

18. Landscape Leader

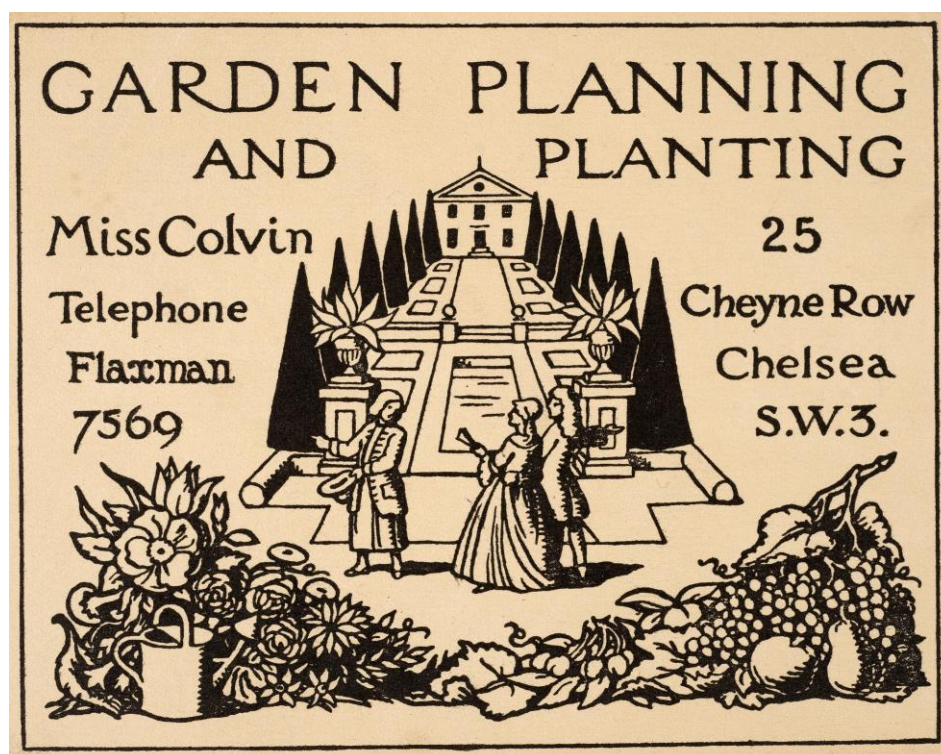
In this response, landscape architect Hal Moggridge tells the story of Brenda Colvin, who became President of the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1951. The page forming the focus of this piece is a short announcement from page two of the Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects in November 1951. The announcement was accompanied by a portrait of Brenda Colvin, a summary of her contribution to the profession up to that year, and was followed by the text of her presidential address.

Announcement, 'The New President – Miss Brenda Colvin', 1951



Announcement of her presidency in the Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects, November 1951 (MERL Library PER Open Access Jou/Ins-L).

In 1951 Brenda Colvin was elected President of the *Institute of Landscape Architects* (ILA, now the *Landscape Institute*). She was the first woman to be elected president of any design, planning, or environmental profession in the UK, probably in Europe. The MERL holds an archive of her work as part of its *Landscape Institute* (LI) collection, which includes historic ILA journals. Women have played an important role in the landscape profession since the foundation of the Institute in 1929. In 1951 Madeline Agar, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, Sylvia Crowe, Sheila Haywood, Susan Jellicoe, Judith Ledebor, Mary Mitchell, Marie Shephard, and Jaqueline Tyrwhitt were some of the women who were prominent in the profession. Dame Sylvia Crowe's archive is also a vivid part of the LI holdings at The MERL. Brenda Colvin shared her office from 1945 to 1965 with Dame Sylvia; they were never in partnership, but shared staff as well as premises, an unusual arrangement. In 1951 Brenda Colvin was actively designing at least four private gardens, tree planting for schools in Hertfordshire as well as the grounds of County Hall, Hertfordshire, the grounds of a hospital, and three quarry restoration projects. At the same time she was being approached about the design of new power station landscapes, a type of project in which she was to excel during the next two decades.

