



A MEDIAEVAL GARDEN at the Tower of London

By Jeremy Ashbee

The Tower of London has in its time performed many roles: royal castle, state prison, armoury and arsenal, observatory, zoo and mint. It is best known today as the treasury of the Crown Jewels and as the historic place of execution of two of Henry VIII's wives, Lady Jane Grey and Sir Thomas More, or as the prison of the 'Princes in the Tower' and Sir Walter Raleigh. Of the two and a half million visitors who pass through every year, it would be surprising if even a dozen had heard about the castle's connections with mediaeval royal gardening (a few more might know about Sir Walter Raleigh's attempt to grow tobacco in the Lieutenant's garden adjoining his prison). And yet there is documentary evidence from the thirteenth century onwards that both inside and outside the castle there were large orchards and gardens, in which the Kings and their Queens took a personal interest. Though we can do little to reconstruct details of their planting or their layout, recent research is offering some clues as to where exactly they lay. This has opened up a potentially fascinating line of conjecture, bringing in literary evidence from a quite unexpected source.

The researches of Sir Howard Colvin and the late John Harvey in the 1960s clearly demonstrated the interest of mediaeval English Kings in the more exotic elements of garden design. In the late twelfth century, for example, Henry II may have planned his rural retreat at Everswell (now in the grounds of Blenheim Palace) with arcaded cloisters and pools linked by water channels to imitate the Islamic gardens of the Norman court of Sicily, with which he maintained close links.¹ Whilst

we have hints that Henry II's house within the Tower of London was likewise planned around a cloister, the first real references to the Tower's gardens do not occur until the next century, in the reign of the artistic Henry III. Here again the King probably came under the influence of the Mediterranean, in this case from his wife, Eleanor of Provence.²

The first references to a garden at the Tower indicate a location immediately outside the fortress. In March 1262 (following on from a series of enforced royal stays in the castle throughout the previous year), Henry gave instructions for the planting of trees in a walled enclosure outside the castle but within the city wall, specifically pear trees of a variety called '*cailhou*'.³ This orchard was then known as the '*King's garden*'. It seems almost certain that this extra-mural garden lay on the north side of the Tower moat on a property later to be known as '*The Nine Gardens*'. The first accurate plan of the area, the survey of the Tower and its Liberties by William Haiward and John Gascoyne prepared in 1597 and now known from eighteenth-century copies, shows that the Nine Gardens had preserved their identity, although from the fourteenth-century brewhouses and other buildings had begun to creep into the gardens.⁴ (fig. 1)

The other royal garden was clearly inside the castle itself. It first appears in documents of 1266 with an order to buy plants (unspecified) to the value of 20 shillings and to repair the wall around 'the King's Garden in the Tower of London'.⁵ Nothing else is mentioned for the rest of the reign, though it is clear that the gardens were of remarkably high quality. When Edward I succeeded to the throne on Henry's death, he was abroad on crusade,

