

The Conservation of English Landscape Gardens of the National Trust.

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Great Britain enjoys the greatest concentration and the most diverse collection of historic gardens and landscape parks of any country in the world. At first by accident, later by design, the National Trust has come to own an important cross section of them; indeed the most varied collection and the largest number ever owned by a single independent organisation. Almost one third of the United Kingdom gardens listed by ICOMOS as "of outstanding international importance" are owned by the National Trust.

The National Trust is primarily a land-owning charity. It owns 650 kilometres (over 400 miles) of coastline (about half the total still unspoilt) and nearly 200 ha (half a million acres) of land of the highest landscape quality, including more than a quarter of the English Lake District National Park. The Trust owns over 150 important country houses (stately homes) and often with them their estates and their gardens; some like Stourhead, of the greatest importance. But in recent years the Trust has also accepted gardens in their own right, quite independent of house and estate - hence the acquisition of world renowned gardens like Hidcote, Bodnant, Nymans, Sissinghurst, Knightshayes etc. On the other hand the trust is not acquisitive of houses and gardens and believes that usually the

responsible private owner is the best custodian of private gardens (and always the best makers of gardens).

The National Trust has powers and responsibilities in the ownership of its properties that are unique in the world. Its power to declare property inalienable makes the Trust the most effective preservation body that could be devised; safe generally from government as well as private acquisitions and exploitation. The Trust currently spends annually more than £ 2 1/2 m on the upkeep of its gardens, about 14% of total expenditure. All its income is raised privately and the Trust has found it possible to keep abreast of the rapidly rising costs of recent years only because of a comparable increase in income from a rapidly rising membership, now over 1,000,000. This is one of the greatest voluntary memberships of any charity in the world and wonderful encouragement to all who value the heritage of the past.

It is one thing to make a garden or to design a landscape but quite a different matter to consider its preservation in perpetuity. This demands the kind of long-term approach, spanning successive generations that was adopted by the land owners who first created them. So much has been written about the great English landscape designers of the 18th century - Kent, Brown, Repton

etc - that the importance of the owners as innovators and, equally important, as enlightened clients who cultivated the plants and turned ideas into reality, tends to be underrated. Only with the consistent care and the critical eye of the owners was it possible for the great 18th century landscapes, whether designed by professionals or the dilettantes, to reach the satisfactory maturity that we see today.

In practical terms the conservation of an historic landscape garden demands a clear policy and a management plan designed with the history of the garden, its creators, its associations, its locality and its unique qualities in mind. The policy must be conceived primarily for the preservation of the garden, for its own sake, rather than merely for its exploitation as a useful resource. On the other hand it would be folly to ignore economics. Income derived from new uses, provided that they are compatible, and from larger numbers of visitors can be the means of survival and regeneration. While the policy and the management plan must be flexible enough to allow such changes to be absorbed, now and in the future, historical and aesthetic consideration should always be paramount. In practice conservation must always be a compromise between the historical ideal and the modern demands of visitors and economics. What is important is that management should be consistent and based on a belief that the garden will continue indefinitely in its present form. In their time Brown and Repton were selling not just a radical new fashion but a system of upkeep, a management plan, so well adjusted to the economics of the English countryside that it has survived for 200 years.

The application of such a policy is

far more difficult than its conception. It involves a discipline and a consistency that in the 20th century few families and even fewer organisations can sustain. On the part of those responsible it calls for subtle and sensitive management; it calls for acute critical observation, the ability to anticipate change and constantly to be able to visualise the future results of today's actions, not only major matters like the siting of car parks but also all the other detailed operations of upkeep and restoration. A garden is not an object but a process, always developing and decaying.

Change is inevitable and the function of management and their advisers should be to direct such changes along the lines of a policy that preserves and restores the essential qualities of the place. In the context of the National Trust it involves the need for rapport between all those involved - management, advisers, committees and not least the gardeners on whose skill, enthusiasm and understanding much depends. Only this personal touch can ensure the appearance of being loved and cherished that distinguishes a true garden from a mere open space or institutional playground.

Some of the greatest gardens ever made were the work of individuals, accomplished in the span of one lifetime. More often great gardens are the outcome of creative partnership; sometimes of husband and wife, sometimes of architect and artist-plantsman, most frequently of designer and client. Many of these great gardens have been successfully preserved as near as possible as they were made, especially where the design is formal and finite.

With all landscapes and gardens, especially those of the English landscape kind, a great design, a wonderful

vision, is not enough. It has to be planted and cultivated, interpreted and nurtured for many years, both as it develops and then again, if it is to survive, after it has matured. The remarkable consistency of ownership of many houses in England over the past 200-300 years and absence of serious political upheaval, invasion or civil war has been particularly conducive to the long-term needs of garden and landscape conservation.

