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### Cowden Japanese-style Garden - Clackmannanshire



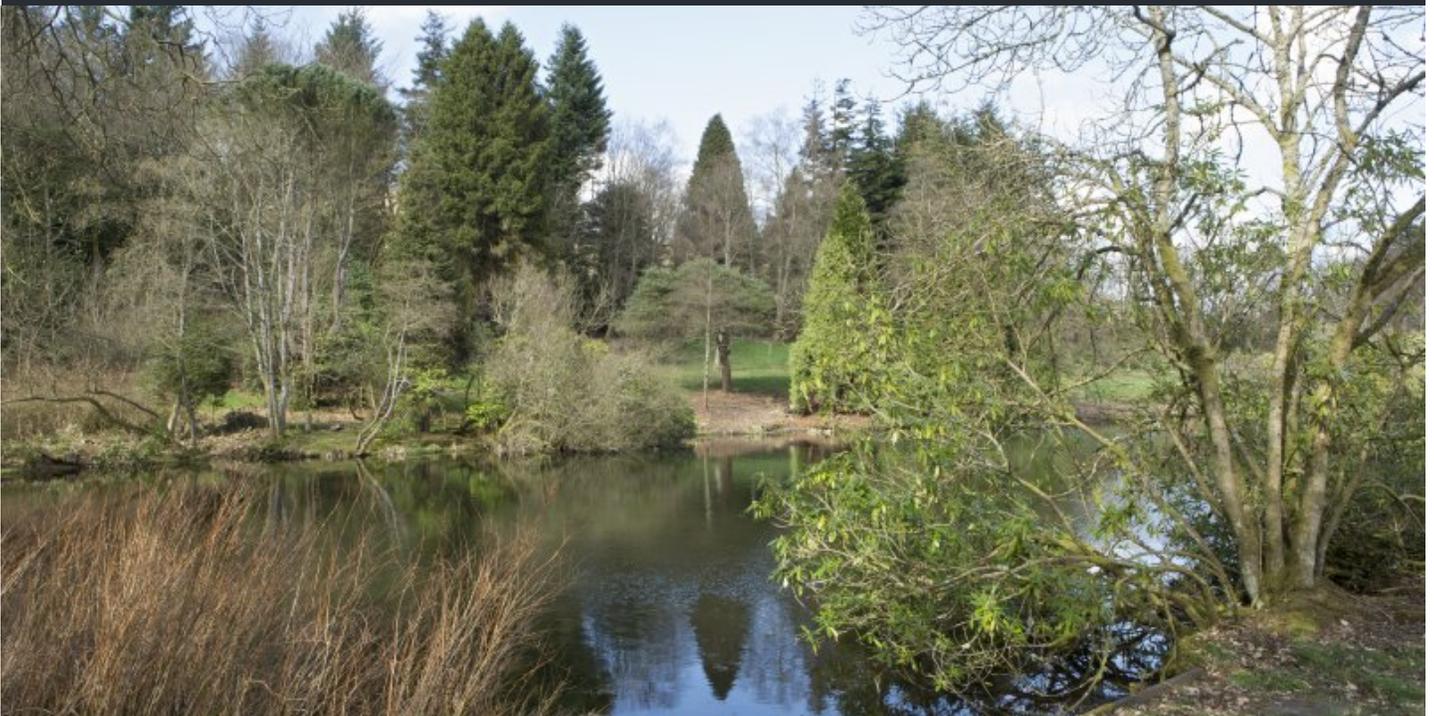


## Transformation and exploration

*Deep in the Clackmannanshire countryside, a century-old Japanese-style garden is undergoing an amazing transformation. Photographs were taken in 2014 just before work began on its restoration, with broken lanterns, moss-covered stones, and mature planting providing clues about the former plan and design.*

*First created between 1907 and 1908, the garden was the vision of Isabella (Ella) Christie (1861—1949), pioneering female explorer and the owner of the Cowden Castle estate. Following a trip to Japan in 1907 she settled on creating her very own Japanese-style garden back in Scotland. This became her ‘Shah-rak-uen’ — a place of pleasure or delight — and a venue for later family gatherings and story-telling about her far-flung solo expeditions to places such as China, Burma, India, Korea and Tibet.*

*Japanese-style gardens were very fashionable in the UK at this time. While other examples tended to be a pastiche, or a mismatch of elements, Christie engaged Japanese practitioners, well versed in the ancient and complex discipline of Japanese garden design. These included Taki Handa, female horticulturalist and initial designer, the London-based Professor Jijo Soya Suzuki, who advised on key principles for the garden, and finally Shinzaburo Matsuo, who lived and worked as gardener at Cowden from 1925 until his death in 1937. The result was a coherent piece of garden design that achieved fame in its hey-day for its authenticity. According to Professor Suzuki in 1925, it was the best Japanese garden in the Western world.*



## The Garden

*Cowden follows in the tradition of Japanese stroll gardens. These are typically associated with a water-body and intricate shore-line and involve a sequential progression along paths and stepping stones to experience overlapping views of the garden landscape. From the south and east, views of the Ochil hills act as shakkei, or borrowed landscape, forming part of the total composition. The central focus of the garden is a long, artificial lake. By necessity, it was the first act of garden making in 1907 with work on drainage ditches and a secure embankment successfully transforming the formerly marshy field. The lake remains the organising feature for other core components of the garden.*

*Islands in the lake include the important Scattered or Outlying Isle, located in the western half of the lake. The original plan also included the Galaxy Isle; a closely grouped composition of stones, and two smaller connected islands; the Master's Isle and Guest's Isle, at the extreme western end of the lake.*

*The careful positioning of highly charged, symbolic stones is an important and complex aspect of the Japanese garden tradition. Many such stones remain in situ at Cowden. Original built features, including bridges, gateways, a tea-house and boat-house are no longer extant, but restoration seeks to build on this tradition and introduce new structures. From the start, the hard, structural elements at Cowden were combined with a planting scheme of many different ornamental trees and shrubs, selected with reference to both the Japanese garden tradition and the limitations of the Clackmannanshire climate and soil. Many plants still thrive and contribute colour and texture to the overall garden composition.*

*Despite serious vandalism in the 1960s, much of the essential structure of the garden endured. It is now being restored and you can follow progress at <http://www.cowdencastle.com/>.*

*Cowden survives as an exceptional example of the Japanese-style garden tradition in the UK and is the only Japanese-style garden featured in the Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes.*

Julie Candy, Senior Designations Officer



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/340091/cowden-estate-garden>

<http://www.cowdencastle.com/>

<https://www.historicenvironment.scot/advice-and-support/listing-scheduling-and-designations/gardens-and-designed-landscapes/>



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