

The Hanging Gardens of North Lowestoft

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New house, new garden

In 2018 we moved house - from an old house in the centre of Norwich to an even older house on the cliff in north Lowestoft. While only 30 miles down the road it moved us a great distance – not only from Norfolk to Suffolk but also from a provincial city to the most easterly town by the sea. Our friends and family asked us “*why ever are you moving there?*” or told us “*there’s nothing there*” but we had a number of reasons for buying our house – not just as a renovation ‘project’ for keeping us busy but the stunning views of the North Sea from the kitchen window that would inspire us. The house, of course, came with a garden - it too had become overgrown and unkempt - but it was the garden that was to lead to our greatest surprise and to other projects that we could not have previously imagined.

Early settlement on, and development of, the cliff

In researching the history of our house we also became aware that we could not understand our new/old house without understanding the development of other houses neighbouring it and the land these were built on. Local historians believe that the cliff was developed for housing in the 1300s; those who settled there needed to be in close proximity to the sea, their source of income as well as protecting themselves from potential floods in other lower lying areas and in areas next to the sea itself. The cliff that was to be settled on needed to be stabilised first through a system of terraces that stretched for nearly a mile down from its highest point to its lowest, a drop of some 50 feet (about 15 metres)¹ from north to south. Although put in for building purposes, these terraces became an integral part of each dwelling with the first terrace being used for household storage, the third and fourth for fishing sheds and the like while the second terrace – the focus of interest for this study – were given over to gardening and cultivation. These second terraces became known as *Lowestoft’s Hanging Gardens* and our own garden, we found out, was one of these.

Lowestoft boomed in the late 1700s not only as a centre for fishing and the fish trade but also as a seaside resort. It was considered so important that a history of its development and its recent commercial affair were documented in a work that remains an important historical source today. Gillingwater, the author, makes particular mention of the houses and gardens on the cliff:

“The declivity of this cliff, which formerly was one continued slope of barren land, is now converted ... into very beautiful hanging gardens, descending from the dwelling-houses above, to the fish houses at the bottom of the hill, and being interspersed with alcoves and summer-houses, are not only extremely pleasant and convenient to the inhabitants but exhibit a very pleasing appearance when beheld from the sea”².

The gardens on the cliff were not only for the enjoyment of those who owned the houses above but were also visible to visitors to the town from the grassy area below and from the sea³. The commanding vista of the cliff and its gardens was captured in an etching by J. Cole at around the

¹ David Butcher, 2008.

² Gillingwater 1790, p 49-50.

³ e.g. Henry Cole in 1833 on his trip to Scotland (drawing found in the Victoria and Albert Museum).

same time (shown in Figure 1), also indicating that the fame of the cliff was not only acknowledged locally but nationally too.



Figure 1: A perspective view of Lowestoft from the N. E. Battery by J. Cole, 1790; a copy is held in the National Maritime Museum.

Another guide to the town in 1812⁴, also noted that Lowestoft had become a “*place of fashionable resort*” and referred to the special position that the High Street with its ‘Hanging Gardens’ held. The author notes that most of these gardens were

“... richly planted with various kinds of trees, intermingled with shrubs; and the white alcoves, summerhouses, rustic seats, &c., with which they are interspersed, agreeably diversify the scene as they peep for the dark foliage which surrounds them, and give to the whole an appearance entirely unique”.

Change of use over time

Clearly the gardens of 200 years ago were mostly well-maintained and a source of pride for their owners and keepers. There is sense that 18th century gentrification occurred with landowners vying for ‘most spectacular garden’ and trying to outdo their neighbours in upkeep and show. Yet the Hanging Gardens did start to decline and to lose their former reputation; we were intrigued to know what had happened to our own garden and why. Research in the Lowestoft Record Office indicated that our house had been rented out as a pub in the mid 1800s (rumoured to be even a brothel!) and that there were other houses on the cliff that were similarly rented out for purposes other than the fishing trade that in previous times the owners had engaged in, meaning that the gardens were of no importance to those trying to make a living there.

A trawl through the internet showed that many artists had come to Lowestoft and drawn aspects of it. We knew of one such drawing – an etching by Edwin Edwards entitled ‘*Old Lowestoft*’

⁴ ‘The Lowestoft Guide – a Descriptive Account of Lowestoft and its Environs’ (1812), written (it is claimed) ‘By a Lady’; copies held in Suffolk Archives, Lowestoft.

from 1867 and we suspected that this might be our neighbour's garden at that time. Further research about Edwin Edwards uncovered a large travelogue of his visit to Lowestoft as he travelled through the Eastern Counties from London to Great Yarmouth. His focus was on *Old Inns of England* yet his etchings and drawings also included the environments in which these old inns were found⁵. His time in Lowestoft is described:

We put up at the Crown⁶, one of the old Inns of the place with a new front and begin to look about us – there is much to see. Many of the old Inns at Lowestoft have little lookouts, platforms or balconies built upon them so that the sailing folk can indulge in pleasure and attend to business at one and the same time, can drink their fill and look after their work, one eye on the sea the other on the full tankard of liquor.

