

SPECIAL PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH THE  
CONSERVATION OF GARDENS OF HISTORICAL INTEREST IN GREAT BRITAIN

Your President's first choice of Speaker to address this Symposium on behalf of British experience was Mr. H.F. Clark. He died on March 31st of this year. He would have been proud to receive your invitation; his knowledge and wisdom are irreplaceable and I am confident that you would wish me to express our great regret that we meet today in his absence. As his pupil and colleague for many years I am conscious of the honour you do me and hope that in some small way my remarks are worthy of his contribution to and influence upon the matters before us. It is our fortune that the Garden History Society of which he was President from its inauguration in 1965 until his death, invited him to address its seminar held at Stowe School on 20th April, 1968 on the Restoration and Reclamation of Gardens. I commend it to your attention. (1)

The conservation of gardens is a relatively recent concern and I make no apology raising more questions than I can answer. To begin with the title I have been given : are there in fact problems peculiar to Britain as distinct from any other country which is industrialised and densely populated and which some authorities argue are already overpopulated ;

1) Published in Garden History Society Occasional Paper N°1 (1969), price 52.5p; available from R.G.C. Desmond, Esq., 31 Markesbury Avenue, Richmond, Surrey, England.

whose land surface is finite but is annually required to accomodate uses which appear infinite in number and size ? Do we, by using the word conservation, intend a deliberate distinction to be drawn from preservation, and if so what? Do we all understand and agree what is a garden ? And within what bounds do we regard a garden to be of historical interest; local, regional, national or international ? As for history the Town and Country Planning Act of 1968 has brought forward the date for its consideration of historic buildings from 1914 to 1939; when does a garden become historical ? Is our discussion described by facts pertinent to the conservation of nature or the conservation of art? If the latter then what kind of art and from which circle of informed opinion - assuming such exist - do we accept judgement ?

Let me suggest that a garden is an assemblage principally of vegetation kept in a preferred state of exological arrest by the craft of gardening; remove the control and it ceases to be a garden. If at any stage in its growth and decay it is judged a work of art then that can only be a retrospective judgement. And since chance plays so large a part we must agree that the gardener is only partly responsible for its success or failure. (For that and other reasons you will remember Repton wished to be judged by his writings and not by his landscapes). Let me also suggest that the fewer the number of senses through which an experience is to be perceived the greater control the creator has over his medium; to put it another way : the purity of a work of art is inversely proportional to the number of senses through which it is experienced, where purity means the degree of control the artist can exercise. Now a garden is, of course, multi sensory hence the difficulty of precision. But matters are simplified if the garden is resolutely concerned with one experience, e.g. paved, dry, surfaces, enclosed by one species of clipped evergreen. If for some reason - because of its aesthetic uniqueness, as a memorial to a famous person, an example of one important garden maker,

the age of the garden or the rarity of the evergreen or paving - such a garden is singled out for conservation it should present few problems. But British gardens rarely are that simple.

If as is frequently claimed Britain's - to be geographically accurate England's - sole contribution to the visual arts has been the landscape garden of the eighteenth century, then we have an international responsibility to safeguard them. But we must be precise about what they are intended to represent, for between 1720 and 1820 it was possible for a garden initiated to the design of Bridgeman, shortly afterwards to be distinguished by Kent's genius, later to be enlarged by Brown and his work in turn improved by Repton, so that if we describe such a garden as an example of an eighteenth century landscape park or garden there can be no doubt that is a correct description, but we cannot say that it is the work of one man, nor if it is to be restored do we know according to whose plan - supposing that any were made and remain - we are to work. Mr. Clark in the paper I have referred to had this to say, "I imagine that the restorer should avoid a too pedantic approach to period accuracy, especially in planting, what I should imagine to be more important, is scale and understanding of the original designer's intentions." Even in the case of a painting we can never know what the artist's intentions were precisely, all the restorer can do is maintain the painting in which it was known to have left the artist's hand. Suppose the artist is still alive, then by that measure who better to restore the painting than the artist himself? Yet we know from contemporary examples that he is far more likely to alter or even destroy his original intentions. So what of William Kent, would he allow the Rousham has fulfilled his intentions? Not I think if we are to judge by his perspective drawings.

