

IAN GOW

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## WHO LIVED IN THE NEW TOWN AND HOW WERE THE GARDENS USED?

*This paper explores the back garden of the typical Edinburgh New Town house rather than the jointly managed pleasure gardens enjoyed by subscribing key-holders and celebrated in Connie Byrom's inspiring book, The Edinburgh New Town Gardens (2005).*

The back gardens of Edinburgh New Town houses seem to have slipped below the radar of the planning regulations. They are not included in the many revisions of the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee's *Maintenance Manual*, devoted to the structure of New Town houses by Desmond Hodges and are not an aspect of the National Trust for Scotland's (NTS) presentation of 7 Charlotte Square as *The Georgian House* that can be experienced today. However, the NTS is justifiably proud of having united it with its neighbours in 1970 to create William Gillespie's landscaped car park, in which all but one of the existing trees was conserved. His design was seen as providing a model template bringing new life to these 'mostly overgrown' private gardens which had found themselves behind offices at a time when attitudes to cars in the 'New Town' was very different. A brief account was published in *New Life for Historic Areas* (1972) by The Scottish Development Department, since when the space has been extended by Gillespie in 1976 to take in two adjacent gardens to the west.

One of the few attempts to analyse these back gardens is The National Trust for Scotland's Georgian House's handout, 'The Garden of 7 Charlotte Square', prepared by Alison Craddock in March 2003. She pointed out the oddity that pertained on the north side of Charlotte Square through this strip of gardens sharing a boundary with Lord Moray's pleasure grounds to their north, which resulted in these houses being deprived of the normal run of mews houses with an access lane at the foot of their gardens. Instead, the geometry of the street plan was cut across by a diagonal boundary which curtailed their normal long rectangular plans. But there was one considerable advantage enjoyed by residents as a result in that the north facades of their houses had a splendid view, or borrowed landscape, over the Moray's pleasure grounds. All these houses were therefore planned to have their dining rooms at the back of the houses to command this unusual open view.

The only secondary source identified by Craddock to provide further evidence of these gardens was *Memoirs of a Highland Lady*, an autobiography of Elizabeth Grant born at 5 Charlotte Square in 1797:

I remember nothing of Edinburgh but a certain waggon full of black sacks which represented coals, which I vainly attempted to pull or push up some steps in the garden, and which I think was taken from me for crying, so that its possession must have been very near my baby heart when this impression was so vivid.<sup>1</sup>

