Early Japanese-style Gardens in Britain - an Overview

Evaluating the early Japanese-style gardens

A hundred years ago the Japanese arts were the height of fashion. Visitors with the necessary wealth flocked to Japan and returned with a compulsion to recreate the gardens they had seen back on their home soil. Now, a century later, the early Japanese-style gardens of Britain are only just beginning to receive the attention they deserve. For too long they have been perceived as a frippery of the Edwardian era.

When early Japanese-style gardens are viewed in Britain they are often considered to lack a resemblance to the refined gardens of Japan. This questing for authenticity by the modern viewer has devalued many of these gardens, the presumption having been that these British creations should be replica copies of those in Japan. This has been to miss the point that gardens away from their native geology, climate, society and culture will be different. Josiah Conder (1893:2), writer of the influential Landscape Gardening in Japan saw this as inevitable:

rransferred to a foreign clime where landscape presents itself in a different garb, and regarded by people who interpret nature in another manner, these lovely gardens can hardly fail to appear as examples of a quaint and fanciful conceit.

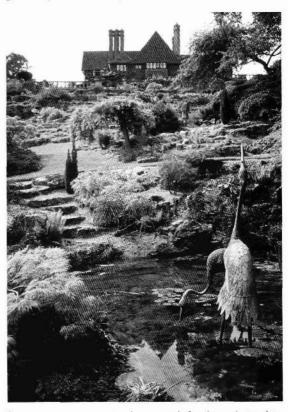
These Japanese-style gardens tell us far more about the state of British society at the time of their creation; of opportunities to travel, of political alliances, of artistic trends and of horticultural fashions. Most of all these gardens were a celebration of our relationship with Japan.

Enchantment with Japan

Prior to the Victorian era Japan had been closed to the rest of the world for over two hundred years. The arrival of the American, Commodore Perry, saw the opening of Japan in 1854, at first to diplomats, then to traders and by the latter part of the century to a stream of tourists. Visitors of all types viewed and wrote of Japan in the most lyrical terms, and many Japanese-style gardens are the results of these travels.

Shopping mania seemed to grip many causing them to purchase plants, lanterns, rocks and even live deer to be transported home to Britain. Japanese lanterns remain in gardens to this day as testaments to those overseas adventures but they were not solely the result of foreign travel. As demand for all things Japanese increased items could be purchased from specialist firms such as Gauntlett's Nursery, in Surrey, who specialised in plants and items from Japan, their catalogues displaying an extensive list of influential clients. In Japan companies ran a thriving export trade with the gardeners of Britain, seducing overseas buyers with stunningly beautiful catalogues. Though contemporary commentators saw that Japanese ornaments were not enough to create an accurate interpretation of Japan, Lawrence Weaver (1915:277), a journalist for Country Life, commented that:

66 The disposition of a few typical ornaments, of a bronze stork here and a stone lantern there, does not make a Japanese garden, it only makes an English garden speak with a Japanese accent.



Bronze cranes were a popular souvenir for the early tourists to Japan; sadly these wonderful examples no longer gracefully fish in the gardens of Hascombe Court, Surrey.

The Distribution of the Japanese-style garden in the British Isles, 1819 to 1955 (note: dots indicate the number of gardens per county not their exact location, total number of sites 168). Source: Raggett, J. (2002)

Guernsey



Japan was seen from the mid-nineteenth century until well into the twentieth century as a rich source of new plant species for the British Isles, especially since both countries shared similar maritime climates. There was knowledge of the Japanese flora prior to the opening of Japan to the West from the physicians Englebert Kaemfer, Karl Pieter Thunberg and Philip Hans von Siebold, all employed by the Dutch trading concession on the island of Deshima, adjacent to Nagasaki.

After the gunboat diplomacy of the 1850s early visitors to Japan included the plant collectors of nursery firms and botanical gardens, including Robert Fortune and John Gould Veitch. Their collecting trips were well reported in the horticultural press, by 1862, *The Proceedings of the Royal Horticultural Society* stated that, 660f the novelties or rarities introduced by them, the conifers are probably the family in which the greatest number of Fellows are interested...? (Murray, 1862:265).

Collectors frequently wrote accounts of their explorations of Japan that featured in the gardening periodicals of the time. Many of the plant species that were sent back successfully found a home in the British garden, and some took on a special significance due to their connections with Japan, including maples, wisterias and irises. Nursery firms, both in Japan and Britain, were to supply the demand for these plants and these new additions to the flora of the

British garden became a distinctive part of the palette needed for the creation of the Japanese-style garden.

Gardens of Exhibitions and Shows

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a series of international exhibitions in Britain, mainland Europe and the United States. It was these exhibitions that were to become the showcase for the Japanese garden in the West. The Japan-British Exhibition of 1910 attracted over eight million visitors in just a six-month period, with two major gardens constructed to display the skills of Japanese landscapers.

