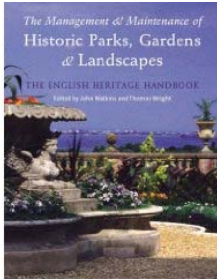




Publisher of Historic Gardens Review



The Management & Maintenance of Historic Parks, Gardens & Landscapes: the English Heritage Handbook, edited by John Watkins and Tom Wright. Frances Lincoln. 352 pages. £35.00. ISBN 978-0711-22439-1.

Eternal vigilance may or may not be the price of liberty but it is assuredly the price of historic gardens. No cultural artifact is more vulnerable. Abandon a historic building and it will gently crumble. A decade will suffice to ruin a garden.

Conservation, restoration and constant maintenance are therefore essential to the preservation of our garden heritage. There has in the past been relatively little literature devoted to the practicalities of these tasks. There are endless books on how to garden and even on how to rejuvenate one that has been neglected or become over-mature; but few have looked at the particular problems of managing historic gardens or considered the wider aspects of the historic landscape from a cultural standpoint. Even the National Trust, otherwise prolific in book production, has fought shy of tackling the subject.

Fortunately, English Heritage has brought out what must surely be the definitive work on the subject: *The Management & Maintenance of Historic Parks, Gardens & Landscapes: the English Heritage Handbook*. A high-powered team has been assembled to give the book the necessary authority. The editors are John Watkins, currently English Heritage's Head of Gardens, and Tom Wright, heavyweight academic landscape expert. There are no fewer than sixteen 'contributing authors', a roll-call of garden history luminaries such as Maggie Campbell-Culver, Brian Dix and Brent Elliot. One point to get out of the way immediately. 'Handbook' is somewhat of a misnomer. Weighing in at over 5lbs (2.4k), the book is big and glossy and not one to slip into the pocket of your gardening trousers. It is full of superb photographs (the coiled hose on the tiled floor by James Davies would not disgrace a serious gallery exhibition). It is thus a somewhat strange combination of a glossy coffee-table book and a (literally) down-to-earth 'how to' manual of everyday garden tasks.

The strength of the work is in its holistic approach. It will tell you what to plant and where, but it will also explain how to create a complete strategy for restoring, conserving and maintaining a historic landscape. The core of the book is the 'Conservation Management Plan' (CMP) which is essential for the management of any serious historic park or garden. This CMP process starts with a welcome statement of the basic principles, helpfully set out in a table drawn up by Dr David Jacques. The keynotes are prior research, preservation of what is already there as far as practicable, sensitivity to the site and, above all, a coherent plan for long-term maintenance. The authors do not set their face totally against 'restoration' of lost or severely damaged features, nor even against 'reconstruction', but they warn, rightly, against modish

34 River Court, Upper Ground, London SE1 9PE, UK
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7633 9165 Fax: +44 (0)20 7401 7072
E-mail: office@historicgardens.org Website: www.historicgardens.org



Publisher of Historic Gardens Review

'period' kitsch, particularly when it masquerades as the genuine article. There are similar helpful tables of principles for searching for historical evidence and researching period planting.

The practical advice is by no means confined to the best methods of pruning your yews or selecting historic varieties of rose. There is a lengthy and first-class section on the legal and planning constraints of managing a historic landscape, including employment law and the ubiquitous health and safety. The list of birds and beasts which must be protected in the UK (seemingly at all costs) exemplifies high-minded governmental meddling in all its surreal dottiness.

There is a detailed section on the economics of maintaining a garden (with lists of costings of both in-house staff and contractors) and tables of labour and skill requirements for specific tasks. The analysis of the problems of admitting visitors will be much studied by those who open to the public. No doubt all this economic information could be obtained elsewhere but to have it properly collated and as lucidly explained would itself alone have justified the work.

Of course the bulk of the book is concerned with the restoration and maintenance of historic parks and gardens on the level of 'hands-on' everyday tasks. One of its glories is the profusion of explanatory line-drawings which often convey the essence of advice more quickly and clearly than either text or photographs.

Finally, there are ten case studies of major historic gardens or landscapes, including Chatsworth, Great Dixter and (HGF prizewinner) Sheffield Botanic Garden. Endearingly the final study is of Stonehenge – surely the ultimate in hard landscaping – enthralling no doubt but perhaps somewhat atypical of the problems faced by the average historic garden owner or manager.

One small niggle: given the eminence of the sixteen authors, it is, surprisingly, almost impossible (save in a few minor instances) to ascertain which parts of the text have been written by whom. Both we and they deserve to have them identified for the sections they contributed.

A good case can be made for asserting that this was the most significant book on historic (or any) gardens produced in recent years.

Review by Philip Stephen, January 2009.

34 River Court, Upper Ground, London SE1 9PE, UK
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7633 9165 Fax: +44 (0)20 7401 7072
E-mail: office@historicgardens.org Website: www.historicgardens.org