



Pitmedden Historic Landscape Survey

Summary

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1 Introduction

Background

This report is the result of a commission from the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) to Peter McGowan Associates and Addyman Archaeology to undertake a historical landscape survey of the Pitmedden landscape and to investigate the development of its archaeological and designed landscape by surveys and research to provide information for the future management of the landscape and its gardens, policies and woodland. The study has been part-funded by a grant from the Scottish Natural Heritage.

Location and setting

The NTS property at Pitmedden lies on the north-west side of Pitmedden village and 22 km (14 miles) north-north-east of Aberdeen in the parish of Udny in the county of Aberdeenshire (formerly in Grampian Region). The town of Ellon lies under 8 km to the east and Oldmeldrum a similar distance to the west. Pitmedden mansion-house stands in a fairly flat landscape, falling gently to the Bronie burn to the south-east, with Tolquhon castle just over 1 km to the north-west.

The boundaries of the designed landscape are broadly formed by the Oldmeldrum to Ellon road (A920) on the west and north, by the Bridge of Don to Tarves road (B999) on the east, and by the Newburgh to Oldmeldrum road (B9000) on the south. Most of the NTS-owned land lies within this area, apart from Limekiln wood to the west, although historically the designed landscape has extended further east and west.

Historic and landscape background

Pitmedden is renowned today for the Great Garden, originally created in the later 17th century: a square enclosure contained by high walls, with the house on the west side, divided into an upper west and lower east part by a north-south retaining wall with gate and steps. The garden here was laid out from 1675 by Sir Alexander Seton, although not much is known of his design apart from the surviving architectural components of walls, gates, stairs and pavilions. The property lies within a rectilinear landscape of field enclosures and drives, overlaid with some informal elements, and is lightly wooded with tree belts and small woods.

The Seton family owned Pitmedden from 1603 until 1893. Early in the 19th century the two-winged courtyard house burnt down and was subsequently rebuilt c.1860. The estate was sold in 1893 or 1894 to the local Keith family. Major James Keith lived at Pitmedden and was an innovative and successful agriculturalist, running several of the farms on the estate and in the wider locality, with the Lower walled garden run as an ornamental and productive kitchen garden. He donated the garden and estate to the NTS in 1952, and a large proportion of the estate lands were sold to provide an endowment fund for investment in and maintenance of the property.

With the approval of the Keiths, NTS planned a restoration of the Great Garden in the lower part of the walled garden. A design for parterres on a grand scale in the style of the early to mid 17th century based on James Gordon's 1647 birds-eye view of Royal Mile was prepared by Dr Richardson and implemented during 1956-57 with George Barron managing the work as head gardener. Herbaceous borders and wall-trained fruit trees were retained in the garden and various complementary features were added at the time and subsequently. The property has been run with the Great Garden as the principal attraction for 50 years, although also featuring the Museum of Farming Life, providing estate walks and other activities.

Initially the house was used for residential purposes and to accommodate the property representatives. It subsequently it became NTS regional office and with residential use. Today the North wing is leased out, the first floor of the South wing is staff accommodation and the ground floor of the South wing is used for ticketing, shop and tearoom.

Study aims

The project brief stated that the main purpose of the historical landscape survey is to expand the Trust's understanding of the origins, development and cultural significance of the historic landscape of Pitmedden estate. The survey will provide an essential tool for the management of the estate in terms of practical conservation, visual amenity, recreation, education and interpretation.

Study methodology

The project has comprised site surveys and historical research, leading to analysis of the information gathered in statements of significance for the whole place and its parts and recommendations for management action.

The report commences with a broad visual assessment of the landscape as it exists today as an introduction to the site and its relationship to its surroundings. A detailed chronology of the development of the landscape and gardens follows, drawing on the research carried out for the study.

A major part of the project is a survey of the components of the landscape: the garden buildings, garden and field boundary walls, drives and paths, water features, garden planting, trees and woodland, and views. This survey of features appears in a Gazetteer volume, where each feature has an individual entry, and is summarised in the main report.

Analysis of the survey and research information takes the form of a summary of the significant development periods, styles and key features of the landscape; an exploration of Pitmedden within its cultural context; a statement of significance based on the Pitmedden entry in the 1987 *Inventory*; analysis of the areas and components of the landscape; a series of plans showing the landscape development in its key periods; a composite phasing plan; and finally, a plan summarising the analysis.