The eighteenth century landscape was a combination of a rural economy managed by a classically educated élite; an economic viability as well as aesthetically gratifying. Now if as is suggested conservation is

" the reconciliation of change and preservation " (1) then a garden or park - most especially in Britain during the eighteenth century - is itself an exercise in conservation : of soil, water, plants and animals, with the intention and in such a manner that quite clearly a painting is not concerned with the conservation of canvas and paint; a poem of paper and ink; St. Paul's Cathedral of Portland Stone. Yet at some stage we decide that a particular form of nature conservation has become a work of art which we may then wish to conserve and by so doing we compromise the work of art by the act of further conservation. Alterations are necessary to any kind of garden which was intended for one use, e.g. a family's private use - and when taken in care for the nation becomes public ; which change is surely not fulfilling the intention of the original design. So we face the familiar paradox : the object which attracts attention is destroyed by the number of people it attracts, which is why the Lascaux Caves have had to be closed. Even our most highly prized gardens in Britain are not prized as highly as that; the paying public helps in their upkeep and its needs are met by lavatories, car parks, restaurants, litter bins, wider paths and so on. And further to stimulate interest and curiosity, addittions are made; from lions among Brown's beech woods to bright and coulourful plants in summer when garden visiting is most popular. So not only do we see a gradual destruction by physical numbers but the gradual viciation of an idea by the different tastes of contemporary visitors.

During the nineteenth century existing Bristish gardens were altered and new ones created to accomodate the vast number of plant introductions. Our climate has proved hospitable and since a garden's pleasure is so often revealed by rare and unusual plants in unfamiliar association it is arguable that a garden made in N.W. Scotland of Asian

- 1) Conservation and Development of Historic Towns and Cities - report of Historic Towns and Cities Conference. York April 1968. Edited Pamela Ward, Oriel Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne England, 1968

and Antipodean plants is of more importance than a garden made by a Scot of the same plants in China. Just so is a Japanese garden in England or Ireland, a quite different matter from its source in Kyoto. But Loudon quotes Stewart and advises caution, "accidental associations ... instead of being common to all mankind, are peculiar to the individual. They take their rise from education, from peculiar habits of thought, from situation, from profession; and the beauty they produce is felt only by those whom similar causes have led to the formation of similar association". And personal association render them, "alive to every trifling recommendation belonging to what is their own, while it blinds them to the most prominent beauties in the property of their neighbours". (1) My point may be obscure; I wish to say that gardening as an activity has a wider following in Britain than garden history. Ancient traditions are still alive in suburban gardens, visiting a garden is more likely to be prompted by a search for ideas for one's own garden; a comparison of horticultural standards, botanical identification, than by a dispassionate enquiry into the history of garden art. It is from the ranks of great garden owners or botanic garden directors that the National Trust recruits its Gardens Committee, men who whatever their rank in society are all practical gardeners, none are garden historians in the sense that an art historian is not a practising artist. Indeed were such persons available it is unlikely that they would meet all the requirements for a garden restorer listed by Mr. Clark; which in addition to knowing a great deal about the history of garden art, its periods and styles, and the way in which certain effects were achieved, includes a knowledge about scientific garden techniques, plant materials and the ways of achieving certain effects with modern equivalents. The National Trust meets these requirements with its Honorary Committee and its one professional horticultural advisor and without let it be said any assistance from a

(1) J.C. Loudon. Encyclopaedia of Gardening 1822 p. 998 (7171) (7174)

Landscape architect. Their help may have been required to design the garden originally but not at a later date to restore it. Which fact is, I suggest, also a continuation of our ancient tradition which honours the amateur and empirical.

There is ample evidence from the published guides to gardens that our principal interest is for flowers in season; even Stourhead has become a part through an arboretum interrupted by a grotto and classical temples : of which Kenneth Woodbridge writes that when we view through pictorial and sequential concepts, "We are, of course, using formal and stereo typed picturesque conceptions which belong to a different age. A twentieth century sensibility, apt to find prospects where it may, will possibly reject these". (1)

Let me briefly make a few further points. Continued guidance by such bodies as the National Trust, the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments and the Garden History Society is our safest guarantee. But our government has not ordained any listing of gardens of historical importance. The first garden accepted by the National Trust was Hidcote in 1948; it is now concerned in some way or other with over one hundred garden properties. Whilst the Trust strenuously avoids anything approaching a uniform style, the fact that they are chosen by the Trust inevitably leads to a conformity of taste : and neither it nor any other body champions the poor man's cottage garden, the naive or avante garde.

Land in possession of the National Trust is not unalienable as the test case at Saltram Park in 1968 illustrated and the present case over Killerton gives cause for further concern. The National Trust, it is important to state, is a voluntary body and is not supported by

(1) K. Woodbridge, The Stourhead Landscape, National Trust, 1971

created at Berby in 1840 contained 1013 different species and varieties; since then industrial pollution has destroyed all but three of these original specimens. It is now clear to us that unless we conserve nature there will be no gardens - historically important or otherwise and this is no problem particular to Britain, it is Universal.

L.J. FRICKER

United Kingdom

(1) These matters are thoroughly described in Robin Fedden's The Continuing Purpose : A History of the National Trust its Aims and Work, London 1968.

