

books

THE LONDON TOWN GARDEN 1700-1840

By Todd

Longstaffe-Gowan

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London's gardens take a stand against the city's grit, but they can't keep it at bay, says Peter Ackroyd

If the small garden is not an English invention, it ought to be. It cultivates, if that is the appropriate word, a delight in the earth and prompts several very useful arts of horticulture. It is an amateur pursuit and pre-eminently an individual one, combining privacy with containment. It exudes, in other words, a thoroughly native and practical spirit. That is perhaps why London harbours more gardens than any other capital city, and why the latest satellite reports reveal that over a third of London is given over to "natural" areas.

They have a long history. The eminent historian J. H. Plumb concludes that in the 18th-century city there was "a mania for gardening and planting". The shape of the city was compared to a laurel leaf, and it was deemed "to flourish like the trees". Natural imagery was used to subdue apparently unnatural conditions of growth and change.

Yet if from a distance it was a smoke-filled oven, at closer hand the brick and stone were interrupted by squares, orchards, bowling greens and small gardens. The gardens themselves were compact and serene, small areas of privacy in a city where contact bred contagion and fear. They were planted on an orderly basis, as outlined in *The City Gardener* by Thomas Fairchild — alias "The Gardener of Hoxton". He noted down those plants which flourished even in the smoke and stink of London, among them the lilac and the lily, the angelica and the sunflower.

To these may be added the aptly named London Rocket, a yellow-flowering plant which emerged after the Great Fire and the Blitz. There was a vine in Leicester Fields, a mulberry in Ludgate Street and of course the plane tree which still stands at the corner of Wood Street and Cheapside as a token of nature's persistence.

In this wonderful study Todd Longstaffe-Gowan reveals that town gardens were labelled "fourth-rate gardens" according to the Building Act of 1774, but they were first-rate at lending individuality to an otherwise unexceptional house. The neat rows



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Rus in urbe: William Upcott's back garden in Upper Street, Islington, 1835 — with the spire of St Mary, Islington, in the distance

Green fingers

of Georgian terraces could thereby be subverted by front or back gardens. Gardens also afforded the promise of light and air in the close-pent city, while the bright colours of the purple lilac or the yellow laburnum might glimmer through the smoke and the fog.

Even in the tenements and back-alleys of the city the window-box was ubiquitous, and no sketch of London was complete without the outline of a geranium in a flower-pot. One of the

famous cries of London was: "All a-growing, all a-growing, here's flowers for your gardens!"

Those who lacked their own gardens might be satisfied with views or prospects: the squares and parks of the city provided the illusion of *rus in urbe*, and houses which overlooked them were described in auction notices as "genteel" or "enchanting". Those who did not possess such advantages often employed artists to paint landscape murals on

garden walls, or introduced miniature landscapes of their own upon balconies and verandas; the thirst for scenery was not easily slaked in a city where building was slowly covering over all the charms of the natural world.

More eccentric attempts at gardens are outlined in this book. At the bottom of his town garden, William Stukeley built a hermitage with stones from demolished churches, while John Hill created a floral allegory and "Temple of Happiness" at the back of his house in Petty France. Others took horticulture rather more personally, and there was a vogue for women fashioning little gardens in their hair. One contemporary records a dinner party in 1777 where the female guests had "on their heads, an acre and a half of shrubbery beside slopes, grass-plats, tulip beds, clumps of peonies, kitchen gardens, and green houses".

The pleasures of the imagination could, however, be satisfied by the real thing: town gardens were supposed to provoke, in Longstaffe-Gowan's words, "a

sense of beauty, surprise, curiosity, sweetness, gaiety, melancholy or wonder". The same emotions, particularly the two latter, could also have been kindled on the streets of London itself. Gardens may have encouraged a distance or detachment from the ills of the urban world and they may have been employed to anaesthetise rather than to excite feeling. That is perhaps why, as the author observes, there was remarkably little change in their pattern or nature over the 140 years covered in this volume.

Throughout that period it was ordained that regularity should be combined with variety; there might be groves and terraces, with dwarf trees and statuary, shrubs and gravel walks, but all arranged within the smallest possible domain. This sense of enclosure may explain why so many of them fell into desuetude and despair, so that by the middle of the 19th century they had become the home of dead creepers and dusty sparrows, damp stones and broken pots. That is how London gets its own way.

In a city of artifice, however, it is appropriate that there should have been a vogue for artificial gardens, with exotic fruits in greenhouses and "indoor temporary gardens" for balls and masquerades. Plants could be hired for the night and ripe fruit trees placed on dinner tables so that the guests might pick their own dessert. In a similar spirit the squares of London were laid out to "give our Thoughts an Opportunity of Country Amusements" replete with elm, lime, mulberry and fig. But again the city crept in. The squares became the haunt of ruffians and prostitutes, the turf receptacle of bones and bottles, newspapers and rags.

The London Town Garden is marvellously detailed and well informed; it is written with scholarship and love, the text itself complemented by rich and ingenious illustrative material. There are asides on map-making and the location of privies, all of them contributing to an extraordinary example of urban literature. The history of London is not complete without a study such as this.