2 Analysis, development periods and statement of significance

Development periods

Pitmedden is generally known for its great 17th century walled garden, which lies at the core of this property, although it lies within a "small historic enclosed 18th century parkland setting with ... considerable 19th and 20th century overlays with tree-lined drives, ha has, walls and dykes." (NTS Property Statement 2002) To this summary can now be added a 17th century designed landscape that provides the framework of all the later phases of the landscape. Pitmedden has a designed landscape of the 17th century with the great walled garden at its centre, which is larger than had been supposed and extends well beyond the NTS's current ownership. Contemporary 17th century drystone dykes are accompanied by other dykes, drainage channels and tree belts to form a distinctive rectilinear landscape – the latter components being either of similar date or later but conforming the geometrical pattern. In the core of the landscape, to the west and south of the house, are limited areas of informal and parkland landscape of mainly 19th century origin, which evolved through the 19th and 20th centuries. The remains of an early to mid 18th century layer are also likely.

The Pitmedden landscape is obviously complex, reflecting several centuries of activity for aesthetic enhancement as well as for agricultural improvement. For the purposes of this analysis, because of limited remains from the prehistoric

to the medieval periods, the analysis of the landscape development starts with the later periods. Based on the survey and research information presented in the study, eight periods of building and landscape development are evident at Pitmedden, as follows.

early 15th century

Panton family. Possible date of earliest house on the site.

1603

Earliest reference to a garden and estate landscape at Pitmedden: tower, fortalice, manor, garden, orchards, dovecote, water meadows, pastures.

1658 – 1719

Sir Alexander Seton took possession of Pitmedden in 1658 and became the key figure in the whole development of Pitmedden as we know it. Squarish walled garden in the centre of a formal landscape of other rectilinear enclosures to a similar alignment extending to an outer rectangle of 0.75km N-S and 1.12km E-W, although with no evidence for rectilinear boundaries in the NW part: it is assumed that ownership prevented completion of the rectangle in this area. On the north and west field boundaries take a different alignment as far as the parish boundary which lies one field beyond, then realign to those associated with Tolquhon.

18th century

Setons. Intermediate phase of formal landscape represented by the oldest trees shown in rows to S of garden on 1st edition OS, now mostly gone except a few south of the car park: aligned generally N-S but not parallel to 17th century features. The public road during this phase was along the line of the South drive, past the house on its west side as far as North Mains, then west to Raitshill and north to Tarves.

Late-18th – 1858

Setons. The tenure of Sir William Seton, 6th Baronet from 1775-1818, is an assumed period for the first stage of the informal landscape (which may have been curtailed by the house fire of 1807) when a natural style layout overlaying the rectilinear pattern with parkland planting in the core and in West parks was first developed. The following time of his son's minority and his (Sir William Coote Seton, 7th Baronet from 1829? to 1880) later non-residence suggests inactivity although according to the NSA the gardens were actively cultivated and remained 'one of the finest and best laid out gardens in the north of Scotland.' This was the period of new turnpike roads with the E road (B999, constructed 1821) cutting diagonally and W road (A920, date unknown) cutting vertically through the 17th century pattern. Landscape changes associated with the roads in the form of new drives, avenues and tree belts may have happened either within this or the next period.

1858 – 1893

Setons. Continued development of the informal or natural landscape style following the building of the new house including additional small scale planting west of South avenue and in the West side of the landscape, creation of the Upper pond, and tree/shrub planting in the Upper walled garden, during the continued tenure of Sir William Coote Seton but possibly influenced by tenants. Development of new drives, avenues and tree belts related to the turnpike roads may also have occurred. Financial problems during the latter part of the period and attempts at sale under the 8th and 9th Baronets again suggest a time of inactivity in new landscape developments.

1893(4?) – 1952

Keiths. Small-scale alteration and rationalisation of the designed landscape and restocking, with South wood and North wood paddocks planted up, Exit drive

belt added and South side belt extended. Major Keith is said to have added to this pattern during 1945-50, but not significantly; use of Lower walled garden as a productive and ornamental kitchen garden.

