



*The Piper Alpha memorial in the rose garden in Hazlehead Park. All photos © Ian Talboys and Aberdeen City Council.*

## Aberdeen: the changing face of the Bloom

Sandy Scott

Aberdeen is the only place in Scotland to have entered Beautiful Scotland in every one of its 50 years, winning the city category 37 times and the rose bowl for the highest score in all categories 11 times, as well as many successes representing Scotland in Britain in Bloom. In 2010 Aberdeen represented Scotland in the city category of Britain in Bloom again and was very lucky to receive a bronze medal, a humiliating experience given the city's pedigree. Part of the report from the RHS judges stated that it was obviously a council entry and did not embody enough representation from the community.

Aberdeen City Council was under severe financial constraints even before austerity was recognised nationally and more budget restraints placed on the Environment Services. What the bronze medal made council officers realise was that 'past glories could not outweigh the need for new investment' a quote

from the late David Welch, former Director of Aberdeen's Leisure and Recreation Department, and a different approach was required as to how the city was presented, not just to judges, but to Aberdeen's residents, tourists, and those who worked and spent leisure time in Aberdeen.

### **New approach**

A whole of service review started in early 2011 and this meant that as part of the streamlining process many experienced personnel either left or took early retirement. One of the key drivers for the review was the determination to seek out public opinion on what their views on public open spaces were and to that end an open space audit was commissioned. Over a quarter of the land in Aberdeen consists of open spaces, including parks, gardens, playing fields, woodland, river corridors, play areas, allotments and civic space. The audit looked at the amount of each type of open space as well

as their quality, and how accessible they were to the communities around them. There is growing evidence that quality and accessible open spaces contribute towards improving health, economy, environment and wellbeing. They promote sustainable development, help mitigate the impacts of climate change such as flooding and air pollution and provide green networks benefiting biodiversity.

### **Strategy**

The Open Space Strategy is based on the results of the audit and involves communities, businesses, residents and partner organisations. The strategy aims to provide opportunities for everyone to contribute towards improving the quality of life throughout the city, particularly in those areas identified by the audit as low in quality. Within a context of serious financial constraint, it promotes innovative and radical ways of maintaining and managing these open spaces. As the strategy developed it was clear that new ways of thinking and working were already being developed by council staff and volunteers were invited onto the In Bloom steering group who

had experience in Bloom campaigns. The vice convener of the then Housing and Environment Committee had attended the 2010 awards ceremony in Guernsey and intimated that she was willing to be Aberdeen's parks champion within the council, a great help when budgets were decreasing and grounds maintenance was becoming a lower priority. The councillor promoted the work of the group, partners and volunteers to the rest of the elected members, heightening the In Bloom profile.

### **Community involvement**

As a city, some communities were already mobilised and our existing partners, Culter in Bloom, Dyce in Bloom and the emerging Cove in Bloom were all brought closer together as a team with the council and an In Bloom strategy evolved which included all the necessary criteria. It is no longer just about colourful flower beds and baskets. Environmental responsibility and community involvement are now important and along with horticultural achievement are the three pillars that underpin Beautiful Scotland and Britain in Bloom. Children's involvement, investi-



*Beds within the David Welch Winter Garden complex.*



gating which schools within Aberdeen are proactive in environmental issues, encouraging partnership with business, friends groups, voluntary and other services, aligning objectives to National Health outcomes and other relevant national strategies, including biodiversity and climate change, are all needed.

When the steering group looked at ways of improving Aberdeen, it quickly emerged that Aberdeen had only two entrants in the It's Your Neighbourhood campaign. Between them council officers and local communities increased this number to 25 groups by 2016. The entrants are wide and varied including Drugs Action Recovery Garden Project, Friends of Duthie Park and Garthdee Field Allotments Association. Some examples of Friends Groups are Friends of Hazlehead, one of the city's major fundraisers, Friends of Seaton Park, who were instrumental in the clear up after this year's flooding, Friends of Johnston Gardens, a fledgling group just started who have already carried out great work in the park.

