and all the members of the family to bring the garden back to some sort of order. Lost paths, steps and features were also discovered and restored.

In the early 1960s the family started to host events for charity at Tudor Croft and these have continued to be held to this day. The first events were garden fetes with stalls and summer games including a coconut shy and 'hook a duck', and garden openings for the Red Cross. As time went by the entertainment became more sophisticated with a number of grand Summer Balls in marquees on the bottom lawn, 'breakfast from midnight' and bands such as The Temperance Seven.

In 1973 the wooded part of the garden with large mature trees was sold to a family friend. A rare summerhouse by Henry Caesar and his son Julius of Knutsford, Cheshire was in this wood but was kindly given back to the Heagney family later and Mike has lovingly restored it (**Figure 6**).

Tony Heagney died in 1975. Mrs Heagney was always a keen gardener and she worked tirelessly in the garden, occasionally supported by Mike who, with his brother John, ran the family businesses.

One day in 1989 Mike read an advert in the local paper offering land for sale 'with beautiful views over Tudor Croft gardens'. He bought it, though he had to pay a premium for a view of his own garden. This land is west of the rose pergola and is now a long woodland bank and a gravel garden raked in the Japanese style (**Figure 7**). It also features a path paved with huge paving stones which came from the top of the Newton Cap viaduct at Bishop Auckland. This had been a railway and is now a road. One result of purchasing this land was that the garden returned to its original size of 2 hectares.

At about the same time, what is now the secret garden had a poor Ionic hedge along one side of it. Mike removed this and planted a purple beech hedge to almost entirely enclose and transform it (**Figure 8**). Interestingly, after planting this hedge he had one sapling left over. He planted this in the streamside garden and it is big and tall, unlike, of course, the hedge of the same age.

In the 1990s Mike started to become fascinated by snowdrops and all their variations. He started collecting and planting them in marked clumps at Tudor Croft (**Figure 9**). There are now over 300 different snowdrops in the collection which attracts hundreds of visitors in February.

The family Supermarket business was sold in 1999 and the following year Mike started a gardening business. This also benefitted Tudor Croft because he now had the time and the occasional help from skilled gardeners to raise the garden to a higher standard. Each area was carefully looked at. Unsuitable plants, trees and shrubs were trimmed, or removed and replaced. Large numbers of new plants were sourced. Everything planted was and is now recorded, uniquely numbered and labelled. An unexpected result of this has been that the garden is often referred to as a 'Botanic Garden'.

Mike also began collecting stone troughs and created a garden filled with troughs planted with alpinists. The orchard, now unproductive, was replaced with a wildflower garden. The rose gardens were cleared of roses; the soil was replaced with fresh soil and home-made compost, then replanted with David Austin roses. The building which had started life as an aviary became a garden room. The fernery, after a succession of glazed roofs using wood which rotted now has an aluminium glazed roof. Stepping stones have been built for children to cross the beck. There are beehives. There is a large plant nursery. Gel now lives in the gardener's house. The garden has gradually changed for the better in so many ways and it is still changing.

Mrs Heagney lived happily at Tudor Croft for sixty years and died peacefully aged 98 in 2011 in her room overlooking the garden.

In 2015 Mike and Gel began to invite volunteers to come and help. This has been a great success, benefitting both the garden and the volunteers. Tudor Croft now welcomes many regular volunteers, skilled and unskilled, on Tuesday and Friday mornings. These generous people are also invaluable on open days assisting visitors.

The garden presently opens over four days in February for viewing the garden, sales of snowdrops and refreshments and again over four days in the summer for enjoying the garden, sales of plants, refreshments and entertainment. Many gardening clubs and other groups also visit by appointment.

The garden has featured twice on BBC's 'Gardeners' World' and in many publications.

Tudor Croft is very special. It is unusual in that its many delightful gardens are filled with so many flowers which thrive in the different microclimates these gardens provide.

It has also been a very happy home to two remarkable families: the Crossley family who created it and the Heagney family who, at the time of writing, have loved it for 70 years.

Over the years it has become much loved by thousands of regular visitors.

4. SITE DESCRIPTION

The garden is divided into the following areas:

The Azalea beds

The Banks of the Beck

The Bog Garden

The Bottle Garden

The Elf Garden

The Fernery

The Fern Garden

The Gravel Gardens

The Herbaceous Border

The Hosta bed

The Palm Bed

The Plant Nursery

The Rock Garden (House)

The Rock Garden (Water Gardens)

The Rose Gardens

The Rose Pergola

The Secret Garden

The Streamside Garden

The Snowdrop Beds

The Tennis Court

The Trough Garden

The Upper Garden Bank

The Vegetable Garden

The Walled Garden

The Water Gardens

The Wildflower Garden



Figure 1 – Tudor Croft rose pergola. Photo Joe Cornish



Figure 2 – Tudor Croft pathways. Photo Joe Cornish



Figure 3 – Tudor Croft Hutton Beck. Photo Nigel Bourke



Figure 4 – Tudor Croft rose bridge. Photo Joe Cornish



Figure 5 – Tudor Croft water garden. Photo Louise Wickham



Figure 6 – Tudor Croft summerhouse. Photo Nigel Bourke



Figure 7 – Tudor Croft gravel garden. Photo Louise Wickham



Figure 8 – Tudor Croft copper beech hedge. Photo Joe Cornish



Figure 9 – Tudor Croft snowdrop banks. Photo Louise Wickham