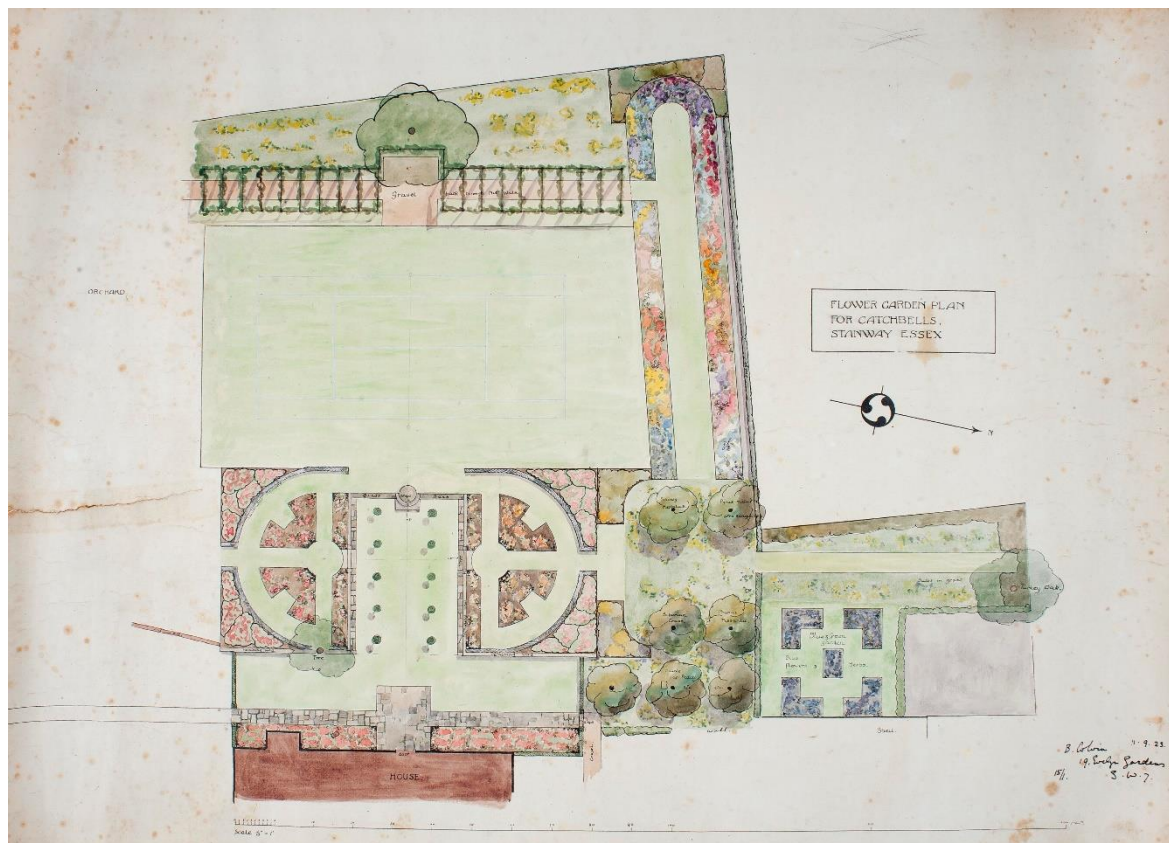


An early example of Brenda Colvin's business card, circa 1920s (MERL AR COL B/3/10).

Brenda Colvin was born June 1897 in India into a family who were part of the elite Indian Civil Service. She wrote:

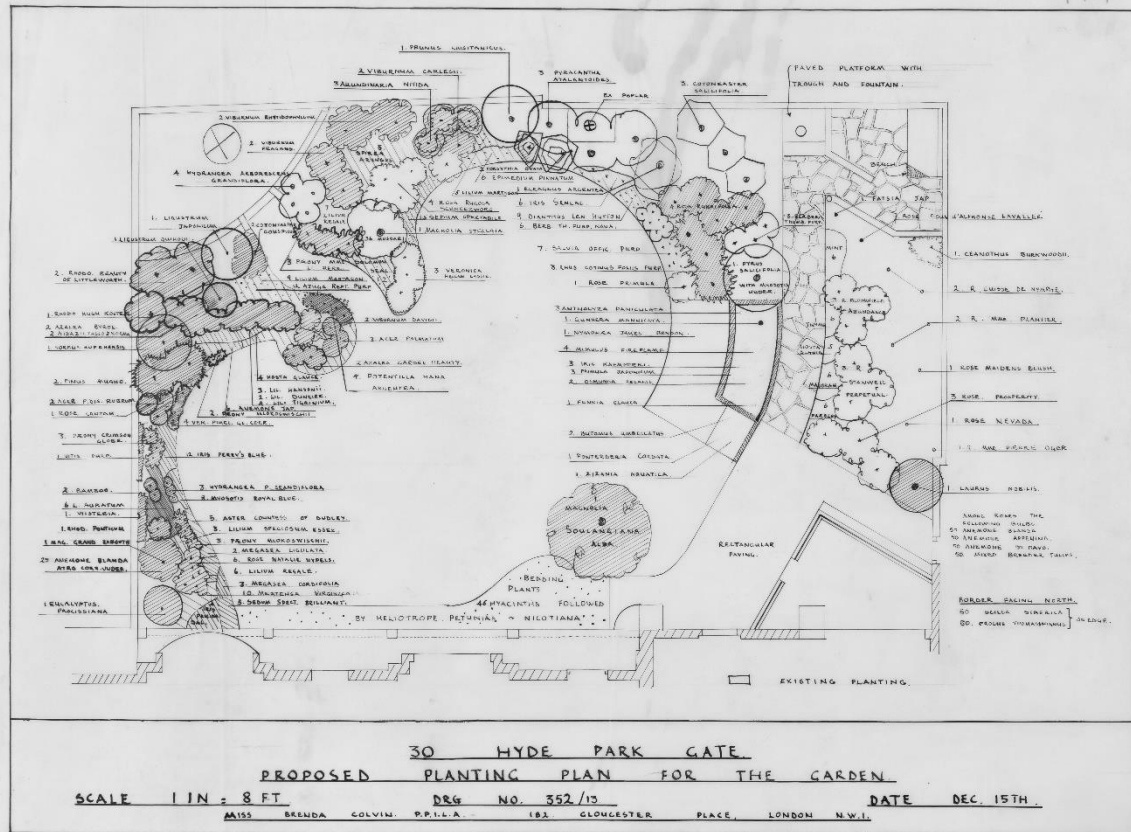
"My earliest schooling was in a houseboat on the river Jhelum [in Kashmir] ... I remember the wealth of wild flowers and almond blossom orchards on the lower terraces of the surrounding mountains. I remember picnics on the banks and islands of the lakes and in the gardens of the Shalimar."

She would sometimes remark with characteristic dryness that due to her haphazard subsequent schooling, though she spent some teenage years resident in a grace-and-favour apartment in Hampton Court, the census would categorize her as an illiterate immigrant, a status which she welcomed. Aged 21 she attended Swanley Horticultural College where she soon transferred to the landscape design course taught by Madeline Agar, for whom she afterwards worked for a short time. When this design course was closed before she had completed it, she promptly led a group of students to leave Swanley College and employ Madeline Agar privately to teach them. In 1922 she started her own landscape architecture practice with which she continued all the rest of her life.



The Garden at Catchbells, an example of a pre-1939 design by Colvin (MERL AR COL DO1/3/2).

Her archive at The MERL includes a few pre-1939 drawings together with a collection of black and white photographs, almost exclusively private or school gardens. Her work in the 1920s and 1930s was in the Arts and Crafts style, though already with hints of the more naturalistic flowing work which she was to develop after 1951. Her great skill as a plantsman was already evident in the photographs of completed gardens. Indeed throughout the 1930's she contributed regular articles about planting design to *Landscape & Garden*, the pre-war quarterly journal of the ILA, copies of which are held by The MERL. The MERL archive also includes the two important books she wrote – *Land and Landscape* (1st edition, 1948) and *Trees for Town and Country* with drawings by S. R. Badmin (1st edition, 1947). Her post-war work is represented by numerous drawings, many large, and some supporting material.