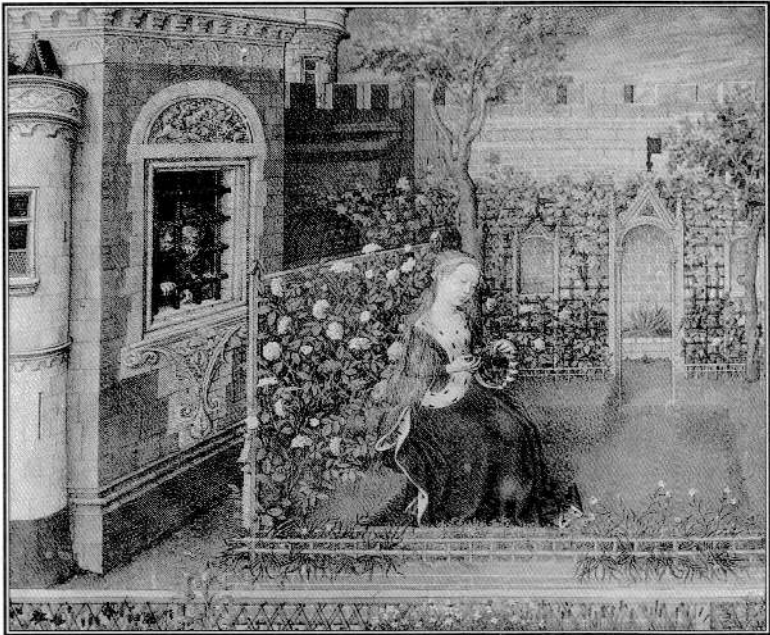
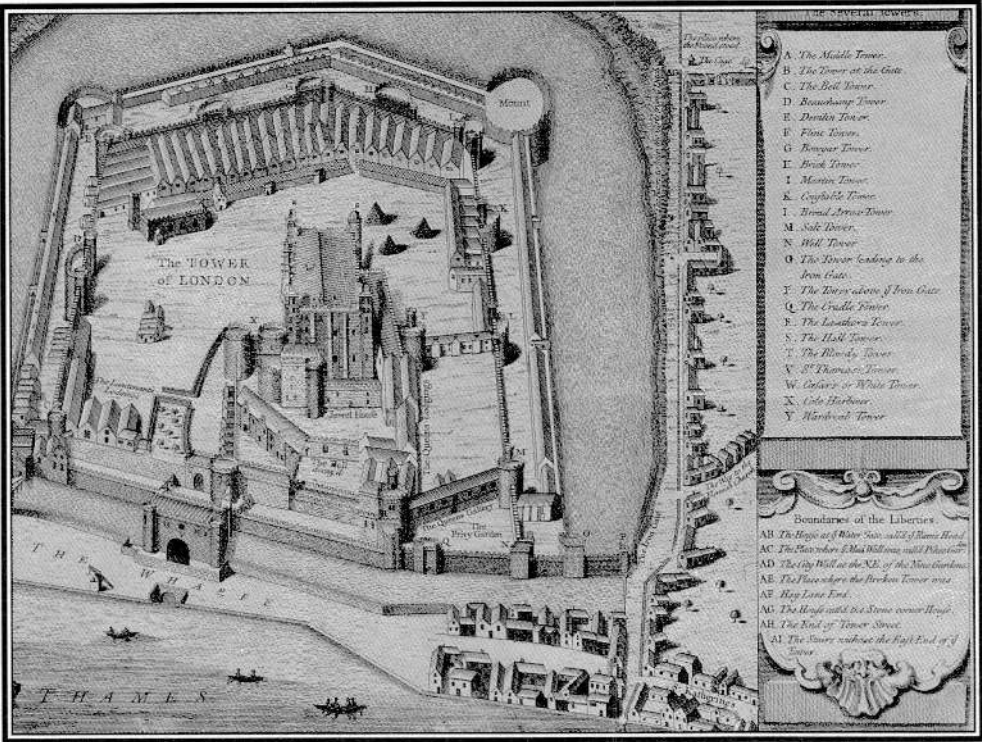
2. *The Pipe Roll 32 Henry II, 1185-1186* (1914), p. 49. M. Howell, *Eleanor of Provence* (1998), pp. 174-5.

3. *Calendar of the Close Rolls of Henry III, 1261-1267* (1936), p. 30.

4. *Calendar of Miscellaneous Inquisitions, 1368-1377* (1976), p. 104.

5. *Calendar of the Liberated Rolls of Henry III, 1260-1267* (1961), p. 197.

1. H.M. Colvin, 'Royal Gardens in Medieval England', in *Essays in English Architectural History* (1999), pp. 1-13. For Sicilian gardens see G. Bellafiore, *Parci e Giardini della Palermo Normana* (Palermo, 1996).



