

TODD LONGSTAFFE-GOWAN

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan (PhD London, M.Land Arch Harvard) is a landscape architect with an international practice based in London. He is President of the London Parks and Gardens Trust, Gardens adviser to Historic Royal Palaces, and has recently redesigned the gardens of Kensington Palace to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Her Majesty The Queen. He is the author of *The London Square: Gardens in the midst of town* (Yale University Press, 2015).

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DESIGN CONCEPT

The concept for the setting of this outstanding historic building creates a simple and welcoming setting for the Palace, and has been informed by a detailed analysis of the long and complex history of the development of the palace and its setting.

The aims of the new gardens were simple: to create a more coherent and dignified setting for the palace, to recover important historic views to and from the garden and to reconnect the palace to the neighbouring park, thus restoring Kensington Palace to its place at the heart of Kensington



Gardens. The new ten-acre royal gardens build upon and compliments the bold 'unaffected Englishness' of the landscape improver Charles Bridgeman's early eighteenth-century landscape. Today, this new layer in the 'most layered' of gardens is a contemporary response to the palace, the park and the needs of a modern audience.

Until recently, Kensington Palace was virtually invisible - an unloved royal backwater, set behind forbidding railings, heavily embowered with shrubs and trees, and the approach to the front door was labyrinthine-like and confusing to many potential visitors that only a few attempted to persevere.





Among the most important achievements of the Kensington Project has been to move the public entrance from the north to the east front of the palace where it is more visible and welcoming to the millions of souls who cross the Broad Walk every year. Visitor numbers to the Palace gardens have more than trebled since the new gardens were opened. The removal of great swathes of clutter – including benches, dustbins, security railings, trees and shrubberies to the northeast and southeast

of the palace was important as it helped recover expansive eighteenth-century views over Kensington Gardens.

The building of the new east gardens has, like that of the earlier ones at Kensington, involved extensive earthworks: 7,000 cubic metres of soil were excavated to form a gently-sloping ramp between the new palace entrance and the raised level of the Broad Walk. Sixty-four mature trees were felled to reveal the palace and to open historic views linking the palace and the gardens. Two new gravelled walks were laid out on the slope, as well as a series of crisp grass terraces studded with playfully clipped yew sentinels. The uppermost terrace of this 'Palace Lawn' forms a verdant plinth for the gleaming white marble statue



of Queen Victoria. This statue, now encompassed by an octagonal reflecting pool, was sculpted by her daughter Princess Louise and erected in 1889 as a tribute to the Queen's generosity in throwing open the gardens and the Palace to the public.

Drawing on a lost Bridgeman bastion, a new mount has been raised on the north side of Palace Lawn and new lozenge-shaped 'slips' bedizened with flowering shrubs and herbaceous plants have been laid out on the south side of the garden adjacent to the Grand Walk. The traditional park fencing has replaced high security railings and the Golden Gates have been stripped of their modern extensions along with a wildflower meadow formed on the south lawn. The Wiggly Walk – a 90 metre long sloping path adjacent to the Queen's Wing that snakes through a clipped hornbeam plantation – is among the more curious additions to the gardens and has been laid out to provide ramped access between the lower gardens, the Orangery Lawn and the Cradle Walk. The walk's winding layout mimics the paths that once threaded Bridgeman's wilderness gardens.

Sir Simon Jenkins, former Chairman of the National Trust, has remarked that 'Kensington Gardens seems to me a model of respectful reinstatement and of imaginative innovation. The approach from the park has been cleared of cluttered vegetation. The palace has emerged in all its glory and the new gardens are designed wonderfully to offset the main avenue. The whole quarter has been refreshed and repopulated. It is all a delight!' 