Understanding History in Historic Parks and Gardens
conservation in Ireland

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Abstract

Understanding a park’s or garden’s history is a primary vital ingredient in determining the correct manner and approach in which a park or garden should be restored or conserved. History in this context is meant not only in the strict chronological order of its archaeology, landscape, infrastructural, architectural and landuse but also in its available art historical data, its cultural, sporting, recreational, social and even its special national and international events as well as its public and commercial activities.

The restoration of the Phoenix Park and related historic parks and gardens in Ireland will be used to illustrate how a number of features were restored on these properties using a thorough knowledge of their history and understanding of the purpose for which they were constructed. The concept of why features or the totality of these parks and gardens should be restored will be explored since this aspect of landscape design and management can be little understood by practising professionals.

Three examples using different parks and gardens will be used to illustrate the above points. These include the works undertaken in the Phoenix Park – a 17th century royal deerpark whose landscape was known to have been inhabited by man 5,500 years ago as indicated by a burial chamber which is still present on the site; the development of St. Stephens Green Park, Dublin, from its 17th century origins and finally the development of Iveagh Gardens (also in Dublin) which was developed in the mid-Victorian era to demonstrate the art of the landscape practitioner as well as a commercial concern.

Introduction

Agreed international criteria for the conservation and restoration of historic parks and gardens are set out in several charters and conventions under the guidance of ICOMOS and UNESCO which include the Venice Charter (1964), the UN Convention (1972), the Burra Charter (1979) and Florence Charter (1981).

The Burra Charter is particularly useful in that it describes clearly the various definitions used in the historic restoration of parks and gardens. These include PLACE, CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE, FABRIC, CONSERVATION, MAINTENANCE, PRESERVATION, REPAIR, RESTORATION, RECONSTRUCTION, ADAPTATION,
USE, COMPATIBLE USE, SETTING, RELATED PLACE, RELATED OBJECT, ASSOCIATIONS, MEANINGS and INTERPRETATIONS. However for the purpose of this short presentation it will not be possible to delve into all the definitions outlined above but rather let us concentrate on a number of them and the overall framework into which they can be placed which is the CMP or Conservation Management Plan.

**Conservation Management Plans (CMPs)**

Most designed landscapes will date from several periods and some will have layers added to existing designs whilst others will have layers swept away or concealed beneath existing landscapes. What features are of most importance and can be renewed can only be done with a thorough understanding of all the layers of history of the whole park or garden. The use of the Conservation Management Plan approach will enable us first of all record all the artifacts on site and to see how these contributed to the overall design or designs of the site. It will also enable us to evaluate the practicality of restoring part or all of a particular feature or landscape for example a parkland, avenue or vista.

It is important to note that the success of any Conservation Management Plan will depend on the inclusion of all the relevant professional inputs which include arboriculture, archaeology, biodiversity (ecology and wildlife), forestry and farming, garden and architectural history, garden design and management, horticulture, history, geology, engineering, social science and community involvement. More professional inputs of a specialized nature may be required depending on the demands of the site.

The first Management Plan for an historic park in Ireland was produced in 1986 for the Phoenix Park and though relatively modest in setting out its management and conservation objectives of which there were four main ones – conservation of the historical landscape, nature conservation, public appreciation and enjoyment and park/community harmony - it served the conservation and management of the park well. The OPW (Office of Public Works) has now produced a second management conservation plan for the Park 2010 (now in its draft form) with much expanded design, technical and academic inputs along with considerable community consultation and involvement; a wide range of other interested bodies were also involved. The latest Conservation Plan lists 13 strategic objectives for the future management and protection of the park into the 21st century. Included among these objectives are: To preserve the peace and tranquility of the Phoenix Park and to seek appropriate international and national designation status and to enforce appropriate legislative controls.

Before we look at some examples of historic park and garden conservation and restoration in Dublin, Ireland (Phoenix Park, Saint Stephen’s Green and Iveagh Gardens) we will first look at some of the definitions relating to historic park and garden restoration outlined above. These have a precise definition but have been loosely used by some professionals undertaking such works in the past.
Conservation: Means all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance. In terms of historic park and garden restoration it has particular relevance for natural processes such as the continual renewal of the natural environment.

Preservation: Means maintaining the fabric of a place in its existing state and retarding deterioration.

Restoration: Means returning the site to an known earlier state by removing additions or by reassembling existing components without the introduction of new material.

Reconstruction: Means returning the place to an earlier known state but distinguished from restoration by the introduction of new material into the fabric.

