

The Role of Tudor Gardens in Shaping English Cultural Identity and Influencing Attitudes Towards Heritage Conservation

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Abstract

The gardens of Tudor royalty and aristocracy stand as living testaments to the cultural legacy of the Tudor era (1485–1603), offering profound insights into the intersection of nature, art, and human imagination. The paper presents the medieval tradition of the “hortus conclusus” developing into the pleasure garden, which came to occupy a symbolical position in English cultural identity; moreover, it considers the example of the garden at Kenilworth Castle and conservation principles formulated by English Heritage as a case study to justify that Tudor gardens play a major role in shaping contemporary English cultural identity and influence attitudes towards heritage conservation.

Key words: cultural identity, Tudor garden, Kenilworth Castle, heritage conservation, hortus conclusus

1 Developments in Garden Design – from “hortus conclusus” to “locus amoenus”

The early modern period in England, which lasted between c. 1500 and c. 1750, brought about significant changes concerning architecture as medieval trends were gradually abandoned; the tradition of the typical medieval garden faded as well, and instead, extensive pleasure gardens were laid out, adjoining the residences of the royalty and aristocracy. The accession of Henry VII (1485–1509) to the throne of England after his victory in the Battle of Bosworth Field marked the beginning of the Tudor era (1485–1603); around 1500, England entered what we now refer to as the early modern period. From a historical perspective, the establishment of the Tudor dynasty brought about immense political, social, and religious changes, where major achievements included the solidification of the dynasty and financially stabilising the realm; from a cultural historical perspective, new trends of court culture and architecture emerged.

In respect to gardens, the medieval tradition of the “hortus conclusus” lived on, however, the layout of gardens transformed significantly; new features came into use¹. Formal Tudor gardens came to symbolise the power and wealth of the royal house under the reign of Henry VIII (1509–1547); Hampton Court, Whitehall, and Nonsuch being the earliest examples, as in the case of these palaces, the adjoining gardens became the setting for a deliberate display of chivalry, heraldry, and the descent of the ruling dynasty (Strong 1984: 10). Even during the successive reigns of the Tudor monarchs, the garden as a component of the royal and the aristocratic residence was subject to constant change and evolution, and by the time of the Elizabethan era, the most important development was the fact that the pleasure garden became an essential adjunct of the great house (Strong 1984: 45). However, Elizabeth I (1558–1603) was not an enthusiast when it came to buildings and construction; therefore, the innovations of the second half of the 16th century are all associated with the aristocracy and their great country houses; besides becoming a permanent adjunct of the great house, the Elizabethan garden saw substantial growth regarding its size (Strong 1984: 49).

“Hortus conclusus” and “locus amoenus” are two fundamental concepts that are deeply rooted in literary and artistic traditions, and both are often associated with gardens, nature, and enclosed spaces. The developments in garden design during the Tudor period can be adequately illustrated by presenting the transition from “hortus conclusus” to “locus amoenus”. The notion of “hortus conclusus”, i.e., the enclosed garden, has long occupied a primary position within medieval imagination, and its tradition runs deep within English cultural history as well; while “locus amoenus” intends to refer to a charming place, a pleasance, an idealised place of safety and comfort. The concept of “hortus conclusus” is known and derived in the Western world from the Bible, while that of “locus amoenus” is more of a literary topos but also encompasses the connotation of the Biblical Eden (McAvoy 2021: 7).

The pleasure garden that became fully developed by the end of the Tudor period derives from the “hortus conclusus”, the enclosed garden, which has its long-standing tradition in both English and European history. The enclosed garden mediates between dwelling and nature as it is at the intersection and the combination of building and landscape. There has always been a need for an enclosed space, a need for creating a boundary wall around a piece of land so that it enables us to comprehend it as a defined and owned space (Baker 2018: 8); the demand might originate from the western Christian tradition where the idea and image of an initial “cosmic garden” are strongly present – the Eden where life began, and that was allocated to man and woman, but which gift resulted in exile (McAvoy 2021: 7). The parallel between Eden or Paradise and the ordinary garden is further emphasised by Tigner (2012), who indicates that “a garden in the Western world ... is never just a garden but always a reminder of paradise, of the Garden of Eden ... Gardens tap into the nostalgia for a legendary time of the untarnished human soul and pristine planet” (1)². In support of this claim and in order to establish the connection between paradise and the enclosed garden, the etymology of the word “paradise” should be revealed, a word that originates from the Persian³ term “pairidaeza” meaning exactly “walled garden” or “enclosure” (McAvoy 2021: 7).

