The Gardens at Castle Drogo

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When Julius Drewe engaged Sir Edwin Lutyens as his architect to design Castle Drogo, the commission included the design of the garden. Documents from as early as 1910 reveal that the two men discussed a terraced cascading garden, descending from the walls of the castle into the Teign Gorge. Celebrated garden designer Gertrude Jekyll and Exeter-based landscape specialist Peter Veitch of Veitch & Co were included in discussions, but all communication ceased in 1916 and none of the original plan was proceeded with.[1] Largely because of the Great War, all work on the castle was suspended until 1919 when Drewe's trusty clerk of works, John Coates Walker, set about re-recruiting a workforce, with priority being given to the completion of the castle.

The most important year in the evolution of the garden design at Castle Drogo was probably 1921. Firstly, Lutyens' plan to cascade a garden from the castle wall down into the Teign Gorge was decisively rejected by Julius Drewe. Secondly, an agreement was reached that a detached garden would be constructed at its present site. Thirdly, and possibly most importantly, Julius appointed George Dillistone as joint garden designer with Lutyens; Jekyll and Veitch were no longer involved.

Figure 1: Sir Edwin Lutyens.[2]

[1] Taken from the numerous letters and drawings between the main contributors (many of which are undated), which are retained in the National Trust records at Castle Drogo.

[2] Copyright National Trust/Ian Hutt.

Following the end of hostilities in 1918, the building of large country houses such as Drogo became virtually impossible because of the mood in the country. Wealthy businessmen proposing such schemes would have been viewed very unsympathetically as war profiteers, especially by returning servicemen. Lutyens had no new building commissions and should therefore have been much more attentive to his existing clients, including Drewe. Unfortunately for those clients, his work with the War Graves Commission meant that in the early 1920s, he was responsible for 137 cemeteries in France & Flanders, including the Dartmoor and Devonshire Cemetries in the Somme region. Additionally, he designed fifty public and private memorials throughout the UK as well as nine others internationally.[3] His memorials included the County of Devon Memorial outside Exeter Cathedral, a cross created from a single piece of Dartmoor granite sourced from Haytor Quarry and unveiled in 1921 by the Prince of Wales.[4] Together with his work for the Delhi Commission, necessitating long periods of time in India, he was seldom available to consult with in the UK. A further distraction in the early 1920s was his preoccupation with designing a doll's house for Queen Mary – now exhibited at Windsor Castle and unveiled in 1924 – which led to him being taken to task by a friend for being obsessed with the doll's house and neglecting other matters.[5] Despite there being a Lutyens apprentice available for much of the time, for Julius it was a case of always having to 'speak to the monkey rather than the organ grinder', to coin a phrase of the time. It is little wonder, therefore, that he chose to appoint someone else to collaborate with Lutyens on the garden design and construction.

George Dillistone was a director and manager of the landscape department of Wallace & Co., a nursery firm based in Tunbridge Wells. Residing at Wadhurst Hall at the time (having previously resided at Culverden Castle, Tunbridge Wells), Drewe would have been aware of the company.

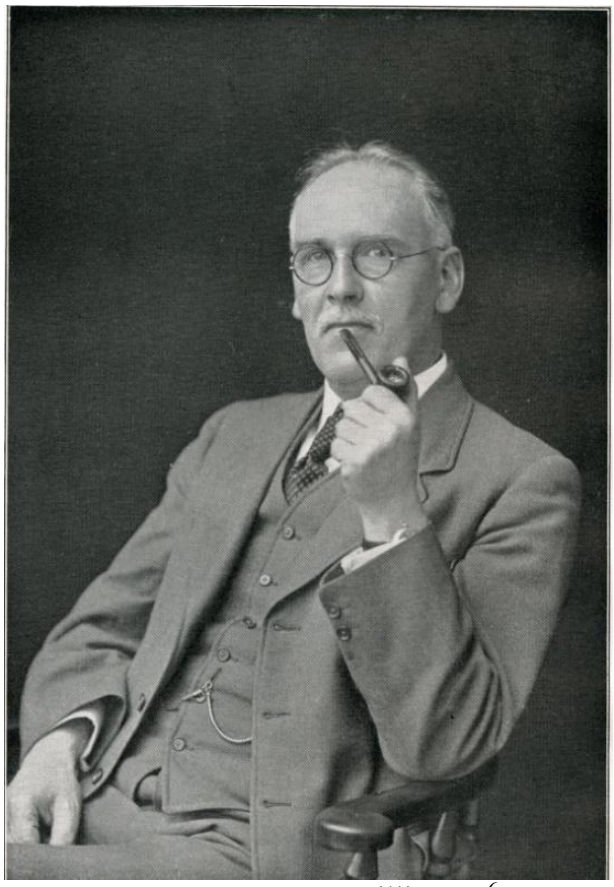

Figure 2: George Dillistone.[6]