Aberdeen Muslims, who are a large community group, joined forces with Friends Of Seaton Park and the council to tackle the clean up after particularly bad flooding in

Seaton Park. It took weeks of hard work and tonnes of debris had to be cleared. The Seaton Park Wetlands Project was set up. There had been attempts to drain the areas susceptible to flooding but the park continued to flood and wetland plants started to colonise naturally, along with visits from different types of birds. In August 2015, the council approved plans to make it a designated wetland, and is now continuing to work with the local community and schools to implement the design as well as get involved with looking after it. The wetlands include a viewing platform as well as planting which will increase biodiversity and looking visually appealing. It will also be structured to discourage children and dogs from entering areas of deeper water.

### **New thinking**

More effort was made in future planning; the council had been taken to task regarding the condition of street furniture, the majority of which was the responsibility of the roads authority. A schedule of work was drawn up, funding sought and better partnership working achieved between council departments.

Austerity measures had led to a 50% reduction in summer bedding; baskets and window boxes had been lost to the cuts. A new joined



*Demonstration and community beds in Duthie Park.*



*Summer colour in the Victorian corridor in Duthie Park.*

up effort was made to involve the private sector and communities to enter partnerships. Now, five years on, virtually every bed, planter and window box, with the exception of the Town House and the Music Hall, are privately supported. Last summer over 250 baskets were supported by Aberdeen Inspired, the Business Improvement District in the city centre. A shift in landscape planning has seen more perennial herbaceous borders designed and implemented and a reduction in urban rose planting, due to high maintenance costs. Roses, which Aberdeen was traditionally famous for, can still be seen in quantity in some of our city parks.

In planning for the future Aberdeen has a new, enhanced green space designation the Green Space Network. This covers our best areas including river valleys, the coast, woodland, District Wildlife Sites and local nature reserves along with other valued landscapes. These areas are eligible to benefit from significant investment to rejuvenate and revitalise them. Developing along the transport corridors increases the potential for people to use public transport, helping to reduce congestion and commuting times while helping our environment.

## **Nature conservation**

Aberdeen's Nature Conservation Strategy is a partnership with a wide range of relevant organisations both statutory such as Scottish Natural Heritage and voluntary. Of particular interest is work done at East Tullos Burn. In 2012 Aberdeen City Council launched a project to look at ways to improve the East Tullos Burn in Torry. Sadly the burn had been neglected, suffering with poor water quality and litter problems. The aim of the project was to look at ways to transform the burn into a more natural water feature to improve the water quality, provide a haven for wildlife, and become attractive to local communities and visitors to the area.

With the help of the local community, a design was produced and work on the ground to implement it began in March 2014. The design included a new meandering course for the burn as well as the creation of pond areas, with extensive planting of wetland plants and trees, plus improved access around the area including a new bridge. Local school children from St. Fittick's Primary school helped put the finishing touches to the burn by helping to plant flowers on the site.





*Two views of Johnston Gardens.*

The site quickly became awash with colour during the summer of 2014. Plants included yellow iris, ragged robin, purple loosestrife and meadowsweet as well as poppy and cornflower in drier places, with many lasting well into the late autumn and early winter. Many insects such as ladybird, butterfly, damselfly and dragonfly have moved in and many bird species have been seen including the odd migrant and rare visitor. The Nature Conservation Strategy includes plans to help species of special conservation concern such as our thriving population of red squirrels and the bottle nosed dolphins which live offshore.

The new approach was summed up in the title of our campaign and the revised portfolio *Growing Smarter Granite City* which is given to the judges before their visit to show how the city has managed its open spaces throughout the previous year.

### **Aberdeen parks today**

Aberdeen has six city parks, seven local parks, 32 neighbourhood parks and many more green spaces around the city. The city parks are large parks with a number of different facilities, capable of attracting large numbers of residents

and visitors from a wide catchment area. All cater for a specific area of the city but each has its own distinctive features.

Duthie Park is located close to the city centre, so popular with locals and visitors alike and recognised as one of the best designed parks in Scotland. The 18 ha. park has a wonderfully spacious feel and includes open green spaces, mature deciduous and evergreen trees, flower beds and a cascading ornamental pond system with wetland area. The open grassed area has a band stand that is still in use, cricket is played in the summer and special events like Opera in the Park and fun days make full use of the space.

