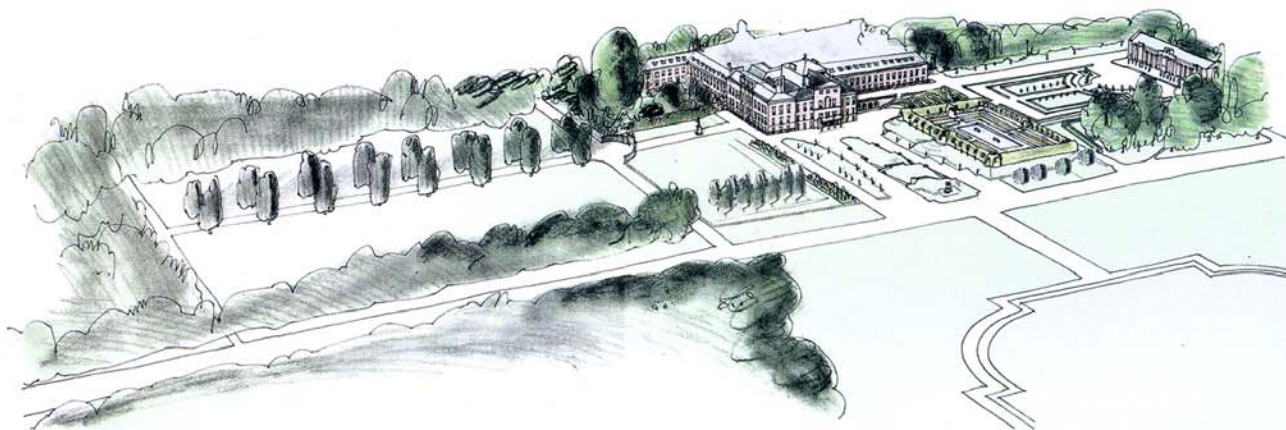




All change at Kensington Palace



An aerial view of Todd Longstaffe-Gowan's garden at Kensington Palace. The new design draws on the 18th-century idea of land-forming

KENSINGTON PALACE, for so long the residence of various members of the Royal Family, is about to present a different face to the world, thanks to a brand-new formal garden that's being created on its eastern side. The palace, which regularly opens its state rooms to the public, has, in recent years, felt rather marooned in its public-park setting, hidden behind a dense belt of trees and high railings. But that's destined to change: the plan is to reconnect it with Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, and generally to show a more welcoming face to the thousands of visitors it attracts.

It's all part of a major revamp of the 'visitor experience' at this popular tourist attraction. The project, which also involves an ambitious re-presentation of the interiors, will be completed to coincide with The Queen's Diamond Jubilee next year, much as the last round of significant improvements to the royal estate

in 1899 marked the Diamond Jubilee and 80th-birthday celebrations of her great-great-grandmother, Queen Victoria.

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, the landscape architect commissioned for the work by Historic Royal Palaces, has not been asked to restore anything, as there was basically nothing there to speak of in the first place. In all the 18th-century views, including the fine John Rocque plan of 1756, the East Garden, as it is now termed, appears as a simple and unadorned green sward, opening up to frame an axis to the huge Round Pond that still dominates this section of the park. It was Queen Caroline, George II's consort, who remodelled Kensington Gardens from 1727 to 1754, and she reserved any decorative flourishes for the wildernesses and wooded walks in the farther reaches of the estate.

Mr Longstaffe-Gowan is making a garden that reinvokes the 18th-century design intentions,

as he puts it, without being modelled on any specific precedent. His plan consists of a large central turf parterre, the Palace Lawn, with yew topiaries and hornbeam spirals across three terraces, flanked by two wide pathways leading down to the palace, and then two other areas of greensward, the North and South Slips.

'The garden reinvokes the 18th-century design intentions'

Landformed grass terraces and a viewing mount add another decorative note, echoing the signature feature of Charles Bridgeman, who laid out Kensington Gardens for Queen Caroline. The garden is overwhelmingly green, with no flower colour, and the dramatic geometric shapes of the terraces that form the Palace Lawn lend it almost an Art Deco flavour.

From the palace, the garden rises up a gentle slope towards the statue of Queen Victoria, which remains the focus of the space at its eastern perimeter, around which a new water basin is being constructed. The idea is to make the statue the clear focus of the garden, when previously it has had a slightly incidental role.

Boundary fences that were erected in the 1980s have been replaced with low railings, and all the trees and hedges have been removed, in order to reconnect the palace with the park. Mr Longstaffe-Gowan was inspired by the knowledge that sheep were grazed in the southern section of Kensington Gardens even into the 1950s, and his intention is to re-create a hint of that bucolic tone. As part of this process, the fences on either side of the gates on the south side of the palace will also be replaced by low railings.

Meanwhile, on the northern side of the palace, and connecting it with the Orangery on a higher level, a wiggling 'wilderness' walk—another homage to the early 18th century—will take visitors down to the palace entrance, shop and cafe.

Even now, at construction stage, one can get a good idea of the garden's final proportions, especially from the windows above. Already the palace looks much happier in its setting. With almost all the trees removed, the view north creates a much stronger sense of Kensington Palace as an originally modest—although much extended—royal residence, first conceived as a place of seclusion set amid pasture.

Tim Richardson's *Great Gardens of America* is published by Frances Lincoln at £40

Next week: *Calendula* charms

Horticultural aide memoire

No.32: Plant strawberry runners

The strawberry plant reproduces by the endlessly fascinating method of runners, reaching across the soil and taking root on contact. The gardener wishes to regulate this territorial expansion by confining the plants to manageable rows, and achieves this by pegging down the most promising runners into pots of compost and removing the rest. Now that these plantlets have established themselves, they can be detached and transplanted into their final positions, 18in apart, in soil buffed up with fish, blood and bone. **SCD**

