

NATIONAL WAR MEMORIAL GARDENS -ISLANDBRIDGE-

NIHGC CONFERENCE VISIT – OCTOBER 25TH 2009

Summary

Designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, the National War Memorial commemorates the 49,400 Irishmen who died and the estimated 300,000 who fought in the armed forces (Army, Royal Navy and RAF) during the Great War. Unlike his other war memorials, Lutyens designed a tranquil garden on the banks of the Liffey - a garden that was originally intended to be linked to the Phoenix Park on the other side by a bridge. The garden consists of a Great War stone surrounded by circular fountains which in turn are enclosed by pairs of 'book rooms' and pergolas. The 'book rooms' take the form of small limestone pavilions with sloping stone roofs and blank niches. Originally these rooms contained books designed by Harry Clarke containing all the names of the war dead.

Early History

Commemorations of the Great War in the decades following 1918 were often subject to rowdy disturbances, so they gradually had to be moved away from the city centre of Dublin. From the outset however efforts were being made to provide a permanent memorial, starting in July 1919, when a Trust Fund was created to consider plans 'to commemorate all those Irish men and women killed in the First World War'. In November 1924 a committee was formed to pursue proposals for a site. This made little progress, due to lack of finance and official 'amnesia' at Government levels – though attitudes at individual and family level was much more complicated, as many of those involved in the disturbances in Ireland of 1920-23 had close connections with, or served in the Great War. In 1927 Merrion Square and St. Stephen's Green were proposed as possible locations, but this came to nothing. Eventually Cecil Lavery was appointed by the Free State Government to head a 'War Memorial Committee' to advance the memorial process.

The process of finding a site had in fact to wait more than twelve years. The big breakthrough came in December 1930 when a 60 acre (20 hectare) site alongside the south bank of the Liffey at Islandbridge, known as 'Longmeadows Estates', was proposed by W.T. Cosgrove, President of the Irish Free State Executive Council. His proposal was adopted by the Committee almost exactly a year later and two years after this, in December 1933, a gift was eventually sanctioned by the Free State government of the Islandbridge site. Work in fact had already started in 1932 when 164 men of the OPW had started work on the site.

Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944)

The renowned architect and landscape designer, Sir Edwin Lutyens, had been chosen by the War Memorial Committee as early as 1927 when the plan was to site the memorial in Merrion Square. As the designer of the Cenotaph in London, Lutyens was regarded as a noted memorialist architect and by that time he was also very familiar with Ireland,

having previously worked at Howth Castle for T. J. Gaisford-St Lawrence; at Heywood, Co. Leix, for Colonel Pöe and at Lambay island for Lord Revelstoke. His gardens at Islandbridge however, have proved to be his best Irish work, and are often regarded as among the very finest memorial gardens to have been created anywhere in the world.

The Garden Design

Lutyens was very impressed with the proposed location for the memorial and set about producing plans for the site in 1931. In his original scheme the main axis of the garden was to lead down the hill, across a lawn, to a three arched bridge over the Liffey aligned with the Wellington Testimonial in the park. Sadly this was never built (it would have been spectacular) and instead the gardens were confined to a lineal site alongside the south bank of the river. The core of the garden, as laid out by Lutyens and as created, is divided into three major geometrically planned compartments, namely a large oval raised lawn, flanked symmetrically at each end by circular sunken rose gardens. Outside of this core area, the ground, which overlooks the Liffey, has been planted with trees and shrubs, through which run a series of tree-lined roads and paths, all radiating from the garden centre. Within view from the garden are the boat clubs on the opposite bank and the Old Magazine Fort.

The raised oval lawn is the central focus of the site. It is enclosed by a high dry limestone wall with granite piers. Within this enclosure, flanked by obelisks, basins and fountains (symbolising candles), is the plain Stone of Remembrance (or War Stone) and behind this, up another large flight of curved steps, stands the Memorial Cross. The War Stone, a seven and half ton block of local granite, symbolizes an altar – its dimensions being apparently identical to Great War memorials found throughout the world. The Memorial Cross or the Great Cross of Sacrifice, nine metres high, overlooks the whole site and is aligned upon the War Stone and down an axial avenue leading towards to the river.

On the perimeter of the raised oval lawn are two pairs of matching granite pavilions – their elegant Neo-Classical style and detailing being very characteristic of Lutyens. Each pair of pavilions is linked to one another by pergolas of granite uprights and oak cross beams, another characteristic Lutyens feature. The pavilions, which represent the four provinces of Ireland, were designed as ‘book rooms’ to house the names of the 49,400 Irish dead. These are contained in twelve illuminated volumes and can be viewed during daylight hours – no admission charge. The pavilions also contain the famed ‘Ginchy Cross’ – this is (according to one account) ‘a wooden cross fashioned on the style of a celtic cross and designed on a sheet of blotting paper, by Major General W.B. Hickie, the commander of the 16th (Irish) Division. It was made from old oak beams by the divisional pioneer troops and was originally erected during the war on the Somme in a field between the villages of Guillemont and Ginchy. Those two villages had been liberated by the 16th (Irish) at the cost of 240 officers and 4,090 men killed, wounded or missing. Granite replicas of the original cross were erected in 1926 at Guillemont and at Wytscheate in Belgium, while a third was erected in Salonica, in Macedonia, to commemorate the 10th (Irish) Division who fought in Gallipoli, Macedonia and the Middle East’.

