

EDINBURGH'S ARCADIA – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Edinburgh is not alone in having a rich heritage of classically inspired private or semi-private gardens or parks. However, in Edinburgh they form a key element in the 'New Town' aspect of the Edinburgh Old and New Town World Heritage Site and so need to be seen as a whole as well as being studied and understood for their individual and distinctive characteristics. It is argued that the gardens deserve an overarching management plan containing more detail than is feasible in the UNESCO-required management plan for the entire World Heritage Site. It is further argued that the gardens in the valley of the Water of Leith form a special subgroup, the question of setting being addressed as they were conceived as being complementary to the houses and bridges of the valley. Sharing experience internationally is strongly recommended and particular reference is made to the possibility of a link with the gardens and parks of Potsdam in Germany which, in much the same way as in Edinburgh, form a key role in the Potsdam World Heritage Site.

THE CHARACTERISTICS AND RELATIONSHIPS OF EDINBURGH'S 'NEW TOWN' GARDENS

A humorous poem by William McGonagall puts its finger shrewdly on the key aspects of Edinburgh's gardens and especially those in the valley of the Water of Leith: consciously Picturesque in a manner derived from classical models as interpreted through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century landscape paintings: winding walks through greensward and shrubberies; conceived as being for healthy exercise and other forms of 'pleasure'.¹ A thorough study of Edinburgh's gardens and squares needs to comprise three elements, the first being to understand them as exemplifying the ideals of the Northern European Enlightenment as expressed through a conscious approach to town planning in which 'rus' is combined with 'urbs'. This combination of classically inspired buildings with classically inspired garden landscapes was intended to provide scope for exercise and fresh air and at the same time recall the ideal landscape of Arcadia, evoked by the poets of ancient Rome and latterly by the poets and essayists of Augustan Britain. Arcadia was distinguished by greensward, by winding walks, gentle slopes, lavish planting of trees, water where possible, and by buildings around or within the gardens which would stir the human memory and evoke feelings of civility and kindness. A second element must be to 'explain their significance, to celebrate them and to demonstrate how they can be maximised for the benefit of the social, economic and cultural life of the city in the 21st century'; and the third element is to consider their present management and how it might be enhanced.²

This paper emphasizes the cumulative value of the whole ensemble, as depicted in numerous aerial photographs (Figure 1). However, citizens of Edinburgh often have the opportunity to experience the extraordinary extent to which their buildings and garden landscapes are interwoven to make one indivisible whole if they return to Edinburgh from,



Figure 1. Edinburgh New Town (looking south-east) showing how the architectural elements and garden landscapes are closely interwoven. Courtesy: Edinburgh World Heritage Trust

say, London on a summer's evening in good light when, as often happen, the aeroplane banks steeply over the mouth of the mighty River Forth, then flies due west following the river, affording a spectacular panorama of the New Town of Edinburgh laid out below. The castle on its volcanic bluff is clearly visible and to its north is immediately the long line of Prince's Street Gardens; then there are the main urban blocks of the first New Town, the layout designed by James Craig (1744–95) in 1766–67,³ with well-treed Charlotte Square at the west end of these blocks and the somewhat less well-treed St Andrew Square at the east.

Then, going northwards, there are three huge rectangles of parkland densely planted with trees: these are the three sets of Queen Street Gardens, separately owned and maintained. The westernmost of the three Queen Street Gardens appears from the air almost to debouch into the great 'O' of Moray Place; which in turn appears to debouch into the three-quarter circle of Ainslie Place. Royal Circus Gardens, although in practice three separate gardens plus the tiny India Street Garden, appears almost as mighty in size as Moray Place Garden. Extending northwards, and a long way eastwards and westwards, below Doune Terrace, Moray Place and Ainslie Place, is the long line of the Moray Bank Garden running down to the public footpath which skirts Edinburgh's river, the Water of Leith. Across the Water of Leith is the almost equally extensive Dean Gardens, a little later in date, and beyond that again to the west and north the still later and extensive gardens in front of the architecturally handsome Belgrave Crescent of 1874 by John Chessher (1820–93), the latter gardens the subject of an insightful doggerel poem by William McGonagall:

