

**Report on the Northern Ireland Heritage Gardens Trust conference
'Commemoration Gardens and Gardening' held in Dublin Castle
7-9 October 2016**

This was the 24th annual weekend conference of the Northern Ireland Heritage Gardens Committee (now Trust). Usually these conferences are held alternately north and south of the border and as this year (2016) was the turn of the south, the NIHGT joined forces with the Office of Public Works (OPW) to have a joint conference in the splendour of Dublin Castle. The theme 'Commemoration Gardens and Gardening' was chosen because this year was both the anniversary of the Somme and of the 1916 Rebellion. It was seen as an opportunity to look for the first time in conference at this subject in Ireland. As with previous conferences, the occasion was planned as a forum for public debate and discussion, seeking to draw together a wide range of expertise, professionals and managers, individuals, property owners and organisations to share experiences and encourage interest in Irish historic gardens and designed landscapes. Although hosted by a Northern Ireland based organisation, these conferences are always very well attended by delegates from across the island and from Great Britain.

The conference opened in Dublin Castle on Friday evening 7th October. The opening address was given by the Commissioner for Public Works, John McMahon. Delegates were reminded that death comes to all citizens and that everyone needs a place to bury their dead. The development of cemeteries and churchyards, their layout and their monuments, reflects the complex sociological changes of the country. The opening lecture was given by Margaret Gormley, who as Chief Park Superintendent with the Office of Public, has overall responsibility for caring, maintaining and operating all the country's state-owned and managed historic parks and gardens; these include the Phoenix Park, St Stephen's Green; Emo Court; Inlacullin; Derrynane; Glenveagh and many others, all of which attract around twelve million visitors a year. In her paper 'State Commemorative Gardens and Cemeteries - A Glimpse of our Shared Heritage' Margaret looked at those cemetery gardens under her care in the Dublin region, notably the Grangegorman Military Cemetery, which is the largest military cemetery in Ireland, founded in 1876; Arbour Hill; the Gardens of Remembrance and the remarkable Lutyens designed National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge; the latter was built in the 1930s to commemorate more than 49,000 Irishmen who died during the Great War. She explored each of these in turn, looking at their historical development, architecture, planting, conservation and management.

On the Saturday morning, October 8th, the conference was begun with a lecture by Brent Elliott, the retired head librarian and archivist at London's famous Linley (RHS) library. Brent Elliott is also one of the world's leading garden historians, author of numerous papers and books. In his paper, he looked at 'Landscape of Commemoration: the Cemetery Tradition before the Great War'. We told us that non-denomination cemeteries in the UK began in the 1820s - there was no effective tradition that landscape designers could draw upon to tell them how to lay out such landscapes and the first 20 years of cemetery design in the UK was a somewhat a mixed bag of experiments leaving no significant progeny behind. Elliott noted the first example in Britain was the Rosary Cemetery (1821) in Norwich, planned on same principals as an ordinary parish churchyard. Not until 1830s that there was any sort of literature relating to the question of how cemeteries should be laid out. One tradition that emerged (Norwood seen as an example) consisted of looking at the general sort of approved landscape for private domains in the 18th century - the Landscape Park. Within these there was no central formal architectural features giving focus to the landscape and were usually decorated with clumps of trees and serpentine paths. Other early cemeteries were placed in disused quarries (St James, Liverpool)

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and others on hill tops (The Glasgow Necropolis). However, the principal tradition of cemetery design in those early years and one that became very important was the setting of the Prince Regent's house in London - Regent's Park, which had a grand carriage drive and a circular road, but no architectural focus in the centre. The overall mode of landscape seen there was widely applied and probably the most influential early cemetery was Kensal Green (1833); here we had a principal carriage drive leading from the entrance towards the chapel, and crossing it a large circular road. By end of the decade more rigorous rectilinear formality appeared in cemetery design, but keeping the basic tenets seen at Kensal Green. The Burial Acts of 1850 and 1852 made it compulsory for local authorities to start establishing burial grounds outside built up areas of cities and at the time a manual on how to make cemeteries came into existence. John Claudius Loudon was to develop the formality of design in cemeteries, famously with his publication *On the Laying Out Planting and Managing of Cemeteries* (1843). Loudon objected on practical grounds to the previously fashionable landscape park designs with their serpentine paths, tree clumps and undulating grounds. He said it made it difficult to find graves, arguing that clumps of trees took up valuable space. Trees he said should be planted as single specimens and not deciduous trees because of the maintenance costs of lifting the leaves. Cemeteries he said also should not look like a nobleman's seat, but should have a distinctive 'cemetery look'. He proposed using fastigiate trees set at nice regular intervals in a grid plan to make it easier to find graves. He was later to add another cemetery principal, initiated at Highgate, that of a viewing platform or terrace. This feature became prominent in cemeteries after Paxton's well known cemetery at Coventry (1847). An early example of 'Loudonian' principals in Ireland is seen at Glasnevin begun in 1832-33. In the 1870s there were signs of impatience with Loudonian grid designs and a desire for greater informality. By the 1890s landscape architects like Henry Ernest Miller could boast (as Stoke Cemetery in Guildford) that there was not a straight line in the entire cemetery. The end of the 19th century however also brought a major change in cemetery tradition - the crematorium. Golders Green Crematorium was landscaped by Irishman William Robinson who was a prominent advocate of the clearing away of monuments and of having ornamental gardens with very few memorials. He finished his talk with the fashion for remembrance, which was such a feature of the inter-war years and would be discussed by David Lambert.

