



## Edinburgh

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# Edinburgh's private parks: time for action?

**Guest blogger David Hill suggests a more open future for some of the capital's locked parks**

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*David Hill*

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The phenomenon of Edinburgh New Town and West End's 'private parks' raises its head every so often, with the most recent news, last autumn, relating to the [possible opening up of Rutland Square](#). We shall see what happens here, but, in general, those supporting a policy of more open access have not had much cause for optimism in recent times.

Moreover, when the issue does receive media attention, this tends to follow a common blueprint: a report on a possible unlocking of a particular garden gate leads to a brief, heated- almost ritualised-discussion on whether the limited access to these perceived urban oases is a serious injustice or, conversely, simply the politics of envy. Then suddenly, after a day or two, the subject disappears off the radar screen, spleens adequately vented and the status quo mostly left undisturbed.

While this may be in part due to the nature of the media in general and the internet in particular, it seems unfortunate, to say the least, that there is a lack of serious public discussion on the subject.

Leaving aside the possible irony of adding to the internet discussion of the subject, what exactly is so wrong with these private parks? Why are they so problematical for some people? Aren't they simply particularly well-kept private communal gardens for those properties not fortunate enough to have their own, and as such, one of the city's glories? As some might say, you wouldn't want people wandering around uninvited in your garden, so what's the problem in others wanting to keep their own outdoor space private and beautiful?

Well, of course there is an element of truth here: they are certainly used as private gardens, and they're certainly well-tended, but, as is often the case, this is used to muddy the waters somewhat and establish a disingenuous argument for keeping the great unwashed at arm's length. This is because the parks are not really private - I appreciate that the law wouldn't necessarily agree with me on this-in the commonly understood sense of the term as it relates to residential gardens, which is a specific outside area attached to a specific property for its personal use only.

## Exclusive access



📍 Many of the city centre's green spaces and gardens are private

Rather, the term 'private' is used in a subtly different sense, one that, to my mind, allows an unfortunate use of much of the city's open space. It is used to denote urban parks that are accessible to certain local residents only; they are not really 'gardens' as we usually conceive of them. As such, rather than private, they are perhaps better seen as public spaces which have, anachronistically, been allowed to maintain a policy of exclusive access. As such, they seem to belong in the same world as the private country club.

While there may still be a place for the latter, the former sits ill at ease - and rightly so - in a modern city that, in terms of how it manages its open space, needs to formulate a more progressive approach. While the desire to maintain the present state of affairs may have the law on its side (and it's not exactly unknown for Scottish law to legitimise patterns of land ownership that prioritise the rights of a few), the parks, in practice, exist more as areas of privatised public space within the city centre.

Moreover, it is also true that the rest of the city does not exclude New Town residents from their own comparable green space, so why should this work in reverse? Residents in many other parts of the city, particularly other inner city neighbourhoods are no more likely to have their own gardens than New Town inhabitants, and yet, the latter - or at least many residents thereof - continue to believe they deserve exclusive access to those extra bits in their midst.

Another argument against the whole idea of private parks relates to the fact that they are not even accessible to all local residents but just a select stratum thereof: property owners rather than all those who live in the catchment area. As such, the phenomenon is rather like a horticultural equivalent of eighteenth century suffrage rights: extra privileges accrue to those who meet the property qualification. I appreciate that all this does not exactly constitute a big scoop, but people really should stop and think a little bit more about just what it means to exclude a city's population from this space [in its World Heritage centre](#). To be fair, I know some of you do think about this.



📷 Once a locked-gate area, St Andrew Square was recently redeveloped and opened to the public

Among those lucky enough to have access to these verdant woodlands, there seem to be three (or perhaps two and a half) schools of thought on the subject: those who like things as they are, those who would open up the parks (or at least say they would), and those who would like to restrict access further still so that even the dogs of local owners are not permitted entry. Heated debates ensue, even on the issue of dogs. This is what we are up against.

For maintaining the status quo, aside from the private garden trope, the usual (public) reasoning given-in as far as Residents Associations feel obliged to give any - is that they worry about gardens being maintained to their present standards.

### **What can be done?**

Well, much as I would like to see the 'utopian' solution of all such space being opened up to all who would care to enjoy them, this seems unlikely. So how about a compromise as a step in the right direction, surely not beyond the wit of any civilised city: you can maintain the small annual fee, but how about opening all gardens up to anyone who is happy to pay the subscription? Surely this is not asking too much? The greater income obtained thereby would be more than enough to maintain surroundings to their existing standards, perhaps even to improve them.

Should this be a non-starter, other individuals, more radical than I, might recommend a more subversive approach. While, for those willing to be economical with the actualité (and through other means), more illicit methods of getting hold of the elusive key may indeed present themselves, it should not have to be like this.

Therefore, if you do already have a key and feel the gardens should be opened up - as opposed to just 'talking the talk' on the matter - why not let others copy yours? I know one or two of you do this anyway, but how about the rest of you 'progressives'? The more capitalist among you could even charge a small fee; for the rest, why not just leave a few - clearly labelled - around the city. Think of the all the good karma you'll accrue. Heaven knows, some of you need it.

### **A form of apartheid?**

Edinburgh councillors, although certain individuals may well have some sympathy with my point of view, are unlikely, collectively, to make much more than a perfunctory effort on the issue unless it becomes much more important for Edinburgh citizens too. Indeed, we only have to look at the council's attitude to some of the city's other green spaces such as [Inverleith Park](#) and others (issues such as commercial access and selling-off land for property development) to appreciate that there is a long way to go in convincing many of them of the importance of the city's open space.

A more cynical person than me we say that we are not likely to see serious interest on the issue until the day that vast reservoirs of oil are discovered under the gazebos and oak trees. I hope this is not the case. Local elections are coming up next year and I think that this offers something of an opportunity to push the issue.

As things stand, while we live in a city where many people are doing positive and important things to improve the urban environment and the lives of those who live here, the spirit of the nineteenth century lives on in some quarters. A form of apartheid operates in parts of Edinburgh giving an 'us and them' feel to part of town, and undoubtedly detracting from the spirit of the area's designation as a World Heritage Site.

So, how about a less half-hearted approach from the council that doesn't just make a token effort and then, when it receives the expected response, backs off with its tail between its legs? Behold the glory of **St Andrew Square** where some effort has been made, but we want more! And if in the end such efforts are, as usual, simply met with intransigence, how about issuing a compulsory purchase order on the land in question?

Yes, let me end with an appeal more cynical motives, but ones which nonetheless correspond to noble ends: I imagine that, despite the howls of protest from the obvious sources, this would be a vote winner, and, for once, for good reasons. So what are we waiting for? After all, what are locals going to do: barricade the parks with their X5s?

**David Hill usually blogs at [The New Town Flaneur](#).**

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