1. Detail of Haziward and Gascoyne's *Survey of the Tower of London* (1597) showing The Nine Gardens. Records from the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century confirm that a royal garden lay close to the Lanthorn Tower – presumably east of the Queen's Lodgings (HISTORIC ROYAL PALACES)

2. Picture of a royal herber of the late Middle Ages in a French manuscript of the *Livre du Cuer d'Amours esprits* (c.1465) (THE NATIONAL LIBRARY, VIENNA)

allowing his ministers Robert Burnell and Walter de Merton two years to make everything ready for his return: correspondence between the two includes the stipulation that repairs to the Tower must be concentrated on 'the garden in which my Lord takes the greateast delight'.⁶

The documents for some of Henry III's other palaces and castles, such as Clarendon Palace and Windsor Castle, leave no doubt that a common place for such gardens would be immediately adjacent to the King's or Queen's chambers. This begins to throw attention on one particular corner of the Tower of London – the southeast corner next to the round Lanthorn Tower in which Queen Eleanor of Provence probably lived when staying at the castle.⁷ Though there are only sporadic accounts for the rest of the Middle Ages, the documentation of Henry Tudor's works to the castle in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century confirm that the royal garden was indeed close to the Lanthorn Tower. Most compelling is the construction of a tall staircase within the garden rising to the 'round tower where the Lord King is accustomed to sleep'. Henry also built himself an extension to the palace in the form of a wooden gallery along the stretch of the castle wall which provided a view over the gardens on either side. The gardens were obviously among the principal attractions of this sector of the castle. Those with a taste for the ominous may care to consider that it was probably in these gardens that Henry's brothers-in-law, the 'Princes in the Tower', had been last seen alive in the summer of 1483.⁸

A Literary Reference?

One of the best-known literary descriptions of an English mediaeval garden occurs in *The Knight's Tale* written by Geoffrey Chaucer in the late 1380s as the first of *The Canterbury Tales*. This tale, adapted from a classical fable and more directly from a story by the Italian poet Boccaccio, tells the story of two noble kinsmen who are captured in battle by Theseus, Duke of Athens and imprisoned for life. From the window of their cell they

observe and fall in love with the same woman, which leads inevitably to a deterioration of their friendship. This tale has conventionally been interpreted as a hymn to chivalry and its narrator as a paragon of knightly virtues. However, in a recent and controversial study, Terry Jones (*né* Python) has argued that the character of Chaucer's knight is written as a satire on professional mercenary soldiers, and that the tale he tells contains every possible violation of the chivalric ethic. In short, the Knight takes elements from Boccaccio's story – a genuine tale of chivalry – and subverts them.

The passage describing the garden occurs during the point in the story when the kinsmen have been imprisoned for life in Athens. In Boccaccio's story, they are kept in luxury in the Duke's palace, served in a manner befitting royal princes, in rooms on the ground floor of the building from which they can look directly into the garden. (fig. 2) However, Chaucer's knight places them in considerably less desirable conditions:

*The grete tour that was so thikke and stroong
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun⁹
Ther as the knyghts weren in prisoun
Of which I tolde towe and tellen shal
Was evene joynant to the gardyn wal
Ther as this Emelye had hir pleyynge.
Bright was the sonne and cleer that morwenynge
And Palamoun, this woful prisoner.
As was his wone, by leve of his gayler
Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh
In which he al the noble citee seigh
And eek the gardyn, full of braunches grene,
There as this fresshe Emelye the shene
Was in hire walk, and romed up and doun.*

Chaucer's text leaves no doubt that the prisoners were kept on an upper floor in the keep of a castle in the middle of a capital city. A few lines earlier, he states that their incarceration in the tower was a life of anguish and woe, a far cry from the comfortable life of the prisoners in Boccaccio.

The description of the keep and garden in this urban castle has strong resonances with the layout and use of the Tower of London during the late fourteenth century. The great White Tower which stood beside the garden

6. PRO, SC1 7/46.

7. S. Thurley, 'Royal Lodgings at the Tower of London, 1216–1327', *Architectural History* 38 (1995), pp. 36–7.

8. *Great Chronicle of London*, quoted in K. Dockray, *Richard III. A Reader in History* (1988), p. 93.

