

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

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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



people started to move in, attracted by the gardens and their wonderful advantages for children. Dilapidated letting houses were taken over and done up by single families, stucco started to gleam again, and the gardens became more polished with the influx of money for new planting. Unfortunately prosperity has brought new dangers as well, not only in the form of side extensions blocking light to the inside and shutting out green glimpses from the street, but also by over-conspicuous conservatories and incongruous brick boundary walls or wooden fences, instead of cast-iron railings. Worse still are isolated raised brick flower beds outside the private gardens; these should surely be put in consistently along one complete side of the garden, if at all. In this unique form of lay-out it is arguable that the private back gardens with their railings or balustrades should have the same protection under planning laws as front gardens have at present. Visually they are an integral part of the overall design.

Magnificent trees are the glory of the communal gardens, even if they are sometimes a contentious issue. The combination of clay soil, pockets of gravel and underground springs together with a microclimate caused by the tall buildings has encouraged some remarkable specimens; indeed the narrow leafed ash in Stanley Crescent garden may well be a 'champion' tree. Huge horse-chestnuts, ashes and limes and picturesquely twisted hawthorns are probably part of the original planting, as are most of the planes which could last for centuries more. Some of these are conspicuous from the street, often hanging out into it and far outclassing the pavement trees.

Dutch Elm disease, drought and the 1987 gale have all taken their toll, and as the trees get older and surgery is needed, or com-

plete felling if dangerous, the question arises of planting for succession. Garden Committees would do well to have a simple plan drawn of their trees (commendably a few have already done so already), showing the size and condition before any long term decisions are made. Surprisingly soon a small sapling grows into a tree large enough to over-shade buildings, detract from other trees and be protected by Conservation Area Laws; the Town Hall arboriculturalists or a tree consultant (not necessarily the same as a tree surgeon) will give advice on these matters, including the vexed question of tree roots.

Even so decisions are not easy to make. An example of this is in Lansdowne Crescent garden where a semi-circle of original limes, now pollarded, stands along the western side. In winter their sooty trunks emphasise the curve of the crescent and in summer their leaves screen the backs of the houses (and the new garage extensions unfortunately now built); but they also over-shade both the private gardens and rose borders in the communal garden, and drop sticky aphids on them. One proposal is to fell them eventually, after lighter-foliaged trees have become established in the main garden; this would benefit the flowers but detract from the Victorian framework of the curve of the decorative railings and handsome piers, still intact.

In other gardens the trend has been similar, to replace the tall trees immediately outside the back gardens with light ornamental or shrubs, and to keep a few forest trees in the centre. Eliminating tall trees entirely would let the buildings become too dominant in scale, and living links with the past, to which people become very attached, would be destroyed.

In their size and spacing trees

determine much of the character of each garden, the most densely covered being Arundel/Ladbroke with its eleven magnificent planes and other forest trees. Perhaps the early Victorian style, with its bold contrasts of light and shade, is best preserved in Stanley Crescent; curving paths through evergreen shrubberies and tall trees link three open glades, with a handsome urn in the centre. The intricate layout makes a wonderful place for children to play. The most 'modern' would be the northern Lansdowne Road/Clarendon Road garden, where an open lawn, lightly planted with trees spaced informally, is surrounded by beautiful borders of flowering shrubs.

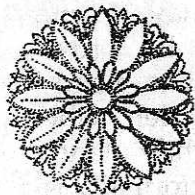
The most surprising and a delight for the ecologist must be Hanover Gardens, hidden behind Ladbroke Grove; here groves of seemingly native woodland, regenerating saplings as much as planted limes and holm oaks, lead up the grassy slope to St John's Church, a patch of country hillside below a village spire.

The variety and interest of all these gardens cannot be described properly in a short article. Each has its own character and atmosphere, reflecting its history and the influence of the different residents through the garden committee at the time. They are genuine examples of self-government. Decisions tend to be casual and informal, and this is part of the gardens' charm, that they are not planned too rigidly.

All the same their remarkable beauty is worth fighting to protect, for they are appreciated by the whole district, and not simply by the residents. As an example of early Victorian town planning they are unique; there were other garden suburbs of that date, and other isolated garden squares with direct access from

private gardens. There is nowhere else with the combination of these two concepts on this scale and with such success.

Henrietta Phipps has designed many landscapes for Kensington & Chelsea Council, mostly on housing estates. She is writing a study of the Ladbroke Communal gardens, and would be grateful for the loan of any material connected with their history, or for individual memories.

