

Private Gardens of London - Lutyens Revisited

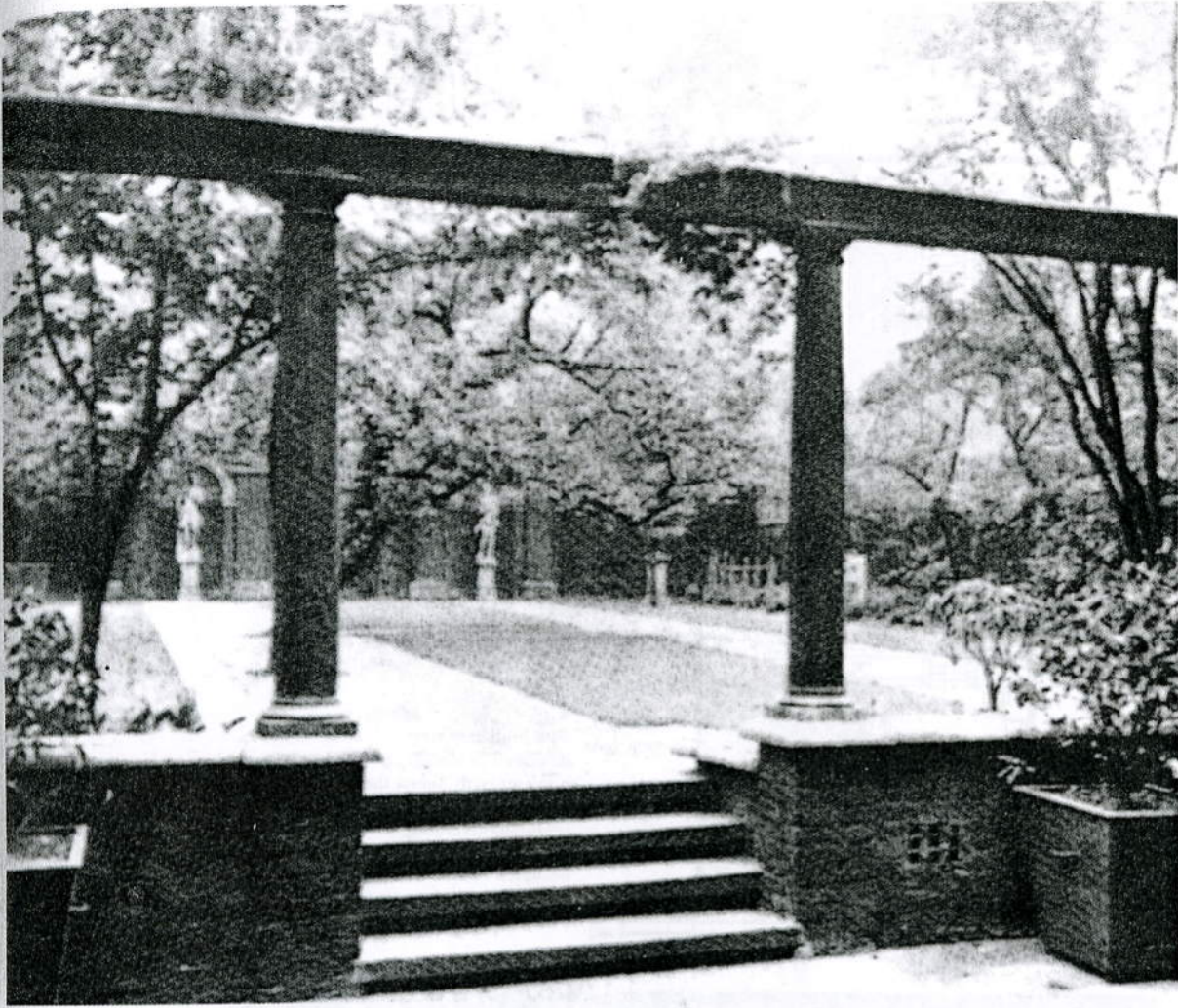
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The elegant 17th-century façade of Lindsey House is a fitting prelude to the refined simplicity of the garden that lies behind, protected from the continuous hum of heavy traffic along the Embankment by its high brick walls. The only dwelling of its date to survive in Chelsea (it had just been built when the Royal Hospital was founded in 1681), the house is a reminder of the days when the only traffic noises to be heard were the clatter of hooves, the rattle of carriage wheels and-of course- the splashing of oars. When Sir Thomas More, ill-fated Chancellor to Henry viii, chose to build his country manor here (within easy reach by river of the Palace of Westminster) in the sixteenth century, Chelsea was a tiny riverside fishing village, surrounded by open countryside which stretched to the east as far as the walls of the City of London. Ever since that time men and women of letters, scholars and artists seem to have been drawn to Cheyne Walk and the Chelsea Embankment as if by a magnet, attracted perhaps by its charm and the ever-changing light of the river.

