

SALTBURN VALLEY GARDENS CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN



Executive summary

In December 2018 Chris Burnett Associates were commissioned by Saltburn Valleys CIO (Charitable Incorporated Organization) with support from Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council and grant assistance from Historic England, to prepare a Conservation Management Plan for Saltburn Valley Gardens, one of the principal areas of public open space in Saltburn by the Sea.

The Valley Gardens form part of the late Victorian seaside resort of Saltburn-by-the-Sea which was developed between 1861 and 1873 by the Quaker Henry Pease. In 1860 he founded the Saltburn Improvement Company (SIC) with his brother John Pease, his nephew Joseph Whitwell Pease, several iron masters and industrialists, and the Stockton and Darlington Railway Company. The layout of the town was designed between 1861 and 1863.

The subsequent layout of the Valley Gardens, or Pleasure Grounds as they were known, was accomplished quickly in a single, relatively short, phase following the appointment of landscape architect Joseph Newton. Joseph Newton's proposals were accepted and implemented between 1865 and 1867. These included a walled propagation and nursery area, extensive tree planting, a croquet lawn, a bandstand with banked seating, an extensive network of woodland paths and steps linking the existing lower and upper paths, two new entrances with pay booths at the coast, the Albert Memorial, several summerhouses, seating, and the formal 'Italian Garden' described by Newton in the Gardeners' Chronicle of October 1871. Much of the gardens layout is still traceable today but a lack of maintenance over many years has contributed significantly to its decline such that it is now on Historic England's At Risk register.

The primary objective was to gain a better understanding of the Gardens and to prepare a plan for its conservation and management which will help safeguard its future. One of the key functions of the plan will be to provide management policies and an action plan which will set out practical ways in which these objectives can be achieved.

Historic research into the origins and developments of the gardens was undertaken, assisted by members of the Saltburn Valleys CIO board, and this was accompanied by a detailed condition survey to assess the condition of the significant components of the gardens today. A review of the garden's ecological status was also carried out.

The key elements of the gardens as they exist today are as follows:

- The Italian gardens
- The Tea Rooms
- Saltburn Miniature Railway
- Albert Memorial
- Walled garden and Woodland Centre
- Play area
- Rifts wood
- An extensive network of paths most of which follow the historic layout of the original design but with some new additions on the valley floor.
- Skelton beck

Key elements that have been lost include Halfpenny Bridge, which straddled the valley and connected land on both sides, the Fountain Garden, Gardeners Cottage and the boating lake.

An assessment of evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal significance was made in accordance with principle developed by Historic England. Overall, the evidential, historical and communal significance of the landscape was judged to be outstanding with aesthetic significance under threat due to the present condition and state of the Valley Gardens.

As a result of the historic research and condition survey, various issues surfaced which stood out as being critical for the survival and legibility of the historic design and future conservation of the gardens:

- Most path on the valley sides are in a poor state with little in the way of surfacing and are often narrow due to encroaching vegetation.
- Some paths, c. 10%, have been lost altogether or closed due to the danger of subsidence
- The openness of the initial design has largely been lost and has been replaced by dense naturally regenerating sycamore woodland in a large area of the gardens. As a result, most of the key views up and down the valley, and also to the sea, have been lost.
- The boating lake has now disappeared.
- New features such as the Saltburn Miniature Railway have radically increased the number of visitors to the gardens.
- The Bandstand and Fountain and have disappeared
- Albert memorial is in poor condition and subject to graffiti and views of this pivotal designed element of the gardens have been lost up and down the valley.
- Signage and interpretation was judged to be poor

A vision and policies were drawn up to act as the foundation for the future conservation of the garden with the following commensurate benefits:

- An improved and resurfaced path network which would allow the visitor load to be spread more widely and provide more opportunities for gentle exercise and with additional seating.
- Clearance of naturally regenerating stands of sycamore, with a few key mature trees retained, on the banks of the northern part of the garden would improve views and, at the same time, improve the long term sustainability of any restored path network.
- Clearance of woodland and mature shrubbery around key components of the design such as the Albert Memorial and the Italian Garden would allow them to stand out as key designed elements, accentuate the character of the gardens by improving its legibility, and restore its status as a significant historic designed landscape of the 19th century.

An improved and sustained level of maintenance was also recommended however, as being an essential component of the gardens long term and sustainable future.

Policies and detailed recommendations were made which covered the following topics each with key recommendations:

Conservation: felling of sycamore on the northern banks of the garden, supported by a programme of public consultation, path restoration, restoration of paths, restoration of the Italian Gardens and Tea Room lawn.

Visitors and Access. Improvement to all entrances with appropriate gateways and signage, improved interpretation, rationalization of fencing, improved internal signage. Seek ways to support the Woodland Centre in its work as a focus for the local community and visitors to the gardens. Improve, integrate and promote the number of events held each year.

Buildings and Structures: Restoration of the Albert Memorial including its setting, restoration of the Zetland railings

Skelton Beck. Improve edge to Cat Nab car park, monitor water quality, remove the silt bank close to mouth of the river.

Biodiversity. Riftswood should continue to be safeguarded as an outstanding resource for nature conservation with minimal and sensitive management input.

The Conservation Management Plan was supported by Landscape Masterplan and 10 year Outline Action Plan with a series of actions aimed at delivering the key recommendations over a 10 year period.

One of the key recommendations, to clear the northern bank of naturally regenerated sycamore, in accordance with the adopted conservation policy and vision, was adjusted to span a five year period and made subject to a programme of public consultation.