

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

- Merrion Square is the most intact of the public squares of Dublin. It is considered by many to be the pre-eminent example of Georgian architecture in the city; comparing favourably with urban squares of this period elsewhere in Britain and Europe.
- The Georgian era extended from 1714 to 1830, and in Dublin was a period of unrivalled growth. Situated on the south side of the city, the Fitzwilliam estate stretched from outside the walls of Trinity College along the coast road to Booterstown as far as the family seat in Mount Merrion.
- There were plans to establish a new garden square in front of the east side of Leinster House from 1762, but the construction of the houses surrounding Merrion Square continued for at least another forty years.
- By the early nineteenth century the twelve-acre garden and the townhouses that surrounded it were complete; with the precursor of the present garden layout shown on a survey drawing by John Roe from 1822. The garden was reserved for the sole use of the residents whose houses faced onto the square.
- This park was purchased by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin in 1930 as the intended site for a new cathedral, and was subsequently leased to Dublin Corporation in 1974. Following a programme of restoration works it was opened to the public for the first time under the name of *Archbishop Ryan Park*, renamed *Merrion Square Park* in 2010.
- The urban square has historic antecedents with many variations in form and purpose; but the model of the garden square is particular to Britain and Ireland. Key characteristics include- metal railings enclosing a private shared garden with simple planting schemes, pathways fringing open lawns enhanced with statuary and memorials; surrounded by townhouses arranged in terraces to give an overall coherence to the urban space and the surrounding streets.
- Garden squares have in many cases been re-designed or redeveloped with buildings for new uses. They were originally designed to be for the sole private use of the *keyholders* who used the garden to socialise and to promenade among their peers detached from the busy surrounding streets.
- A plan dated 1762 depicts a scheme for a rectangular central space with narrow plots occupied by parapet and gable-fronted townhouses on the remaining three sides of the square. The park is shown laid out as a wide, open lawn with tree-lined pathways around its perimeter. When the square was constructed, lands to the south and east remained as fields, which were soon to be replaced by expanding development.
- By 1791 the residents obtained an Act of Parliament that provided for the enclosure of the park, and Benjamin Simpson won the competition for its design. In 1792, the Rutland Memorial was built to the west side of the park to the designs of Francis Sandys. By 1794, the planting, perimeter pathway and wrought-iron railings were in place fringing a wide open lawn.
- Maps record how the park landscape was gradually altered over the nineteenth-century, but also how the original scheme remains intact, albeit partially obscured. Interlocking pathways were installed to connect the entrance gates on the north and south side, and formed an elegant ellipse at the centre of the park. The new paths created five open areas laid out as lawns with curved blocks of planting appearing periodically within the perimeter pathway.

- Since the opening of the park to the public in 1975, Dublin City Council have maintained the square, introduced new planting schemes, new buildings and sculptures. The historic path layout was largely retained, with some alterations to the southeast corner to accommodate the installation of depot buildings.
- The internal paths are in a reasonable state of repair, with some signs of erosion in the form of holes, hollows and patch repairs. However, the quality of the surface is poor and should be replaced in time with a more attractive finish appropriate to an historic park.
- The replacement railings are in a reasonable state of repair, however, the moulded granite plinths are in a poor condition in many places. The railings, especially to those sides used as the outdoor gallery, are in need of redecoration. Works are required urgently to the plinth stones to avoid their being damaged beyond repair.
- The depot buildings are of poor quality construction, visually unattractive and nearing the end of their life span. They are to be removed in the near future, allowing the reinstatement of the perimeter path network.
- Improvements to the public realm could include uncontrolled pedestrian crossings opposite park gates, and a new esplanade to Merrion Square West which could act as a national event space where pedestrians would have priority. This would improve links to the National Gallery and Natural History Museum.
- The planted areas having grown into the central area of the park have altered its original character. Dublin City Council have initiated a programme of selective clearance and tree surgery that is being carried out during the winter months. This work has re-established the prominence of the specimen trees, as well as opening up historic views across the park and towards surrounding buildings by reducing the height of the understorey.
- The Rutland Memorial was conserved as recently as 2009, and remains in good condition. Consideration should be given to reinstating the water features and also adapt it to act as a gateway into the park. The site of the former park lodge to its rear could be used as an outreach facility for the many cultural institutions around the park, or a memorial to the diaspora supported by the Irish Famine Commemoration Fund.
- As identified by the Merrion Square Innovation Network, the park would benefit from the provision of new facilities such as a café and toilets, in order to improve links among the many institutions that line the square into the garden and to allow visitors to linger. This should be sited beside the new playground, and be sensitively designed and respond to its historic setting. It could incorporate a gallery space and interpretation material.
- Another idea would be to provide a new *event shelter* and performance hub beside the mound in the south-east corner that would enliven this part of the garden.
- Merrion Square is an historic place of national significance and makes a major contribution to the European significance of Georgian Dublin, with its fulfillment of Enlightenment urban planning ideas that flourished throughout the continent during the eighteenth century.
- Although its original intended purpose as a private garden was to be transformed considerably when it was opened some forty years ago, Merrion Square Park has become an important part of the social fabric of the city as well as being a valuable amenity for all. It is an ideal setting to present Georgian garden heritage, its historical associations and its ongoing conservation to visitors and locals.