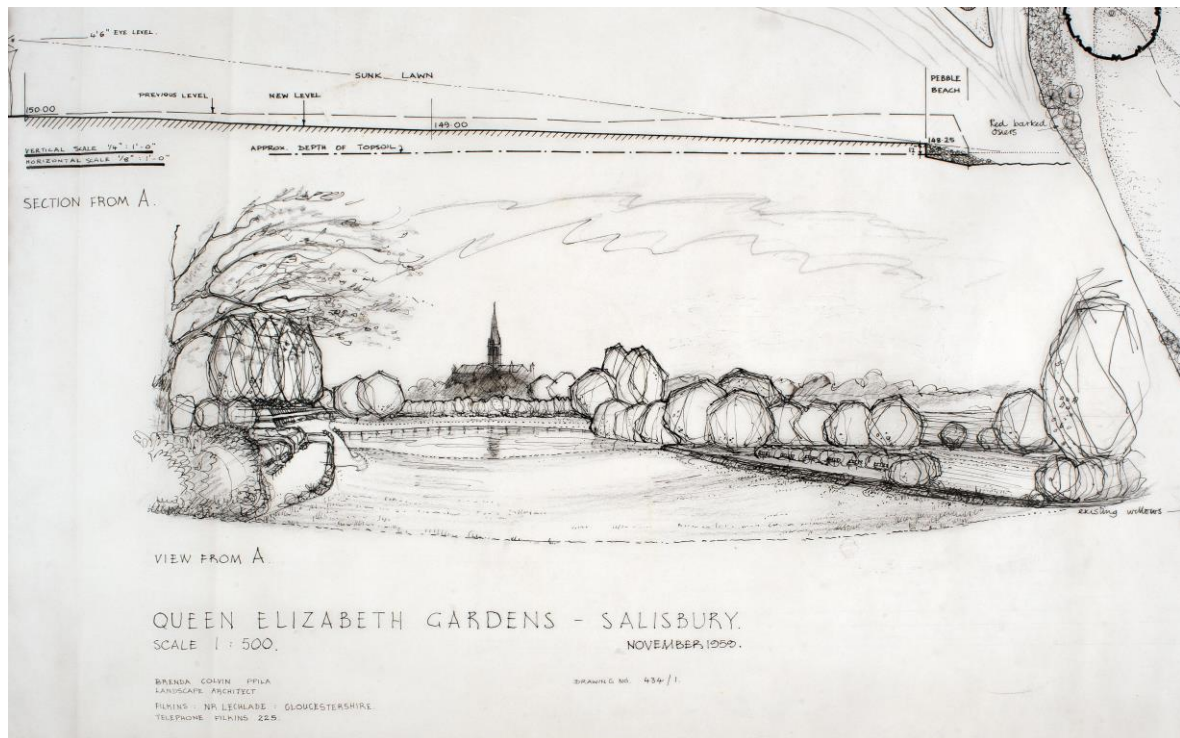


A design for 30 Hyde Park Gate, a private garden, dating to 1953 (MERL AR COL DO1/2/3/3).

She was a founder member of the ILA in 1929 and was elected to Council continuously for 47 years from 1929 until 1976. For ten years from 1939 to 1948 she had been Honorary Secretary to the Institute, the progress of which owed a great deal to her energy and devotion. While she was Vice-President the 1951 Festival of Britain was being prepared; it is characteristic of her professional integrity that she herself stood back from personal involvement while ensuring that “members of the Institute of Landscape Architects have had some share both in the planning and detail designing of all these exhibits”, as Frank Clark wrote in an article in the October 1951 *American Landscape Architecture Magazine* (Vol.42 No1), adding:

“We on the South Bank expect you to feel ... the spaciousness of a moorland escarpment, the languor of a flowery meadow on a hot summer day, the heat of the jungle, the coolness of streams trickling over pebbles and rocks, and so on.”

Frank Clark with Marie Shephard, Peter Youngman, and Peter Shephard all played a major part in the layout of the principal 1951 Festival site on the south bank of the Thames nearly opposite the Palace of Westminster. Peter Shephard’s archive is also part of The MERL collection.



Design for Queen Elizabeth Gardens, Salisbury, dating to 1959 (MERL AR COL DO1/2/7).

The influence of the landscape profession in Britain was growing rapidly in the 1950s. Landscape architects were being commissioned at the beginning of many major institutional projects. Thus it came about that in the 1950s and 1960s Brenda Colvin, while continuing to design elegant gardens, was appointed landscape architect for substantial projects including Queen Elizabeth Gardens and crematorium for Salisbury, Aldershot new military town, Trimpey reservoir, and several power stations. The process of early appointment of landscape consultants for large public institutional projects culminated in the influential clause 11 of the 1968 *Countryside Act* which reads:

“In the exercise of their functions relating to land under any enactment every Minister, government department and public body shall have regard to the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside.”

