

The Fellows' Garden

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In front of the main entrance to the Science Building and flanked on one side by the Refectory is a rectangular, low-walled garden. The word garden is perhaps slightly euphemistic, for bare paving stones and the low brick walls dominate the scene. But it will not always be thus; a final phase has yet to come, a phase that will add height and grace to this rectangular flat patch.

The original eyesore

Before it was acquired by Brunel almost all of what is now the University campus was covered by greenhouses; it was said to be the largest greenhouse complex in western Europe (see Brunel Bulletin, June 1975). In addition, there was a pumphouse supplying water to the greenhouses from artesian wells. All this was cleared away during the early site works, except for the old pumphouse floor and the wells. The original steam boilers and pumping machinery had rested on solid concrete bases which, characteristic of the age, were several feet thick. They were built to be permanent. The general floor, too, rested on a raft of concrete which by today's standards was also pretty thick. Unfortunately, the old pumphouse floor, together with its artesian wells was declared a place of historic interest and subject to a preservation order. Thus, while the Brunel lawns surrounding this ugly patch were

carefully tended and planted with trees, the area within the unsightly fence lent a general aura of scruffiness to this part of the campus that really beggars description.

The second phase

After the preservation order was eventually lifted, it was estimated that to dig up the massive concrete foundations would cost up to £10,000 (even at that date), a sum that clearly could not be found even if it were justified. It was decided, therefore, to look at the problem the other way and to see whether anything could be done to cover it up. I sought the advice of Anne Preston, an experienced landscape planner and designer. It would, of course, be easy enough to build, say, a rockery over it as was, in fact, suggested. But rockeries are difficult and expensive to maintain. Also, as Mrs. Preston pointed out, it would be a visual disaster to break away from the severe architectural lines of the surrounding buildings, and an equal disaster not to incorporate materials of a tone, texture and colour already used by the architect.

Two very severe constraints faced the planners: any structural work must be done at minimum cost since the money would have to be found out of odd amounts left over from sundry votes and any planting would have to be of such a

nature that it could, in the years to come, be maintained at minimum cost and effort. In addition, the plan would have to take into account the existing distribution of thick and thin (or, rather not so thick) concrete; only the less thick areas would be dug up so as to make access to soil for planting. Also, any structural work would have to stand on already existing foundations, since there clearly would not be any money for digging new ones. These were very hard constraints indeed, ones that would have put most planners off. But Anne Preston accepted the challenge and came up with a simple but effective plan of brickwork, paving and plants; the brickwork not only matching the overall design of the master architect, but following the old foundation line. The main 'structural' interest would eventually come from the plants with their various textures and heights; these were to be considered as much a part of the design as the brickwork. I took the liberty of modifying the plan slightly because I could see that with a little adjustment the garden could not only serve its prime purpose of covering up this great scar on the campus, but also could provide an ideal place in which academic staff could hold outdoor seminars during the warmer months. If the walls were capped with suitable coping stones to provide seats and the spaces between the four



Fig. 1. The Brunel eyesore that disfigured the campus for nearly ten years; contrast this ugly patch with the carefully tended lawns and beds surrounding it



Fig. 2. The Brunel Scab that replaced the old eyesore in 1975; it remained in this unfinished state for a further two years. The picture shows clearly the old foundation-line, which would have to be followed in the new scheme

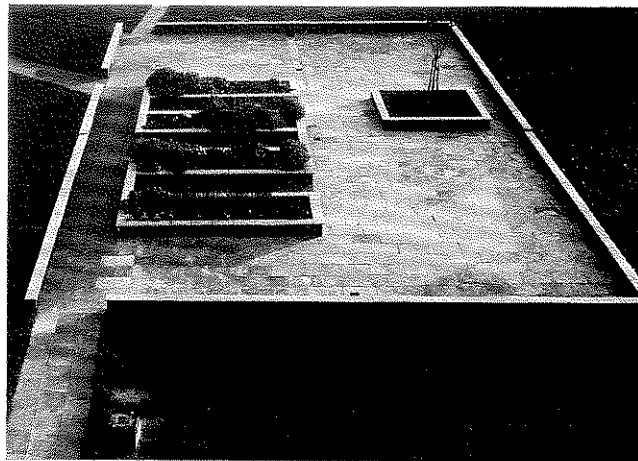
main raised beds joined across as shown in figs. 2 and 3, each of these spaces would make an ideal 'seminar room', a commodity of which the University was notoriously short. I could picture a member of staff sitting on one of the end walls with a group of students disposed along each of the long walls on either side; within a short time the plants would provide the necessary privacy.

Work was started on clearing the muck away and building the walls. The brick-laying was done by Mr. D. Reid, a Senior Porter, exercising his hidden talents on dry weekends. But the little money available soon ran out and for two years the scheme remained unfinished and looking almost as bad as if nothing had been done (fig. 2). The eyesore was healed but in its place was an ugly scab.

The third phase

Nearly two years passed. Then in 1977 with an injection of energy from Mr. Robert Adlington, work started again and in a surprisingly short period the coping

Fig. 3. The Garden in 1979. Some of the paving stones in the N.W. corner (bottom right) will one day be removed to allow further planting. Berberis, yellow leafed Eleagnus, Fatsia and Phormium, although not on the original list, might make a good start?



and paving were added and the area garnished with at least some of the plants previously selected with such special care. It is not yet finished. Eventually some of the paving (bottom right hand corner of fig. 3) will be removed to allow further planting (see figs. 2 & 3), but this, I sup-

pose, will have to wait for a phase four.

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