9. *Donjon*, or castle keep.

was indeed used for the confinement of important state prisoners. In 1360, for example, Edward III gave orders that state papers be moved out of the building in order to make room for 'his adversary of France', King John 'the Good', captured in 1356 at the battle of Poitiers.¹⁰ A few years after Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, the upper rooms of the White Tower would again be used in this way to hold the deposed Richard II (as the French writer Jean Froissard notes with satisfaction, in the very same building in which Richard's grandfather Edward locked up the French King).¹¹

The contention is that when called upon to provide his knight with an unpleasant version of the pleasure garden of Boccaccio's tale, Chaucer turned his thoughts to the Tower. It possessed a garden in the shadow of the great White Tower; it was under the direct control of the King (perhaps read *Richard II* for a characterisation of the capricious Duke Theseus?), and it lay in the centre of London: even now it is possible to gain a view of 'al the noble citee' from the highest windows. As a member of John of Gaunt's entourage, Chaucer was probably very familiar with the Tower and this familiarity would become even greater in the 1390s when he was appointed Clerk of the King's Works, an office which brought with it a house inside the castle.¹² It may also be significant that only a few years later, another of the Tower's prisoner-poets, King James I of Scotland, included a homage to Chaucer's *mise-en-scène* in a poem about his own confinement (either at the Tower or Windsor castle):

*Now was there maid fast by the touris wall
A gardyn fair, and in the corneris set
Ane herber grene with wandis long and small
Railit about, and so with treis set
Was all the place, and hawthorn hegis knet...*¹³

The later story of the royal gardens at the Tower was not a happy one. Elizabeth I's relationship with the place was inevitably soured by her previous experience of imprisonment there, and royal visits to the fortress during her reign were few and far between. The royal

palace inside the castle was allowed to deteriorate still further, and after James I's reign, the court never again took up residence there, not even for the traditional preparations for the coronation. Soon after the Restoration, it was decided that the garden, probably in a very poor state, should be redeveloped. Accordingly, a warrant was issued in January 1663 for the construction of a new military storehouse (the New Armouries) on the site of 'the void peece of ground...commonly known or called by name of the wardrobe Garden'.¹⁴ This storehouse building can still be seen today – the last marker of the location of the royal gardens.

Author's addendum

Archaeological discoveries being made at the time of writing (December 1999) are suggesting that long before this, the Tower's gardens were under siege from the fortress's other activities. Under the floor of the New Armouries building (presently being converted into a restaurant), excavations have produced remains of at least one mediaeval building running along the east side of the garden: pottery evidence suggests provisional dating in the later thirteenth or early fourteenth century. One building was probably timber-frames sitting on dwarf walls, and seems to have been a bakehouse: it contained several phases of tile hearths and an oven. The writing of this article began long before the excavations revealed anything, and much of the above text is based on the idea that the Tower's gardens were idyllic – places fit for Edward I to 'take the greatest delight' and for the eminent prisoners to fantasise about love and freedom. The discoveries provide a salutary lesson in the potential surprises which a place of the Tower's age and complexity holds for modern students. They also warn against the potential dangers of reading too much into mediaeval literature!

SIR JOHN SOANE'S COURTYARD GARDENS AT LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS

By Helen Dorey

The two small courtyards behind Sir John Soane's Museum at Nos. 13 and 14 Lincoln's Inn Fields must be among the most curious and evocative relicts of London's early nineteenth-century town gardens. Hidden away at the centre of the buildings, these north-facing basement areas,

10. *Calendar of the Close Rolls of Edward III, volume 11, 1360-1364* (1909), p. 24.

11. G. Brereton, ed., *Froissard. Chronicles* (1978), p. 455.

12. R.A. Brown, H.M. Colvin and A.J. Taylor, *The History of the King's Works*, vol. 1 & 2. *The Middle Ages* (1963), pp. 192, 194.

13. *James I of Scotland. The King's Quair*, J. Norton Smith, ed. (Leiden, 1981), XXI-XXIV, p. 8.

14. G. Parnell, *The Tower of London* (1993), p. 64.