The David Welch Winter Gardens is an extensive glass house complex that provides a year round indoor garden experience. It is home to many exotic plants including one of the largest collections of cacti and succulents in Britain. It was the subject of an article in the *Caledonian Gardener* in 2012. Duthie Park gained Aberdeen's first Green Flag in 2013. The play area to the south of the park was voted best play space in Scotland in 2013. Duthie Park recently underwent a major restoration thanks to Heritage Lottery Fund's



Parks for People programme. The funding allowed the restoration of most of the park's original Victorian features, community gardens and the reintroduction of paddle boats to the upper pool. We were also able to employ park rangers who provide activities for schools and community groups throughout the year. Duthie Park even provides a setting for a wedding service, either inside the Temperate House of the Winter Gardens or outside in the park on the bandstand. The Heritage Lottery Bid took over seven years to complete and was the single most ambitious and expensive project the service has undertaken in the last 20 years.

Hazlehead Park is a large park of over 180 ha. on the outskirts of Aberdeen. It is heavily

wooded and is popular with naturalists, picnickers, walkers and sports enthusiasts. Surrounding the park are football pitches, two golf courses, a pitch and putt course and woods for walking, running and cycling. The park itself features two recently restored rose gardens. The North Sea memorial rose garden was refurbished, with the roses in full bloom in time for the 25th anniversary of the Piper Alpha disaster. This was funded by oil and gas UK with many industry partners. The Queen Mother's Rose Garden was refurbished with funding from the Friends of Hazlehead, the local volunteer group who have done such fantastic fundraising for the park. The large children's play area is great for the young ones while the







*Flooding and recovery in Seaton Park.*



*The Groovy Growits replanting the carnivorous plant display.*

maze is fun for all. Pets Corner features many different animals that children love to see: rabbits, chinchillas, miniature donkeys, tropical fish, ducks and many more. A significant collection of sculptures by a range of artists are on show in addition to a number of heritage pieces, which were rescued from various places within the city.

Our core paths network provides an invaluable link from Hazlehead Park to nearby areas. These paths in turn link with others to create a wide network, which opens up the whole city.

Seaton Park is a much loved 27 ha. park on the banks of the River Don to the north of the city. The central Cathedral Walk is a stunning floral display that leads the eye and the walker to nearby St Machar Cathedral. The walled garden is a hidden gem providing a secluded sheltered spot. The meandering River Don provides a natural boundary at the west of the park. A lovely riverside walk is part of the core paths network and links the park to the historic Brig o' Balgownie and beyond to the North Sea. The popular children's play area has the unusual and popular attraction of an old brake van and railway wagons. A spell of wet and windy weather from 29–30 December 2015 affected parts of the UK as Storm Frank arrived. The storm resulted in further flooding across North East Scotland. Areas of Seaton Park were under two metres of flood water for

several weeks. A major programme of works began in 2016 to embrace the environmental changes caused by the flooding, including a man-made wetland and a viewing point. With an investment of £90,000, Aberdeen City Council was the lead for the project in partnership with the Friends of Seaton Park.

Victoria Park has open spaces, plenty of flowers, shrubs and deciduous trees in its five ha. A spring highlight is the Rhododendron Dell, which bursts into a stunning array of colours and smells. In the centre of the park is a fountain made of 14 different granites, presented to the people by the granite polishers and master builders of Aberdeen.

Aberdeen Beach and Queen Links is an extremely popular recreational area. A short distance from the city centre, the beach is visited by holiday makers and city residents all year round. Aberdeen Beach is a Resort Seaside Award beach. The award, which is granted by Keep Scotland Beautiful, recognises excellent litter management, safety procedures and water quality. Aberdeen Beach has received the award every year since 2007.

Westburn Park is a spacious park with open grass areas and mature broad leaved trees. The Gilcomston Burn cuts through the 10 ha. site and feeds three gently cascading ponds. Further downstream is a small managed





*Spring colour from azaleas in Hazlehead Park.*



*Hazlehead woodland. Natural areas are as important as flower beds.*





*Carpet bedding in Union Terrace Gardens.*



*A new roof garden in the city centre.*





*Tree planting in Hazlehead Park.*



*A polytunnel used for a drugs recovery project.*

marsh area. The well-stocked children's play area is very popular with the local community. In addition there is a practice cycle track for children. For the more adventurous there is a skateboard ramp and a mini concrete skateboard/BMX park.

