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Reawakening a Kensington Palace treasure

IT was in December 1903 that *COUNTRY LIFE* pointed out a 'collection of broken-down greenhouses and forcing frames, which have long disgraced and disfigured the area of Kensington Gardens lying just in front of the windows of the palace'.

A campaign to reform the eastern pleasure grounds at Kensington Palace had been instigated some time before, in the mid 1890s, by the historian Ernest Law, who urged that the gardens should be reformed to render them 'conformable' with the old palace and its noble Orangery—both of which buildings were restored by 1889 and opened to the public by command of Queen Victoria. It was, he believed, indefensible and intolerable that their surroundings should have been so 'uncared-for and neglected', and that the 'dead, formless, depressing blank of the metropolitan, County Council, standard "public park" pervades the whole'.

'The garden is imbued with archaic sentiment expressive of old-fashioned English gardenage'

Law proposed that the Orangery Lawn and the garden beside it would be an ideal place to create a public garden imbued with archaic sentiment expressive of old-fashioned English 'gardenage'—including a 'sunk formal garden, with such quaint devices as clipped shrubs, trimmed box, figured beds, sundials and leaden vases' (in the manner of the Pond Garden at Hampton Court Palace).

Edward VII helped advance the campaign, recommending that Kensington Palace Orangery—being 'very representative of English domestic building at one of the happiest periods'—should inspire the design of the British



The Cradle Walk beside Kensington Palace, in its mid-20th-century prime (main) and today (inset)

Pavilion at the 1904 World's Fair in St Louis, Missouri. A full-scale replica was built, set in fine gardens in the late-17th-century style, and it was these that formed the basis for a new Orangery Lawn and Sunken Garden at Kensington Palace, completed in 1908.

The Cradle Walk was one of the principal attractions of the new gardens, calculated to provide a raised viewing gallery with a series of openings through which visitors could gain 'vignetted pictures' over the central pool and the flower garden, to which there was no public access. The unusual parabolic or catenary profile of the Cradle Walk's arches was strikingly modern, and is reminiscent of the contemporaneous iron pergola at Antoni Gaudí's Parque Güell in Barcelona.

The original bower was removed in the late 1980s for safety reasons following storm damage, but its recently installed replacement, made by the Sheffield-based blacksmith Andrew Renwick, has been

created with hundreds of slender steel arches, clad in red-budded lime (*Tilia platyphyllos* Rubra).

Over the past two years, head gardener Paul Clark and his team have systematically stripped out and double-dug the Sunken Garden, planting bold new displays of bulbs, annuals and herbaceous perennials in the spirit of the original layout. The fountains and the pond have been cleaned, the garden's brick walls and paths are being restored, new Pulhamite plant containers have been ordered. Moreover, new semi-parabolic 'windows' have been introduced into the Cradle Walk to give views south and east, the most impressive of which is aligned on the Victoria Tower at the Palace of Westminster.

The aim of this scheme, and indeed the broader plans for Kensington Palace gardens, is to enhance the pleasure grounds for locals and visitors alike to enjoy. The project, which also involves an ambitious representation inside the palace, will be completed by summer 2012 to

coincide with the Diamond Jubilee of The Queen, much as the last round of significant improvements to the royal estate marked the Diamond Jubilee (1897) and 80th-birthday celebrations of her great-great-grandmother Queen Victoria, who was born in the Palace in 1819. The Cradle Walk and Sunken Garden, just off the Broad Walk immediately east of Kensington Palace, can be enjoyed all year round.

For opening times of Kensington Palace and Kensington Palace Gardens, telephone 0844 482 7777 or visit www.hrp.org.uk

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Next week: Chelsea review