The second paper of the morning was given by Professor James Stevens Curl, one of the best known and prolific architectural historians today; he held chairs at three Universities, and has twice been Visiting Fellow at Peterhouse, University of Cambridge. His paper was on 'Edward Young's Night Thoughts and the Transformation of the Landscape Garden to the Garden cemetery'. As he noted in his talk, for more than a century Young's *Night Thoughts* was one of the most influential, widely praised, and well-known poems in the English language. Most importantly, it was a seminal influence on the 'secular cult of sepulchral melancholy'. Young brought it out in nine parts (1742-1746); the third part dealt with the famous 'Narcissa Episode' in which a young Englishwoman, dying in France, was buried by night in a previously used grave, deprived of the dignity the French gave even to their dogs, because she was a 'heretic'. Enlightened Frenchmen responded to the charges of obscene bigotry by not only erecting monuments to so-called 'heretics' (i.e. non-Roman Catholics) in their gardens, but, even more potently, burying the bodies of men like the Protestant-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) and Antoine Court de Gébelin in their gardens and erecting monuments over their graves in order to

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demonstrate publicly their lack of bigotry and their open-minded credentials. These factors played no small part in the origins of the new garden-cemeteries without which no nineteenth-century town or city could function (despite clerical opposition).

Finally, David Ivison, vice-chairman of the Royal Parks Guild, spoke on the 'Role of London's Royal parks during the First World War' with reference also to the commemorative memorials and gardens. He explained that the Royal Parks Guild is a voluntary Partner Organisation of The Royal Parks who are responsible for managing and preserving over 5,000 acres of historic parkland across London. One important object of the guild is to research, record and conserve all aspects of The Royal Parks' heritage. This can be reminiscences from past employees, photographic records, day-to-day artefacts, historical events in the parks, people from the parks and so on. Using the research, we were regaled with images of London parks such as Hyde Park during the first war when it was used for allotments, piggeries, gun emplacements, military training and manoeuvres. Various memorials in the parks were discussed and the history of the Whitehall cenotaph discussed in some detail, the original being designed by Lutyens as a temporary wood and plaster structure for the London Victory Parade in 1919. It was eventually located between the Foreign Office and Richmond House and became so popular that the government were forced to commission Lutyens to make it permanent by building it in Portland Stone.

After lunch conference went on an organised tour of a number of cemeteries, notably Grangegorman Military Cemetery which was founded in 1876 for the Marlborough Calvary Barracks near the Phoenix Park. It contains the remains of soldiers and their families who served in both the UK and across the Empire. Managed by the OPW who won a Green Flag in 2015 for their management. After Arbour Hill, where the 1916 Rebellion leaders are commemorated, we visited Glasnevin Cemetery. It was consecrated and opened in 1832-3 and originally covered nine acres of ground. Now it covers 124 acres. The central focus is the Irish round tower replica that stands over the tomb of Daniel O'Connell, whose burial vault conference delegates visited. The cemetery, which contains both Roman Catholics and Protestants, offers a view of the range of death monuments over the past two centuries from the austere plain erections of the 1840s to the elaborately carved Celtic crosses of the 1860s and the Italian marble statutory of the late Victorian and early 20th century.

In the evening of Saturday 8th in St George's Hall in Dublin Castle, Ian Hussein gave an entertaining overview of the work of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. He explained that the CWGC has a presence in almost every country on Earth except the Antarctica; he has responsibility for the Mediterranean region (18 countries) and is based in Cyprus. Among those that are commemorated are the 1,700,000 men and women of the Commonwealth forces who died in the two world wars. His talk was focussed on his work.