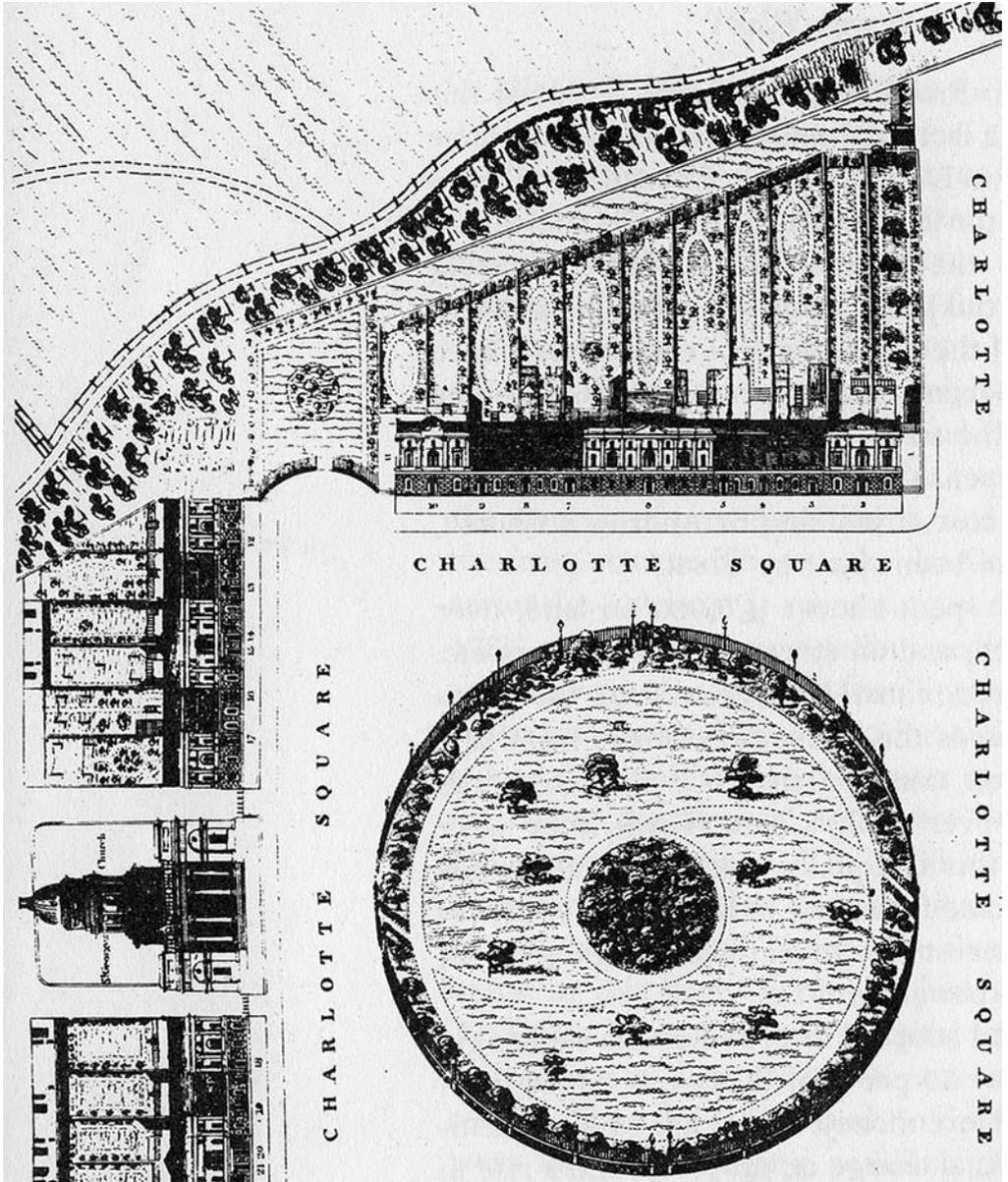


Figure 1. Charlotte Square, from Kirkwood's Picture Map 1819 (detail).  
 Courtesy: National Trust for Scotland

Faced by such scanty recollections, it is not surprising that Craddock turned with relief to contemporary maps with Kirkwood's so called 'Picture Map' of 1819, of which she wrote: 'Their designs are varied and distinctive, which would indicate a genuine interest in their individual planning.'<sup>2</sup>

#### KIRKWOOD'S 'PICTURE MAP' 1819

With so many of the early New Town gardens in George Street and Princes Street having been built over to provide banking halls and shop saloons Kirkwood's 'Picture Map' appears to be a prime source for their original appearance and variety (Figure 1). On the original map these rectangular gardens are only  $1/4 \times 3/8$  inches, and thus are a truly



Figure 2. Surviving access door in New Town, Edinburgh. Courtesy: Private collection

remarkable feat of engraving in their action-packed individual detail with no two side-by-side gardens appearing alike. However, care should be taken when interpreting such plans which may portray common characteristics rather than being accurate representations of actual gardens.<sup>3</sup>

Although some of the plots are rendered asymmetrical by jambs shot out from back facades, they almost all have a strong degree of symmetry. A central path leading from steps bifurcates to create an oval or rectangle then it rejoins to create a central path leading to a central back gate or mews. This probably reflects their ground floor plans because, as James Simpson discovered during the conservation of 26–31 Charlotte Square, to serve as the (former) headquarters of The National Trust for Scotland, these plans almost always had a central corridor connecting the front service door with the central back door on the garden facade (Figure 2). By contrast, the ground or street floor plans have the front door offset to the right or left of their street facades.

