

# Historic Gardens Conference at Galgorm Castle 6th November 1993

by Brian Woods

Galgorm Castle on the edge of Ballymena was a great venue for a most informative and relaxing conference on Historic Gardens. 30 or so delegates (quite a few of them chapter members!) were given serious and light hearted insights into the activities of the NI Heritage Gardens Committee and its fruitful machinations over its very short lifetime.

Like the best of committees, its Chairman, Derry solicitor and stately home/garden owner, David Gilliland, told us - Northern Ireland Historic Garden Committee is composed of carefully selected individuals not representatives of bodies!

Belinda Jupp, (Garden Historian) took us through the Committee's main work - a mammoth 3 year task culminating in a published inventory of 648 historic gardens in Northern Ireland. The committee employed Ms Jupp (with the help of a fellowship provided by Queens University) to do the work. Garden history is a young science, not more than 30 years old, she said, and gardens are of course not only very ephemeral, but unlike buildings, so owners can and do enjoy changing them! Irish gardens have tended to be low on lasting elements like earthworks, lakes, canals, tree clumps and buildings (all ideal for the keen researcher) but high on lawns, hedges and shrubs which can change or be transformed in just a few decades.

Restoration and the importance of pre-design research and was by Terence Reeves-Smith. He works in the DOE's own restored historic building in Hill Street in Belfast - (just opposite John Morrison Associates). He took us through the business of pre-restoration investigation. The National Trust in UK use multi-discipline teams of up to 6 specialists; not so in NI! Terence, assisted only by Tom McErlaine, also from Hill Street, used all sorts of sources like family estate papers and garden accounts. The garden accounts are hard to fund because they weren't kept in the big house! Aerial photography (Barry Heartwell from Queens Archaeology was the man) and interviews with garden employees and their families were crucial. Old family photographs were helpful plan less so.

Untangling the mysteries of long dead gardens is not for the faint hearted!

Dr Ann Hamblin, head of the Historic Monuments Branch of the DOE's Environment Service, talked about garden and monuments in the car of the state and about two special garden restorations. Firstly one has to visit the 'new' garden at the Abbey, Greyabbey, where a sort of physic garden has been created. Barbara Pilcher was the consultant and procurer of the plant material. Barbara grows herbs at Lisdoonan south of Carryduff and provides plants to grow and to eat!

Philip Wood - one of Ireland's top plants people, was the advisor for the recreated 17th century Knot Garden and 19th century's yard garden at Tully, on the shores of Lough Erne. That garden is a must for any one funding themselves in Fermanagh.

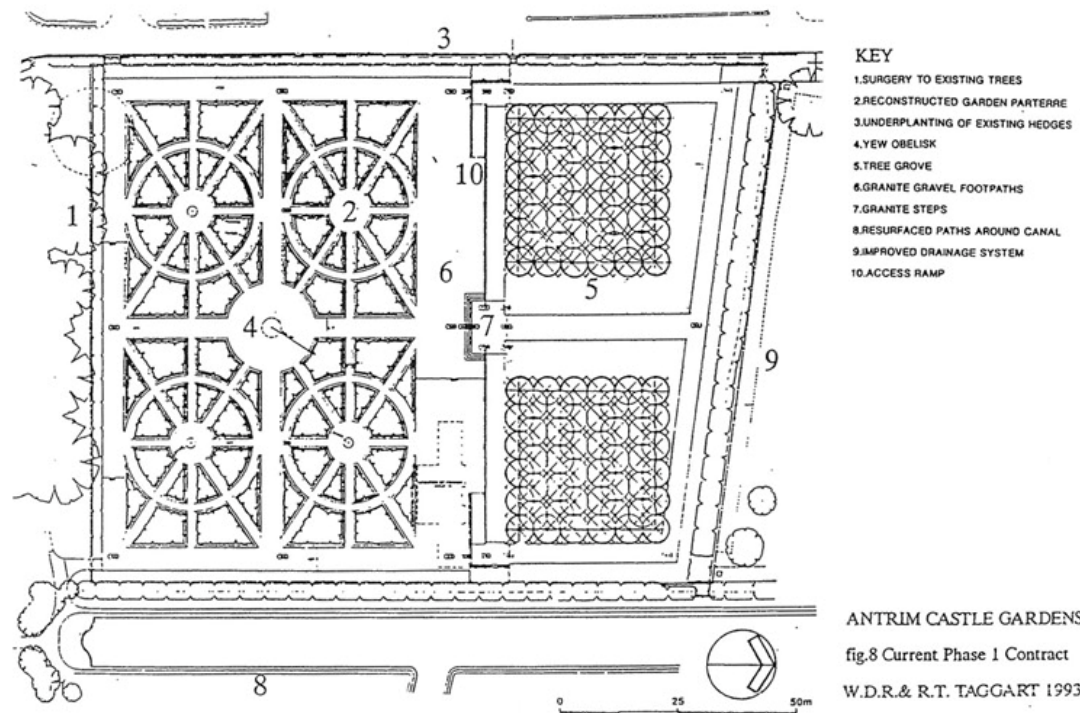
Another thing we need to see is the garden archive at Hill Street where information is held on the 648 gardens collected by Belinda Jupp. The chapter hope to organise a visit some time and it would be good for CPD! Let me know if you think it's a good idea.

The formal end of the day was dealt with by one of Ireland's most authoritative and entertaining speaker on plants and gardens - Dr Charles Nelson. He likened a garden to an iceberg; much is now out of view and the whole, may finally melt away. Plants are like mayflies. Gardens need management and plants do die and need to be replaced. If a tree dies in a 200 year red alley, do you plant a silly little one or fell the lot and start again? Garden rule: if you need an authentic plant and can't get the old variety, plant the species never plant a recent cultivar. He referred to "Hardy's list of late eighteenth century plants" published by the Garden History Society and of course the Irish Garden Plants Inventory, which Mary Forest prepared for IGPS and which is based on 30 notable Irish gardens. Dr A Nelson entertained notwithstanding his use of the worst overhead slides I've ever seen! Such is his skill.

After the more formal talks in the morning the site visit to WDR & RT Taggart's scheme for Antrim Castle gardens (now well under construction) was a surprising and delightful interlude. Whilst Dave Kirkwood exploited the autumnal gloom and blended almost out of sight - we explored the acres of parterre. It would be well worth while to keep an eye on this over the coming years as it literally takes shape. Then back to Galgorm for a fine meal and lots of friendly chat.

A relaxing and educational day when the usual frustrations and jealousies which we sometimes have to endure, were nowhere to be seen!

(The inventory can be purchased for £5 from Ms Belinda Jupp, Hon Sec, NIHGC, 42 Osborne Park, Belfast BT9 6JN and the Archives can be seen by arrangement with DOE Hill Street - Telephone 235000; ask for Terence Reeves-Smith or Tom McErlaine).



ANTRIM CASTLE GARDENS

fig.8 Current Phase 1 Contract

W.D.R. & R.T. TAGGART 1993