The 'Garden of Peace', also known as the 'Garden of Silence', was much admired due to its high standard of finish and the surrounding panorama that prevented intruding views. The 'Garden of the Floating Islands' was considered 66 well designed and eminently attractive 🤊 (The Gardeners' Magazine, 1910, 21 May:386). It occupied a prominent position with a lake edged with rocks and surrounded by walks with deciduous and evergreen trees. There were teahouses to provide 'rest and shelter' for visitors, and an island with a rocky promontory which was reached by means of a stone bridge. The latter was considered to be of a design that was 66 essentially Japanese 🤊 (The Gardeners' Magazine, 1910, 9 July:532). Stone lanterns and other accessories were felt to add to the 66 interest and attractiveness of the garden > ? (The Gardeners' Magazine, 1910, 9 July:532), and the lantern was considered a characteristic feature of the Japanese-style garden in Britain.

Early Japanese-style Gardens in Britain continued...

Many Japanese-style gardens have developed a folklore that their origins were the result of the Japan-British Exhibition or the efforts of the Japanese craftsmen that were employed at White City but the data to support most of these claims remains sparse if not absent.

Interpretations of the Gardens of Japan

The expression of Japanese-style gardens in Britain was extremely diverse ranging from carefully constructed replicas striving for authenticity to a nod to 'the fair Japan' with the addition of such novelties as a random lantern, bridge or plant.

The new plants introduced from Japan were the inspiration for the first 'Japanese' gardens. As early as 1819 Whiteknights, Berkshire, had a collection of Japanese plants. Prior to 1900 there was the develop-

ment of the bamboo garden, promoted by the work of Freeman-Mitford in *The Bamboo Garden* (1896). The subtropical garden formed an early prototype of the Japanese-style garden, with the garden at Gunnersbury House (1900), Greater London, forming a leading example. The garden did not echo the restrained design philosophy of the Japanese, but was to set the trend for the fashionable addition of a Western interpretation of a garden from Japan.

Diplomats with experience of Japan created the early examples of Japanese-style gardens such as Saumarez Park (c.1890), Guernsey, and Heale House (c.1901), Wiltshire. These were filled with authentic items with which their owners had returned from the East, and yet even with the aid of Japanese design consultants, these gardens were poor representations of those in Japan; the various features seeming disconnected from their new settings.

bridges were part of a network of informal paths that encompassed pools and various features, including a 'teahouse', which like the bridges was either imported from Japan or of local origin.

Gardens where there was a greater degree of involvement from a Japanese designer came closest to gaining the appearance of a garden as they would have been found in Japan. The work of Taki Honda (and later J. Suzuki) at Cowden Castle (1907), Perthshire; of Seyemon Kusumoto's involvement, from 1923, at Cheynes (Cottered) (1906), Hertfordshire, and finally

The archetypal Japanese-style garden was a pastiche

based around an irregular water feature that was

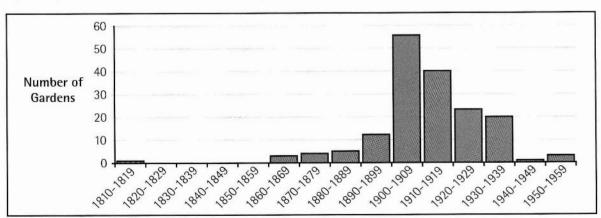
outlined with rocks and included planting areas for

irises and water lilies. The water would be crossed by at

least one bridge, possibly a representation of the red

bridge at Nikko, as seen at Heale House (c.1901),

Wiltshire, a stone slab or stepping-stones. These



Graph Showing the Creating of Japanese-style Gardens in the British Isles by Decade, 1810-1959.

Source: Raggett, J. (2002)

Conservation of early Japanese-style gardens

examples of much stronger and convincing designs.

the designs of J. Suzuki at The Node (c.1930), Hertfordshire, and possibly at Trewince (1935), Cornwall, were

Where are these gardens now? A few are well known and cared for such as the Japanese-style garden at Tatton Park, Cheshire, but the majority are lost, hidden under encroaching undergrowth and suffering the effects of neglect, vandalism or the sale of the more valuable ornaments. The majority of the early Japanese inspired gardens are located on the fringe of major gardens often associated with woodland, water

or rock gardens. As maintenance of the complex pre First World War garden became impossible due to rising labour costs, the Japanese areas of the garden were first to revert to the wild. Many a lantern remains now only as a base and the water's edge it once graced is filled with debris.

Historical authenticity seems to raise a particular area of concern for the Japanese-style garden, since those responsible for such gardens are frequently caught-up with the title 'Japanese', and with the best of intentions are endeavouring to return the garden to one more like our present early twenty-first century viewpoint of the gardens of Japan. Sometimes the



The remains of a Japanese lantern at Cowden, Perthshire, a common sight in many early Japanese-style gardens.

allure of Japan still seems to hold a magnetic force and gardens are 'restored' to a 'Japanese' model that was not envisaged by a past designer. The Japanese-style gardens of the British Isles need to be viewed, as far as possible, through the eyes of their contemporary creators, builders and garden visitors, both for their accurate restoration and for an understanding of the complex history they represent.

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The red Nikko-inspired bridge at Heale House, Wiltshire, an example of gathering memories of Japan to create a garden



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