

THE FORGOTTEN GARDEN

by
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(TITLE) At Antrim Ireland's last formal garden is declining in the face of encroaching road plans and public indifference.

Few Irish towns can boast of a spacious public park adjacent to their centre; none has such an historically unique survival as the town of Antrim. Until recently the park was the private property of the Massereene and Ferrard family, whose castle was its centrepiece; however, since the family had for many years lived at Chilham Castle, Kent, they gave most of the grounds to the townspeople for use as a place of recreation and pleasure.

The original castle was built by Sir Hugh Clotworthy and enlarged by Sir John Clotworthy, who was created Viscount Massereene by Charles II. It was datable to 1613 and 1662, rebuilt in 1813, extended in 1887 and burnt out in 1922; however its front facade stood until a few years ago when it was deemed unsafe and demolished. The most important feature of this castellated and symmetrical facade was the cutstone Mannerist frontis piece surrounding and surmounting the main doorcase. This had been reassembled during the restoration of the castle in the early 19th century but retained its essential Jacobean elements of rudimentary Ionic pilaster and strapwork. These pieces have been preserved and it is hoped to have them re-erected in a suitable position in the grounds.

The imposing new-Tudor entrance arch (probably by John Bowden, c. 1818) stands on the southern west corner of the Market Square, against an early 19th century wall which contains a substantial part of a 17th century bastion. Less well cared for than it demands, it leads into the former forecourt of the castle. This area, somewhat bleak and featureless now that the focal point of the castle facade

has gone, is to be further made a nonsense of by having a highway, raised on piers, bisect it and form a visual and psychological barrier between town and garden. To the south flows the pleasant stream of the Six-Mile-Water, its banks less dischevelled than further upstream, where it has been cold-shouldered by the town; to the north, behind the extensive tiered wall garden lies the formal garden, laid out probably in the late 17th century but evidently largely replanted in the early 19th.

The concept of a formal park had been perfected by the French in the 17th century and in particular by André le Nôtre (1613-1700) who had planned among others the enormous park at Versailles (1662-90), with its vast parterres of lawns, fountains, sheets of water and seemingly endless parallel and radiating avenues between tall trimmed hedges. The style was copied in England, for example at Hampton Court Palace, where it served to enhance Wren's new building for William III. Curiously there is an oral tradition that the first house in Castle Street in Antrim is called French man's house; it is now Victorianized but the lower half of its walls are much older. It is quite possible that Lord Massereene may have brought over a French man towards the end of the 17th century to design a garden in the most up-to-date fashion. More important, the park largely escaped the onslaught of the landscape architects of the 18th century and survived more or less intact to the present day.

The central feature of the gardens is the long canal divided into upper and lower and joined by a small waterfall; high walls of clipped trees, which change their hue to a glorious gold in autumn, flank and enclose it. Although the vista from the end seems unbroken, a visitor on exploring will come suddenly upon a subsidiary canal breaking in from the right - a typical ploy of the formal gardener, who aims to surprise and delight by opening up unexpected views. As part of the carefully laid

ut plan the old-Anglo-Norman motte was planted with spiral hedging, a path running between and leading to the top; the mound was designed both to be an eye-catcher and a vantage point. Indeed, in the garden's heyday this must have been the spot where Lord Massereene would first have taken his visitors; for the view of the gardens would have been very similar to those illustrated in Kip and Knyff's famous birds-eye engravings of English estates. Curiously, there never seems to have been a maze at Antrim. No better use for the old site of the castle could be imagined than the planting of one; the confusion and erraney of those trying to find their way through it could be viewed from the mound with considerable entertainment.

To the east of the canal stretches a very fine avenue of mature trees, some now well past their prime and in need of replanting. Three-quarters of the way up it broadens before an oval pond in which there is an islet, rather like a yoke within an egg. Beyond, the avenue narrows again. Between and around these two major features are criss-cross paths and rectangular open lawns, some with clipped and formalized hedging.

To the west lies the very fine Jacobethan stable block of about 1840, two flanking pepper potted wings and a central gateway, of considerable charm and character. The building has lain empty for some years and despite the efforts of various bodies, no very satisfactory solution has been found for its re-use. Meanwhile the structure falls increasingly into disrepair.

Facing it, in contrast to the rest of the park, is a monumental 19th century rock garden - a place of subterranean paths and Acherontic gloom. Alas, few of its original features are intact and the unbridled growth of trees and bushes has reduced the ordered informality of the layout to chaos. If properly restored and maintained it could provide a unique contrast between the opposing doctrines of garden design - formal versus picturesque. Beyond lies the path leading to the rubble stone bridge and ashlar gate pier which give access to the estate on the south.

The recent history of the gardens has been distinctly unhappy. When handed over the park was no longer in trim condition. Little beyond the bare necessities had been done to it for many years and the Rural District Council in turn were not inclined to devote much time or finance to its rehabilitation. Under the aegis of the Development Commission and through the pressure of such outside bodies as the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, a scheme for the park has been prepared. Unfortunately, this has been lost in the limbo of the interregnum between the demise of the local councils and the setting up of the area boards. Almost as serious has been the decision to drive a by-pass along the eastern edge of the park, through the former kitchen garden and over the main access route, regardless of the essential privacy and peace of the area. It would have been theoretically possible to build it towards the west of the grounds but to the south the golf course lay in its path, and presumably sporting interests were considered of more importance than public amenities and historical significance.

Meanwhile the daily wear and tear goes largely unrepaired and Ireland's only genuinely historical formal garden is reaching the stage of being irredeemable. No proper survey has been published by an acknowledged expert in landscape gardening of how effective planting, replanting and rehabilitating of existing features could be achieved, taking into account the changing pattern of the seasons. No attempt to advertize the park as of historic interest has been made; few seem to know about it and those who know have shown a depressing lack of concern and urgency. Almost any other European country would find such an attitude inconceivable and such a problem as the park in its present state presents an overwhelming challenge.