

The Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury

Self-taught 'high priestess' of historic garden design

who restored the gardens at Hatfield House

THE DOWAGER MARCHIONESS OF SALISBURY, who has died aged 94, was regarded as the "high priestess" of historic garden design, best known for her triumphant restoration of the gardens at Hatfield House, the Cecil family's Jacobean seat in Hertfordshire.

She also designed gardens for the Prince of Wales at Highgrove and to the delight of satirists encouraged him to talk to his plants. "Don't all gardeners do that?" she enquired innocently. "If you love and care for your plants, it makes such a difference."

The former Mollie Wyndham-Quin first applied her interest in historic plants and garden design at Cranborne Manor, the family home for some 30 years of her husband, then styled Viscount Cranborne, son and heir of the 5th Marquess of Salisbury. The garden designer Arne Maynard recalled that his own passion for gardening was sparked by a childhood visit to the Cranborne gardens, where he spotted the then Viscountess working on the borders, attended by a butler rattling across the lawn with trays groaning with family silver.

Formidably determined and independent-minded, Mollie Salisbury, dubbed the "Green Goddess" by one gardening magazine, could also be disarmingly modest. She was quick to point out that she had had "no training whatsoever" and in her *A Gardener's Life: The Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury* (2007, with illustrations by Derry Moore) she was happy to confess to "failures". In 2005, however, her boldly symmetrical garden at Cranborne, filled with historic plants, was named as one of the 10 best gardens in Britain by David Wheeler, the editor of the gardening quarterly *Hortus*.

Cranborne Manor prepared her for the much greater challenge of the gardens at Hatfield House, where she moved when her husband succeeded as the 6th Marquess of Salisbury on the death of his father in 1972.

The house had been built in 1611 by his ancestor Robert Cecil, secretary of state to Queen Elizabeth I and chief minister to James I, on the site of an earlier palace that had been the Queen's childhood home. Cecil employed John Tradescant to design the gardens, sending him abroad to search for bulbs and unusual plants.



Lady Salisbury and the formal gardens at Hatfield House



When Mollie Salisbury arrived, however, the original gardens had vanished, and what remained was overgrown, gloomy and badly pruned. A Victorian marquess had surrounded the house with paths of asphalt and red gravel, and the gardens had been further neglected during the Second World War. "It was a daunting prospect," she recalled. "I particularly felt that the house was standing in very bleak surroundings, unlike how it must have been when it was built."

Lists of seeds, flowers and trees that were bought by Tradescant were found in the archives but with no information about their deployment, so rather than try to recreate the original gardens, Lady Salisbury set about designing a garden in the "manner" of those that existed at the time the house was built. She travelled

to Italy to study Renaissance gardens, consulted historic-garden experts and combed archives for clues.

As chateleine of Hatfield, over the next 31 years she undertook 42 acres of improvements, creating bizarre baroque topiaries, an Elizabethan-style knot garden, a Georgian-inspired cascade and exuberant heraldic parterres, as well as more naturalistic wilderness and woodland gardens.

At both Cranborne and Hatfield, Lady Salisbury led the way as a pioneer of organic gardening ("when I began, in 1948, I was written off as a complete crank"), banning pesticides, artificial fertilisers and herbicides in favour of compost heaps and organic insect control.

It was this that inspired Prince Charles to consult her about Highgrove. She introduced him to Miriam Rothschild, the eminent scientist, who helped him create a series of stunning wild-flower meadows, while she herself helped him with the more formal core elements of the garden – the Sundial Garden, Terrace Garden (featuring among other things a central pool with a "Toad Road" ramp), and Kitchen Garden, before the Prince himself designed the rest of the garden with help from Rosemary Verey.

Lady Salisbury was once asked whether her garden projects had given her a sense of accomplishment, to which she replied that they did "to a degree", adding, with typical understatement, "It's always a great pleasure when you've created something if it doesn't look too bad."

She was born Marjorie Olsin Wyndham-Quin on St Swithin's Day, July 15 1922, the second of three daughters of Captain Valentine Wyndham-Quin (a younger son of the 5th Earl of Dunraven) and his wife, Marjorie Prettyman, of Orwell Park in Suffolk.

Valentine Wyndham-Quin had served in the Royal Navy during the First World War and then had various jobs, including running the polo on the then Italian islands of Brioni, as an organiser of the Conservative Party,



Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London

and later as naval attaché to Argentina. The family lived a peripatetic life and it was with their Dunraven grandparents in Ireland that Mollie and her two sisters, Ursula and Pamela (later Lady Egremont) passed the happiest days of their childhoods.

Educated haphazardly by a series of governesses, Mollie (whose first response to plants had been to develop an irrational phobia of dandelions) found her true calling after the family finally settled in Dorset, when her mother gave her and her two sisters a small piece of land each and she discovered the "intense pleasure of garden design".

The three Wyndham-Quin girls were very beautiful; a cavalry subaltern was reputed, in the course of a week, to have proposed (without success) to all three in turn, but in 1945 she married Robert Edward Peter Gascoyne-Cecil, eldest grandson of the 4th Marquess of Salisbury, who had served in the Grenadier Guards during the Second World War, in which he was twice wounded. In 1947, when his father succeeded as 5th Marquess, he was styled Viscount Cranborne and subsequently served as a Conservative MP for Bournemouth West, from 1950 to 1954. He succeeded his father in 1972 as the 6th Marquess of Salisbury.

Mollie Salisbury combined her gardening with running the household at Hatfield and bringing up a large family, and as she became better known she took on other projects, mainly for friends, in Britain, Ireland, France and America, where she designed an "auricula theatre" for the New York Botanical Garden and the gardens at White Birch Farm in Greenwich, Connecticut, among other commissions.

As president of the Garden Museum, opened in 1977 in Lambeth Road in London, she designed most of the garden, including a knot garden with a stone wall fountain from Italy.

In the mid-1980s, the Salisburys bought a chateau in the Vaucluse region of Provence, which they spent the next 20 years restoring, and during that decade and into the early 1990s,

she drove lorries containing vital supplies to Poland, having become sympathetic to the plight of impoverished Poles, to whom she felt Britain owed an enormous debt, owing to the role played by Polish pilots during the Battle of Britain.

That must have been a remarkable spectacle. Mollie Salisbury was often accompanied by the diminutive Sue Ryder, Lady Ryder of Warsaw. Between them, the two indomitable old girls brushed aside the security apparatus of the Soviet empire and "my-good-manned" their way past any number of border guards. On their trips, the irresistible force always vanquished the immovable object.

Lady Salisbury never had any time for pretension. She recalled that when, in 1951, she and her husband were invited to a costume ball given by Charlie de Beistegui in Venice (often described as one of the great parties of the 20th century), they had declined. "Everybody on the Lido was sucking up to Charlie (for invitations)," she said. "We were appalled, and fled. We soon heard it was awful."

Upon the death of her husband in 2003, she handed over Hatfield to their eldest son and moved to a house in Chelsea, exchanging her vast acres for the challenge of an urban roof terrace. She divided her time between London and her home in Provence, where she also created a wonderful garden and wrote *A Gardener's Life*.

Always immaculately coiffed and impeccably dressed in a soft, feminine style, Lady Salisbury remained a beauty into old age.

The Salisburys had six sons and a daughter. One son died in infancy; another, Lord Richard, a freelance journalist who occasionally worked for *The Daily Telegraph*, was killed by a stray bullet in Rhodesia in 1978.

The current Lord Salisbury, born in 1946, was, as Lord Cranborne, Leader of the House of Lords under John Major.

The Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, born July 15 1922, died December 12 2016