Concerning the physical layout of the enclosed garden, the primary component of it is the wall, the feature that provides much of the shape and character of the garden (Baker 2018: 17); and the one that makes it possible to view the enclosed garden as an embodiment of a philosophy of life as it becomes a miniature concentration of nature (Baker 2018: 23), which ultimately enables us to consider the garden as a mediator between nature and art, nature and human life. Strong simplifies the complexity of the medieval garden by explaining that it was usually a series of enclosures with the focal point being a modest fountain surrounded by plantings of fruit trees, roses, and herbs, often including benches as a place for sitting down (1984: 12). Certain traditions of the medieval enclosed garden lived on during the Tudor period for example, the fundamental concept of taming nature that came into expression by the design of walks, mounts, arbours, or flower beds; however, traditions were supplied with novel architectural components, such as walls, turrets, heraldic beasts on posts, or decorative elements of coats of arms – all of which intended to proclaim the harmony of the Tudor rule (Strong 1984: 10).

By the end of the 16th century, the gardens of royalty and aristocracy were referred to as “pleasure gardens”, thus becoming a “locus amoenus”. The garden of Kenilworth Castle, which is introduced by Strong as one of the earliest examples of pleasure gardens, was laid out somewhere between 1565 and 1575, the latter being the date of the most lavish entertainments ever presented in honour of Queen Elizabeth I (1984: 50); the contemporary reconstruction of this pleasure garden serves as a suitable subject for analysis in order to justify that Tudor

gardens play a role in shaping English cultural identity and in influencing attitudes towards heritage conservation.

2 The Garden as Component of English Cultural Identity

Gardens, including designed landscape parks, can be defined as carefully organised and maintained spaces for aesthetic impact and enjoyment that integrate various elements such as the site, terrain, plants, animals, water features, and often buildings and other structures. Unlike other art forms, gardens engage all the senses – sound, smell, taste, and touch – along with sight, creating a unique sense of place that may emerge through intentional design or naturally evolve over time (Sales 2014: 23). “Gardening has always been regarded as a peculiarly English activity; indeed, it has assumed a key role in English identity” (Strong 2011: 128). In order to validate the aforementioned claim formulated by Strong, it is crucial to analyse the nature of English (cultural) identity and distinguish it from the British identity. As explained by Schwartz et al. (2006), cultural identity is “a special case of social identity and is defined as the interface between the person and the cultural context”; furthermore, “it refers to a sense of solidarity with the ideals of a given cultural group and the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours manifested” (6).

As discussed earlier, the (enclosed) garden has its long-standing tradition in the Western world and in European history, but it needs to be examined to learn what makes it peculiarly English and in what ways it shapes English cultural identity. There is a demand for the distinction between the concepts of British cultural identity and English cultural identity. At the same time, it must not be disregarded that the British are an imperial and post-imperial nation, which makes it dubious to discuss English cultural identity. Kumar calls attention to the problematic nature of the distinction because of the recent revival of the nationalist movements of the smaller countries of Great Britain, i.e., Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, whereas there is constant demand for preserving the social and political unity of Britain (2003: 6). Burden also points out the noteworthy difference between Britishness and Englishness, where Britishness is a concept of national unity based on the union of different cultural and ethnic groups, whereas Englishness is a notion distinct from Scottishness and Welshness (2006: 15). Nonetheless, symbolic landscapes and places have specific cultural meanings that construct, maintain, and circulate myths of a unified national cultural identity (Burden 2006: 14).

However, there are still certain cultural reasons that could serve as an explanation why gardening became a favoured activity in England, the most significant one being a phenomenon that was brought about by the English Reformation. Before the break with Rome, churches, monasteries, and nunneries were the preferred places for religious contemplation, but as a result of systematic iconoclasm and the dissolution of the monasteries, English people started to consider the natural world and the garden as an appropriate space for reflection (Strong 2011: 130). Moreover, gardening came to be considered as an appropriate occupation for a clergyman; John Laurence (1668–1732) in his *Clergy-Man’s Recreation: Shewing the Pleasure and Profit of the Art of Gardening* (1714) highlighted the reasons behind the clerical fascination with gardening.

The tradition of gardening, which originated in medieval times and was re-established during the early modern period, still constitutes a determining component of English cultural identity and engages millions of people; furthermore, it is evident that this tradition is most

deeply rooted in England, as the country remains a global destination for horticultural enthusiasts, often regarded as a pilgrimage site for gardening. The practice of opening the gates of gardens to visitors on certain dedicated days each year and the fact that professional gardeners are entrusted a part of the English landscape to cultivate it all confirm the hypothesis that it contributes immensely to the shaping of English cultural identity (Strong 2011: 128).

