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OPENING ADDRESS

The Garden History Society is the oldest society in the world dedicated to the conservation of historic designed landscapes, parks and gardens. It also promotes the study of the history of gardening, landscape gardening and horticulture in all their aspects and encourages the creation of new parks, gardens and designed landscapes. But what is garden conservation and how do you conserve the overall living and dynamic garden townscape of the New Town of Edinburgh which has so many different individual large gardens within it? This conference aims to provide some answers to those questions.

Over the centuries there has been a changing climate and changing priorities and in a busy city there is a constant need for continual management. There is, however, an irony that though the New Town was founded to escape the filthy pollution of the Old Town, it was to be overcome by pollution a century later. However, it has now recovered from over fifty years of the Clean Air Act. The first two sessions of this conference, 'Historical Significance' and 'Social Aspects', examine the ideas behind the inception and building of the New Town – how the buildings and spaces, parks and gardens were created, and how people originally used them. The next two sessions, 'Management in the 21st Century', consider how best we should and can manage them for twenty-first-century life.

Many of the forty-seven New Town gardens are privately owned and run by resident committees, although the City of Edinburgh Council is responsible for the main landscapes of Princes Street Gardens, Calton Hill, London Road and the Dean Valley Walkway. If we are to conserve and renew our parks and gardens, particularly with public monies, it is important to demonstrate that the public have been involved in the process and for them to have an input. So how should we manage our parks and gardens? John Byrom, husband of the late Connie Byrom, who wrote the wonderful book on the New Town gardens published in 2005,¹ has written a garden handbook, which will soon be published by Edinburgh World Heritage Trust.² The purpose is to serve the private garden committees as a convenient, long-term, baseline reference to assist them to manage and adapt their gardens for present-day and future usage. As Byrom commented:

Gardens are by nature dynamic, they change as they grow, they change in use, and they change by the values placed on their future. [...] Every change is a challenge to informed management in striking a just balance between old and new.

He continued that management of the private gardens by their committees and the way the gardens are managed are its greatest potential shortcomings, as committees come and go, there is loss of continuity and understanding of a garden's created design aesthetic in supporting and contributing to its essential character and to the ensemble of the New Town as a whole. These shared cultural values known as 'picturesque improvement' are remarkably consistent throughout the New Town and add to its universal value within its Edinburgh World Heritage designation. The management of them should, therefore, be coordinated and holistic.

In a report funded by the Scottish Civic Trust written in 1970,³ Byrom also stated:

- That much of the original dressed and planted ground, and particularly their tree planting, was reaching the end of its useful life.
- There was a need to ensure continuity of the essential picturesque character of the visual ensemble of the New Town.
- That conservation need not compromise either private or public usage.
- Professional landscape design advice needed to be available to garden management committees in conserving them to agreed best practice as part of the ensemble of the New Town.

Probably the most important point we will all learn today is the need for appropriate planning. Planning law plays a major role in how we protect, conserve, and care for the spaces and their features. But these are not determined solely by 'suits' in offices, nor by central and local government who can gaze out onto Arthur's Seat and the royal park. Planning, over time, has carefully worked-out criteria, rules and guidelines from government agencies with input from academics and professionals working in the field of heritage.

Our magnificent New Town has not always been valued through its lifetime, however. The north terrace of Charlotte Square was saved from demolition by the 4th Marquess of Bute at the beginning of the twentieth century. He bought up a number of houses, now owned by our nation. And later in the early 1970s when the Edinburgh New Town Conservation Committee was founded, dramatic tactics had to be used to prevent buildings from being bulldozed, with the late Colin McWilliam prostrating himself in front of those to be demolished. These were demonstrations of those who valued our heritage and wanted to preserve it from others with different ideas. And people can achieve change too.

But planning criteria are not always clean cut, particularly the concept of managing for nature conservation in a designed landscape. Nature has to be managed in towns, particularly to achieve successful biodiversity. Not managing nature can allow invasive species like ivy to grow thickly, smothering everything. Pruning and thinning out the canopy of trees allows light to filter through to the under-storey, thus encouraging biodiversity which is pro-nature conservation.

There are ways of working through the planning guidelines in a process which will achieve better outcomes. A recent example of heritage versus nature and how to deal with this occurred in the restoration of St Bernard's Well project managed by Fiona Rankin at Edinburgh World Heritage. The newly restored listed building, one of the most important buildings in the New Town, is threatened by a nearby weed ash tree whose seeds could drop onto the new roof and grow causing ongoing damage. However, because of the planning rules on tree management in a zone managed for nature conservation, removal was denied. As Dean Valley is a designed landscape in the inventory held by Historic Scotland and part of Edinburgh World Heritage Site, the solution was to commission a conservation statement which took into account what the entire valley and gardens were intended to be and how they could be maintained in the future to benefit all of us. The statement will adjust the planning rules for the valley to allow it to be managed properly as a designed landscape and to give it an overall cohesive vision

But the process was complicated because the valley is under multi-ownership, both private and public; and permission had to be sought from all the stakeholders including Historic Scotland and Edinburgh City Council before the statement could be commissioned. Fund-raising from members of the public and a grant from Historic Scotland pays for

the statement, which should enable the appropriate overview of the management of the entire valley. This goes to the very heart of the issues of the management of the landscapes and gardens in our city and the Garden History Society promotes both an understanding of and good management of our historic landscapes parks, gardens and squares by aiding in the process and making sure it is done in the most effective way.

REFERENCES

¹ Connie Byrom, *The Edinburgh New Town Gardens: 'Blessings as Well as Beauties'* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005).

² John Byrom, *The Care and Conservation*

of Shared Georgian Gardens (Edinburgh: Edinburgh World Heritage Trust, in press).

³ The report can be found on the final page of Byrom, *Care and Conservation*.