The pergolas are attractively clothed in clematis and wisteria. The pavilions and the linking pergolas stand on terraces, each overlooking one of the circular sunken gardens which flank the central oval lawn. Both gardens, which mirror one another, have a diameter of 200 feet and are each approached down steps from the pavilion terraces. Both are enclosed by a yew hedge, both have a central lily pond with surrounding stepped tiers or terraces designed for roses. The gardens contained 4,000 roses and the original varieties planted here (purchased in multiples of fifty) included 'Shot Silk'; 'Madame Butterfly'; 'Étoile de Hollande'; 'Duchess of Atholl'; 'Betty Uprichard'; 'Golden Cleam' and 'Golden Glory'. The restoration work here in the early 1980s considered it appropriate to also include the well known 'Peace' rose, produced by Meilland in 1945. The planting schemes, as originally devised in the 1930s, were implemented by a committee of well-known horticulturalists, including Sir Frederick Moore (1857-1949), former Director of the Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin.

The extensive area of the gardens lying outside the raised central lawn and flanking sunken gardens is crossed by tree-lined avenues, all radiating from the 'War Stone' in the centre. These included lines of *Prunus* 'Ukon', 'Hisakura' and 'Watereri', while the main axial avenue was originally of elms and the diagonal avenues of golden poplars. The lower avenue (at right angles to the central avenue) were lined with Norway and silver maples. The informal parkland trees outside these were chosen for seasonal colour and contrast – purple beeches, evergreen oaks, whitebeams, scarlet hawthorns, silver birches and Atlantic cedars.

Construction 1932-37

The gardens were constructed from 1932-37 by 164 men in the employment of the OPW. These were drawn from the unemployed, fifty per cent of whom were former Great War ex-British Army and fifty per cent ex-Irish Army men. In order to ensure that there was plenty of work, it was decided that the use of mechanical equipment should be restricted. Even granite blocks of 7 and 8 tonnes from Ballyknocken and Barnaculla were manhandled into place with primitive tackles of poles and ropes.

The Eamon de Valera administration was both involved and interested in the construction and the cabinet approved wording in English and Irish. The Office of Public Works, then a somewhat bureaucratic organ of state, insisted that a 'Completion Certificate' had to be issued on its completion, which eventually (and after some difficulty) was issued in January 1938. Once this took place the government started to plan for an opening in July 1939, but unfortunately this was postponed. The outbreak of war further postponed a ceremonial opening, though the gardens were eventually opened (without any ceremony) to the public on Armistice Day, 1940.

Later History

Small commemorations took place in the gardens for a few years from 1948. However, the political situation 'did not sanction that the Gardens be "officially" opened and dedicated'. Subsequent lack of staff, especially following a staffing embargo in 1968,

resulted in the site falling into an extremely bad state of neglect during the 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, it had become derelict. Its trees had suffered their toll from fifty years of winds and the gardens had become an open site for tinkers caravans and animals. The appalling state of the gardens was highlighted on RTE's 'Late Late Show' in the early 1980s and it was perhaps this widely watched programme which stimulated a change of public and government attitudes.

Restoration

From 1985 to 1993 restoration work was undertaken to renew the park and gardens to their former splendour. This was carried out by the OPW and co-funded by the Irish National War Memorial Committee. Work was sufficiently advanced by September 1987 to enable the garden to be formally dedicated by representatives of the four main Churches in Ireland and unofficially opened to the public.

On the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, July 1st 2006, the gardens were at long last 'officially' opened and dedicated. In attendance were the President of Ireland, the Irish Premier, Members of Dail, leading representatives of all political parties in Ireland, the Diplomatic Corps of the Allies of World War I, delegates from Northern Ireland and representatives of the four main Churches. All were solemnly accompanied by a Guard of Honour of the Irish Army and Army Band. It was an important event, symbolising the emergence of a more mature attitude by the Irish establishment towards their own history. The occasion was perhaps anticipated in 1998 by the opening of the Great War Irish National Memorial at the Island of Ireland Peace Park, Messines, Flanders, Belgium. The Irish National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge are now managed by the Office of Public Works in conjunction with the National War Memorial Committee.

Terence Reeves-Smyth, October 2009

The following sources have been used:

British Legion Annual. *Irish Free State Souvenir Edition* 1925-1935.
Dúchas, The Heritage Service. *Visitors Guide to the Gardens*.
Harris, H.E. D (1968) *The Irish Regiments in the First World War*. Mercier Press, Cork.
McCullen, John (1993) 'The Irish National War Memorial gardens'. *Irish Garden* Vol 2, No.3 (May-June 1993), pp30-32.
Moore, Steven 2005) *The Irish on the Somme*.

Access

Location: South Circular Rd, Islandbridge. Entrance from Con Colbert Rd. and South Circular Rd. (Phoenix Park end). Vehicular access is from the South Circular Road at the Islandbridge end.

Bus Route(s): No's. 51, 68 and 69 from Aston Quay



