

THURLOE SQUARE

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT AND GARDEN HISTORIAN TODD LONGSTAFFE-GOWAN DIGS INTO THE HISTORY OF THURLOE SQUARE



Thurloe Square lies like a densely embroidered green mat at the foot of the lofty front of the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is one of hundreds of leafy lesser lungs which contribute to the airiness, convenience and charm of the metropolis. Laid out and developed from 1840 by George Basevi in collaboration with the Alexander family, and named rather tenuously in honour of John Thurloe (d.1668) - 'little secretary' to Cromwell's protectorate - the square was regarded by Victorian topographers as 'too modern a growth to have historic associations'. It was to them - like the squares of Bloomsbury - new, spruce and uninteresting.

Since the early twentieth century, however, this little square and its garden in particular, have possessed considerable charms and rustic associations: like nearby Pelham and Brompton Crescents and Alexander,

Brompton and Onslow Squares, the central enclosure is a relict of the formerly bucolic surroundings of Old Brompton - a hamlet to the parish of Kensington which was long celebrated for its 'soft air, and for its nurseries and flower-gardens'. The garden continues to convey a degree of *rus in urbe* - that is a 'country in town' atmosphere - to this very thriving and densely settled quarter of London.

Like many London squares, the history of the garden is documented in the Minutes of its Committee of Garden Enclosure. These stretch back to 1919, and record with admirable clarity the resolutions, ambitions, achievements and petty squabbles of the garden's guardians. To peruse these memoranda is to relive the garden's past. We discover, for instance, that the pleasance was originally planted with box,

holly and evergreen oaks (most of which were removed in the mid-1920s), and a former 'bed of rhododendrons surrounding the Knoll in the Centre of the Garden' was planted with specimens gathered by General and Mrs Montcrieff from the Dorsetshire estate of Lord Chelmsford (one-time Viceroy of India).

There are also copious references to the day-to-day upkeep of the square garden - including lopping, sowing, raking, the laying of gravel paths, cleaning drains, and the supervision of the gardeners who were sometimes obstructive and bloody-minded, or prone to crankiness or lethargy. Most of the Minutes, however, deal with the proper conduct of the garden users, which were set out in the Code of Rules for the Guidance of the Committee and Subscribers of the Garden. Dogs and children were the source of greatest disquiet: dogs, when they were allowed in the garden, had to be muzzled, and children were grudgingly tolerated (as was the case in just about every garden square in London), being accused of acts of 'vandalism, hooliganism, reckless behaviour and general rowdiness'.

For many years the garden was managed in an *ad hoc* manner, when the Committee was starved of funds and relied heavily on the generosity of rich subscribers to improve the gardens: plants were frequently donated to fill gaps, and the gardener or the contractors made do with what

little was available. There were, none the less, times when the residents were capable of co-ordinating more ambitious refurbishments - such as the creation of new beds and the planting of bulbs in the spring of 1937 to mark the coronation of George VI. The most dramatic re-ordering of the garden took place from 1948 when, on the advice of the Royal Horticultural Society, the Committee consulted Thomas Hay, former Superintendent of Royal Parks 'at a small fee to advise on the management and planting of the garden'. The garden had suffered greatly during the War: its railings had been requisitioned and the gardens had been allowed to grow rank. Hay's report was adopted by the Committee in February 1949, and it established the basis for the subsequent refurbishment of the garden. A new management scheme was put in place, the Committee was reformed, new planting was introduced and 'impregnable' Durafencing and new gates were erected to protect the 'seclusion' of the garden.

The next concerted refurbishment of the gardens took place in the 1990s. This round of improvements must, however, be the subject of another article.

Thurloe Square is part of the Open Garden Squares Weekend in London. The 2008 weekend is planned for the 7 and 8 June, tickets are available from May, online at www.opensquares.org



- 1 - Thurloe Square, South Kensington in the 1940s. Residents filled sandbags as war grew imminent. The sand came from the pre-war National Theatre site nearby.
- 2 - Hand drawn map, circa 1950 found in a Thurloe Square trustees' minutes book.
- 3 - The 11th edition of *The London Gardener*.

Todd Longstaffe-Gowan is the editor of *The London Gardener*, the annual journal of the London Parks and Gardens Trust which is the only journal dedicated to the history of London gardens. *The London Gardener 2007-2008* will be the thirteenth edition and is published this autumn. Todd is also the author of *The London Town Garden 1700-1840* (Yale, 2001), and *The Gardens and Parks at Hampton Court Palace* (Frances Lincoln, 2005). He is currently writing a history of the London square for Yale University Press. To subscribe to *The London Gardener*, please visit www.londongardenstrust.org