

Property in Care (PIC) ID PIC156

Designations: Garden and Designed Landscape, Listed Building
(GDL00275; LB7386; LB44164; LB44165)

Taken into State care: 1995 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2015

HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

MAVISBANK POLICIES



We continually revise our Statements of Significance, so they may vary in length, format and level of detail. While every effort is made to keep them up to date, they should not be considered a definitive or final assessment of our properties.

MAVISBANK POLICIES

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Mavisbank Policies comprise an area of designed landscape laid out in the early 18th century around Mavisbank House. The in-care area includes the majority of the core of this designed landscape but does not include Mavisbank House.

The house is roofless and partially gutted following a fire in 1973. The policies at Mavisbank are formed within a section of the River North Esk valley. Created as a setting integral to the contemporary house the grounds comprise a lake, woodlands, a walled garden, walks, view points, open pasture, fields and several structures, such as the dovecot and game larder, which had ornamental and/or functional roles in the estate.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview

Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676 – 1755), builder of Mavisbank, was one of the most prominent men of his generation: politician, advocate, antiquarian, author and acknowledged arbiter of taste. He was active as a patron of the arts and influential both as an amateur architect and as an agricultural improver. On his Grand Tour (1697-9) he had visited Rome, where he was instructed in architecture and drawing and had studied antiquities, classical literature and music. Added to these experiences, he also travelled widely in Britain making tours to view the great houses and landscapes of the nobility and was therefore at the very forefront of the rapidly developing theories on these subjects. Clerk left a rich archive of accounts, letters, memoirs and an unpublished poem *The Country Seat* (1727). These documentary sources allow a good understanding of how the physical estate works progressed, and also the intellectual concepts and cultural references they were intended to embody.

The Policies were of course intended to set-off Mavisbank house. The house is acknowledged as a critical structure in the history of the evolution of the villa as a major building type. Architecturally the design shows the influence of Clerk's travels in Europe, with clearly discernable influences drawn from contemporary Dutch, French and Italian buildings, and from the designs of the sixteenth century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. Mavisbank was built in the early years of the eighteenth century revival in interest in Palladianism which would go on to influence architectural thought in Europe and the colonies for the following century. It is contemporary with Chiswick House, Middlesex, the seminal villa constructed by Lord Burlington on the outskirts of London. In many senses Clerk's role as patron and arbiter of taste parallel Burlington's, and Mavisbank's position in promoting the Palladian style in Scotland mirrors the importance of Chiswick in the English context.

Some key dates and sources are given below:

1697	Plan of Mavisbank drawn for Sir John Clerk, 1 st baronet; shows location of the early farmhouse
1722	Sir John Clerk, 2 nd Baronet and William Adam in correspondence re design and construction of Mavisbank House
1724	Walled garden under construction. Begins consideration of enlarging house by provision of pavilions.
1728	House largely complete and north pavilion under construction
1728	Correspondence between Clerk and Wm Adam re siting of pavilions and their effect in obscuring views to the walled garden. Adam's opinion was that the long view east was the most important – <i>I look upon the whole bottom to be the Rurall Garden, and the distant view with water the best</i> " quoted in Turnbull ¹ p8.
1731	Gazebo built in walled garden (building has 1731 datestone)
1735	Adair's map of Midlothian. Indicates general layout of Mavisbank landscape showing 3 radial allees, the house and the circular walled garden. There is no indication of the doocot or any terminal features for the allees.
1738	Many authorities give this as the building date for the doocot, but none give a precise source.
1752 - 55	General Roy's map of South Scotland. Shows Mavisbank landscape in great detail: house, pavilions, "Roman station"; allees, walled gardens. Does not show Dooocot, or terminating feature for central allee. Does show a structure terminating the north allee; Turnbull interprets this as Roy's surveyors misplacing the doocot.
1755	Sir John Clerk, 2 nd Baronet, dies.
1761	Mavisbank estate conveyed by Sir James Clerk, 3 rd baronet to his cousin Robert Clerk (who may have been born at Mavisbank). The Dooocot seems to have been retained by James Clerk as part of the Barony of Loanhead holding, see below.
1786	Plan of the Barony of Loanhead drawn for Sir John Clerk, 3 rd Baronet. The Dooocot is on the boundary of the Mavisbank/Loanhead holdings and is the only part of the Mavisbank landscape shown.

During the 20th century both house and grounds fell into disrepair and neglect; the house was gutted by fire in 1973. The structure was stabilized in the 1980's under the instruction of Historic Environment Scotland. It remains in a roofless, derelict and deteriorating condition with the Mavisbank House Trust actively campaigning for its restoration. In 1995 Mavisbank Policies came into the care of Historic Environment Scotland.

Archaeological Overview

One of Clerk's reasons for selecting this site was the location of what he thought was a Roman fort. This mound, directly to the SW of the house, is more likely to be a "native" Iron Age site. Bronze objects, including Roman medical equipment,

¹ Mavisbank House and Policies, 2005 Project Planning Submission; Appendix D Landscape Report, Mark Turnbull Landscape Architect.

were said to have been found on the site in the 18th Century. At present, there is no firm archaeological evidence to indicate the nature of the mound.

Records survive of a farm to the E of the present house, but little is currently known of the pre-Clerk occupation of the valley.