The braes of Belgrave Crescent is lovely to see,
 With its beautiful walks and green shrubbery.
 'Tis health for the people that lives near by there
 To walk along the bonny walks and breathe the sweet air.
 Therefore all lovers of the picturesque, be advised by me
 And the beautiful scenery of the River Leith go and see,
 And I am sure you will get a very great treat,
 Because the River of Leith scenery cannot be beat'.⁴

These three gardens along the north and south banks of the Water of Leith are a special treasure in the World World Heritage site because taken together they are so extensive and because they form a kind of 'hinge' in terms of spatial planning, access and visual amenity. At the point at which the Dean Gardens and the Belgrave Crescent Gardens adjoin one another the spectator glimpses (depending upon the time of year, as there are many unmanaged trees in the small segment of land on the south bank of the river) the Dean Village (Figure 2). This is one of the most bravura moments in the townscape of all Edinburgh: industrial archaeology and heritage, fine buildings of various dates, nature conservation, the designed landscapes of the gardens – and the thrilling sound of the mighty waters falling over the weir. However, every single element in this composition requires skilful conservation-oriented management. It is a scene that presents us with the possibility of a hierarchy of management planning opportunities and responsibilities.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) requires all World Heritage Sites to have a management plan – to cover, in broad



Figure 2. At this point of Dean Village, Dean Gardens and Belgrave Crescent Gardens meet and there is a thrilling coming together of many elements, all requiring careful management.

Photos 2–8: author

principles and clearly expressed aspirations, all aspects of conserving and managing the site as a whole so as to sustain and enhance all aspects of significance. Edinburgh World Heritage Site has such a management plan, but, in the case of Edinburgh, the gardens are clearly so important in their complementary character to the architecture, and for their own unique qualities, that they arguably deserve to have an overarching management plan dealing specifically with them, with their challenges and imperatives. In any event, the gardens of the Water of Leith Valley (Moray Bank, Dean, Belgrave Crescent) form a special group within the wider context and a management plan for that particular group and its setting would make good sense. It would provide an opportunity to explore and resolve the diverse cultural, community and planning aspects and to provide solutions satisfactory to all. Ideally, as well as an overarching plan, every individual garden should have its own management plan to guide and encourage local aspirations and activities, and because – in spite of all the common factors – every garden has its own unique characteristics and opportunities.

The inclusion of ‘setting’ is important. This includes such elements as the bridges, the question of the degree of public access (currently it is the Water of Leith walkway and cycle route) and the exceptionally rich dialogue between architecture and gardens. In late summer or autumn splendour the river bank in front of Dean Terrace is so overcrowded with adventitious unmanaged vegetation that the dialogue is no longer possible. There are two bridges over the Water of Leith which have a special relationship with these riverside gardens: Dean Bridge (1829–31) by Thomas Telford (*The Buildings of Scotland: Edinburgh* describes it as ‘one of his boldest masonry designs’) and St Bernard’s Bridge (known to local people as ‘Mackenzie’s Bridge’) (1824), by James Milne, made more ardently Picturesque in 1887 by the addition of a stone staircase in, unexpectedly, the neo-Jacobean style, with ornamental railings and elegant street lighting. The visual relationship between the garden landscapes and the bridges needs to be kept more clearly legible at all times of year.

As to architecture, there is one of the most beautiful classical structures in Edinburgh: St Bernard’s Well, designed by Alexander Nasmyth and constructed in 1788–89 for Francis Troupe, Lord Gardenstone, which enshrines a sculpture of the Greek goddess of health, *Hygieia* (Figure 3).⁵ Nasmyth’s own painting of *St Bernard’s Well* is on public display in the National Trust for Scotland’s ‘Georgian House’ in Charlotte Square. This is a remarkable painting in this context as it shows the Water of Leith Valley as a sublime classical landscape, almost as though it had walked out of the Roman *campagna* or a painting by Claude. The relationship between the temple-like structure and the Picturesque planting of the landscape is well-nigh perfect, and could be again given a more vigorous approach to management. The repair of St Bernard’s Well in 2012–13 was a major achievement of the Edinburgh World Heritage Trust, City of Edinburgh Council, a number of local residents and, most especially, the many professionals, craftsmen and conservators who were responsible for carrying out the project. The Pump Room in the basement of the building is one of Edinburgh’s best-kept secrets, although volunteers keep it open on summer Sunday afternoons, and the revival of its rich decorative scheme was a major part of the project. It deserves to be said, however, that a major factor in the deterioration of the building was a nearby self-seeded tree which became a matter of some controversy.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Drummond Place, towards the eastern edge of the second New Town completed c.1820, deserves a special mention because it was originally the garden of Bellevue House by Robert Adam (1775), which remained after the square with rounded quadrants at



