

A TOUR OF EDINBURGH NEW TOWN PRIVATE PARK

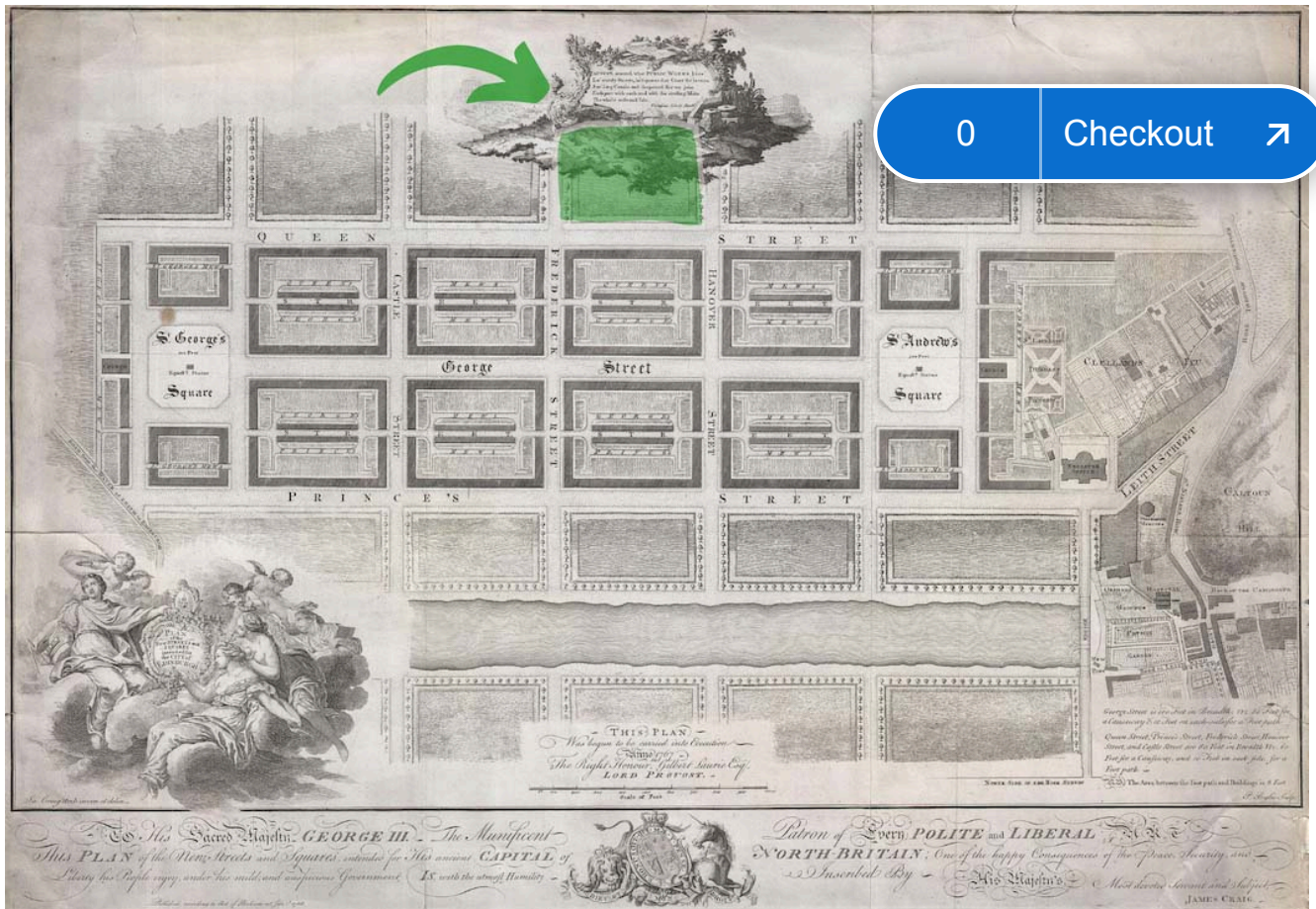
BY OLGA GOGOLEVA

We invite you to an armchair tour of Edinburgh New Town! Come along with us to the private Central Queen Street park, a favourite on our New Town tours steeped in Georgian history.



