

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

SPRING 1994

CHANGES IN THE COMMUNAL GARDENS

Henrietta Phipps

Imagine a family in the 1850s, installed in their newly built house on the slopes of 'Kensington Park'. Perhaps the father would be a city merchant, or a retired admiral, attracted by the open prospect to the west across the fields to the distant hills of Harrow and Uxbridge. Certainly he would have chosen his house, then as much as now, for its verdurous setting so near the centre of the Metropolis.

Even then most of the green effect would have come from the amazing series of communal gardens. There are no fewer than fifteen of them, sandwiched between the backs of the houses and curving round the hillside. They can be glimpsed through gaps or from roads across the ends, but to see them properly they have to be looked at from the back of a private house and, if possible, entered and explored.

As well as being difficult to see in their entirety, they are also hard to refer to, for only a few have separate names; most have to be described awkwardly by their enclosing streets and perhaps this is one reason why they are not better known.

Comparing the gardens as they are now with the early plans, some from the 1840s, but mostly from the very clear Ordnance Survey set of 1869 recording all

the large trees and groups of shrubs, it is striking how each garden has evolved with a different character, in spite of similar layouts at the beginning. What the plans do not convey is the fact that nearly all are on a slope, sometimes in two directions. Those curving round the hill have as well the peculiar fascination of one end being hidden from the other.

A peripheral path survives in all; often lost are the inner paths, generally in bold circles or teardrop patterns, allowing for figure-of-eight walks (to meet the neighbours or not as desired). Sometimes the paths led to a small circle in the centre, around a feature such as a rose bed, a weeping tree, a group of evergreens, or a fountain as in Ladbroke Square. The paths were surfaced in golden gravel, fortunately retained in all but two

gardens, edged with rope pattern or castellated tiles. There were always lawns; in Thomas Allason's original concept plan of 1823 for the whole estate the shared greens are shown as 'Paddocks', conjuring up an attractive New Forest-like picture of horses and cows among the buildings. But by the 1840s when building started, the lawnmower had been invented, and the garden plans clearly show shrubberies, not grazing. The mews and private carriage of fashionable London were replaced on the Ladbroke Estate by the communal garden; nearby there were plenty of stables, and later the omnibus.

Each garden was given a strong framework, not only by the backs of enclosing buildings, often themselves stuccoed and designed as façades, but also by the boundaries of the private gar-

Stanley Crescent Garden retains its early-Victorian character and dense planting



dens. These were generally cast-iron railings and gates between piers, or sometimes balustrades. The other unifying factor was the sweep of evergreen shrubs in the beds around the edge, which acted as an enclosing rim and gave a degree of privacy to the back garden. Very often trees were planted in these peripheral 'buffer zones' outside the railings, screening the backs of the houses from each other. Inside the garden the trees were grouped together and shrubs planted densely to emphasise the intersections of the paths, creating dramatic contrasts of light and shade.

Although this style can be considered a revived form of the Picturesque, popular in architecture at that date for 'Rural-Italian' villas, the overall design can be traced back much earlier. It is a scaled-down and double-sided version of Repton's way of setting a country house on its own flower-garden terrace, a foreground leading to the broader landscape of the park. In the Ladbroke Estate this is adapted to

the private gardens of the semi-detached villas and terraces, leading onto the shared pleasure-ground enclosed between two parallel streets. Ladbroke Square is an exception, with streets on three sides, and so are North and South Stanley Gardens, where there were originally no private gardens, and the houses gave directly on to the main gravel paths; possibly Thomas Allom did not want to restrict his design by narrowing these relatively small spaces.

In some of the gardens an 1850s family would feel little had changed except for the trees, now splendidly mature if they have survived. But it is impossible to 'freeze' a garden in time unless kept formally clipped, and others have evolved differently. They are all beautiful places still despite the various changes that have been made and the tides of fashion.

As the neighbourhood slipped downhill socially (literally some modern householders would add), especial on the northern

flank of the hill, the gardens tended to be simplified; paths were taken out and shrub beds grassed over. World War II hastened this process; gardeners were scarce; part of Arundel/Elgin was dug up for vegetable; there was an air raid shelter in Arundel/Ladbroke and a barrage balloon in Ladbroke Square (it came down on the roofs of Kensington Park Gardens on the night of 16th September 1940). In 1949 a Council report described Lansdowne/Elgin as being in a neglected state as a result of 'unauthorised persons' using the garden as a dumping ground, gaining access through premises demolished by bombing. The background to the gardens deteriorated as houses were rebuilt in unsympathetic styles, sometimes as blocks of flats in harsh red brick, and stucco peeled away.

The 1949 Report, however, describes many of the gardens as being well cared for by the residents, and there were still many prosperous families in the area. In the mid-1960s fashionable

The gardens curve round the hill with St John's Church (right) at the highest point