The very few surviving individual house designs, such as that for 13 Heriot Row of 1802, tend to show a desire to create a symmetry around this central back or kitchen door.<sup>4</sup> In No. 13, this central corridor is offset to the west as the party wall of the kitchen is on the centre line. In the ‘back area’, a little court, the three steps up to the garden, with elegant curtail curves on the lowest, is flanked by small projecting jambs on the left for a larder and water closet, and on the right with a larger scullery jamb, with a door connecting it to the kitchen. It is impossible to say from the tiny scale of Kirkwood’s map whether he is depicting gravel or lawns in these central plots defined by the dividing paths – even by comparison with known nursery gardens on the fringes of his New Town Picture Map. But what is certain is that a prime purpose was for drying the weekly wash. It is certainly wash drying day at 87 Princes Street with three neat transverse clothes lines running from garden wall to garden wall and presumably strung from the metal curling hasps sunk in them, which are so common in later Edinburgh town gardens. So this is not washing bleaching on grass as in the related communal Bleaching Greens, which inevitably grew up around Edinburgh houses to be deemed an unfortunate eyesore. By contrast all was neat and symmetrical in Kirkwood’s backyards, the transverse lines strung from one division wall to another, following the same neat geometry of the paths and beds.

Another common distinctive structure is a little narrow kiosk or telephone box-like feature – just too small to be read in detail, but most likely to be airy meat safes rather than privies, now an almost vanished genre, although every Edinburgh garden had one until refrigerators became the post-war norm.



Figure 3. A rebuilt 'garden bridge' in New Town, Edinburgh.  
Courtesy: Private collection

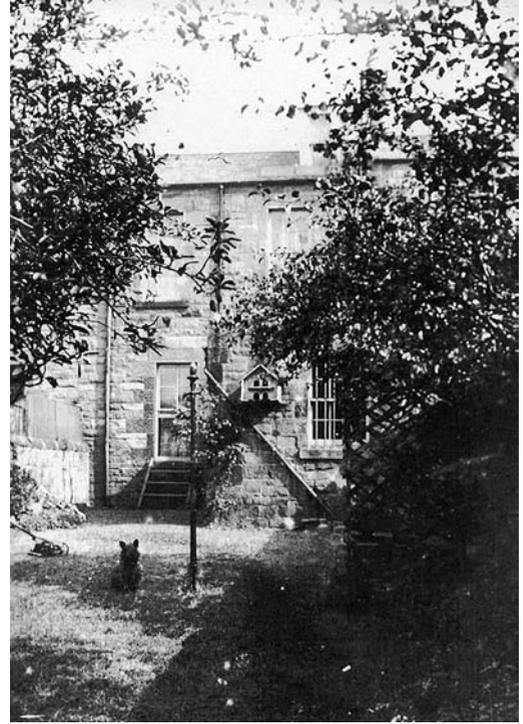


Figure 4. The back garden at 16 Leamington Terrace, Edinburgh, c.1900.  
Courtesy: National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS) Photograph Albums: The Mather Album

#### THE USE OF THE BACK GARDEN

In so far as these Edinburgh New Town houses were stated to be in the English style, Todd Longstaffe-Gowan also provided a key to how these gardens were used.<sup>5</sup> Although, at first sight, it might appear to be a servants' zone, a connecting 'bridge' from the family's public rooms on the floor above the basement kitchen was common in both London and Edinburgh. A rare survival, though rebuilt, is to be found in New Town where the lower sash on the back street floor rests on a hinged timber 'door' arrangement (Figure 3). Furthermore, a photograph of the back garden of 16 Leamington Terrace c.1900 conveys something of the essence of the hallowed purposes of these back gardens (Figure 4).<sup>6</sup> The timeless features are the outshot jamb (not seen in the photograph) and the washhouse with copper and its own flue; the associated clothes poles – here centralized and of a distinctive Carron cast-iron type with pine-cone knob; the patch of lawn below, here featuring a lawnmower; and the rather perfunctory steps down from a public room, possibly also for use by the family pets, like the Scottie dog commemorated here and who had the freedom of this domestic zone.

The lawn was probably as convenient for the practicalities of its drying green function, as for a pleasure garden. Refinements, not unique to 16 Leamington Terrace, include a mini-doocot and a flimsy trelliage summerhouse, of some charm. The survey of the house interior – the album containing the photographs was almost certainly assembled to be taken away by one of the daughters on her marriage – confirms there was a jamb off the kitchen, which in this case was a scullery. A further characteristic feature is the kitchen window with stout iron bars. The washday function of the back gardens is curiously

absent from Lettice Milne Rae's *The Story of Drummond Place* with its immortal line: 'Soon there will be few who can remember, even from hearsay, how life was conducted in the tall Georgian Houses of Drummond Place.'<sup>7</sup> And she takes one on an imaginary tour of a household like her own family home culminating in the laundry with its copper and the information that the 'housemaid also acted as laundry-maid' with the wash starting at 5am, but unfortunately she fails to follow her very detailed description of the laundry process through to it being hung out to dry in the garden.