### **Local parks**

Local parks serve smaller catchment areas than city parks, have fewer facilities but can contain specific attractions. In season Johnston Gardens is a gem of a garden set in the west end of Aberdeen. The one hectare site was gifted to the city in 1936 and has streams, waterfalls, ponds, rockeries and a rustic bridge. The garden is planted with rhododendrons, spring bulbs, heathers and alpine. This tranquil spot is the location for the Expro Memorial which commemorates the 16 men lost in a helicopter crash in the North Sea in April 2009.

Rubislaw and Queens Terrace Gardens is a pleasant strip of green lawn with mature trees, and flower beds which stretches westwards from the city centre. These were originally private gardens belonging to the homes along Rubislaw and Queens Terrace. The council took over the land and formed the park when many of the elegant houses were converted into office blocks. The unusual square pool and fountain was built to celebrate Aberdeen's success in Britain in Bloom's 1969, 1970 and 1971 competitions.

Allan Park's six hectares are almost hidden from view in a sheltered hollow between the Deeside Walkway and the River Dee at Cults. The main feature is the bog garden with its wide variety of marsh and water plants. The 2 ha. Stewart Park is named after a former Lord Provost of the city, Sir David Stewart. Two

curios in the park are whale jaw bones presented to the park in 1903 by the Captain of the Arctic whaler *Benbow*, and an intricate fountain designed as a replica of an Italian lavabo. Bon Accord Terrace Gardens is a lush green oasis adjacent to the city centre. The area is mainly open grass and mature deciduous trees and provides a welcome respite close to the bustle of Union Street. The two hectare park is believed to be the site of a bloody battle over 300 years ago: The Battle of Justice Mill.

Union Terrace Gardens is an unusually shaped one hectare park that provides a very important and unusual green space in the heart of the city dating back to 1879. Situated just off the city's main thoroughfare of Union Street, the park was built in the valley of the Denburn and the amphitheater formed over the remains of the flattened Denburn Terrace. Union Terrace Gardens is used for concerts and leisure activities as well as providing an oasis for relaxation in the city centre. On the north side is a magnificent floral crest depicting the city's coat of arms. Above that are three beds that change each year and depict local and national groups or topical events. At the Union Street end of the gardens a group of mature elms, approximately 200 years old, are a remnant of a site known as Corbie Woods. Corbie is the traditional Scots word for crow, and crows nest there to this day.

Westfield Park is the largest park in the Bridge of Don area. The large expanse of grass with a number of tree belts is crisscrossed by footpaths and is mostly used for informal recreation though there are also several sports pitches and facilities.

### Success

All the co-operative effort culminates in judgement day in early August when judges from Beautiful Scotland or Britain in Bloom assess the city. From the low point of bronze in 2010 Aberdeen achieved gold medals in Beautiful Scotland in 2015 and Britain in Bloom in 2014. In 2016 Aberdeen hosted Beautiful Scotland's 50th anniversary award



*Mac the mandarin duck in Johnston Gardens. At first thought to be an escape he was found to have been ringed in Norway.*



*A red squirrel.*



*Wildflowers at East Tullos Burn.*





*Part of BP's award winning garden at their Greenridge Centre.*

ceremony in the Beach Ballroom. It proved a very successful year for the city as we were awarded gold medals by both Beautiful Scotland and Britain in Bloom as city category winners. The work put into restoring Seaton Park was recognised with awards for overcoming adversity, while Duthie Park was named best Public Park in Britain and the David Welch Winter Gardens received the David Welch Award for Something Special which commemorates Aberdeen's legendary parks director. As one judge commented: 'Aberdeen is back where it should be'.

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*Sandy started gardening at 14 in a local nursery. He became an apprentice gardener with Aberdeen City Council in 1979 and served his time in Amenity Horticulture. He progressed through charge hand, supervisor, and then area officer responsible for over 100 staff acquiring his Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management Diploma on the way. He now runs a team developing strategies for parks and open spaces, including the Duthie Park HLF restoration project and Hazlehead Park, Scotland's first Climate Change Park. He has been chair of Aberdeen in Bloom and is a Beautiful Scotland judge and a Green Flag judge. He also chairs Aberdeen's allotment forum and sits on various friends and community groups. He likes to give talks on Aberdeen's heritage of parks. Sandy has fond memories of his mentor, the late David Welch, who was Director of Aberdeen's Leisure and Recreation Department and, like David, thinks of himself as, first and foremost.....a gardener.*





*Spring crocus in Stonehaven Road.*



*Recent awards for the city and our partners.*



*Celebrations!*