



# Life on the 'sea-girt' island

Liz Dixon-Spain's home is an old vicarage which has been in her family for almost sixty years

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Looking at the Old Vicarage, Holbeach Hurn, today, set in its beautiful gardens; it is not surprising that Liz Dixon-Spain is delighted to be living in the home of her childhood.

Holbeach Hurn is to be found in the rich farmlands near The Wash. Like the nearby Holbeach St Marks and Holbeach St Matthew, it is built on land wrested from the marshes. A hurn means a corner or spit of land, and as long ago as 1408 Holbeach Hurn was described as 'the sea-girt island of Holbeche Hyrne. It is interesting to note that the word hurn is often added to place names in Holland. Holbeach Hurn was part of an extensive salt-making area, where salt was made by evaporating sea water and silt in salterns (a saltern is another name for a salt house or salt works). Remains of these can still be seen in the landscape at Holbeach Hurn in the form of pits and hollows.

This area of Lincolnshire is also an ornithologist's paradise.

It is here that oystercatchers and red-shanks stop for a while on their migratory journeys between the Arctic and Africa.

In about 1870, the incumbent vicar, the Rev Walter James Hill, was given £1,400 to build a vicarage. He built what is now The Old Vicarage, situated a little way out of the village on Low Road. The house was constructed on raised land, and as most of the area is flat, the fact that it was raised nine feet, and that it was built with Flemish-bond brickwork, shows that it was

regarded as an important building.

Liz's father was born in the village, and he and his wife bought The Old Vicarage in 1948. A new vicarage was to be built closer to the church of St. Luke. Liz's father was a farmer and the old vicarage and land were perfect for him and his young family. There was, however, one unusual thing that had to be done before using one of the rooms as his office. That was that it had to be de-consecrated, as when it had been a vicarage, it had been used as a chapel.

The Old Vicarage is such a well-designed, spacious, family house, only one room had to be altered, and that was the kitchen. Originally, this area would have been entered through a green-baize door, and would have been the servants' quarters. There would have been a large pantry, and there still is a larder, which contains a well, which was once part of the house's water supply. The servants would, definitely, know their place here, as, at one time, there was a door which led up to the attics by the 'back-stairs', where the servants slept, effectively keeping them in a separate part of the house.

When you enter the Old Vicarage, you find yourself in a wide main hall. A striking feature of this hall is the black and white floor tiling, designed by Liz's mother to replace the original Victorian red tiles.

All the downstairs rooms lead off the main hall. In the dining room, there are

*Opposite: A Georgian archway in the garden*

*Below: Liz's herb garden*

*Below right: Paintings of 'The cries of London' decorate one of the guest bedrooms*



sash windows with interior wooden shutters, which fold away into discrete wall cupboards. These shutters are unusual, and recur in the morning and drawing rooms. These must have been a godsend when a hurricane hit Holbeach Hurn in August 1891 and the closed shutters protected all the glass windows. A large painting of Christopher Harrisson, Liz's father, dominates one wall and was painted by Daniel, one of Liz's four sons, who is an artist. Samples of his work, using different media, are mounted all round the house, and he uses the cellars as a dark room. An artistic streak obviously runs through the family as the other sons are Charles, a web designer, Tom a television editor and George, a musician. Liz herself is a garden designer and this year has designed a 'small garden', called 'Paddington's Marmalade Garden', for Action Medical Research. This was on display at the RHS Flower Show at Hampton Court in July. Painting groups often come to stay in the Old Vicarage, because the garden and house are so appealing. Also, because of the situation of Holbeach Hurn, the lighting and amount of sky are ideal for artistic purposes.

An interesting feature of the vicarage rooms is the ornamental ventilators set high in the rooms on the chimney walls. All the main downstairs rooms have attractive views over the garden. The morning room, which is now a television room, contains a fireplace tiled with Delft tiles, which were taken from the original fireplace in the room. These are an appropriate decoration to find in Holland, Lincolnshire. Although no longer in use, most of the original white mantelpieces and hearths remain in situ.

Though the house was built in the mid-Victorian era, the main staircase, leading up from the hall is wide and shallow, more like one from earlier times. In consequence, it is very easy to climb. At the end of the first flight, it branches off into two directions. There are five main bedrooms and two attic rooms, catering, no doubt, for the large family of a Victorian parson.