The morning of Sunday October 9th was started by David Lambert, one of the best-known garden/landscape historians in the UK and currently director of the Parks Agency, a consultancy specialising in public parks. His subject at conference, 'Conflicted Landscape: War Memorial Parks and the Battle over Commemoration', is one on which he has published in the *Journal of the Garden History Society* and also for *Historic England* (2015). He began by noting that that landscape and memorialization have always been closely linked. The 18th century landscape parks were often punctuated with classical statues, dedicated buildings and inscriptions. The 19th century public parks were stocked with statues commemorating the lives of

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national or local heroes. Britain pioneered the landscaped cemetery in which tombs were given a green setting of magnificent trees and lawns and in the present century we see the continuation of this powerful idea in the National Memorial Arboretum at Alrewas, Staffordshire, 'where our nation remembers'. It can also be seen in the large number of war memorial parks and gardens laid out after both world wars.

He explained that 20th century war memorials took the form not only of crosses and figurative sculpture but also of other, more functional, memorials; memorials that could be enjoyed by the living even as they commemorated the dead. These 'useful' memorials included village halls, club rooms, burses' homes, hospital extensions and reading rooms, and most common among them were parks and playing fields. These were often modest in design terms, sometimes but not always, containing an architectural monument. Most date from the First World War but a significant number also date from the Second World War. In debating the form of living memorial local communities considered local needs and opportunities. The days of creating parks to provide for genteel promenades among flowerbeds had passed by the time of the Great War period and the period of the 1920s and 1930s saw a rapid growth of interest in outdoor pursuits, sport and healthy exercise. This he noted had a significant effect on public park design. Furthermore, economic conditions after the First War did not support expensive public works and open spaces created were characterised by sports provision in all forms - athletic tracks, cycle tracks, football and of cores allotments for another form of active recreation. Thus, parks laid out as war memorials in the 1920s shared a number of characteristics. While small sites were laid out in a formal manner focussed on an architectural or sculptural feature, the larger sites were dominated instead by facilities for play and sport. With some exceptions, most memorial parks were laid out to designs prepared by the borough surveyor with advice on planting from local nurseries and to date there is very little evidence of professional landscape advisers being involved - all probably due to a shortage of local authority funds. Funds were often dependant on local subscriptions. There was often opposition to spending money on war memorials - councillors would argue that people needed to make up their minds what was meant by a war memorial - one heard remarks that it 'was not the war itself which we wish to keep in memory'. Money was also spent if available not just on the memorial but on ornamental entrance gates into the park. A significant number included avenues and ornamental trees, including singly planted memorial trees. However, the provision for formal sport and active recreation was the dominant feature of most memorial parks of the inter-war years. Finally, he concluded by saying that as a symbol of youth and the future, parks certainly caught the imagination of many grieving communities seeking a suitable memorial to their war dead. As yet he said, this is a little researched field; he illustrated his talk with some Ulster material, notably the park at Ballymena.

This paper was followed by a lecture by John McCullen, the retired Chief Park Superintendent of the Office of Public and currently member of our Northern Ireland Heritage Garden Trust, with Craig Savage, the head gardener at Islandbridge. They discussed the history of the National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and built in the 1930s to commemorate the Irish dead in the Great War. Stated to be the finest memorial garden ever produced by Lutyens, and perhaps the finest of its kind anywhere, it comprises circular fountains, enclosed by pair of pavilions (the book rooms), pergolas and sunken rose gardens. The gardens fell into neglect from the 1960s, but were magnificently restored in the 1980s by the OPW under the supervision of Dr McCullen. The story of this restoration and more

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recent history were all recounted. This paper was followed by one given by the landscape/garden historian at UCD Finola O'Kane on the large arboretum that was created in county Wexford to commemorate the late JF Kennedy. The arboretum, one of the largest of its kind in the world, was created around the site of the old Kennedy homestead. The last paper of the day was delivered by our fellow NIHGT committee member, Reg Maxwell, formerly of Belfast City Parks Department, who gave an overview of his work in Normandy, where he had been overseeing for over ten years the creation of a British war memorial in the town of Caen. Finally, in the afternoon, conference delegates were brought on a tour of the remarkable Victorian cemetery in Dublin, Mount Jerome, which is sometimes compared to London's Highgate. The day was concluded with a visit to the National War Memorial Gardens at Islandbridge, which looked beautiful in the autumn sunshine.

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