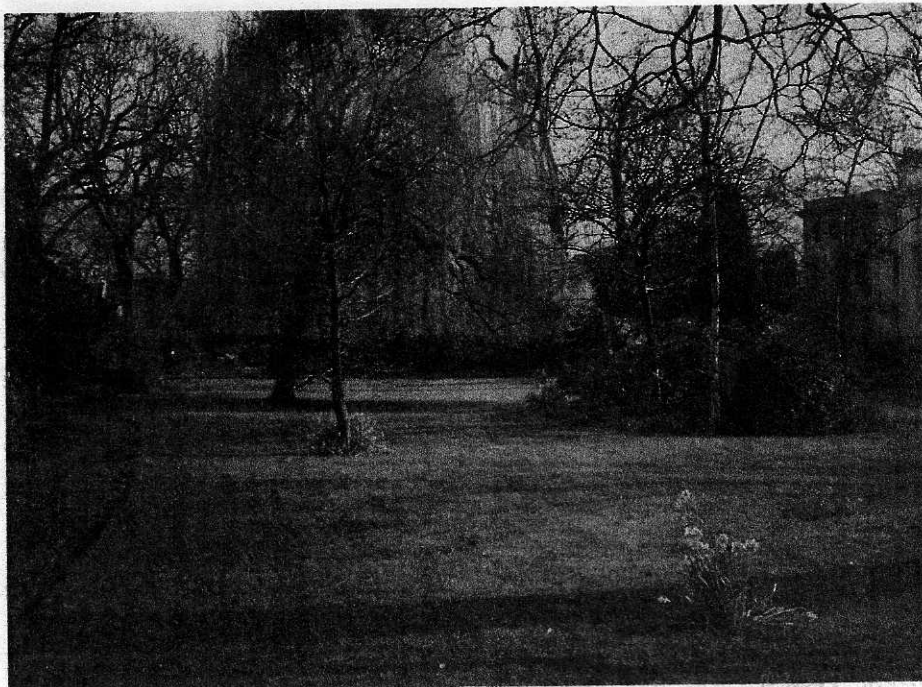


TREE SURGEONS

Brian Ellsmoor

There is good reason to suspect that spurious firms of tree surgeons are operating in our Conservation Area and indeed that some residents have already fallen victim to their practices. Too many trees are damaged or destroyed as a result of unskilled work and too many people are stung by unprincipled charging.

The Golden Rule is NOT to employ any person who offers tree surgery services on the doorstep, however strong a case they seem to make for taking immediate action because of a tree's supposedly dangerous condition. *Bona fide* tree surgery companies do not and indeed do not need to operate in this way. If in doubt you should contact the arboricultural team at Kensington Town Hall, 071-937 5464, Ext. 2767 or, in an emergency, Extension 2013. Outside office hours the Duty Officer at Pembroke Road Council Offices should be contacted on 071-313 6099. Expert technical advice, diagnosis and prognosis is available entirely free of



Clarendon and Lansdowne Garden: the central shrubbery remains, but the four paths meeting these have been grassed over

charge. Some firms try to panic tree owners with wild stories of public liability; advice on legal rights and liabilities of tree owners in Conservation Areas is also available from the Council.

The Royal Borough maintains a list of contractors approved by the Arboricultural Association that work in our area. To be on the Association's list a contractor would have to work to a proven standard in line with British Standard, BS 3998 (Revised 1989) and to hold third party liability insurance appropriate to the services they offer, usually to a limit of £2,000,000. You should satisfy yourself in this respect before signing any contractual agreement.

Remember, The Arboricultural Association requires a high standard of workmanship from its contractors because of the irrevocable nature of all operations in tree care and you can help to conserve our local heritage by refusing to be persuaded by doorstep offers; you will in all probability also save yourself a deal of money in the bargain.

LAMP POSTS

The Council have already started to replace the 1976 concrete lamp posts in our area with new 'Chelsea' steel columns of a fairly 'traditional' design. Examples may be seen in St John's Gardens. Residents not satisfied with these may opt to have cast-iron standards of 'Victorian' pattern instead, but only if they can raise the funds for a whole street or square. The cost is a minimum of £1400 per lamp, but as they give less light, more lamps would be required and wiring costs may be higher. Your committee felt that, taking all this into account, it was preferable to have uniformity in the area and to accept the standard column.

Mr T Felstead, the Council's Street Lighting Manager will be glad to offer residents any help or advice they may require.

