

# Lecture Reports

*Brian Little*

**Thursday 9th December 2004.**

***The History of Oxford College Gardens –***

**Michael Pirie, head gardener, Green College, Oxford.**

Michael Pirie looked at a variety of college gardens on a century by century basis. His selection was guided by the availability of maps and the need to try to identify the functions of specific gardens.

The earliest map illustration was for 1578 and highlighted the colleges. In the case of Magdalen it revealed kitchen gardens as well as other green spaces with fish ponds. At Merton the social hierarchy within the College appears to have been a factor in garden designation. There was a warden's garden as well as one for bachelors. New College exhibited very different features. Vines were grown and, by 1500, an orchard had been acquired. In contrast, All Souls was more plant conscious and saw no need to grow its own fruit and vegetables.

By the seventeenth century the incentive for colleges to have kitchen gardens was much diminished by the growth of market gardens located on the edge of the city and prepared to sell to the University. In the case of Magdalen and Wadham Colleges, a different kind of response was to invest in more formalised layouts. Robert Plot found that Wadham had evolved a water display and John Evelyn spotted apiaries in the grounds.

During the eighteenth century, although some college buildings were neglected, associated gardens continued to be the focus of attention. At New College a formal layout with yew trees was their interpretation of a dominant landscape movement. There was attention to borders of flower beds and grand gates gave added significance to the whole garden approach.

As the century advanced so layouts became more informal, more naturalistic. This trend persisted through the following hundred years and was very visible at St John's, Trinity and Wadham Colleges. The outer gardens at St John's became a popular rendezvous spot on Sundays.

Michael Pirie concluded with some observations about the present day and the likely future appearance of college gardens. The formal garden is still around but has the disadvantage of being labour intensive. On the evidence specially of St John's and New College, a high value is placed on the possession and appearance of gardens which suggest that in general college gardens have a good future and will continue to attract visitors.