The Phoenix Park was created from 1662 onwards by James Butler, Duke of Ormond, on behalf of the King Charles II of England. Initially it was conceived as a royal deer park and originally included the demesne of Kilmainham Priory south of the River Liffey but with the building of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham from 1680-1684 the Park was reduced to approximately its present size of 707 hectares, all of which are now North of the River Liffey. The Phoenix Park with its unique blend of historic monuments, buildings, landscape, political, social and sporting history was designated as a National Historic Park in 1986 and its management and conservation is guided by the principles set out in the various charters outlined above. The Phoenix Park was opened to the public by the Earl of Chesterfield in 1747. In the same year the Phoenix column – a thirty foot high Corinthian column of Portland stone - was erected in a strategic location in the middle of Chesterfield Avenue to signify park improvements.

The Phoenix Column as can be seen from the illustrations has gone through a series of changes whilst still retaining the original Column erected by Chesterfield. Likewise the architectural policy for the various sporting pavilions and gate lodges are to retain the original character of the buildings whilst not extending their size even though there are frequent demands to do so.

The conservation of the Park’s landscape presents one of the greatest challenges. The landscape footprint of the Phoenix Park is that inherited from the extensive landscape works undertaken by Decimus Burton, the famous English landscape architect from 1832 to c.1849. For the purpose of this presentation we will only look at three aspects of his works in the Park – the realignment of Chesterfield Avenue, the creation of the People’s Gardens and the formation and renewal of tree copses or groups of trees.

Detailed historical research has shown that varying tree planting formations once lined this magnificent avenue which was realigned during the Burton era. Some elements of the original avenue still survives and portion of it has been reconstructed since if demonstrates the use of ‘mound’ planting of trees which helped the trees to avoid poor drainage and give an initial visual advantage. Further avenue plantings consisted of infill planting between the initial ‘square’ formations of English elm (nine per square) to ‘diamond’ and ‘elliptical’ groupings. Burton’s realigned avenue was planted with
‘roundels’ of Red twigged lime which were subsequently replace by three lines of trees (Chestnut, Lime and Beech) on either side of the avenue in the 1890s.

The appellation of the Peoples Gardens only arose in the 1860s after additions to it by the Earl of Carlisle but was formerly created in 1840 by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests and Decimus Burton and known at the time as the Promenade grounds thus making one of the earliest public gardens made available to the working classes. Various landscape features including floral features and rockwork were added during the 19th century.

The challenge for the conservation of historic parks and gardens particularly in relation to replacement planting of avenues, tree groves or roundels are considerable. In the Phoenix Park we have endeavoured to create a varied age structure which was somewhat limited. This has been achieved to some degree by planting on the perimeter of tree groupings and felling parts of the original planting where appropriate. Another feature of this planting is that plantings were undertaken in groups to aid future thinning and felling at maturity.

We will also look at the restoration and recreation of two walled gardens within the Phoenix Park – the former Viceregal walled gardens now in the demesne of the President of Ireland and the former walled garden of the Under-secretary for Ireland which is now a visitor attraction with the demesne which now hosts the Phoenix Park’s visitor center.

In relation to the walled garden at the President’s residence considerable restoration works have been undertaken in the past and the upper portion which is illustrated clearly shows a new creation or a recreation. The space was formerly used for fruit production but recent demands for cut flowers and foliage resulted in its redesign. However it is important to note that it can be returned to its original layout by removing the central path with its varying statuary and other landscape elements.

The walled gardens of the Under-secretary’s demesne (now the part of the Phoenix Park’s visitor center) charts in a very precise way the evolution of the walled garden from the 18th to the 19th century. The walled garden now under restoration has undergone considerable changes in outline from the 1850s to that now shown on the 1867 OS map. Some slight adaptation has taken place in relation to path width to cater for large numbers of visitors but overall the integrity of the infrastructure has been with the exception of reinforcing the walls with pillars. The Jacob Owen designed Victorian vinery has an unique arched underground heating system which is currently being investigated.

**St. Stephen's Green Park** in the centre of Dublin once formed part of an area extending as far as the banks of the River Dodder, which was granted to Dublin Corporation by King Henry II (1154). Clarke & Simms's Map of Medieval Dublin, c1170- c.1540, shows the unenclosed area of St. Stephen's Green. In time these lands became known as "the city's common pasture" and the city fathers ordered that it should always be left free.
and open for the grazing of the cattle of the citizens and whereon the citizens might take air and exercise.