Figure 3. The Greek goddess of Health, *Hygieia*, is wittily but irritatingly accompanied by a bottle of Buckfast wine placed in an inaccessible position. See also Peter McGowan (in this issue), Figure 4

the east end (it is not a true circus) was completed, but had to be demolished *c.*1840 because of damage caused to the foundations by the construction of a railway tunnel that extends under the neighbouring Dublin and Scotland streets. However, it is now the shared property of the freeholders of Drummond Place and is in effect shared ‘front gardens’, communally maintained through an annual subscription (which allows for the employment of a part-time gardener and specialist contractors for tree pruning or other purposes) and, in many cases, by lending a hand with mowing and clipping and other basic tasks of good garden craft (Figure 4).⁶

THE IMPORTANCE OF RAILINGS AND GATES

One respect in which the garden landscapes of the Edinburgh New Town differed markedly from the classical landscapes of antiquity as filtered through literature and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century paintings of the Roman *campagna* is the extent to which they were enclosed by railings. In describing the development of the houses of Royal Circus, designed in 1820 by William Henry Playfair (1790–1857), one of Scotland’s greatest early nineteenth-century architects, Connie Bryom, mentioned that the owners of the houses were bound to enclose the open areas in the Circus:

with parapet and retaining walls and iron railings in a suitable and handsome manner according to drawings and directions to be given and furnished for executing the same by Mr Playfair [...] and the said proprietors shall have the exclusive privilege of using the same as ornamental pleasure grounds.⁷

This short quotation raises a number of issues, one of which is the patchy survival rate of the railings and their gates. For example, in Drummond Place the railings on the north,



Figure 4. Drummond Place – a young volunteer at work in the garden on a sunny September morning

east and south sides are a post-Second World War replacement – serviceable, painted black and so scarcely visible against the dark vegetation of the hedge, but inauthentic. At the west end the original railings survive, the uprights topped with alternating crosses and fleurs-de-lys, along with a most elegant gateway and gate. Nor is this the only gate to survive: quite a number do, and the one on the east side of the North Garden in Royal Circus was presumably designed, or at least approved of, by Playfair. The anthemion design of the rounded archway which surrounds the gateway is pure delight (Figure 5).

Elsewhere there are other patterns of railings and gates, such as the Drummond Place design in which the tops of the uprights alternate between a crown and a fleur-de-lys: it is suggested that this was an allusion to the Scottish regalia which was rediscovered in the 1820s around the time of George IV's celebrated visit to Scotland in 1822. Another design can be seen in the stretch of original railing running north-south along the short edge of the Doune Terrace Garden (Figure 6). Here the upright spears have an unusual elegance about them. Below them runs a frieze which, bay by bay, consists of the motif of a flowery wreath.⁸ Little is currently known about the designers of these gateways and gates, although Anthony Lewis's research has recently provided more information on this:

Products such as iron railings, brass locks and door handles, bricks and window glass were all being made in and near Edinburgh [...] the great Carron ironworks near Falkirk where the Carron Iron Company supplied fireplaces, railings, pipes, cisterns and cookers.⁹

THE NEED FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY

Little survives to demonstrate the quality and the value of the craftsmanship – especially in the handling of stonemasonry and blacksmithery – which went into the creation of the New Town gardens. For example, there is, to the author's knowledge, only one surviving example of an original path – the horronized path that runs right around the circular



Figure 5. Gateway to the North Garden of the Royal Circus – designed by or with the approval of the architect, William Henry Playfair, c.1820