But gardens in the New Town were not confined to these backyard drying greens. The New Town had a strong social character with formal dinners that were an aspect of the marriage market – an important purpose that required the splendid Georgian Assembly Rooms in George Street. A hostess's social obligations were returned in a series of dinner parties, often with hired-in cooks and butler for the night, interspersed with the informal supper parties, that were so dear to the Edinburgh residents that they were said to 'dine twice'.

To return hospitality most hostesses also held a 'rout', often for one hundred to two hundred guests, during the winter season when the houses were most fully occupied and the courts and schools operated. As Elizabeth Grant recalled, for these routs entire artificial gardens were created with greenery and hired pot plants in the big double drawing rooms, and carpeted porches were erected temporarily across the pavement providing a covered way to the front door.<sup>8</sup> There is an interesting account of these practices in Edinburgh in *The Villa Garden Director* (1810) by Walter Nicol, who thoughtfully reminded his nursery customers who had hired pot plants from him for parties that it was helpful to water them. Edinburgh still abounds in cast-iron flower rails for pot plants on window sills or window boxes.

#### EDINBURGH VILLADOM

But the finest private Edinburgh gardens were in the surrounding villadom. The New Town houses were surrounded by villa quarters and most householders had two if not three houses. The town house was supported by a country villa for summer use and many families, like the Allans of Queen Street at Lauriston Castle, also had a house for sea-bathing, with Portobello being founded as almost a village of sea-bathing retreats when this became fashionable. Children could be brought up in better air in the villa, as Sir John Clerk of Penicuik practised at Cammo.

Kitchen gardens and office courts provided produce for the New Town houses. The grandest of Edinburgh villas was Sir William Forbes's new-build Colinton House, now Merchiston Castle School, where an old-fashioned garden with holly hedges was established around the Old Tower, which was 'ruined' to provide a Picturesque incident in the policies, and a greenhouse, especially for cherries, was shipped up especially from London.<sup>9</sup> The New Town was to flatten the nearest of these villa quarters to allow the city to expand, although one villa with a spectacular view of the Castle, Inverleith House, survived as the Keeper's House of the Royal Botanic Gardens.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that one of the finest descriptions of a backyard in use, although in Chelsea, is by a Scot, Thomas Carlyle, whose use of it as an outdoor smoking room can be followed in successive National Trust guidebooks – but he also describes the plantings of flowering shrubs!<sup>10</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Lady Strachey (ed.), *Memoirs of a Highland Lady, The Autobiography of Elizabeth Grant of Rothiemurchus afterwards Mrs Smith of Baltiboy 1797–1830* (London: John Murray, 1911), pp. 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kirkwood, *Plan & Elevation of the New Town of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Kirkwood & Son, 1819); National Library of Scotland.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, informed by years of experience in researching the illustrations for *The London Town Garden, 1740–1840* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), warned that he had learned not to trust the accuracy of these individual garden plans filling out spaces on plans and even surveys in the manner of *staffage*.

<sup>4</sup> National Monuments Record of Scotland (NMRS), EDD/428/15.

<sup>5</sup> Longstaffe-Gowan, *London Town Garden*.

<sup>6</sup> NMRS.

<sup>7</sup> Lettice Milne Rae, *The Story of Drummond Place* (Edinburgh: Shepherd, 1954), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup> This world of parties and greenhouses on stilts is ably re-conjured with superb illustration in Longstaffe-Gowan, *London Town Garden*, ch. 7: 'Artificial Gardening'.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Gow, 'The Edinburgh villa', in *The Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, N.S., vol. 1 (1991), pp. 34–46.

<sup>10</sup> Ian Campbell (ed.), *Carlyle's House, London* (London: National Trust, 1992), pp. 37–38.