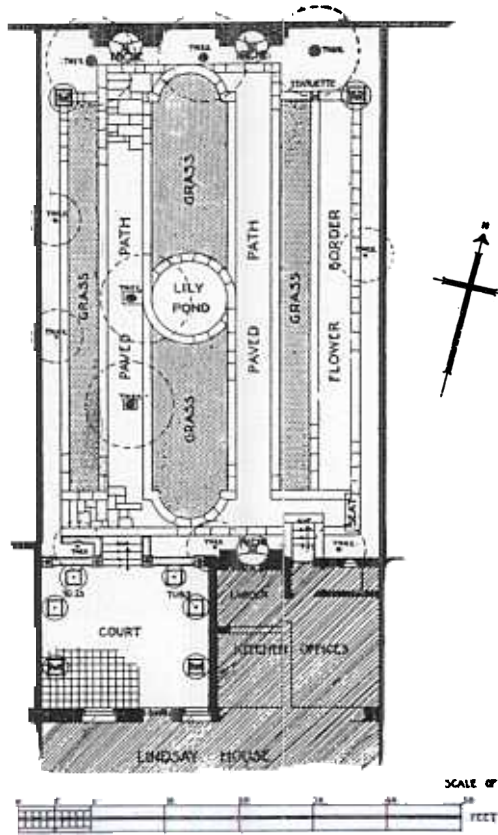
The third Earl of Lindsey built Lindsey House in 1674, and in the succeeding centuries it has been home to a colourful array of people, including Isambard Kingdom Brunel, James Abbott McNeill, Whistler and the Moravian Brethren. The garden too has

undergone its vicissitudes. Its original formal layout must have suffered in the eighteenth century, not only because of changing tastes in garden design, but also because the house was then divided into five separate dwellings. These became three in the 19th century, and it was for one of the three gardens that Edwin Lutyens was asked to supply the design. This was a doubly fortunate choice, for Lutyens was predisposed, not only by his personal taste in garden design but also by his training as an architect, to respect and echo the simple formality of the house. Whether he intended it or not, his garden design must surely echo in spirit the garden through which the Earl and his friends strolled over three centuries ago.

In this long, rectangular and (it must then have seemed) limited space, about fifty feet by thirty. Lutyens demonstrated a finely judged understanding of such a site. With commendable restraint he flew in the face of current fashion, choosing not to clutter the space with elaborate flower borders, nor to over-design it with the gamut of carefully contrived features then in vogue. Instead he chose a linear composition of grass, water, trees and stone, modest in its elements and quietly restful in its effect. Two broad stone paths, echoed by two narrower, paralld paths at the far sides, ran the length of the garden,

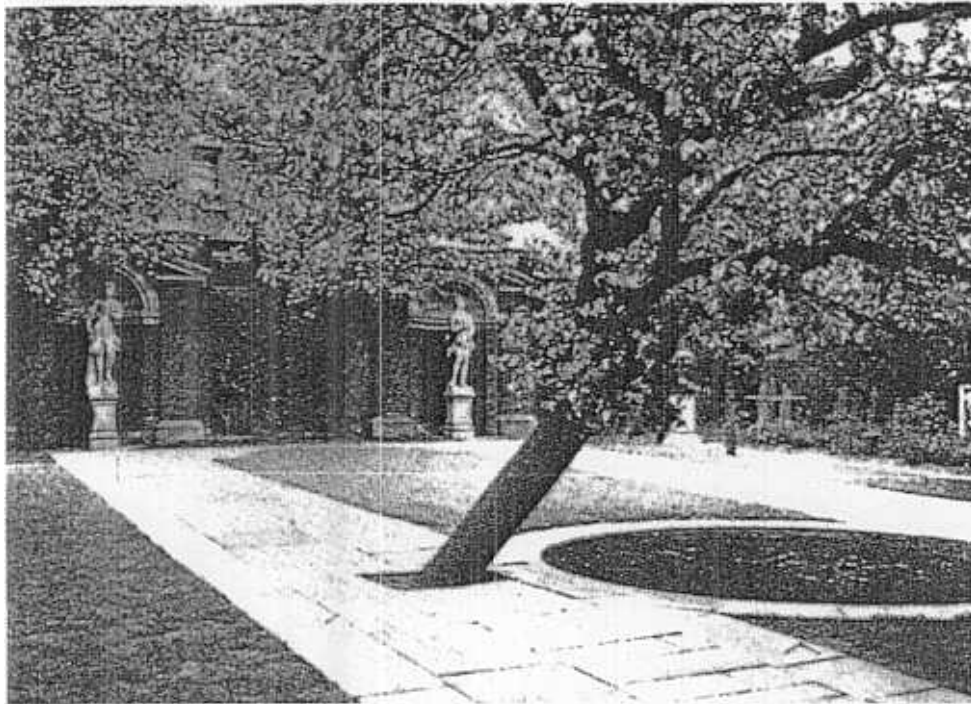


The simple stone colonnade, designed to divide the courtyard from the rest of the garden, as it was when the garden was originally laid out.



