

Protection of Historic Parks and Gardens in Northern Ireland

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PARKS, GARDENS AND DEMESNES.
BY TERENCE REEVES-SMYTH



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It is now over fifteen years since a planning policy was put in place in Northern Ireland to give protection to historic parks and gardens of special historic interest. Inevitably, there have been teething problems, and many refinements are still needed, but the policy has to-date been an undoubted success. Not only has it helped to safeguard the specific qualities, character and integrity of these sites against inappropriate development, but it has helped focus attention on this highly valued part of our heritage.

The establishment of what is officially known as the 'Register of Historic Parks, Gardens and Demesnes' in Northern Ireland, followed the example

already set in England, Wales and Scotland, where similar registers had been created in the 1980s. These had been set up in response to the increasing pressure of rural development which emerged during the 1970s, particularly in southern England. Golf course development in particular was proving a major threat and many particularly fine examples of landscape parks - Rococo, Brownian, Picturesque, Gardenesque and other forms, were being irretrievably destroyed to accommodate the little white ball.

An important milestone, not just in Great Britain, but throughout Europe, came in 1981 with the Florence Charter, agreed by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). It emphasised the pressing need for each nation to identify, list and protect their best historic parks and gardens. A few years later a register of historic parks and gardens was started in England (empowered by the National Heritage Act of 1983), followed by Scotland in 1988.



Mount Stewart gardens and Lake, photo by Terence Reeves-Smyth

Although inclusion of sites on these registers brought no additional statutory controls, it ensured that impacts on historic garden and designed landscapes were included as a material consideration in determining planning proposals.

In Northern Ireland the first move to protect historic parks and gardens came in 1993 with the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland. This was followed in 1999 with the publication of Planning Policy Statement 6, which specifies that historic parks and gardens included on a register should be a material consideration in the determination of planning. Its policy statement is quite explicit:

'The Department will not normally permit development which would lead to the loss of, or cause harm to, the character, principal components or setting of parks, gardens and demesnes of special historic interest'.

The role of compiling this register and advising the planners belongs to Built Heritage (Environment and Heritage Service, DOENI) in Belfast. They are

fortunate in possessing a systematic scholarly database of over 700 sites known as the 'Heritage Gardens Inventory', compiled in 1989-92 by Belinda Jupp. On the basis of set criteria, over 150 of these sites have been carefully selected from this archive to be included on the register. These are included in local government plans as they are published, while both the full register and the inventory are published on the EHS website (www.ehsni.gov.uk). Work is currently underway reviewing the register and expanding entry texts for printed publication..

The Department of Agriculture has included a 'Parkland' component in its Countryside Management Scheme, with over 140 owners in Northern Ireland taking advantage of its generous provisions.

Planning policy can protect the physical attributes of a site, but it is more difficult to safeguard the trees, though in recent years Planning Service have been applying blanket Tree Preservation Orders to sites on the register. To encourage owners to maintain and where necessary replant their parkland trees, clumps and screens, the Department of Agriculture, with advice from Built Heritage, has included a 'Parkland' component in its Countryside Management Scheme. This has proved enormously successful with over 140 owners having now taken advantage of its generous provisions, thus ensuring that historic parklands will remain a striking and attractive feature of Ulster's countryside for years to come.

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Rowallane & Bantry Gardens. photos by Terence Reeves-Smyth



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