1952 – present

NTS / modern phase. House remodelled with central wynd; pavilions restored / converted. Reconstruction of Lower walled garden in the style of the late 17th century; reconstruction of 17th century features in Upper garden (following loss of 19th century trees and shrubs); new Herb garden and hornbeam allée; some new tree plots and avenue planting; restocking of woods and other tree features; car and coach park, minor new drives and visitor footpaths.

Statement of significance

The following evaluation is based on *An Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes in Scotland* (Land Use Consultants 1987). The statements in italics are the original evaluations which are qualified by comments resulting from the assessment in this study.

Work of Art

Outstanding: Pitmedden has outstanding value as a Work of Art based on the artistic restoration of the formal gardens.

The parterre garden makes impact within the space it occupies and the architectural features, especially the pavilions and central gate and stairs, are of particular quality. But it could be argued that the design is formulaic – transferring patterns from another context and adapting them to this space – and that they are not a sensitive response to the space.

Further analysis of the design could be applied to the Upper garden – with a question here as to the interest of the 19th century garden about which we know more than the type of garden elements which are been recreated here. But at the end of the day, the garden has to be judged as a restoration of its period – in the 1950s and 1990s – and judged accordingly. On balance we feel that Outstanding purely on grounds of design is too high an evaluation, but still think it has high artistic merit.

The wider landscape was not brought into the evaluation previously and, theoretically, could add to its aesthetic value, although with the current level of understanding and with intrusions and additions that obscure the clarity of the layout, at this juncture it cannot be claimed to create a significant aesthetic effect.

Historical

High: The association with the Seton family and the historical references to the original gardens give Pitmedden high Historical value.

The HLS has identified further archival records which add weight to this evaluation, although the lack of written estate records, estate plans and other graphic sources remains a severe impediment to understanding of the place.

The associations with Major Keith, who donated the property to the Trust and was “a locally significant and well known agricultural improver during the early part of the 20th century” is also relevant to its historical value, although we would consider him regionally significant in this respect, being an Aberdeenshire representative on many official national bodies.

Horticultural

Some: The range of plants, particularly the roses and apples, gives Pitmedden some Horticultural value.

If horticulture is about gardening skills as well as plant collections, then Pitmedden is of High or Outstanding horticultural value. This is supported by the NTS Property Statement: “... it has built up a world-wide reputation for horticultural

excellence, acknowledged in numerous publications.” The parterres gardens are probably the best example of the use of box varieties and annual bedding in Scotland and one of the best in the UK. Their establishment and annual planting and maintenance has required and continues to require the highest horticultural skills. The herbaceous borders are among the best of their kind and the skillfully-trained wall fruit trees are a significant collection of varieties giving a complete cover of the N and E walls.

Architectural

Outstanding: The garden walls and pavilions are listed category A, giving Pitmedden outstanding Architectural value.

This evaluation is fixed by the Inventory methodology which gives all Cat. A listed buildings Outstanding architectural value. The additional value of the unlisted drystone walls or dykes in the outer landscape, also dating from the 17th century, gives further justification to the evaluation.

Scenic

High : The woodland strips in the surrounding agricultural landscape give Pitmedden high Scenic value.

The woodland of the outer designed landscape undoubtedly contributes to the landscape of the locality, particularly as seen from the boundary roads. The drystone dykes and water channels are also components of the rectilinear landscape character that is specific to Pitmedden.

Nature conservation

Little : The early 19th century woodland gives the site a little Nature Conservation value.

Although some areas of woodland are older and other areas younger than the 19th century, and much of it has been replanted since that period, there is little arising from the study that would alter the level of the nature conservation evaluation. The NTS Property Statements give it *moderate* nature conservation value and notes the potential of the three ponds and the number of priority species and habitats – red squirrels, wych elm and field margins and boundary habitats – which have Local Biodiversity Action Plans. Perhaps on these grounds the level should be Some value.

Archaeological

Outstanding

Although there are no archaeological designated sites within the site area, there is considerable actual or potential interest in terms of building, general and garden archaeology, exemplified by the standing archaeology of the estate walls, garden structures and parts of Pitmedden House and service court. In the absence of documentary records, it could be that archaeological investigation is likely to provide answers to the major questions concerning Pitmedden, particularly about the garden layout and landscape design in the late-17th century.

Recreational

High

In its present form the Pitmedden gardens, woods and parkland landscape has high value for recreation by visitors, mainly for garden visiting and woodland way-marked walks, for picnicking and for periodic special events. The gardens, parkland and woods have potential for increased recreation of different types including more way-marked walks and interpretation of the wider landscape.

