

Chelsea Flower Show

London's lost river celebrated at Chelsea Flower Show

Designer Jo Thompson's garden at this year's event pays homage to the Westbourne, a river that runs under the showground itself

JANE OWEN



Left: The Westbourne traces its silent route through some of London's swankiest areas in this map dating from 1890

Bottom Left: The Bridge between Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park on the Serpentine' (1840) by Thomas Hosmer Shepherd © British Library/ Bridgeman Images

Bottom Right: Artist's image of the Chelsea Barracks Garden by Jo Thompson

Right: 1 Jo Thompson in her show garden © Damien Davis
2 Angelica Archangelica in Thompson's garden © Damien Davis
3 Rosa Louise Odier in Thompson's garden

Once the limousines have taken home the great, the good and the well-heeled after Monday's Chelsea Flower Show preview gala, most other visitors will arrive via Sloane Square Tube station. It is always decorated for the occasion, but this year the surroundings deserve closer scrutiny by anyone interested in one of the show's most gorgeous gardens – or in London's lost rivers.

Look upwards, beyond the flower swags and topiary, to the vast metal pipe that lunges diagonally across the station roof. This has become a feature in Jo Thompson's Qatari Diar-sponsored Chelsea Barracks garden – well, not the pipe so much as its contents. It carries one of London's lost rivers, the Westbourne, which runs under the Chelsea Flower Show grounds and a corner of the adjacent Chelsea Barracks before joining the Thames at Chelsea Bridge.

The Westbourne traces its silent route through some of London's swankiest areas, including Belgravia and Knightsbridge, but starts life at the Whitestone Pond where horses used to cool off after the

steep trek up to Hampstead in the north of the city (and where I was born), then mostly vanishes underground. At Hyde Park between 1727 and 1731 it made its first star appearance thanks to George II's wife, Queen Caroline, who ordered the great landscaper Charles Bridgeman to dam the river and thus create the Serpentine lake.

Caroline was so landscape-crazy that she died in debt, having poured most of her, and her husband's, fortune into garden schemes, particularly at Kew where her additions included a thatched building called Merlin's Cave, which was inhabited by a wax witch and other critically important garden ornaments. But I digress. Caroline's commission to create the Serpentine inspired a vogue that spanned most of the 18th century: dammed rivers.

Since then, the Serpentine has been supplied by a bore hole, leaving the Westbourne to make its way, underground, to the Thames. Now, thanks to Thompson, the Westbourne has a new starring role.

As the river nears the point where it joins the tidal Thames, it too becomes

tidal. Thompson has picked up this underground echo in her show garden's ebbing and flowing stone-lined rill.

The idea of celebrating the underground river came originally from Kim Wilkie's master plan for the Chelsea Barracks development, where the river's route will be traced by an overground path and in water features by Neil Porter. It seems a shame that the Westbourne itself could not have been revealed but it is so deep by



the time it reaches the barracks it would have had to lurk at the bottom of a deep gully, which might have seemed more Stygian than scintillating.

Yet farther north, where this and other hidden rivers such as the Tyburn, Fleet and Walbrook are nearer the surface, the revealed rivers would make sparkling additions to any street or development.

These hidden rivers could find inspiration from the Longford river and the Duke of Northumberland's river, once consigned to culverts beneath Heathrow airport. Above ground since Terminal 5 was built, they have created a nature playground in the otherwise barren airport surroundings. When the rivers were revealed they were given coir and



Sloane Square Tube station and the giant overhead pipe carrying the waters of the Westbourne river © Alamy



Girls paddling in the Serpentine in 1911 © Hulton Archive/Getty Images

hazel bank supports to encourage wildlife. Water voles, freshwater mussels and silt from the original riverbed were added to the mix along with 84,000 river plants, 450 semi-mature trees, 2,000 shrubs and 100,000 ground-cover shrubs.

Thompson's show garden hasn't the space for quite that number of plants. Instead she has planted 3,150 in a plot 22 metres by 10 metres. This year, as last, Thompson is updating the traditional



'Knights' Bridge, London' (c1825) by Giles Firman Phillips © Bridgeman Images

Carrots to tempt buyers

There is a utilitarian streak running through Kim Wilkie's master plan of Chelsea Barracks that is uncommon to London's super-prime housing projects, writes Nathan Brooker. It includes provision for a 100-metre-long vegetable patch that will supply a local market and restaurant. "All the open spaces should be productive as well as beautiful," was Wilkie's mission statement when the plan was finalised in 2012.

If it goes ahead, how productive it will be might cause the gardeners to sweat. In April, Bloomberg reported homes at Chelsea Barracks had been selling for £4,500 per sq ft, months before their official launch. If that is true – this could not be confirmed by Project Blue, Qatari Diar's development company for the site – Wilkie's vegetable patch might just be the most expensive in history.

Construction at Chelsea Barracks is under way, with the cores of the first phase of three blocks visible above the hoardings. The development will comprise 448 homes – 123 deemed "affordable" – and will join a cluster of elite developments in that part of

London, at a time when the market for prime homes has been sliding; values are down 2.5 per cent in Chelsea over the past year, according to Knight Frank. However, if you take the strip of land nearest the river, where the barracks are located, prices are up 2.9 per cent over the same period.

"The market is not as bad as people are making out," says Ed Lewis of Savills, one of the estate agents for Chelsea Barracks. "The market is not robust enough for ordinary [stock], that's true, but good stock is selling well." Having a one-off, exclusive product, he says, is vital.

Because Chelsea Barracks is still off-market, "what we're doing for them is under the radar," says Lewis. That rings true. The marketing suite that opened on site this month is by invitation only, according to the developer, which is keeping tight-lipped about dates, sales and prices.

What Wilkie's carrots are going to sell for, then, one can only imagine.

