

Hidden Gardens, Hidden History

an interview with Jane Corrie



*Jane Corrie's walking tour **Hidden Gardens, Hidden History** tells a little-known story of old physic gardens right in Edinburgh's city centre, and takes in some modern hidden gardens on the way. Jean Bareham took a tour, and then talked to Jane about her passion for Edinburgh's historic gardens.*

I'm one of a small group standing on a pavement on Edinburgh's Market Street with Greenyonder guide Jane Corrie. The Old Town is behind us, and we're looking out over the vast roofs and rail-lines of Waverley Station. Not what you might expect on a garden tour, perhaps, yet Jane is telling us about one of Edinburgh's now vanished physic gardens which flourished near platform 2 more than 250 years ago.

Jane's tour is exceptionally good at giving a sense of place. I am seeing my own city through new eyes, piecing together its garden history, understanding how its geography fits together. A fellow tour guest, a visitor to Edinburgh, comments 'It's great to see a city through a theme.' That theme is Edinburgh's physic gardens.

After the tour, Jane tells me: 'During the late 17th century and early 18th century we know that seven different gardens were developed in Edinburgh's Old Town for studying and growing healing plants. - I mention them all in the tour. I also show people some of Edinburgh's beautiful and often hidden, modern green spaces near the sites of these ancient gardens.'

Physic gardens

The story that Jane tells throughout the tour is a powerful one: 'For millennia people all over the world have gathered and grown healing plants. In the Christian west, for hundreds of years this knowledge was kept by women and monks. By the 17th century, apothecaries [early pharmacists] were mixing and selling plant remedies, and surgeons - whose trade was linked with barbers as



A modern take on the physic garden, at the Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh

both worked with sharp knives! - served their apprenticeship in apothecaries' shops. In fact one of the first physic gardens in Scotland was established in 1656 by the Incorporation of Surgeons and Barber Surgeons at Curryhill in Edinburgh's Old Town.

'These people jealously guarded their status, none more so than the physicians, who saw themselves as an élite profession.' In 1670 two Edinburgh physicians, Robert Sibbald and Andrew Balfour, concerned that people were being poisoned by quack doctors, took a lease on a piece of ground in Holyrood Abbey, with James Sutherland as head gardener. The space soon became too small and in 1675 another plot of land was leased at

Trinity College Hospital, on the current site of Waverley Station, where thousands of plants were grown. Jane says 'By the end of the 17th century, there were three aspects to the formal physic garden: plants with healing properties were grown in a separate plot, labelled and clearly identifiable. "Order beds" were created showing how all plants could be grouped systematically together. And heated glasshouses were constructed to display plants being introduced from exotic climes.'

One part of the story that is completely new to me is the importance of plantsmen and botanists within the Scottish Enlightenment. Jane says: 'The Enlightenment thinkers wanted to systematise knowledge. Having a physic garden was seen as a symbol of progressive thought, and had extraordinary professional cachet for physicians and botanists.' A major player was John Hope (1725 - 1786) who gives his name to the brand new Gateway at Edinburgh's Botanic.

Two favourite gardens

Where did Jane's interest develop? 'I've worked for the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh for fourteen years, starting as a garden guide then taking on a variety of other jobs. Five years ago, I did a stint in the Library - my job was to go through a mass of duplicated garden accounts and box them up in order. I was fascinated by the huge amount of detail these documents revealed about the lives of people involved in the Garden. Also, I'm trained as a nurse and am finding the time I spent in health care resurfacing.'

Jane's own two favourite gardens on the tour are both modern hidden gems. 'One of the most exciting gardens in the tour is the Archivists' Garden which comes as a great surprise to guests as they walk through the massive imposing buildings of the National Archive of Scotland. It's a 21st century knot garden designed and planted only in 2008. It has a huge variety of plants, each one symbolising an aspect

of the work of the National Archives. For me, it's a wonderfully imaginative celebration of Scotland's past. It was designed as part of Homecoming, and it's a very clever linking-in with people's increasing enthusiasm for genealogy and local history.



The Archivists' Garden: an unexpected hidden gem where every plant has a meaning

'Our final garden at the Royal College of Physicians Edinburgh is a modern take on the physic garden, a collaboration with the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. In spite of being in a small, shady courtyard, it's a wonderful little garden - a triumph of planting through careful choice and good care.' It is laid out in four beds, each containing plants selected from the writings of four different historical periods. So there's the guelder rose and heather in the early herbalists' bed, and snowdrops and ginkgo from the 20th / 21st century bed, both currently being researched for their medicinal properties.

'The plants are carefully labelled and it's been designed so you can almost read the garden like a book. It's a wonderful space to get people excited about plants and medicine.'

Which is exactly what Jane achieves throughout this fascinating tour.