3 Management options

The study consultants conclude that a clear plan is needed for the future of the landscape at Pitmedden. They consider that while the garden is immaculately maintained and planted, the outer landscape comes across as a relatively poor relation with less well-defined management priorities directing its management. While many essential activities such as woodland management (dealing with windblow, tree work for safety, restocking declining features) and visitor facilities are well managed, there is a need for an overall plan to direct future management and development – which may need to include landscape restoration, investment in the landscape fabric, raising design quality and, most of all, bringing clarity to the phases and features of the landscape. This is no easy task and needs further detailed evidence of the landscape development phases to take it forward. The next steps therefore must be archaeological investigations.

Recommendations

- Instigate a programme of archaeological investigations to extend findings of the Historic Landscape Survey, particularly in respect of Old Pitmedden house or other houses, other buildings, the layout within the walled garden, and lines of former drives, walls, water-courses, avenues and other tree features in the wider landscape. Within the walled garden, explore the potential for archaeological investigation which could reveal information about former paths, bed layout, plant positions and planting techniques.
- Building survey and archaeological assessment of Pitmedden House and associated buildings.
- Building and archaeological surveys and drawings of the garden pavilions, gateways, stairs, fountain fragments etc as associated features
- Commission a Landscape Master Plan and Restoration Plan to direct future development of the designed landscape, which may extend to restoration of 17th and 18th century landscape features and long-term acquisitions or management agreements to protect the features of the wider landscape outside NTS ownership and remove intrusions. This must be preceded by the archaeological investigations.
- Improve the quality, consistency and presentation of the naturalistic designed landscape areas particularly in Zones 2 and 3, although this will also depend on an overall strategy for development of the designed landscape in all its phases.
- Upgrade public areas which have become works and service areas, eg. east side of walled garden: full restoration dependent on outcomes of investigations and master plan.
- Promote listing or other form of planning policy protection for the wider designed landscape and the pattern of drystone field walls or dykes, water-courses and tree belts or rows which lie outwith NTS ownership.
- Promote mitigation of the impact of intrusive features in the designed landscape outwith NTS ownership.
- Encourage restocking of tree clumps in North Mains and West zones through management agreements with owners or other means.
- Define archaeologically sensitive areas within the landscape, including the walled garden and all areas within the inner cordon of walls, including all of West park.
- Produce a Design Guide of materials, detailing and equipment for use in the landscape (fencing, stiles, signs etc) with which all new works, repairs and replacement should comply.

4 Conclusion

The Historic Landscape Survey brings together the known records and new surveys and research to provide a comprehensive and detailed record of the Pitmedden landscape. It confirms that it is a landscape of multi-faceted interest with significance in several different historical periods ranging from the rectilinear 17th century layout, with the walled garden at its centre, probably through a subsequent stage of formal layout and planting, to the naturalistic phase from c.1800 and through the 19th century. Inevitably the restoration of the *Great Garden* in the mid-20th century is a focus of attention, although the survey puts this clearly in its context and sets the boundaries of the designed landscape well beyond the NTS owned area and that officially recognised in the *Inventory*.

In more practical terms of management today, the study points to the need for clear policies in management based on understanding following Conservation Plan principles. Although this is now central to NTS management, cumulative actions over the decades have gradually eroded the clarity of the 17th to 19th century landscape. There is now a real need for the restoration of this landscape to be put at the centre of management policy, backed by further investigation where knowledge is lacking.

Despite frequent criticism of the parterre garden, which is always very limited in its scope, the re-creation of the Great Garden remains an impressive achievement of high aesthetic impact demonstrating, in all its features, the highest levels of horticultural skill. As we still know so little about the original late-17th century garden, it can never be considered an authentic re-creation. As a garden of the 1950s period it represents the priorities and status of historic garden research and understanding at that time. In the final analysis, if we tried to make a design for the garden today based on the same principles of re-creation and applying what more we know about late-17th century garden in Scotland, the result would be equally open to criticism after a period of years.

It is hoped that the information, analysis and management options presented in this Historic Landscape Survey will be useful and influential in managing and developing Pitmedden so that its significance is conserved and enhanced and it becomes an even more attractive and multi-faceted destination for visitors.



Pitmedden

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