Hence the survival of so many intact 18th century landscape gardens, protected by a dynasty of the same family of owners.

But over this period styles and fashions in garden design have changed as much as in architecture and a vast range of plants and trees has been introduced from abroad. Many of the greatest British gardens have been overlaid with later styles and "enriched" with plants in response to the tastes, interests, and the fortunes of successive generations. In some cases unquestionably great gardens have evolved as a result, while in other cases the quality of the outcome is a matter of opinion. Always the result is interesting. The unique quality of many British gardens lies in the sense of continuity that they convey and the evidence of change that they exhibit. Where it exists, this quality can be more valuable than unsullied purity of design. But the existence of overlays and additions makes the task of conserving such gardens more complicated.

Any valid policy for the conservation of an historic garden must be based upon adequate research, aimed not merely at establishing the original intention but also at finding out what was actually achieved and added in subsequent generations. Only by unpicking the various layers of planting and development can each be evaluated and a

policy formulated which will go some way to integrating the additions while preserving the original concept.

An important part of research lies in studying the documentary evidence. For British gardens, including those owned by the National Trust, much research remains to be done. Contemporary descriptions and estate records can be of great value but, to me, plans, pictures, drawings and photographs are generally the most useful, being less dependent on the interpretation of the reader. The drawing of Kip and others circa 1700 record many of the formal gardens which preceded those of the English Landscape style of the 18th century. A few of these layouts have survived almost intact, e.g. Dunham Massey Park. Many were swept aside in the tide of the new taste but frequently, as at West Wycomb Park and Wimpole Hall, avenues and other important features were retained and assimilated into the new scheme.

But the existence of descriptions, plans, drawings and engravings does not ensure their accuracy. Kip was clever in exaggerating the apparent size of a property and sometimes seemed to show intentions as well as facts. Layout and planting plans were not necessarily carried out precisely as recommended and there was an understandable tendency for owners to continue to "improve" in their own way once the professional landscape designer was out of sight. On the other hand early Ordnance Survey maps of the late 1800s and the early 1900s are valuable records, every feature being marked precisely, including the trees.

One rarely has the luxury of an exact precedent still valid today but this did occur at West Wycombe Park. Humphry Repton advised the Dashwood family

in 1805 and as was their right they accepted some advice and ignored the rest.

Repton used West Wycombe as an example in his book "The Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening" providing one of his characteristic "before and after" drawings to illustrate how much better the rather small lake would look if the surrounding trees were to be smaller and the island cleared to give a view of the house and reflections of the sky in the water. Over the past seven years, thanks to natural disasters and consistent policy, it has been possible to restore much of what Repton recommended.

Aerial photographs can be useful if by design or good luck the ideal conditions exist at the time they are taken. All are interesting but perhaps 2-3% of normal aerial photographs seem to be of real value. Florence Court near Enniskillen in Northern Ireland is a late 17th century house with an apparently ordinary late 18th century park. Although it is not owned by the National Trust we were asked to advise on the park because it is vitally important to the house. An aerial photograph taken late on a sunny winter's day shows marks in the grassland, which has been permanent pasture for 300 years. It shows evidence of an earlier formal avenue leading to the house, of which there is little other evidence. It also shows where trees seem to have been removed or to have blown down, making it possible to replant according to evidence as well as a feeling for what might be right.

Much more fieldwork needs to be done to check the documentary evidence but the cost of accurate survey work of this kind is very high. In 1979 under a Government-financed tempo-

rary employment programme, the National Trust set up a scheme for making accurate measured surveys of some of its historic parks and gardens and using these in conjunction with available documentary evidence to produce the fullest possible historical account.

The team of young university graduates began at Osterley park in Middlesex, near London Airport. The house was given to the National Trust in 1949 by the present Lord Jersey with most of the inner portion of a once much larger park. The house and park are leased by the Trust to the Government Department of the Environment, who maintain the house as a museum and the grounds as a public park. The M4 Motorway was built in the early 1960 just to the north of the area owned by the National Trust through part of the original park. Although an important Elizabethan house and park existed on the site until the early 18th century, it was the extensive alterations by Robert Adam after 1761 first for Sir Francis Child and then for his brother Robert, that has made the property notable. The superb Elizabethan stable block remains largely unaltered.

No famous landscape designer was involved in the park but it was competently laid out in the English Landscape style most probably by Mrs. Robert Child and her land steward, a Mr Bunce. It has been continuously developed since, each new generation bringing their own ideas and their enthusiasms.