We had been told that there was an etching in this book entitled '*George and Dragon, Lowestoft*' and expected a view from the High Street, we were astonished when we saw that he had drawn our house from the bottom of the garden, not focusing on it being a pub at all.



Figure 2: *George and Dragon, Lowestoft*; an etching by Edwin Edwards (1873); in *Old Inns First Division – Eastern England* (London). This version kindly reproduced by Lowestoft Museum.

Edwards deliberately drew the house from below because his focus was actually the 'hanging garden' that belonged to it:

These gardens are the peculiar feature of Lowestoft – the old street with its old fashioned houses, its balconies, platforms, bay-windows and all sorts of quaint projections is built on the top of the height, below are the steeply shelving gardens hanging over [...] the large

⁵ *Old Inns* etched by Edwin Edwards (London, 1873) First Division – Eastern England, Lowestoft section found on pages 45- 49.

⁶ The Crown on the High Street, near to our house, is still there but is now derelict and waiting for a new owner to restore it to its former glory. Sadly its gardens are also no more – turned into a car park many years ago and now just earth and litter.

flat and sandy and grassy shore where the fishermen dry their nets, where are their sheds, their lofts and store-rooms, rope yards and curing houses.

The gardens in Modern Times

We have followed our house's history from the mid 1800s – from a pub to a grocery shop (part of a retail empire where our house became a factory for sweet making and shop). We know very little about the gardens during this time but we suspect that they were neglected as the family who owned our house lived next door and would have devoted more time and love towards that house and its garden than ours.

The next stage of our story comes when an antique seller buys the house and the one next door in 1981. The two gardens were made one - the new owner's great passion was gardening and garden design and so the gardens were once again terraced (into the seven that still exist today) and were restored to glory once more. Unlike in the past when visitors out at sea or standing on the area below the cliff could have seen and admired the gardens, in this era large trees and a factory obscured outsiders' views. The gardens became only for the owners of the house to enjoy, their view is shown in Figure 3⁷.



Figure 3: Photo of the gardens of 35 and 36 High Street in the 1980s after restoration. Courtesy of Crispin Hook's Facebook page 'Views of Old and New Lowestoft'.

Yet even a few decades ago the Hanging Gardens had not been completely forgotten. A cutting from the newspaper the Lowestoft Porthole in 1981 describes attempts at that time in '*restoring [the Hangng Gardens'] old beauty*' as work was carried out at the back of the Royal Falcon Hotel to '*clear away rubble and weeds which have engulfed the once lovely terraced gardens*'. The article noted that, for many years because of the sloping nature of these gardens on the cliff,

⁷ We are very grateful to Mark Osborne, son of George Osborne who bought the house and gardens, Mark has shared with us his memories of that time and living in our house (he worked on the garden too and describes a pulley system for clearing from the bottom to the top – much hard work!).

they had been a ‘handy place’ for disposing of rubbish and ‘night soil’ as it would roll down and collect at the bottom.

What future for Lowestoft’s Hanging Gardens?

We are still busy working on our old house and its gardens – there is so much to do when a property is so old and has been neglected for a long time. We now have only one house and ‘hanging garden’ (large enough to keep us very busy) to restore and maintain. Our neighbours in other properties in the High Street tend to their gardens with differing interest and investment - some are private oases of calm and tranquillity to be enjoyed by the home occupier (owner or tenant) while others are neglected and overgrown.

The High Street is a mixed street – residential owner-occupiers mix with shop owners and tenants and many houses are badly maintained. If a visitor looks hard enough they can still see evidence of the gardens of the past. Access down the steep slope of the cliff to the road below and to the grassy area by the sea wall is provided by the Scores – natural alleyways and passages that have been fashioned and paved for centuries for bringing up the catch by foot and/or donkey to the High Street to be sold. But in recent times many of the Scores have lost their former purpose and alongside them there is much derelict land - owned by absentee landowners waiting for land prices to rise or for permission to develop and build. We are lucky to have our own ‘hanging garden’ but many who live in the High Street, in our community, have no green space to call their own or to share. We have a vision for bringing back some part of the Hanging Gardens of North Lowestoft and to give our Scores a rationale once more. We want to celebrate our unique surroundings – the cliff, the sea - and put Lowestoft proudly on the Garden Map again through the creation of new Hanging Gardens for all in modern times.



Figure 4: Own photo of Crown Score today (2023), in need of love and attention; also showing derelict land alongside with owner unknown (once a ‘hanging garden’ and could be again).