Once through the gate, the temperature drops along with noise levels. Dense foliage of the gardens and a considerable dip in the gradient mark your arrival. Follow the path to the central area of the gardens, filled with light and gentle bird song. Find the Greek Doric temple hiding behind a small mound.

The Central Queen Street gardens are peaceful, lush, and well looked after. But was it always like this?



First New Town Masterplan, James Craig, 1767. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland



James Craig (1739 - 1795). Portrait by David Allan

Simpler Times

Open spaces to the North of the first New Town were indicated on the masterplan by James Craig in 1767. This mirrored the open spaces on the other side of the axial George street – the future Princes Gardens.

As the construction of the New Town slowly progressed and the first inhabitants moved in, the open fields were used as drying greens where washer women took care of the patrician linens. The land was feud in parcels and served multiple other functions too, such as orchards, greenhouses and sheds, as long as those did not exceed the elevation of the Queen street.

Later on, the livestock of the local Jamaica Street butcher moved in alongside the washer women, and a pond was created for their watering needs.



Washer women and grazing cattle



Interior Staircase (Image: 7 Hills Tours)

Dreams of a Romantic Garden

By the 19th century this was becoming a rather picturesque environment that the upper-class residents of the now completed Queen street and Heriot row were trying to escape in the first place.

The residents dreamed of a romantic pleasure garden to stroll in. In 1822 the Parliament Act was secured to support their case. The land was purchased from the enterprising owners of greenhouses and cattle, to become a common property of the surrounding homes.



The oval pond of central Queen street gardens



Claude Lorrain, Landscape with Apollo and Mercury, 1645. Doha Pamphili Gallery, Rome

Claudian Landscapes

Before any strolling could take place, a fashionable landscape design was in order. A painter nicknamed “Claude of Northern Britain” - Andrew Wilson - was commissioned to design the garden according to the latest vogue in landscape design (think Capability Brown).

Wilson was more than happy to inherit the existing cattle pond. Which, given a formal oval shape and a new island, became the centre of his Claudian landscape. But who was this Claude?

Claude Lorrain – 17th century Frenchman – was known for painting romantic landscapes of woodlands, water and classical temple ruins. British painters like William Turner and Thomas Gainsborough were influenced by his work and through their painting also inspired the new English garden design.



Gardener's tool house

A tool house in disguise

The landscaping of the central Queen Street gardens is seemingly natural and informal but, in fact, is a carefully planned composition of weaving paths, ponds, hills, grottoes and follies.

To make his classical folly useful, Wilson disguised the gardener's tool house as a Greek Doric temple. It was also intended to become a future portal into the tunnel under Hanover Street connecting to eastern gardens. Alas, this tunnel has never been dug, and to this day the three parks of the Queen street are separated, each section requiring a different key.



Kay's plan of Edinburgh James Kay, 1836. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland

Public access to green urban spaces

There is an ongoing debate about making the green spaces of the Queen Street available to the public. We love having a discussion between locals and visitors on our tours of Edinburgh New Town. Here are a few arguments at play:

The council is not overly keen on overtaking the care of these gardens, and there is still a considerable opposition from the residents, which are numerous on the side of the Heriot Row.

Then there is also a change in the security requirements to consider, if the park was to become public. Think of Princes Gardens, how much less dense is the foliage to allow for passive overlooking from the street?

The park is a haven for small wildlife, which thrives in this dense environment, hence arguably the Queen Street gardens would not remain the same lush urban haven if they were to become public. And so, the debate is ongoing.

Central Queen street gardens can be visited on an annual [open doors day event](#) on the last weekend of September
