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## **EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2023/24**

**First Prize: Management or development of a historic park or garden**

**Project: Walmer Castle and Gardens, Walmer, UK**

The category "Management or development of a historic park or garden" is the oldest category within the framework of the European Garden Award, for which we receive many quality nominations every year. There are many historic gardens in Europe, many of them well preserved or reconstructed and carefully maintained for decades if not centuries. What is even more gratifying is the fact that a number of lesser-known parks and gardens, among them many from Eastern Europe that have also been reconstructed is increasing.

We have noticed another interesting observation in the last few years. Organizations and institutions that take care of renovation, reconstruction and maintenance of historical parks and gardens are nominated for award. In the past three years, two British institutions, namely the National Trust and the English Heritage, have been mentioned several times with gardens that have undergone a thorough renovation under their patronage.

This year, the National Trust with Mount Stewart Park and English Heritage with Walmer Castle were nominated in this category. For now, gardens are awarded; therefore, the jury paid attention to concrete space not to institution. However, these two nominations opened a debate within the jury how to recognize the merits of various foundations, non-profit organizations and all others who care that the European garden heritage remains available to future generations. If not with an award, we can thank them for their good work at least with an honourable mention on occasions like today's.

If the nominations of the aforementioned gardens were partly motivated by the death of Queen Elizabeth two years ago, they were probably motivated by the coronation of King Charles III last year. However, the jury did not consider this during the judging process and simply analysed the received proposals and compared them. After the announcement of the results, a welcome coincidence that the award in the "Management or development of a historic park or garden" category goes to the gardens, used often in past by the British royal family became obvious.

**About the Walmer castle and the garden** (this is rather my personal selection of an otherwise detailed description of the rich history of Walmer gardens)

The history of the place begins in 16<sup>th</sup> century with the castle and its garrison. We know for certain that a garden for the captain was in existence by 1725. However, there was a small area

of land outside the castle, belonging to it, in 1567, so it is possible that a garden was established there in the 16th or 17th century. A rich three-hundred-year history followed in which inhabitants of the castle and gardens and their guardians changed and the gardens grew. One of the oldest features is a kitchen garden that is still flourishing today and was also ornamental, a place where family and friends could walk and relax. First larger change around the castle were done at the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century, when “pleasure grounds” were planted as a belt of woodland and shrubbery around the perimeter. A second walled garden was added, a large grassy glade planted with specimen trees (the Oval Lawn), an area of meadow (the Paddock) and an evergreen shrubbery within a deep, dark, abandoned chalk pit – later known as The Glen. The second half of the 19th century brought Broadwalk, a bold avenue leading from the castle moat and ending in a terraced lawn for croquet or tennis, just inside the Paddock. Lined with yew or myrtle hedges, standard roses and ribbon flower border planting, it forged a new central axis that united the castle and its grounds. Other garden elements were added and in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the garden was “modernized” – even a tennis courts were added. Another addition was a vista that extended from the end of the Broadwalk over the rising ground of the Paddock to the very edge of the grounds, where a narrow gap or ‘keyhole’ was cut through the woodland. This created the delightful illusion of making the long view from the castle seem even longer, by giving a glimpse of infinity beyond the gardens. Along the Broadwalk borders, the planting style was altered to reflect the contemporary and fashionable manner pioneered by Gertrude Jekyll, making them far less formal than original layout of the 1860s.

The last major addition to the garden was in 1997 when William Pitt’s walled garden was transformed to celebrate the 95th birthday of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the Lord Warden. The designer Penelope Hobhouse made an entirely new garden within the old walls, creating a formal but tranquil layout around a central pool, with a summerhouse and raised arbour (the yew castle) at opposite ends. The Queen Mother remarked that she had been given many presents before but never a garden.

Instead of describing the gardens in further details, let me use words of Walmer’s head gardener, Mr. Plantaholic himself. I am talking, of course, about Mr. Philip Oostenbrink, who is with us today. You can follow him on Instagram under his alias name and find out what is going on in Walmer Garden on a daily basis. He wrote:

*“The gardens have a wide range of different areas, from the beach, natural woodlands and meadows, to formal gardens, a kitchen garden and perennial borders. This diversity makes it a unique garden. Although it is a historic garden in which plant groups are maintained in particular areas, modern and more exotic plant species are used. The creation of a jungle moat (by the way, Mr. Oostenbrink is the author of this jungle moat) is one that started 3 years ago and is a large undertaking, showing people which plants they can grow in any aspect possible. Currently a new King's Meadow is being created in one of the paddocks. This is to revive a*

*historic landscape and as a commemoration for the coronation of King Charles III. The small team maintains the gardens at a high standard and visitor numbers have increased over the last few years because of the improvements of the garden.”*

**The recognizable historical spatial development of the place, a set of different gardens and individual spatial elements, high-quality design and careful maintenance were the attributes that convinced the jury to award Walmer Castle and its gardens this year's award in the category Management or development of a historic park or garden.**

Many congratulations to the Walmar Castle and to English Heritage ...