[3] Appendix A, B and C of T. Skelton and G. Glidon, *Lutyens and the Great War* (Frances Lincoln, 2008).
[4] Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devon_County_War_Memorial (accessed 6 October 2022).
[5] Dame J. Ridley, *The Architect & his Wife: A Life of Edwin Lutyens* (Chatto & Windus, 2002), p. 304.
[6] Reproduced with kind permission of the British Iris Society.

Born in Suffolk from a long line of nurserymen, Dillistone had trained as a landscape architect, joining Wallace & Co in 1908 and working his way up to director level. After serving as a surveyor in the Royal Engineers during the Great War, he returned to the company in 1919. In 1920, he wrote a book entitled *The Planning And Planting of Little Gardens*.[7] He was also a founding member of the Iris Society and a leading authority on irises, publishing articles in newspapers on a number of occasions. Drewe first consulted Dillistone in 1921, after which his involvement in the Castle Drogo garden design development began, which would continue until the 1930s. His input and influence were considerable.

Julius and his wife Frances were keen gardeners themselves and were obviously involved in the decision taking, as was their son Basil. The latter was an enthusiastic supporter of the project from the outset. Following the death of his elder brother, Adrian, in 1917, he took the lead role in assisting his parents. Interestingly, a book on plants and planting dating from 1917 with annotations made by Basil shows his early interest in gardening. [8] An unusual choice of reading for a twenty-three year old on active duty in France! A telling comment in correspondence from Lutyens and Julius Drewe contains the sentence, 'I have discussed this with Basil' – an indication of Basil's primacy in the scheme of things.[9] Needless to say, John Coates Walker was ever present to implement the final agreed plans.

The first plan for a garden in its present location came from Lutyens when he produced a multi-dimensional drawing containing several of the features that were implemented. Many letters written by all the parties exist from this time, although few are dated, making it difficult to place a sequence of events in precise order. It has been suggested by some that Dillistone was primarily responsible for the garden design. However, in an analysis commissioned by the National Trust in 2011, the author, distinguished garden historian Jonathan Lovie – drawing on comparisons with other designs produced by both – concludes that the overall design was more likely to be attributed to Lutyens than to Dillistone. He comments:

> The boldness of the garden layout and its strong architectural framework has far more in common with Lutyens' later work than it appears to have with Dillistone's fairly conventional 'Arts and Crafts' vernacular-inspired gardens known from other commissions and from his admittedly earlier published designs.[10]

One of the striking comparisons is the similarity of the garden design with that of the Viceroy's Palace and government buildings in New Delhi. Perhaps not surprising, as both projects were developed at the same time. Lutyens spent a great deal of time at sea, travelling to and from India, and whilst on board reserving additional cabin space as an office, working on India drawings on the outward journey and domestic projects on the return trip.[11]

All evidence indicates an amicable relationship between Lutyens and Dillistone and a level of cooperation suggesting that proposed amendments were shown to and considered by both parties before being implemented.[12]

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[7] G. Dillistone, *The Planning and Planting of Little Gardens* (Kessinger Publishing, 2008).

[8] Original in archive at Castle Drogo.

[9] Taken from the numerous letters and drawings between the main contributors (many of which are undated), which are retained in the National Trust records at Castle Drogo.

[10] J. Lovie, 'The Historic Development of the Gardens and Immediate Setting of Castle Drogo,' (commissioned by The National Trust, February 2011), pp. 43, 71.

[11] Taken from the numerous letters and drawings between the main contributors (many of which are undated), which are retained in the National Trust records at Castle Drogo.

[12] Ibid.

The placing of a large order of yew plants in October 1921 suggests an agreement had been reached on the final design, and work was scheduled to start that autumn.[13] Work began slowly as the workforce were still directed towards completing the castle. Although the basic garden design was now agreed, both designers continued to submit amendments and planting suggestions throughout the early part of the decade. The main detailing concerned the rose garden and the need to create it as a sunken secret garden – a requirement strongly advocated by Basil – and its linkage to the circular area designated as the tennis court and croquet lawn. Dillistone was particularly prolific in his submissions, and these tend to confirm his primacy in plant recommendation and selection.

