

An Economic History of the English Garden

Author: Roderick Floud

Floud is an eminent economic historian and clearly a keen gardener. As I sit here during lockdown and working in the garden more intensively than would be normal, it seems an appropriate time to review this book. My local garden centre is shut, and maybe it will never reopen. Easter is the busiest weekend of the year and plants have either in the garden centre or in wholesalers waiting for buyers who cannot appear or take delivery. There is debate over whether gardening should be considered essential. It certainly feels that way but urbanites may not agree. We are all scratching around looking for online suppliers and hoping for delivery before it is too late to plant. The pessimistic amongst us are focusing more heavily than usual on the vegetable patch.

However, most of Floud's book is about the decorative rather than the functional aspects of gardening. He comes to kitchen gardens only in the penultimate chapter and I will reflect on that later. His initial focus, honed by his own experience of the time and money spent in his own garden, is on cost. He is an economist after all.

He starts with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, perhaps because it is possible to get some financial information about the nursery trade and the suppliers to the great and the good designing and developing gardens. An important part of the introduction is his translation of money amounts, done with reference to what we know about wages. On this basis the sums involved are tremendous. On this basis a peach tree bought in 1664 for 5 shillings would be the equivalent of £400 today. Is this extravagant? If you could go to a garden centre you could easily find olive trees selling at £900, so maybe not. The garden in which the peach trees were installed cost the equivalent of £33 million on this method of conversion. Yet the gardens of Alnwick have cost rather more than £40 million over the last decade or so. Gardens are big business, though it may not seem like that from your average plot. The elements of conspicuous consumption and the ability demonstrate power and riches are clear.

In 2017, Oxford Economics calculated that we spent £5.6 billion in nurseries and garden centres and £6.8 billion on landscape services. Floud's book is an attempt to put all this into some kind of perspective. He is interested in how designers, gardeners, nurserymen and clients interacted and affected other activities and industries. He starts by showing how important the state has been in supporting garden industries, firstly the monarchy but then through urban councils laying out parks and gardens to improve the lot of their citizens and through to the garden city movement – to say nothing of the garden village competitions which go on today. This state support may not be considered sufficient by many in the industry but it has been there in various shapes and forms as a backdrop to the private sector to which Floud now turns.

He is both impressed by the great gardens of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries while at the same time resentful of the inequality which made them possible and the sources of wealth, such as slavery, which lay behind several of them. Nonetheless, he sees their creation as producing something distinctive with spinoffs into other areas of life. The following chapters look at these aspects. For those who want more background to the driving forces behind some of these creations, it is worth reading Tim Richardson's 'Arcadia', which lays out the political meanings behind not just Stowe, but other garden and landscape design movements of this period. He deals less with the economics of supporting a garden today. Some gardens will find it hard to survive without visitors, since there is no-one else to generate income with which to pay wages, while owners have insufficient incomes themselves.

Floud is more interested in how the various players in the garden creation process made their money and looks in turn at designers, the nursery trade, gardeners and the role of technology. The chapter on designers has to focus on those for whom we have records. It shows that it was possible for some designers, then as now, to do well. Brown, Repton and Paxton are all well known names. Modern designers, such as the Bannermans or Pearson, are probably in the same league.

He finds it harder to judge the financial success of nurseries. However, several firms have managed to survive through several generations and he uses probate records to try and judge how well different owners have done, from Suttons to Hilliers and Notcutts as well as older names such as Gurler – who supplied Charles II – and Henry Wise of Brompton who died in 1738 probably worth around £179 million. Other nurserymen did less well, some supplying plants to those who didn't pay, and others lasting only a short time.

Turning to gardeners, their lot does not appear to have been a happy one. Apprenticeships were tough and the pay not great. On the other hand, once trained, gardeners could move from place to place, improving their status and given living accommodation. Floud's description of the working and living conditions of undergardeners are not attractive, but a comparative description of other trades might well have been even worse in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He estimates that trained gardeners on average received the average wage for the period. Women's wages were much worse, at least until recently.

Finally, Floud looks at technology, arguing that the drivers of the Industrial Revolution could be seen to have started in gardens. Water and water management required pumps and engines, crucial to the development of the steam engine. Plant breeding for show also had implications for agriculture as did the development of fertilisers and pesticides. The gardener is always on the lookout for new plants and for new ways to help them thrive. Plant collectors travelled the world searching for new exotics and fostering colonial expansion as they did so. The invention of the Wardian case made bringing specimens back from farflung places possible as it created a closed microclimate in which plants could travel. To this do we owe the huge variety of plants now available to UK gardeners.

Floud also looks at the gardens of the 'people', the suburban gardeners who keep the garden industries largely going. The decision to build huge estates in the inter-war period at 12 houses to the acre is uniquely British and gave rise to the garden in which the weekend was

to be spent and a vision which survives to this day. Floud argues that the most popular pastime in the UK is in fact gardening, 'which engages more people from their twenties or thirties until the day of their death'. Who knows whether this can survive a rise in housing density and urban flats?

And then there is the kitchen garden. I know that the purpose of my vegetable plot is to convince me that a properly organised agricultural industry is a more effective way of feeding a nation. Nonetheless I continue to grow vegetables for the pleasure of picking or digging something that goes straight to table. It's not about the economics of food production. It is probably for this reason that kitchen gardens are relegated to a final chapter. Floud concludes that allotments and large kitchen gardens 'could, through intensive cultivation, the application of large quantities of manure and a great deal of labour, produce more per acre than could field horticulture'. But they couldn't do it economically.

Floud really wants gardening to be taken seriously. He concludes that it has 'transformed our country, occupied large amounts of our time and money and become a major topic of conversation. Yet, its contribution to our culture and our taste is undervalued. Gardens pioneered central heating, the application of steam, and iron and glass in construction. Many have argued that gardens should be taken more seriously as an art form. This book argues that they should be taken more seriously as an important element of the economy. Perhaps such an argument is more likely to be effective.

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