Figure 6. Doune Terrace – a short section of the original railing survives and could be closely copied to supply the missing length, c.1820

garden which forms the centrepiece of Moray Place and is an essential element in its integrity and authenticity (Figure 7).¹⁰ In the Drummond Place garden there survive a few stretches of ceramic ‘barley-sugar’ edging for flowerbeds or shrubberies (Figure 8), but these seem likely to be later nineteenth century. This indicates the role that archaeology



Figure 7. Moray Place – an incredibly rare and precious survival, the ‘horrorized’ path of c.1820 that completely encircles the circular garden of Lord Moray’s Pleasure Ground



Figure 8. Drummond Place – an equally rare survival of ceramic ‘barley-sugar’ pattern edging, at the moment impossible to date

has to play in the recording, study and understanding of what is or is not authentic or original and would provide guidance on how to proceed with the restoration and revival of certain areas or aspects of the gardens.

There is surprisingly little furniture of interest in the gardens. The East Queen Street Garden has some attractive benches, either Regency or Regency Revival. Recent furniture has a ‘chosen out of a catalogue’ character about it, for the most part; yet in and around Edinburgh there are furniture-makers and when a noble ancient tree has to come down, it would be imaginative to have benches made to a specific design for that garden.¹¹

GUIDANCE ON HOW TO EVOLVE MANAGEMENT (OR CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT) PLANS

For any philosophical consideration of the future of the New Town gardens, the *Burra Charter 1999* provides useful guidelines for understanding cultural significance, the

research and writing of conservation plans, the writing of reports, and so forth.¹² It is our task and challenge at the present time not just to record the history of the Edinburgh New Town gardens but, through recording and analysis of what has come down to us, to understand their ‘aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations’.¹³ The *Burra Charter* goes on to explain that ‘Cultural significance is embodied in the *place* itself, its *fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects*’. Sustaining and enhancing cultural significance is all about having a well-researched plan – the *Burra Charter* elected to call it a conservation plan, but ‘management plan’ is the preferred terminology of UNESCO, for example with regard to the protection and sound management of World Heritage Sites, and ‘conservation management plan’ achieves the best of both worlds.¹⁴

ENGAGING WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND WORKING INTERNATIONALLY

Nonetheless, even with such a plan, we would still lack an understanding of the Arcadian gardens of Edinburgh as a whole. Appropriately planned, a strategy to achieve a deeper understanding would involve members of the local communities in sharing their stories, exercising their vigilance, experimenting with using the gardens in individual, interesting, creative and artistic ways. For example, how are the gardens used? A number of gardens have well-designed and well-located play areas for children; people have lunch or supper at tables or picnics; sculpture has been commissioned on a small scale here and there – but surprisingly little overall. The most frequent use, as originally intended, is quiet strolling.¹⁵ Edinburgh’s ‘Enlightenment Gardens’ should also be considered from an international perspective, as recognized by their inclusion in the World Heritage Site. A partnership with the parks and gardens of the former royal domain in Potsdam, Germany, also key elements in a World Heritage Site, might be considered, for example. The early nineteenth-century layers of the Edinburgh and Potsdam garden landscapes were coeval and parallel responses to the pictured and literary ideal of an Arcadia within a city, a ‘*rus in urbe*’. There could be opportunities for reciprocal exchanges – ideas, visits, publications, skills, techniques, modes of improving understanding and presenting interpretation.

Similarly, the September 2014 exhibition of the Foundation for Palaces & Gardens Berlin-Brandenburg was about the garden landscapes of the royal domain and scattered about within them. The exhibition made it possible for the visitor to enjoy many different aspects of the gardens as they were experienced in earlier times, with axes and other relationships restored or explained, and with viewing frames stationed so that the visitor could focus on these opportunities. Moreover, in Germany at large and therefore in the State of Brandenburg there is strong parallel legislation for both cultural and natural heritage and at Park Sanssouci a balance is maintained between the two parallel types of designation, as (1) a listed garden landscape of outstanding importance and a constituent part of the World Heritage Site and (2) as a site designated on account of exceptional nature conservation significance.

