

The Gardens of the Nations ~ The English Garden ~

It is easy to forget that the Gardens of the Nations are not flourishing as their trans-Atlantic cousins do in Kensington. Despite their popularity, from their opening in the late 1930's up until their destruction in the 1960's, the gardens no longer exist in their original format.

It is true that some hardscaping can still be found and a good deal of the original planting, especially the trees - now quite mature - are to be found in-situ, growing happily where Ralph Hancock and his team of men planted them. But the gardens, as they were built in 1935, are no more.

Hancock had travelled to New York in 1930 and soon established himself as a landscape architect and garden designer. He won many awards for his innovative rock gardens and he soon became popular on the lecture circuit.

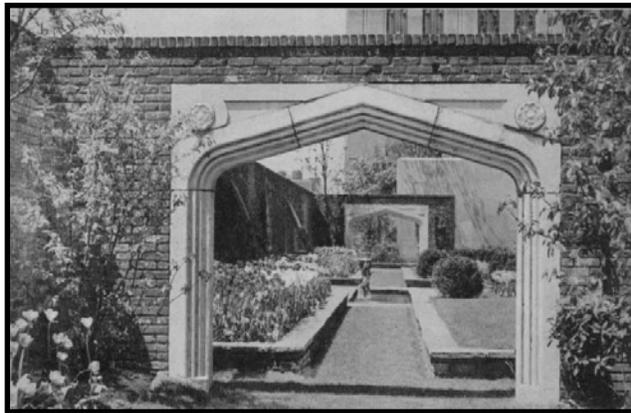
Scholars of Hancock will be familiar with his promotional publication [English Gardens in America](#) and so will already know of his love of the English style of gardens. When he designed the Gardens of the Nations Hancock wanted to make the English garden one of its main features. In fact, Hancock had planned a central English Tea room to grace the 11th floor gardens. Sadly, due to financial restraints, the tea room and much of the original plans¹ did not see fruition.

Despite this setback Ralph pushed ahead with his **English garden**, now scaled down to take up just one side of the 11th floor. Turf was imported from England. Red bricks and a Tudor arch as well as an ancient sundial were man-hauled up the side of the New York skyscraper. Hancock was to also build his own private garden here, nestled amongst espaliered fruit trees, box hedges and a sunken pool complete with a fountain.

¹ The first photograph in this essay shows Ralph Hancock (right) with Raymond Hood (left) the architect of the Rockefeller Center and the original plans for the *Gardens of the Nations*.



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with over 50,000 bulbs. This picture was taken in 1942 and is from a photographic narrative printed in that year.

This charming picture of Rockefeller *Girl Guides* was taken in 1961 and shows the English garden pretty much as it was when it was laid out 26 years earlier. This view is looking back into Hancock's private garden. The grass pathways have been replaced by gravel. The planting looks well established and even the Tudor arch appears to be in good shape too.

Hancock used imported Cotswold stone to establish borders for planting into. The deep red bricks were used for his herringbone pathways and screen-walls.

The Tudor arch², seen here, was used to create a vista through which the visitor could see the English garden. Neatly clipped lawns, a sunken pool and in the distance, Hancock's own private garden complete with his sundial.

Despite the destruction of the gardens, this



antique sundial has been saved and still resides in what is left of the English Garden.

Seen from the reverse angle, we are now looking back into the English garden from Hancock's own private hideaway. With its red brick supporting walls, the Tudor arch was made from reinforced concrete in sections and constructed on site. Climbing roses have quickly established a foot-hold and brightly coloured tulips must have given the garden a spring like feel. Over their first winter the gardens were planted



² The Tudor arch was to be used again, both at Chelsea and then at the Derry and Toms Roof Garden.



These final two images of the English garden were taken in early 2007 by the granddaughter (and her husband) of its creator³.

The English garden has long disappeared and only some of the hardscaping remains.

The sunken pools have been filled-in and their fountains removed. Even the low Cotswold walls are not in their original position. They have been extended and now run the entire length of the 11th floor. The whereabouts of the Tudor arch is unknown.

These red bricks (below), which once supported the Tudor arches, now stand alone in another part of the garden.

Thankfully, the herringbone pathways are as they were when Hancock laid them out and have recently been restored.

Why these beautiful gardens were destroyed is a mystery, especially when those established in Kensington two years later thrived. It has been suggested that the owners of the building no longer saw a need for such an expensive folly and that the money used for their maintenance could be spent on better things. It is true that a television transmitter took the place of some of the *Gardens of the Nations* elsewhere on the roof.



It is also strange that, given the popularity of gardening both in the United States and elsewhere, that these gardens could have been removed. But times and tastes do change and, given the number of people required to maintain such an extravagance, it is understandable how the owners could have made such a decision – even if, in hindsight, it was wrong.

The most depressing part of the story of the English gardens is that since their destruction, indeed the destruction of the entire *Gardens of the Nations*, visitors to the Rockefeller Center are no longer permitted to see what remains of these once magnificent and spectacular gardens.

³ Ralph Hancock died in 1950.