3 Conservation Principles – The Assessment of a Heritage Site

Landscape and garden are closely connected terms, even though they differ in scope, function, and design. As the definition of gardens has already been clarified, it is essential to provide the definition of landscape as well, which according to the Oxford English Dictionary is either “a pictorial representation of scenery” or “an expanse of terrain which is visible from a particular place or direction” (“landscape”). Both landscapes and gardens refer to outdoor areas that incorporate plants, trees, water features to create a harmonious environment. Landscape plays exactly as significant a role in English cultural identity as gardens as the green and pleasant land is a long-established component that could not have been reshaped even by the Industrial Revolution (Strong 2011: 11). Regarding current preservationist discourses, the “virgin” countryside must be protected, must not be spoilt or violated (Burden 2006: 22).

The recognition and conservation of cultural heritage have always been the responsibility of academics and special experts even though there has always been a need for wider recognition, especially of those agents who have the means of providing funding to execute the necessary measures in order to save a historically significant site or monument. The emergence of the paradigm referred to as “values-based” management contributed immensely to the objective judgement and evaluation of cultural heritage, thus facilitating the previously mentioned wider recognition of such sites. The *Burra Charter*, which was first issued in 1979 by the Australian Heritage Council and was subsequently adopted by other bodies worldwide dealing with heritage conservation, is one of the earliest examples of the “values-based” approach as it provides a comprehensive and objective program for heritage evaluation (Jerome 2014: 4). Couch (2014) introduces the concept of the conservation management plan (CMP), that has become in the UK the standard, was to assess heritage assets and defines it as “a document which sets out the significance of a site and explains how the significance will be retained in any future use, repair, alteration, development or management” (182). As a consequence, the determination of significance is the core of the conservation management plan; where significance could be defined as presented in the *Burra Charter* (2000) as “cultural significance” that is “aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations ... that is embodied in the place itself” (2)⁴.

English Heritage⁵ has produced a set of Conservation Principles in an attempt to objectively assess the significance of a place. The four broad values identified by English Heritage are the following: evidential value, aesthetic value, historical value, and communal value (Couch 2014: 188). In the course of the next section, the paper considers the example of the garden at Kenilworth Castle as a case study and intends to present that the garden corresponds to the four conservation values in order to justify that by conveying the significance of such a historically and culturally important place towards visitors and others interested in the cultural heritage of England, the garden has a role in influencing attitudes towards heritage conservation.

4 The Case Study of the Elizabethan Garden at Kenilworth Castle

The Kenilworth entertainments⁶ of 1575 hosted by Robert Dudley (1532–1588), 1st Earl of Leicester, were the longest and most lavish celebrations organised in honour of any of the Tudor monarchs. At Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire, Dudley established an extensive natural landscape, as well as an Italianate garden, which made him a pioneer in this respect as at this time, his contemporaries only began the constructions of their garden at Theobalds or Holdenby (Woodhouse 1999: 127). At Kenilworth Castle, the main purpose of the scenery and the gardens were to serve as a background and setting for the series of events. It must have resembled Paradise – an artificially constructed one – as it was Leicester’s intention to impress Queen Elizabeth I and eventually propose to her. Two detailed early modern accounts survive recording the celebrations: a report by George Gascoigne⁷ who was responsible for part of the setting, and a letter by Robert Langham, who was an official in the Queen’s household (Dix 2014: 339).

George Gascoigne’s *The Princely Pleasures, at the Court at Kenilworth* (1576) primarily focuses on the elaborate entertainment, pageantry, and poetic performances instead of architectural or horticultural details. However, some details are revealed: “whiles I walke in these woods and wilderness (whereof I haue the charge)” (Gascoigne 1870: 123), which provides evidence that the garden was like a wilderness, i.e., a designed, semi-naturalistic area that intended to mimic wild or untamed landscape while it was an intentional, ornamental feature of the garden. The *Langham Letter* is addressed to a Londoner, a merchant friend of the author, who was Robert Langham, an official in court, thus had the opportunity to witness the spectacles organised at Kenilworth Castle. Following an introductory section, the letter briefly presents Kenilworth Castle together with recording the Queen’s visit to Long Itchington, where a hunt took place, followed by a generous dinner (Langham 1575: 3). Through the whole of the letter, details of the celebrations are described meticulously; music, masques, dancing, and hunting all rich in symbolism were incorporated into the series of events; however, a distinct section of the letter is dedicated to the description of the garden and even of specific features of the garden such as the aviary and the fountain, thus the *Langham Letter* is a valuable historical record as it provides an insight into the exact layout of the garden and its details, together with revealing the contemporary perceptions conveyed by the magnificence of the garden.

