

European Garden Heritage Network - Award 2013
Award ceremony at Schloss Dyck, 6th of September 2013

Laudation for category:
“Best Development of a Historic Park or Garden”

By

Ed Bennis, UK
Member of the jury, EGHN

Monserrate Laudation

It is truly a great pleasure to tell you about Monserrate, a garden which I first saw 15 years ago. It was in a terrible state but a team of volunteers had only just started to uncover some of the secrets of this magical place. Then, it was a garden of discovery: rare plants were uncovered and allowed to thrive again, a complex irrigation system came to light, gardens long lost became visible, lost vistas re-opened. The palace was boarded-up, derelict and empty. It has gone through a series of owners, each with their own additions, but some never bothered and the palace and gardens fell into long periods of disrepair. Like many of the best gardens, Monserrate presents itself as a complex garden of layers of different times, thinking and people. What you see today has been a herculean effort to bring back to life both the palace and the garden. Charles Quest-Ritson in *The English Garden Abroad* wrote that ‘the gardens at Monserrate are among the greatest in Portugal’.

While there were earlier developments at Monserrate, today's palace and garden started life in 1790 with a new gothic style house for Gerard de Visme, an English merchant. His garden broke with the formality of the period and was created in the newest fashion, the English Landscape Style. The gardens were decorated with embellished rockwork, architectural elements, a hermitage, a rocky cascade and exotic plants. From 1794-1808 the house was rented by the Englishman William Beckford although he only lived there for the first two years. Beckford was perhaps Monserrate's most famous and infamous resident. He continued to develop the garden; but by July 1809 when Lord Byron visited, the garden was overgrown and abandoned. In his poem *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron writes of Monserrate's demise:

“Here didst thou dwell, here schemes of pleasure plan,
Beneath yon mountain's ever-beauteous brow ;
But now, as if a thing unblest by man,
Thy fairy dwelling is as lone as thou!
Here giant weeds a passage scarce allow
To halls deserted, portals gaping wide,
Fresh lessons to the thinking bosom, how
Vain are the pleasaunces on earth supplied;
Swept into wrecks anon by Time's ungentle tide.”

The popularity of Byron's poetry and the well known wanton lifestyle of Beckford enhanced the exotic and romantic reputation of Monserrate. Despite Byron's and Beckford's fame, the palace and garden we see today are the result of the next English owner, Francis Cook, who in 1856 purchased a roofless palace set in a derelict garden. Cook appointed an English architect, James Knowles, who built a new house between 1863 and 1865. Knowles' design is of its time, an eclectic mix of classicism, Gothic and Moorish forms and details....the Alhambra crossed with the Brighton Pavilion, but with Portuguese features.

On Sintra, the Portuguese poet laureate and Nobel prize winner José Saramago wrote that it was "an admirable paradise if God had decided to have another go...". The gardens are an earthly paradise and provide the setting for this extravagant building that sits proudly on top of a hill overlooking the gardens, and what is claimed to be the first lawn in Portugal. You cannot have an English garden without a lawn! It captures outward views across the Sintra hills and over the plains to Mafra. The gardens break with Portuguese traditions, and while you will find water tanks, it is lacking the formality and decorative azulejo tiles at Queluz or Fronteira. In de Visme and Beckford's time, the newest fashion was the natural style made famous by Capability Brown; it has been said that the English style crossed Europe like a plague and destroyed many great formal gardens. Certainly a formal garden would never have worked here unless the mountain it sits on was flattened. The uniqueness of Monserrate is that it takes advantage of the site, its great changes in levels and specific areas of micro-climate. There are sinuous walks that lead you through woodlands and into individual garden areas. The cascade that Beckford built was later planted by Francis Cook with Australian tree ferns and is known as the Fern Valley. This was of course the time of the great plant explorers and Monserrate is endowed with what can only be described as a botanic collection. Cook was a 19th century collector of plants and the gardens are rich in variety and early introductions, particularly notable are the conifers including pines, abies, cedars, cypresses, and cryptomerias. The Norfolk Island pine at the bottom of the lawn, *Araucaria excelsa*, is thought to be the largest in Europe. It is fascinating seeing these unnatural mixes of plants living and thriving together.

The Cook family continuously modified and added to the gardens over four generations. In the early 20th century, Japanese gardens were highly fashionable and one was built along the water course, and of course it was ideal for displaying new plants. There is a Mexican garden and nearby is the recently restored rose garden from Sir Herbert Cook's time in the 1920s. The garden really is a series of layers of different ideas and times, an eclectic and exciting mixture initially ranging from a collection of plants and some ornamental features, to a site that displays almost every aspect of garden design history over 130 years, the most prolific period of change in garden design. You will find not only themed gardens, but elements of the picturesque and the sublime. However, fortunes are made and lost and the decline set in, and it was difficult to manage an estate from England with 72 gardeners plus house staff, and only being used two months a year!

In 1949, Monserrate was purchased by the Portuguese government, but it continued to decline. It was not until 1992 that the Friends of Monserrate was founded as a group of volunteers to restore the estate. Three years later, Sintra and its parks including Monserrate became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The palace restoration was completed in 2010 along with the Mexican garden and ornamental lakes. Nearly 900 roses have been planted in the newly restored rose garden which was opened by their Royal Highnesses, the Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall in March 2011.

Portugal has many great gardens that are truly beautiful, full of light, colour, splashing water, and flowers. But Monserrate has a totally different atmosphere. There is darkness and light, mystery and magic. It has changed greatly since I saw it many years ago. It is now into a new era, a new layer is being added for future generations. There is a loss, that dark brooding landscape that I first saw has been opened up and filled with light and colour. Emma Gilbert, who was the founder of the Friends of Monserrate and chairman for many years, said that 'It may have lost a little magic, the paths need some weathering and some plants need to grow and fill in, but it is full of vigour and not full of benches, bins, and notices... it is still beautiful and magical'. Every restored garden is initially raw, it takes time to settle.

Monserrate is a garden of today, a mix of generations, yet you can see the garden that Lord Byron wrote about, it is still there:

The sunken glen, whose sunless shrubs must weep,
The tender azure of the unruffled deep,
The orange tints that gild the greenest bough,
The torrents from cliff to valley leap,
The vine on high, the willow branch below,
Mix'd in one mighty scene with varied beauty glow.

Any restoration is complex, particularly when dealing with government agencies. It is important that credit Friends of Monserrate and to Parques de Sintra and to CEO Prof. António Lamas who is currently responsible for Monserrate, Pena and Capuchos Convent. On behalf of the European Garden Heritage and the Schloss Dyke Foundation, our congratulations go to Mr. Nuno Oliveira (Technical Director, responsible for Forests and Parks), Mr. Gerald Luckhurst (Landscape Architect, consultant of Parques de Sintra) and Mr. Sérgio Lourenço (Head of Gardeners at Parques de Sintra) who are accepting the award on behalf of Monserrate and the team of people who have worked for many years to bring Monserrate back to life. Go and see Monserrate, the romanticism and magic is still there, as much as ever. Lord Byron's ungentle tide has at last turned.

Ed Bennis

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