The survey team not only plotted and named each tree but were able also to make an estimate of its age, based upon known growth rates of each species, modified for this site by reference to trees of known age mentioned in the records. In this way it was possible to make maps of surviving trees for each

of the main periods of developments and to compare them with maps discovered in the archival search; beginning with John Rocque's Survey of London 1741-45 when the park was still small and formal, followed by maps of 1818, 1832, the earliest ordnance Survey of 1865, the O.S. map of 1894-6 and finally the O.S. map of 1940. By analysing the results, graphs and histograms can be drawn showing clearly the age distribution of all trees and main periods of planting of each species. Another interesting graph shows the increase in the number of trees its rapid development as an arboretum after c.1850 and then again after c. 1900. As well as all this data affecting the formulation of a future planting policy, the ebb and flow of the park boundaries and changes in access can be traced to build up a complete picture. In more ancient landscapes evidence of old earthworks, parish boundaries, mediaeval husbandry and ancient woodlands can be found. The science of "landscape archaeology" is still in its infancy and there is enormous scope for such work, partly as an historical record and partly as a basis for making long-term management plans such as those the Trust has written for Osterley and for Stourhead, where I worked with Kenneth Woddbridge.

For their effective long-term preservation all gardens must constantly be in a state of partial restoration. Most gardens of the National Trust are in this condition, constantly being restored, replanted, re-worked and adjusted, little by little, anticipating and reacting to change, according to the funds available at the time. But occasionally, because of special circumstances, the Trust is able to undertake a major restoration as at Ham House (Surrey), Erdding

Hall (n.Wales), and Claremont (Surrey). Claremont is in the development of the important 18th century landscape garden and a brief account of its restoration provides a positive note on which to conclude this paper.

The first house at Claremont was built after 1710 by John Vanburgh, playwright and architect of Blenheim and Castle Howard, first for himself and then for Sir Thomas Pelham-Holles subsequently the Earl of Clare 1st Duke of Newcastle. The latter retained Vanburgh to enlarge the house, build the Belvedere and begin to lay out the garden. When he much enlarged the estate in 1716 the Duke consulted Charles Bridgeman and the early scheme with its avenues, round pond and Amphi-theatre can be attributed largely to him. Apart from the firm lines of these formal elements there were signs of the new spirit pervading landscape gardening in the asymmetry of the design and its winding walks and loose groves of trees.

After Bridgeman, William Kent was employed and the survey by John Rocque of 1738 shows how Kent softened the lines of Bridgeman's layout by breaking avenues into clumps and by extending the lake and making an island. He also constructed several buildings. A survey by Rocque of 1750 shows a further stage when Kent's work was largely complete and the grotto had been added.

In 1768 after the death of Newcastle, Lord Clive bought the estate and he employed Lancelot Brown to rebuild the house on a higher site to the north-east. Brown's drawings for the grounds have not survived. Apart from the changes dictated by moving the house, his principal contribution was the diversion of the main Portsmouth road

away from the lake. He retained Bridgeman's unique Amphitheatre.

After Clive's death in 1774 the estate became, for a tragically short time, until she died in 1817, the home of Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg and then eventually became a holiday home for the Princess, later Queen Victoria, who passed it to her younger son the Duke of Albany for his lifetime. In this century the grounds had become entirely overgrown under a shroud of evergreen and in the 1930s it was divided, part being sold for speculative building. The house with its immediate surroundings is occupied now as a girl's school and in 1949 the National Trust was given the remainder, i.e. the south-west corner with the lake and the amphitheatre.

For several years maintenance was in the hands of the local authority and little could be done about restoration. But in 1975, thanks to a grant from the Slater Foundation, it was possible to begin the enormous task of repairing the buildings and clearing the accumulated growth of many years to reveal and restore the landscape.

One of two anonymous paintings of about 1740 shows the lake and island with its rusticated Temple, and the grotto nearby. The extent of the clearance and restoration can be seen from photographs of the same area taken before and just after the work.

Thanks to a total blanket of shrubs and trees, the amount to which the Amphitheatre had survived could only be guessed. There were many reservations and doubts about their total clearance, particularly from local people who had been in the habit of using the place as a public open space. But when the amphitheatre began to emerge, and particularly when it was restored to shape

and grassed over, the reaction became almost unanimously favourable.

As an organisation responsible for gardens and landscapes the National Trust, like most charities, suffers from the familiar problems of lack of money and staff. But it enjoys the enormous advantage of independence, which allows it to take difficult decisions in the interests of its properties. Even more important are its continuity of purpose and the stability of its committees and its staff. This allows it always to take the long view, perhaps the most vital of all approaches to the conservation of landscape gardens.