THE original design of 1911 by Sir Edwin Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll for the garden at 100 Cheyne Walk, was described as 'a good example of what may be done in a limited space'. My revised plan retains the same essential form.

THE mulberry tree, described as already 'of noble growth' when the garden was laid out, originally overhung a lily pond. Statues occupied the niches where the monkeys now live.



accentuating its rectangular shape. The inner paths flanked a central strip of grass, which was interrupted only by a circular lily pond under a venerable mulberry tree. A simple colonnade of stone marked the division between house and garden, and at the far end the boundary wall was enlivened by two pedimented niches, each holding a statue.

Fortunately the skeleton of this elegant composition was strong enough to survive many years of more or less abandonment and neglect. When John Stefanidis, the present owner, turned his attention to it some seven years ago, he found that the bare bones survived - and fortunately in him the garden had found someone who was prepared to devote a great deal of time and care to bringing it back to life. The mossy stone paths and green expanses of lawn were still in place, as were the pond and niches, though both were now empty, and the mulberry had grown even more gnarled and noble. With my help he set about completely reinstating the garden and adapting it to his own needs, approaching the project with his characteristic mixture of stylistic rigor and attention to detail, spiced with an instinct for experiment and sheer enjoyment. The ideas produced by this fruitful partnership were all carefully recorded in a garden book, together with notes of the work done.

The mulberry, it was decided, needed pruning - an extremely specialized task which is undertaken only rarely - and the fine stone of the paths needed cleaning. The empty pond was filled with soil and planted with box to create a raised circle of green, its slightly roughened surface forming a transition between the smooth green and grey of grass and stone and the wrinkled con-

tortions of the mulberry suspended hectically above it. The extravagant asymmetry of the ancient tree strikes a note of jaunty insouciance, echoed in the witty replacements that have been created for the missing statues. Here the gravitas of the niches, with their stately classical pediments and flanking brick columns, is neatly undercut by cheeky wire and moss full-size monkeys, rapidly becoming clothed in ivy. Tails held high, they seem about to scamper up the walls and into the canopy of the surrounding trees.

The outer grass strips of the original design have been curtailed so as to create two small recesses at the end of the garden: surrounded by yew hedges and furnished with pretty wooden seats these now form very comfortable and secluded retreats. Pyramids of small-leaved ivy guard their entrances, and terracotta pots overflowing with culinary herbs perfume the air. This heady concoction of Mediterranean scents is also contributed to by a *Wisteria floribunda* 'Multijuga', which bears extravagantly long white racemes, and a fig tree, with leaves which are not only ornamental but also aromatic, both of which are trained up the end wall. At the opposite end of the garden, overlooked by the house, is another sitting area, a terrace which forms a sort of antechamber to the garden. Here are giant terracotta pots filled with camellias, clipped bay and box balls.

The planting is discreet but imaginative. Under the far wall on one side is a geometrical pattern of dwarf box filled with a variety of plants chosen for their huge leaves. *Crambe cordifolia* and *rodgersia*, hostas and *Rheum palmatum* together create a feeling of lush vegetable growth, of almost tropical promiscuity, which contrasts admirably with

the severity of the rest of the design.

Box, hostas and camellias fill the better part of the borders that flank the garden, with ivy used as ground cover. The camellias are trained as espaliers against the east-facing wall so as to allow light to reach the drifts of plain and variegated ivy with which they are underplanted. The west-facing border is planted with bold rectangular blocks of white variegated hostas and blue-flowering lavender, the fresh, variegated greens and broad, lanceolate form of the hostas' leaves and the lavender's silver-grey spikes making an especially successful combination. The uncompromisingly rectilinear design of the planting makes a splendid foil for the roses, including 'New Dawn', that clamber up the brick work, taking full advantage of the sheltered position and framing two marble plaques.

Colour in this garden is fittingly subtle, relying largely on a seemingly almost infinite palette of greens. In summer the irises add a note of soft blue, the climbing roses give white highlights, and the old rose that spills romantically over the colonnade at the garden's entrance adds a dash of crimson; but still it is green, in all its subtle variations, that is the keynote. Even in spring, when the camellias flower in a profusion of pale pink and white, it is the contrast between the dark gloss of their leaves and the tender fresh green of the new shoots of box that draws the eye.

Sensitive management of each group of plants is necessary to maintain the delicate balance of design, planting and mood in his unusual garden. The opportunity to reinstate and adapt a Lutyens design is a rare one; the opportunity to do so while at the same time respecting the dictates of a house of architectural distinction and the needs of a discern-

ing owner is not only rare but also extremely taxing. Minimalist in its conception yet with touches of romanticism; formal in design but at the same time idiosyncratic; faithful to historic precedent yet wittily original, this garden can happily be deemed a success on all counts.