In early 1969, when she was still running a thriving landscape practice at the age of 71, Brenda Colvin wanted to perpetuate her work, continuing service to long term clients. Thus it came about that she asked me, then aged 33, to join her as a partner so that her practice would continue into the future. Some of her long term projects were carried on for many years after her death in 1981. *Colvin & Moggridge* still thrives, now under a new generation of landscape architects, thus fulfilling her wishes.

A project which continued until 2005 was the construction of Gale Common, an artificial hill near Selby in Yorkshire made out of pulverised fuel ash from two nearby power stations and shale from a coal mine, and restored to fields and woods. Stage 1 of this hill, the only part to have been completed, is some 70m high and one kilometre long and wide. In her presidential address (which

appears on pages 3-7 of the November 1951 *Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects*) Brenda Colvin foresaw such a possibility for the future, saying:

“We may perhaps envisage the making of new shapes, formed from waste material and producing a totally new landscape.”

In this spirit she conceived the profile of the agricultural hillsides of Gale Common hill, Stage 1 of which has been constructed following the shapely contours which she had designed on a huge drawing in 1967.



Photographic item from the archive linked to the Gale Common Ash Disposal (MERL AR COL A/2/3).

Another long-term client was David Astor, the owner and editor of the *Observer* newspaper. Appointed to design the layout of the grounds of his Sutton Courtenay House in 1948, she later designed the garden of his London house (1953), and the grounds of another house, Compton Beauchamp, near Swindon, into which he never moved. However, on the downland hilltops of this estate she planted a series of shelter belts which have now become mature woods. Nearby in the early 1970s we worked together on a reorganisation of the land around the Uffington White Horse converting arable land to pasture to make it accessible to visitors, together with the siting and layout of a hidden new car park, so that this whole hilltop landscape could be donated to the National Trust for perpetual safe keeping. After her death in 1981, I continued to advise on David Astor's Sutton Courtenay estate, thus realising her philosophy of continuity in care for landscape.



Detail showing some of the work for the Sutton Courtenay job for David Astor (MERL AR COL DO1/2/17/2).

The LI archive at The MERL, which was only added to the Museum's holdings in recent years, contains her surviving drawings, papers, and files. It is an invaluable asset for landscape design and for land-related history. Students are already visiting to understand how landscape projects were carried out before the computer age—typically with huge hand-drawn design, contract drawings, and typed letters, all stored in paper files. There are also many photographs, both 35mm slides and black and white prints. Thus The MERL supports Brenda Colvin's aspiration, as expressed in the final sentence of her 1951 presidential address:

"Let this age aim at leaving a landscape for the future to enjoy."

Further Information:

For more about Landscape Institute journal holdings at The MERL see –

https://rdg.ent.sirsi.dynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/merl/search/results?qu=Landscape+Institute.&qf=UR_FORMAT%09Format%09CR%09Journal&lm=MERL2

For more about the Landscape Institute see – <https://www.landscapeinstitute.org/>

For more about Colvin & Moggridge see – <https://www.colmog.co.uk/>

For more information about books by and about Brenda Colvin see –

https://rdg.ent.sirsi.dynix.net.uk/client/en_GB/merl/search/results?qu=Colvin%2C+Brenda%2C+1897-1981.&lm=MERL2

For more information about the Landscape Institute holdings at The MERL see –

<https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/landscape-institute/>

For more information about the Brenda Colvin archive holdings at The MERL see –

<https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/brenda-colvin/>

Further Reading:

Collens, Geoffrey and Wendy Powell (Eds.). *Sylvia Crowe* (LDT Monograph No. 2, 2000)

Colvin, Brenda. *Land and Landscape* (London: John Murray, 1947)

Gibson, Trish. *Brenda Colvin: A Career in landscape* (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd, 2011)

Harvey, Sheila (ed.), for the Landscape Institute. *Reflections on Landscape: The Lives and Work of Six British Landscape Architects* (Aldershot: Gower Technical Press, 1987)

Harvey, Sheila and Stephen Rettig (Eds.). *Fifty Years of Landscape Design* (London: The Landscape Press, 1985)

Journals of the ILA: Landscape and Garden (up to 1939); *Journal of the Institute of Landscape Architects* (from 1946) [as held alongside subsequent LI journals at The MERL]

Moggridge, Hal. *Slow Growth: On the Art of Landscape Architecture* (London: Unicorn, 2017)