Early in the 21st century, English Heritage created a reconstruction of the garden based on archaeological evidence and presumptions that were made relying on the previously mentioned early modern historical records. The difficulty of the reconstruction of sites such as landscapes and gardens lies in the fact that many of the surviving accounts often make assumptions regarding the visual evidence and also tend to be a combination of plans, general structural descriptions, and attempted detailed scientific descriptions of plants. However, when reconstructing, experts can rely on written accounts by travellers or participants of festivities, visual evidence in the form of engravings or paintings, as well as archaeological evidence for the structure and layout – all of which facilitate the reconstruction of Renaissance gardens (Samson 2011: 17). Based on the fact that English Heritage executed the restoration of the garden at Kenilworth Castle, it can be presumed that based on certain aspects, the body found the legacy of the garden worth conserving. In the early modern account, Langham’s description portrays a “locus amoenus” – a place of joy and delight. According to him, the design featured a terrace running along the foundation of the garden, and he also gives account of a timber

aviary that was positioned opposite the arbours situated at either end of the garden. The space between these elements was divided into quarters by sand and grass paths, each plot centred by an obelisk and filled with an array of flowers, herbs, and trees, while in the middle of all, a tall marble fountain was erected – the garden was unquestionably designed to captivate and enchant eyewitnesses (Langham 1575: 20). The present case study attempts to review the four values formulated by English Heritage – the body responsible for the reconstruction of the garden at Kenilworth Castle – in terms of the attributes of the long-lost or reconstructed garden.

Evidential value is “the potential of the physical remains to yield evidence of past human activity” (Couch 2014: 130). The garden at Kenilworth Castle is a reconstructed space⁸; nonetheless, in order to execute the reconstruction, experts did not rely solely on early modern descriptions, as a substantial amount of architectural excavation was carried out at the original site, where professionals uncovered remains of the central fountain, which, corresponding to the description provided by Langham, confirmed the octagonal shape of the fountain (Dix 2014: 340). However, at the same time, no evidence was found of the timber-framed aviary (Dix 2014: 342), which can be explained by the fact that this feature was endowed with a more ephemeral structure than the marble fountain; thus, in this case, the necessary information for reconstruction was extracted from the *Langham Letter*.

Aesthetic value “derives from the ways in which people draw sensory and intellectual stimulation from the heritage asset” (Couch 2014: 130). The *Langham Letter* indicates that even in the 16th century it was true of the royal and aristocratic garden that it was a multisensory phenomenon: “The green plot under that with fair alleys green by grass, even voided from the borders a both sides and some (for change) with sand, not light or too soft, or soily by dust, but smooth and firm, pleasant to walk on as a sea-shore when the water is avaled” (Langham 1575: 20). The garden was delightful to look at, but at the same time, it could be experienced and felt by other senses as well, as it was pleasing to touch it or walk in it. Further emphasising the multisensory nature of the scenery, Langham records the plants that appeal to the sense of smell by stating, “where further also by great cast and cost the sweetness of savour on all sides, made so respirant from the redolent plants and fragrant herbs and flowers, in form, colour and quantity so deliciously variant...” (Langham 1575: 20-21) and highlights features that appeal to the sense of touch as “sweet-shadowed walk of terrace in heat of summer to feel the pleasant whisking wind above or delectable coolness of the fountain spring beneath” (Langham 1575: 22). Finally, as a summary, he implies that multiple senses are involved in the perception of the garden: “to taste of delicious strawberries ... to smell such fragrantcy of sweet odours breathing from the plants, herbs and flowers; to hear such natural melodious music and tunes of birds,” and above all, “to have in eye ... the wood, the waters ... the deer, the people ... the fruit trees, the plants...” (Langham 1575: 22). It can be established that Langham’s description leaves no room for uncertainty considering the multisensory nature of the 16th-century garden at Kenilworth Castle.

Historical value refers to “the ways in which past people, events, and aspects of life can be connected through the heritage asset to the present, such a connection often being illustrative or associative” (Couch 2014: 131). The historical value of a heritage site makes it possible for people to feel connected to the past by providing both tangible and intangible or emotional links between the past and present; this can be achieved by various means, including inclusive or interactive exhibitions. The garden of Kenilworth Castle is open to the public, and visitors can wander through the reconstructed Elizabethan garden while viewing a historical exhibition

which supplies the authentic first-hand experience with valuable historical facts, thus establishing the connection between past and present.