The whole landscape was rapidly surveyed in 1992². This identified a large number of visible features relating to various phases of the designed landscape. These are a significant aid to our understanding of the development of the landscape and the site remains an important archaeological resource.

Architectural Overview

Given his well-known architectural and landscape interests, it is certain that Clerk had very specific intentions when constructing his Mavisbank estate. While Penicuik was the “family seat” and much the grander estate, Clerk’s ambitions for that place were hedged by the need to retain (for reasons of respect, sentiment and economy) the pre-existing house; around it he laid out an extensive and complex designed landscape. At Mavisbank he had a completely free hand to plan house and grounds in perfect harmony³. So he conceived his sub-urban villa: modest in scale, perfectly formed and at the very forefront of architectural taste. It was to be a haven from the city, though not for idle luxury, but a nobler “Roman” form of leisure defined by literary, antiquarian and sporting pursuits. The gardens were designed to be run by a small staff, the formal layout of avenues giving the basic structure, with the wider estate a *ferme ornee*, both ornamental and productive. Mavisbank was regularly used by the family, particularly during the summer months, but Clerk warned that the first duty of the landowner was to the Penicuik estate, rather than the pleasant diversions of Mavisbank!

Within this context then, we can be fairly sure that all of the early 18th century structures, views and features of the Mavisbank landscape were consciously chosen in terms of their appearance, location and design to reflect Clerk’s own taste and to embody his vision for the place. Clerk notes that the immediate siting of the house was chosen in response to the “Roman Station” to the north, and this relationship determines the central axis of the designed landscape.

The central axis begins with the “Roman Station”, continuing through the House, the central allee, the lake, passing through the Wilderness to climb the ridge to terminate in a view of the distant Doocot, thence leading the eye out to the area of pasture beyond. This progression from ancient Rome, through the domestic sphere and out to the wider pastoral landscape is as much intellectual and “on paper” as physical. It is also suggested⁴ that the doocot may have terminated a long vista from the Gazebo across the main axis of the walled garden. Today, the doocot is still visible from the Roman Station and the walled garden, but not from the house; it is too overgrown. The doocot’s distance (approx. 1km) from the house is so great that details would have been difficult to spot with the naked eye.

² Mavisbank: A survey of the landscape. Debois Landscape Survey Group 1992.

³ Though there is evidence that the plan changed as time went on – e.g. the building of the pavilions altered views from the house and interrupted the relationship btwn house and walled garden;

⁴ Simpson & Brown Conservation Statement for Mavisbank Walled Garden, 2009.

If it was harled originally, this would have enhanced visibility, as would its more open original setting.

The estate was sold in the early 19th Century and alterations were carried out, including the creation of a new East Drive running along the valley side. By the end of the 19th Century the house was being used as a lunatic asylum. The house has suffered considerably from the effects of subsidence from mining, the coal reserves of Loanhead having been one of Clerk's principal economic resources.

Social Overview

- The social values of the site have not been formally assessed as part of this report.
- Mavisbank policies are accessible on foot and are used by the local community, and those from further afield, for informal recreation, principally walking.

Spiritual Overview

- The site has no identified spiritual role.

Aesthetic Overview

- The site is currently highly attractive as an oasis of open, undeveloped land in the middle of several small, Midlothian towns.
- The grounds are largely unmanaged, with the result that there is considerable natural regeneration, rank grassland and boggy ground. Their air of neglected grandeur, appealing in adding an air of adventure, is counterbalanced by the unmanaged nature of the site which makes the designed quality of the landscape difficult to appreciate.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- We currently do not fully understand the chronology and development of the landscape.
 - The immediate vicinity of the house and how it merged with the surrounding landscape is poorly understood.
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ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key points

The Mavisbank landscape is chiefly important as the embodiment of the early 18th century intellectual and aesthetic concerns of its creator, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (1676 – 1755). In this, it is impossible to separate house from landscape as both were conceived as an integral whole, their purpose being to demonstrate all aspects of *the Roman Life* espoused by Clerk as the proper mode of living for the gentleman.

Clerk's leading position in Scottish cultural life and his keen understanding of contemporary European and British currents in architecture and landscape gardening made Mavisbank a seminal and influential work. Clerk is credited with introducing the ideas of Switzer and Bridgemen into Scotland, and here acted not merely as a conduit, but contributed his own expertise as amateur architect, classical scholar and noted arbiter of taste.

In terms of the landscape, the Clerk phase (1724-46) is acknowledged as most important and many of its elements remain discernible today. This phase marks the transition from ideas of formality to the beginning of the picturesque movement in Scotland, changes undertaken in the later 18th century phase of the landscape chart the continuation of this trend.

Key surviving features of the early 18th century landscape include:

- The formal axis leading from the "Roman Fort", through the house, along the central avenue terminating in the Doocot eyecatcher
- Traces of the radiating "goose-feet" avenues discernible through their archaeology and remaining trees and stumps, and the planting ("wilderness") between them
- The relationship between the more formal "gardened" areas around the house to the wider landscape of the ferme ornee
- The walled gardens, drives and paths.

The site is an important archaeological resource as other aspects of the landscape indicated by map or other documentary evidence are likely to have left traces which can be interpreted after archaeological study.

Additionally, Mavisbank Policies is a significant green space in an area where discrete communities are becoming increasingly conjoined.

Associated Properties

Duff House, Arniston House (William Adam)