

# Revelations at the palace

*Gardeners will enjoy the new-look Kensington, says Joanna Fortnam*

The image of Kensington Palace burnt most deeply into the national memory is probably that of the Golden Gates lapped by a sea of flowers after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997.

In a few months' time, her eldest son and his wife, the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, are to move into a private apartment in the palace, one formerly occupied by his great-aunt Princess Margaret. But despite its high profile as a grace-and-favour house share for junior royalty, the location of the palace, and precisely where the entrance is, are questions that have confused visitors for decades.

Following a £12 million renovation, however, Kensington Palace has been subtly transformed. The gleaming white statue of Queen Victoria is now encircled by a reflecting pool, and she emphatically marks the spot by the Round Pond where you start your visit.

A creative spin has been brought to the interiors, with a "themed" approach to history: courtesy of the theatre designers Acme Design Studios, visitors can follow four narrative routes through the palace. Artefacts have been staged in a manner intended to be more evocative than the linear "what happened when" approach. Whether this works is a talking-point among visitors: some feel it appeals to a younger audience, others find the staginess a tad intrusive.

But in the public gardens to the east of the palace, the new landscape is a simpler proposition. Even the ornate cast-iron loggia that caused a kerfuffle when the Prince of Wales endorsed it in the teeth of objections from local councillors (it was described as "almost embarrassingly twee"), is forgiven now. Familiar park



Before and after: the new landscape at Kensington Palace

landmarks – the Round Pond and Broad Walk of Kensington Gardens – have been freshly reconnected with the palace via a gentle slope down from the pond.

No more looming security fences, dank shrubberies, random groups of trees and small finger signs pointing the visitor to an obscure side door.

Instead, a new three-acre public garden has been created to the south and east of the palace, and

*'We've added new layers but kept the best of the old'*

more than 250 new trees have been planted.

The sleight of hand that has made the landscape more welcoming and coherent is that of landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan and his business partner James Fox, who, in 2008, won the competition to renovate this historic site. They used the work of Charles Bridgeman, royal gardener 1728-1738, as the catalyst for making sense of this

multilayered site.

Two new wiggly paths from the Broad Walk, as well as a series of grass terraces studded with clipped yew, guide the visitor to the new entry loggia. A wild flower sward has been formed on the south lawn, park fencing has replaced high security railings and the Golden Gates have been stripped of modern additions.

"We've added new layers but kept the best of the old," says Longstaffe-Gowan. The Wiggly Walk – a path that snakes through a hornbeam plantation – is a nod to Bridgeman and among the more curious additions to the gardens, but provides ramp access.

The principle behind the renovation is that it is no longer a park with a palace at its edge but a garden with a palace at its heart. Not that they want anyone to notice: "One hopes that many visitors will suspect the gardens were ever thus. This, in my view, would be the greatest compliment," says Longstaffe-Gowan.

Open daily, 10am-6pm, March-Sept. Entry £14.50 adults, under-16s free, conc £12; 0844 482 7799; hrp.org.uk/kensingtonpalace