A detailed quotation dated 15 November 1924 from Veitch & Co of Exeter for the supply of over 1000 shrubs and plants suggests that agreement had been reached concerning planting. The quotation, which amounted to £211.16.0, covered a large variety of plants from azaleas to *Hamamelis zuccharinana*.[14]

Sadly, in 1925, Drewe suffered a serious stroke and in his own words was 'unable to do business.' Work stopped for a time. Nonetheless, between 1921 and 1926 the final form of the garden seems to have been agreed by all parties, and with workmen including two stonemasons, Messrs Cleve and Dewdney, now released from the castle building, the work progressed apace sufficient for most of the garden construction to be finished in 1926/7. Granite for the steps and walls were sourced from the same Dartmoor quarries that were used for the castle: Blackingstone, Merrivale and Pew Tor. For the excavation of the sunken rose garden, photographs exist showing a very early form of mechanical digger. A great deal of soil was displaced and the spoil was moved to the adjacent borders. As recent projects on adjacent plots have shown– the centenary orchard being a good example – the natural ground is very stoney and difficult to work, yet the soil of the flower beds is varied and of good composition. This indicates that top soil was acquired from elsewhere, but there is no record of the source of this soil.

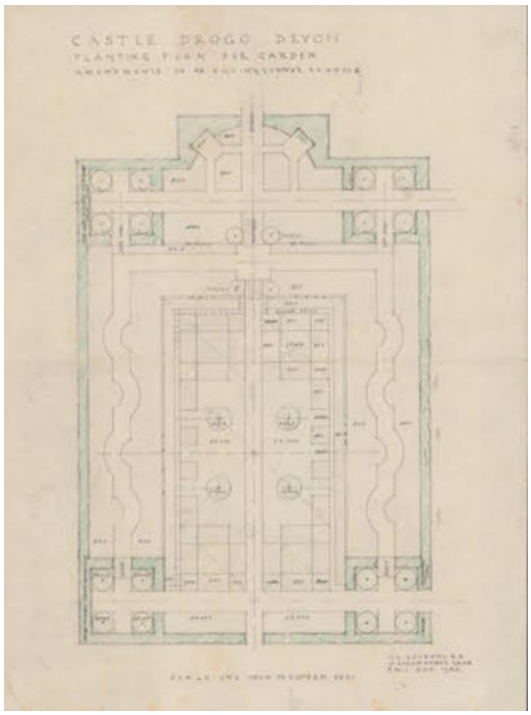

Figure 3: Planting plan for borders around Rose Garden by George Dillistone, dated 24 September 1927.[15]

[13] C. Hussey, *The Life of Sir Edwin Lutyens*, p. 452.

[14] Original invoice in National Trust archives at Castle Drogo.

[15] Copyright: National Trust/Imagetek.

By 1927, the family had taken up part-time residence in the castle and appointed a head gardener, Mr Collacott, together with six gardeners. Although the essential form of the garden was now complete, detailed finishing plans from both designers continued to be submitted. In December 1926, Lutyens produced his final revision of his scheme for the rose garden, fragrant garden and associated borders. In September 1927 Dillistone produced a detailed planting scheme for implementation during the winter of 1927–28. Lutyens' plans for the southern approach to the garden via the steps from the Green Terrace were resolved as late as September 1929, following completion of the garage and stable block in 1927–28.[16]

The final structural element of the garden to be designed was the Chapel Garden, which was determined by Lutyens between 1927 and 1930.

