



BLAIR CASTLE
& GARDENS
ATHOLL ESTATES

Hercules Garden

A Brief History

This walled garden was planned by James, 2nd Duke of Atholl, assisted by his gardener John Wilson. It was undertaken 1736 – 1764 as part of the Duke's ambitious designs for landscaping the grounds around Blair Castle. It is named after Hercules, whose fine statue by John Cheere overlooks the garden.

The site was originally a boggy hollow, so a series of ponds were planned and the whole area was enclosed with a high wall. Mixed plantings of fruit trees, soft fruit, flowers, vegetables, herbs and ornamental shrubs were adopted with an emphasis on sweetly scented shrubs.

In mid – Victorian times John 7th Duke took advantage of the opportunity afforded when the village of Blair Atholl moved to its present position from the historic site around the white houses still visible at Old Blair, beyond the gardener's cottage. He widened the North Terrace, flanked the long path with herbaceous borders and built the folly which stands by the square pond. Once used for curling, the folly now houses a display outlining the restoration of the garden. The Apple House, at the other end of the ponds, houses information on the sculpture.

Two world wars led to a decline in the maintenance of historic gardens and the 1950s saw a failed attempt to run it as a market garden. Subsequently it was planted with Christmas trees but as these were never harvested, Hercules Garden soon became a forgotten wilderness.

The Restoration

In the 1980s, following a report which highlighted the significance of Hercules Garden, Iain 10th Duke decided to restore the garden but sadly did not live to see its completion. A monument to him by Richard Kindersley stands on the east peninsula as a gift from his friends.

The project involved dredging the lake, introducing a new sluice, reforming the banks and paths and planting fruit trees directed by the original designs which had been carefully preserved in the castle archive. The Chinese bridge was rebuilt to Swann's design, McGregor's Folly and the old Apple House were restored and the perimeter borders were planted. The work hopes to encapsulate the essence of the original.





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Planting Strategy

The philosophy behind the replanting of the garden reflects the results of the research combined with a desire to delight the visitor and a practical approach to maintenance. The archives revealed detailed plans of the garden layout but only vague references to plants. The hard landscaping has been replaced, faithful to the original layout, borders similarly are true to the original plans, however there are fewer of them owing to the constraints of modern maintenance. The choice of plants is more contemporary, visual impact, scent, climatic suitability and usefulness have influenced the selection.

The fruit trees have been placed in their exact original positions, using varieties of pears, plums, apples and cherries that suit the soil and northern climate. The garden provides most of the cut flowers used in the castle and many of the plants are grown here from seeds and cuttings. The south west border is planted with perennials and roses which existed in Britain in the 1750s.

Hercules Garden is maintained by our gardening team of four, who also maintain the castle grounds and caravan park. Two greenhouses support the operation and all vegetation and grass cuttings are composted to build up the fertility of the soil. Compost is augmented with manure from the nearby organic Home Farm.

Features

Statues and other art works can be seen around the garden, they are listed on a separate leaflet and information about them is displayed in the apple house. In 2010 Blair Castle Gardens became the Scottish home for works from The Lettering and Commemorative Arts Trust. These works show fine examples of contemporary letter cutting.

The wrought iron entrance gates were designed by J Wilson Paterson and were presented to the 8th Duke and Duchess by everyone on the estate to mark their silver wedding in 1924.

McGregor's Folly was built in its present form in 1888 and named for Duchess Louisa's lifelong friend Miss Murray McGregor. It was used for curling on the lake.

The Chinese Bridge reflects the 2nd Duke's passion for chinoiserie and was designed by the English architect Abraham Swan in 1753. The present bridge of 1999 follows the original design.

The Swan and Duck Huts on the Canal Pond were built to original designs preserved in the castle archive and thatched in the traditional manner with heather pulled from the hill beyond.

Sculpture A separate sheet lists our loan from 'The Lettering and Commemorative Arts Trust'. More information is in the Apple House at the west end of the garden.

