

The book of hours that took 15 years



The creation of a Shropshire garden is the backdrop to a multi-layered book

Ding dong! Ding dong! It was the chimes of the bells of nearby Morville Church which sowed the seed of a book idea in the mind of Dr Katherine Swift as she toiled in the garden.

"All the time that I was out in the garden, from dawn to dusk, every day, month after month, year after year, was to the accompaniment of the bells.

"That gave me the idea that it would be a lovely thing to do to write a book that went through what it was like being outside every moment of the day and the night, because it had been such a revelation to me, having worked in libraries and indoors all my life to then, being out of doors in all weathers and all seasons at all times of the day and night," she said.

That seed of an idea has now, many years later, blossomed into a book, called *The Morville Hours*, which has already been so well received that it will be the Radio 4 Book of the Week for the week beginning May 5.

Katherine wrote the gardening column for *The Times* for four years, and publishers were so keen on her book that her agent was able to conduct an email auction among them for the right to publish it.

And although it is officially being launched on May 5, Salopians will have the chance to jump the gun as



she will be signing copies at the Morville Flower Festival on May 3, 4, and 5, at noon and 3pm.

Nominally the book is about Katherine's arrival in Shropshire in 1988 and her work to create a sort of historical garden telling the history of English gardening at The Dower House, Morville, where she is a tenant

of the National Trust.

But it is also a tapestry with many threads and themes – autobiography, history, local history, family history, Katherine's relationships with her parents, geology, the origins and meanings of words, the Salopians of today and yesteryear who have worked on the same land, and of time, the seasons and the senses.

In fact it took so long and became so complicated (for instance, each chapter is based on a different sense) that Katherine's computer became obsolete during the process and at one point, despairing that she would ever finish it, she did a house swap, spending a winter in an isolated cottage at Shelve, near the Stiperstones, concentrating on the book.

"One day my husband said: 'This is the one. He showed me a photo of Morville'"

The structuring of the book was inspired by the fact that the site – nobody is sure of the exact location – had once been a Benedictine

monastery.

"With that came the idea of the Hours of the Divine Office. As the bells of the church tower would have rung every three hours to summon the monks for the next bit of the Divine Office, I thought a lovely way of structuring the book would be by the Hours of the Divine Office. These are the chapter titles."

So the chapter titles read Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.

"I was brought up a Catholic. My parents were umpteen different religions. My mother was CoE, I suppose, and then she was a Communist. My father became a Unitarian minister. Then they were Anglican, and higher and higher church, and my mother became a Catholic, but in later life she became a Buddhist."

However, Katherine is not a Catholic: "I haven't been to church since I was 16 but I have a strong affection for it. I'm particularly attached to the church year. My mother and I used to sing in the church choir, so we used to sing all the plainsong and do all the liturgy throughout the year."

She became fascinated by garden history while at Oxford University and it was the garden – or rather the potential to create a garden – which brought her and her husband Ken to The Dower House.

"We had been looking for somewhere to make a big garden on historical lines for some years. I finished my thesis in 1986 and went off to be keeper of early printed books at Trinity College, Dublin. We were looking for somewhere to make a garden. I ended up commuting between Oxford and Dublin.

"Ken would meet me at Heathrow every Friday night with a wallet of pho-



Dr Katherine Swift in the historical garden she created at Morville

tographs of all the houses he had been to in that week.

"Then one day he said: 'I think I've found it. I think this is the one.' He showed me the photograph of Morville."

Katherine had never been to Shropshire before.

"The idea of Shropshire had always seemed a very magical one. It seemed right to be coming back to Shropshire. You might say you weren't coming back because you were never here before. It felt like coming back. It's been absolutely wonderful. It really seized my imagination. The book is as much about Shropshire as it is about simply Morville and the garden.

"The reason it's taken me 15 years to finish it is because it kept getting deeper and deeper, with more and more layers being added to it."

A running imagery through the book is of fragments, and trying to build a coherent picture from them.

"It is unintended, but I found that all

the imagery in the last chapter is of completion, and putting things together."

The Dower House Garden is open from the beginning of April to the end of September on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Bank Holiday Mondays from 2pm to 6pm (£4 adult entry).

You won't hear the church bells though – the church is undergoing restoration – but if you're lucky you might spot Billy, the big grey cat of the late Ironbridge coracle maker Eustace Rogers. Katherine took in Billy, and his brother, the late Jack, from a cats' home after Eustace's death.

"My own cats weren't very pleased."

Billy appears on the cover of *The Morville Hours*, walking from the winter scene on the back cover, to the summer scene on the front, and all Katherine's other cats appear in the various chapter illustrations.

The Morville Hours is published by Bloomsbury. It is hardback, 338 pages, and costs £17.99.