A FIRST ATTEMPT TO DEFINE THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GARDENS

In conclusion, as the basis for debate and further elaboration, a definition of the cultural significance of the Picturesque gardens and related architecture and spatial qualities of Edinburgh’s *Enlightenment* era might include (1) the architectural and garden planning of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Edinburgh evolved together, and is unrivalled in scale, range and variety; (2) both the garden landscapes and houses exhibit a remarkable rate of survival; (3) the architecture of the houses and the design and planting

of the gardens are complementary; (4) as with the architecture of the squares, the gardens exhibit an exceptionally high level of craftsmanship, especially where their iron railings and gates survive, and in the execution of architectural elements such as walls and steps; (5) the design of the gardens, in their relationship with the palace fronts of the architecture, exhibits the leading characteristics of the international Picturesque Movement to which British garden designers made an exceptional and widely acknowledged contribution; (6) the gardens are important for their nature conservation interest which requires protection and good management in parallel with their designed aesthetic elements; (7) the gardens relate inventively to the unusual and challenging character of the physical geography of Edinburgh; and (8) the sheer number of the Enlightenment-period gardens of Edinburgh means that they are a vital element for citizens and visitors alike – for well-being and environmental health, for their tranquillity, their visual beauty, and for recreation and enjoyment.

REFERENCES

¹ William McGonagall, 'The River of Leith', in James L. Smith (ed.), *Last Poetic Gems. Selected from the Works of William McGonagall* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1968).

² Preamble to the programme of the Edinburgh Gardens & Squares Conference, Edinburgh, UK, 26 September 2014.

³ Kitty Cruft and Andrew Fraser (eds), *James Craig (1744–1795), 'The Ingenious Architect of the New Town of Edinburgh'* (Edinburgh: Mascot, 1995).

⁴ McGonagall, 'River of Leith'.

⁵ The original had been of Coade stone (1791), but the present statue dates from 1888, when a major restoration was carried out, and is by David Watson Stevenson (1842–1904). It is unusual to have a female deity in a temple of the Doric order, which normally has connotations of masculinity, and is here dedicated to a male saint.

⁶ To a large extent, the houses in the New Town were designed with the expectation that the gardens would follow – sometimes the story of how the gardens came to be as they are is a quite complex one, and we are fortunate to have at hand a remarkable book, industriously researched, beautifully written and lavishly illustrated, which rehearses these stories and on its publication replaced a great deal of myth with fact; Connie Byrom, *The Edinburgh New Town Gardens 'Blessings as well as beauties'* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 246–7.

⁸ There are excellent artist-blacksmiths currently working in Britain at this time – several well experienced at this kind of work – and it would be an immensely worthwhile project to commission one of them to replace the missing railings facing the houses of Doune Terrace.

⁹ Anthony Lewis, *The Builders of Edinburgh New Town 1767–1795* (Reading: Spire, 2014).

¹⁰ This technique was used extensively in

the New Town, but very few examples of it survive, which is a real pity as it produced paths of great beauty of texture. Such paths were formed of small sharp pieces of stone, laid on their edges in lime-based mortar, which were no doubt off-cuts from the building of the New Town houses out of the Craigleith stone which weathers to a silvery-grey colour. There is at least one other area of horronizing, in itself now quite rare, in Glenfinlas Street off the north-west corner of Charlotte Square. But that is not associated with a coherent archaeological project which would survey every New Town garden meticulously – many members of the local communities could be involved in this, but led and supervised by a competent buildings and gardens archaeologist.

¹¹ A bench is an attractive item to give in memory of someone, as indeed does happen already, but so far without 'adding a layer of beauty, interest and significance of the present day'. This is Peter Burman's eighth rule of good conservation practice. The first seven rules are study, research, understand, maintain, repair, cherish and celebrate.

¹² The *Burra Charter 1999* is the revised version of a charter that was evolved by ICOMOS Australia (ICOMOS is the International Council on Monuments and Sites). Philosophically sound, but essentially practical, it is serviceable in dealing with clarity with all kinds of heritage assets, including gardens, in many countries of the world.

¹³ Australian ICOMOS, *Burra Charter 1999*, p. 7, art. 1.2.

¹⁴ We have been extraordinarily fortunate in the New Town that Peter McGowan has been asked already to prepare conservation plans for a number of the gardens.

¹⁵ A number of gardens have their own regulations concerning activities, such as dog walking, many now available on websites.