Sir Arthur Guinness, known as Lord Ardilaun, offered to convert the Green at his own expense, into a Public Park. An Act of Parliament was brought into existence in 1877, to vest St. Stephen's Green in the Commissioners of Public Works. However, it would appear that the bulk of the work was carried out to the interior of the Park. From the Lawrence Photographs Collection (approx. 1880-1910), the redevelopment of the Green is clearly evident. JF Fuller (1835-1924) architect carried out considerable work for Lord Ardilaun at his various properties and his influence on the Green along with William Sheppard, Landscape Gardener can still be experienced today.

This Victorian layout still remains with its beautiful floral panels, serpentine paths, lakes with waterfowl & bog garden, a playground and statuary set within a tree dominated landscape. St Stephens Green has over 1 million visitors per year. St. Stephens Green is a wonderful example of a late Victorian city square with its wonderful floral displays, sunken lawn panels, fountains, ornamental trees and shrubs, lakes, rocheries, bog garden, the bandstand, the garden for the blind, the superintendent’s house and a children’s playground, a bridge, statuary, park benches, a number of pavilions (formerly were Swiss shelters which no longer survive) and foot rails. It will be noted that the brick detail under the foot rail is a modern intervention and though its easy on the eye and considerable helps the maintenance of a difficult space occupied by the foot rails it takes somewhat from the overall historic character of the core.

Statuary now forms an important visual component of the landscape with a fine statue of Lord Ardilaun by James Farrell situated on the western perimeter erected in 1892. Several other statues of Irish literary figures, patriots and a gift from the German government primarily adorn the other perimeters of the Green although a number of penetrated the inner landscape. Unfortunately like so many other parks and gardens St. Stephens Green can be seen as a easy repository for various commemorative objects.

Outside the railed in area of the St. Stephens Green there are a number of broad walks which are separated from the road by granite bollards linked to each by chains which date back to improvements which were undertaken after 1814. The original bollards remained until recently without the chains when they were removed because of a refurbishment of the walks. Because of the extensive damage to the original bollards these were replaced by new ones modeled on the old ones and the concrete and paths and earthen margin replaced with granite slabs.

The Iveagh Gardens

The Iveagh Gardens which were formerly known under various names such as the Leeson Fields, the Earl of Clonmel’s Lawn and the Coburg Gardens were constructed to host the Exhibition of 1865 by The Dublin Exhibition Palace and Winter Garden Company. The lands were purchased by Benjamin Lee Guinness in 1862 and sold to the aforementioned company to be developed as a social and cultural center for the citizens.
of Dublin. The Gardens were laid out to the designs of Ninian Niven, Ireland’s foremost landscape architect of the period.

Niven’s landscape plan appears in the Exhibition catalogue but whereas all the features shown appear to have been implemented though not necessarily exactly as Niven intended them to be. This appears to have happened because when the actual construction took place there was insufficient space to accommodate the feature as intended. This is shown on the OS map of 1862-63 for the gardens which was under construction at the time. The maze (fashioned after the one at Hampton Court) which is shown on the original plan as rhomboidal is constructed in a circular fashion.

Other features of the garden included a cascade with flanking rustic arches, an American garden, rosarium, Italian parterres with fountains and a number of other landscape features among which the sunken archery grounds which converted to an ice rink in winter was one of the more unusual features.

The recreated rosarium maintains the layout and shape of the original beds but their has been no evidence that Victorian rope edge tiles were used or the enclosing ironwork which is used by association with Niven with the Chain Tent he is reputed to have constructed in the National Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin.

The magnificent flow of water in the cascade is recirculated using a powerful water pump whereas originally the water was supplied from the nearby Grand canal. Likewise the water jet shown on the original landscape plans in not operational and there is no evidence to suggest that this was so at the time of the exhibition.

**Conclusions:**

Understanding a park’s or garden’s history is a primary vital ingredient in determining the correct manner and approach in which a park or garden should be restored or conserved. History in this context is meant not only in the strict chronological order of its archaeology, landscape, infrastructural, architectural and landuse but also in its available art historical data, its cultural, sporting, recreational, social and even its special national and international events as well as its public and commercial activities. In terms of historic park and garden work terms such as restoration, repair, reconstruction and conservation have precise meanings and should be used correctly. The consistent use and wider adoption of such terms will help towards a better understanding of the conservation and management needs of historic parks and gardens.
References:


The Phoenix Park Conservation Management Plan (Consultation Draft Dec.2008), OPW.


St. Stephen’s Green, 1880-1980, OPW.

The Illustrated Record and Descriptive Catalogue of the Dublin International Exhibition of 1865, Parkinson and Simmonds, 1866.