One of the main bedrooms is predominantly yellow, and used, at times, by Liz's grandchildren, of which she has four - two boys and two girls. Mrs. Harrisson, Liz's mother, obviously did a lot of designing and decorating in the house, and had an en-suite bathroom added to one of the bedrooms. This particular bedroom has prints of the 'Famous Cries of London' series on its walls, and is used by occasional guests. In another bedroom, there is more of Mrs. Harrisson's work to be seen. A recessed arch is set into one wall over a dressing table. On the opposite wall, are





## HOMES & GARDENS

Sporting prints – not just of field sports, but also of a 1930s' cricketer. Liz thinks that a further bedroom was once a nanny's room, situated appropriately halfway between the servants' quarters and the main house. This reflects the nanny's position in the scheme of things!

The blue bathroom, with its display of blue-and-white plates, is the main bathroom. This leads off from Liz's bedroom, which is also decorated in a lovely shade of blue.

The wide, gracious stairs and landing in the main house are in direct contrast to the stairs leading up to the attics. Just before the attic stairs there is a modern shower room, which had possibly been a cupboard, 130 years ago. When Mrs. Dixon-Spain's four boys were young, they used to love to escape up the stairs to the attic rooms, where nobody could get at them. Obviously, it was an ideal house for young boys to live in.

Mrs. Harrison added the terrace, which looks out over the garden. The Vicarage had extensive grounds that went all the way to Low Road. The garden was mainly grass, with a tennis court and a croquet lawn. Liz's father was particularly interested in sport, playing cricket, tennis and hockey for the county, and having the prestigious position of being a member of the MCC Committee. You can imagine that the four boys were given plenty of advice by their grandfather on the sidelines, when they were playing tennis! Tennis was high on the family's priorities, as Holbeach Hurn Tennis Club has also played on these courts.

When Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, Liz's parents, no longer needed such a large house, they built the 'Garden House' in the grounds, between the Vicarage and the road, and Liz and family then took over the Old Vicarage.

The garden, under Liz's supervision, is no longer mainly grass. Coming from the kitchen, across a courtyard, a Georgian archway leads through to the terrace. When I visited, a vivid tree peony was coming into bloom. It is from the terrace that you can see three trees that are the same age as the house. Still flourishing, they are a beech tree, a London plane tree, and, what was most unusual for its time, a tulip tree.

Both ends of the terrace can lead you into the garden. I would have described the Vicarage garden as a series of garden 'rooms', but I think that Liz is more accurate in saying that she designed it so that one part flows easily into the next, with different aspects of the house and garden visible through arches and viewpoints. Although the gardens extend for over one

and a half acres, you don't feel that you are on a route march as you explore it. Everything seems to be made on a curve, and you are led very easily into a rose garden, a herb garden (with its attractive cruciform paths made from broken slates taken from the old garage roof), vegetable gardens (where various vegetables including asparagus and artichokes are grown, surrounded by raspberry hedges), a wild garden and a pond and bog area. At the time when I visited in early May, the paths in the wild garden were delineated by vivid clumps of purple honesty.

The pond area is fed with water, which flows down an artificial runnel. The water comes from storage tanks by the outhouses, which collect rainwater from the garage roof. A stilt-house, made when the four boys were small, is now used as a playhouse by the grandchildren. No chemicals are used in the garden and the wild life loves it – in consequence, the frog population has multiplied every year.

Old fallen trees are used to edge many of the paths and a sycamore has been converted into three high-backed seats at the edge of the tennis courts. The tennis court is now a lawn surrounded by shrubs and herbaceous flower beds. The lawned area is where the Victorian vicar's ponies once grazed.

To the east of the house, you find the garage, built again in Flemish-bond brickwork, and to the side of this, are two outhouses which were used by Liz, and later her younger sister, to stable their pony when they were children. The brick for the buildings possibly came from the Peterborough brick pits, as these are not too far away. Another interesting garden building, with a pyramid-shaped tiled roof, was once an outside privy, but is now a log store. Near to this building are the remains of another well. In this low lying area of Lincolnshire, the water table is not far under the ground and, in the days before mains water, providing another well was not a problem.

I came to this part, down in the south-eastern corner of Lincolnshire, knowing that I would find a splendid garden. I was not disappointed, but what I also found was an attractive, historic residence, which was interesting in its own right and quite as impressive as the garden. No wonder painters and gardeners enjoy visiting the house, and return to see what is happening, year after year. The Dutch Old Masters are famous. Perhaps their art was influenced by a similar sort of landscape? (The Old Vicarage Gardens at Holbeach Hurn were open to the public in May, June and August of this year and also can be opened by appointment.)

*Opposite clockwise from top: Archways in the garden offer different views of the house*

*The main hallway with the black-and-white tiles designed by Liz's mother*

*The comfortable drawing room*

*Below: Wooden shutters protected the house from the 1891 hurricane*