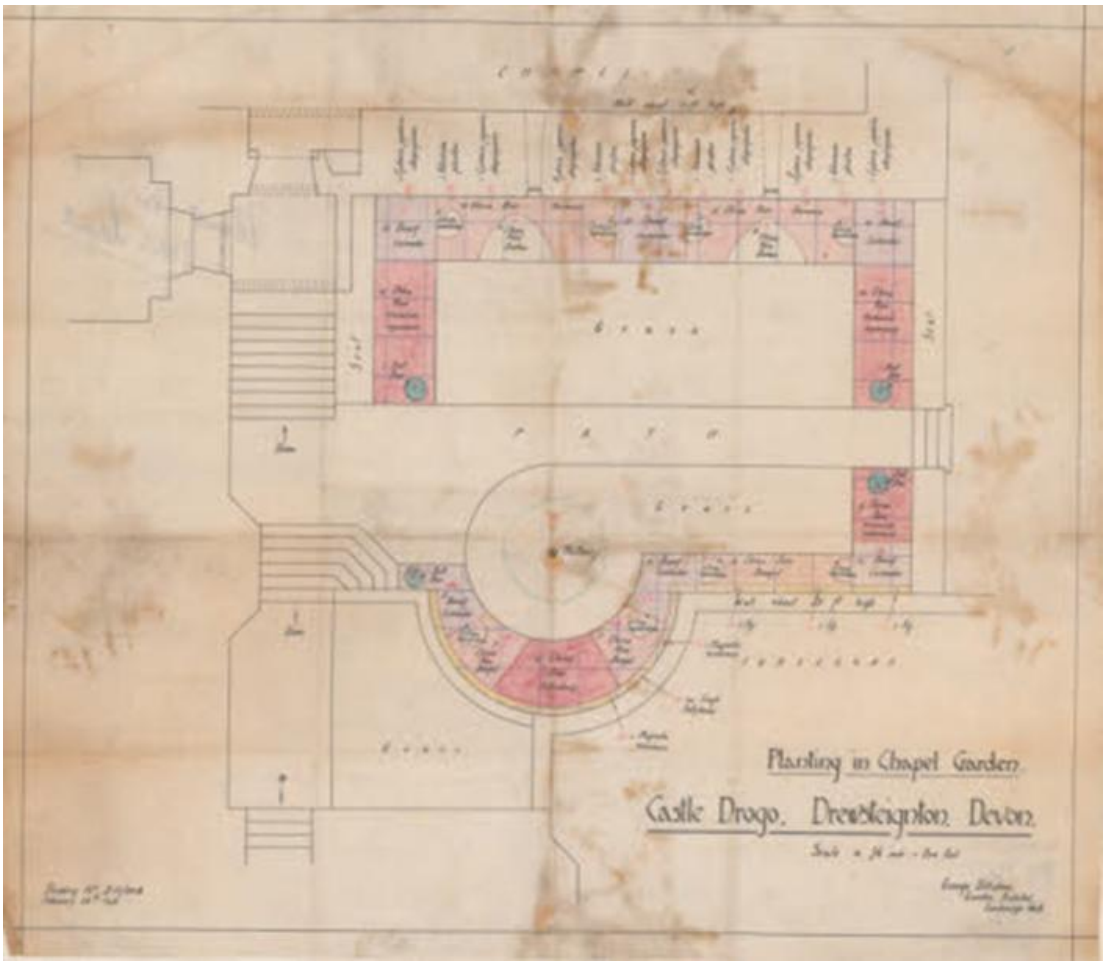

Figure 4: Plan for planting in Chapel Garden by George Dillistone, dated 28 February 1931.[17]

[16] Plan dated 28th February 1928, in National Trust records.

[17] Copyright: National Trust/Imagetek.

Figure 5: Modern day view of the Chapel Garden seen from the Castle roof, showing the important geometry of Lutyens' structural design.[18]

The Chapel Garden was finished in 1930–31 with Dillistone's proposals for planting dated February 1931 being fully adopted.[19] Planting took place that spring, and we can only speculate whether Julius saw the finished project, since he died in 1931 and had lived at his Torquay residence for much of the time leading up to his death.

Postscript

Successive generations of the Drewe family ensured that the gardens were maintained to the highest standard. However, as the gardens matured the number of gardeners were reduced. When the National Trust acquired Castle Drogo and its environs in 1974/5, there were only two full-time gardeners working there. One of those, Percy Cooper, who had been employed as one of the original gardeners under head gardener Collacott and had worked for three generations of the Drewe family, retired. Somewhat surprisingly there are eyewitness accounts of Anthony, Basil Drewe's son and then owner of the castle, helping out with weeding and other menial tasks. The gardens were opened annually to the public on selected days prior to the commencement of the National Trust's stewardship, as part of the National Garden Scheme.

The National Trust has for the past 50 years maintained the gardens in pristine condition. Situated at the highest altitude of any garden in the National Trust portfolio and subjected to the inconsistencies of Dartmoor weather, life for the gardeners and volunteers has sometimes been 'interesting', but adhering to the original designs, they have ensured that the displays will be preserved for future generations. Weekly glowing complementary comments from members of the public suggest Messrs Drewe, Lutyens, Dillistone and Walker would have been rather pleased.

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[18] Copyright: J. Lovie. Plans ref no. NT 901570 and NT 901560 from the National Trust Archive.

[19] *British Iris Society Yearbook* (1938).