Lastly, but not insignificantly, the fourth value is communal value which

derives from the meanings of a heritage asset for the people who know about it, or for whom it figures in their collective experience or memory; communal values are closely bound up with historical, particularly associative, and aesthetic values, along with educational, social or economic values.

(Couch 2014: 131)

The correspondence to this value might be explained by the fact that the art and practice of gardening lives on in the collective memory of the English ever since the middle ages, as the fruit and flower shows, the open garden days in the rural communities of towns and villages, and the flower and harvest festivals in cathedrals and country churches are all quintessentially English events (also clerical with biblical traditions), highlighting the importance of the enduring tradition of gardening in England (Strong 2011: 128).

5 Conclusion

The Tudor garden, originating in the medieval tradition of the “hortus conclusus”, influenced by classical Italianate traditions, developed into the typical pleasure garden, the “locus amoenus”, serving as a space for leisure and enjoyment, and came to be an essential component of any royal or aristocratic residence by the end of the 16th century. The garden of Kenilworth Castle is a significant example, as it can be identified as the embodiment of the beginning of Italianate influence in garden design with its terrace, obelisks, and fountain (Hunt 1996: 104). The French garden designer, André Mollet (1670), who had worked for Charles I (1625–1649), summarised the features that are essential for a garden to be perfect and wrote that “the Garden of Pleasure consists in Ground-works, Wildernesses, choice Trees, Palissados, and Alleys or Walks; as also in Fountains, Grottos, Statues, Perspectives, and other such like Ornaments; without which it cannot be perfect” (1). Based on Mollet’s opinion, it can be restated that the garden at Kenilworth Castle entirely corresponds to the embodiment of the literary topos of the “locus amoenus”.

Nowadays, the Tudor garden is still considered a culturally significant space, and by means of artificial reconstruction, it effectively serves the purpose of maintaining early modern horticultural traditions and shaping the current English cultural identity. As a conclusion, it can be established that the Tudor garden corresponds to the four conservation principles formulated by English Heritage and contributes to the promotion of heritage conservation in the 21st century.

Notes

1. New and fashionable features that the finest gardens of early modern England would have are fountains, arbours, orchards, or aviaries. Moreover, flowerbeds were usually filled with native plants, while exotic specimens were on display in ornamental pots (Henderson 2011: 48).
2. Strong implies that “hortus conclusus” is a symbol of the Immaculate Conception and appears in the Song of Solomon, thus supporting the biblical connotation of the term (1984: 49). Song of Solomon 4:12 does present the concept of the enclosed garden as a metaphor: “A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a spring shut up, a fountain sealed” (“Bible Gateway”).
3. More specifically, “paradise” comes from the Avestan language, which is an eastern Iranian language incorporating Old Avestan and Younger Avestan; however, today it is an extinct language (“Avestan Language”).
4. Conservation is defined as “all the processes of looking after a place so as to retain its cultural significance (*Burra Charter* 2000: 2).
5. English Heritage was originally formed in 1983 and was in charge of developing strategies for the promotion, education, and marketing of the national monument collection. A change came about in 2015 when English Heritage became a self-funding, nongovernmental charitable trust that has the task of managing the national heritage collection (Thomas 2021: 289). English Heritage was the body responsible for the first reconstruction of the Elizabethan garden at Kenilworth Castle in the early 2000s.
6. According to Goldring’s account, Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and her court were entertained for nearly three weeks in July 1575 at Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire. The feast included music, masques, dancing, hunting, and sport practices of the early modern period, such as tilting or bear-baiting.
7. George Gascoigne, an English poet and courtier, was responsible for some of the devices during the Kenilworth festivities, and in *The Princely Pleasures at Kenilworth* (1576), he gives an account of the series of events. The work was put into print in 1576, one year after the celebration. Gascoigne was – as Staub puts it – one of the first professional imaginative writers in England by publishing his *Hundreth Sundrie Flowres* in 1573 (2012: 95).
8. The reconstruction of the gardens at Kenilworth Castle has major significance, as Strong points out that there are no surviving original gardens from before the Civil War (1642–1651) (1984: 11). However, there is valuable evidence considering the physical features of Tudor gardens, for example, the drawings of topographical artists, the most notable of them being Anthonis van den Wyngaerde (1525–1571), a Flemish topographer who produced sketches of the gardens at Richmond Palace, Whitehall Palace, Hampton Court Palace, etc. in the course of the 16th century.

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