



# Sharing Repton: a few final thoughts

As our audience development project 'Sharing Repton : Historic Landscapes for All' draws to a close, it seems fitting to take a look back at its exhilarating two years. In *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening*, Humphry Repton urged "For the honour of the Country, let the Parks and Pleasure-grounds of England be ever open, to cheer the hearts and delight the eyes of all, who have taste to enjoy the beauties of Nature." Inspired by this, the Gardens Trust was awarded a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund to help engage new and diverse people with historic parks and gardens through its **Sharing Repton** project.

**Sharing Repton** was based on piloting five simple activities to engage new supporters with historic parks and gardens and then share the learning amongst volunteers and professionals so that we can all benefit from being more inclusive in future. This outward-looking approach is essential if garden history is to be valued and our park and gardens conserved by future generations.

All of the host landscapes had been designed by Repton and are now open to the public, and we were fortunate to work with local partners including County Gardens Trusts. A small gang aiming high, this group was a warm and supportive team, and we quickly nicknamed them the 'Repton



Some of the 'Repton Buddies', celebrating their project.

Buddies'. **Sharing Repton** simply couldn't have happened without this superb team of pioneers, and the Gardens Trust would like to extend them its sincere thanks.

## Linden Groves, the Gardens Trust's Strategic Development Officer, takes a look back at our project to broaden interest in historic parks and gardens

In September 2018 we kicked off with the first activity, a visit to **Wicksteed Park** for families from a nearby multicultural community centre with Northamptonshire Gardens Trust, who are passionate about working with varied groups. Children and adults together, we tackled activities such as tree

measuring and spotting designed views, but my favourite moment from the day was being politely admonished by a father, originally from Afghanistan, for offering him coffee during the introductory talk whilst he was trying to find out about Humphry Repton.



Measuring trees together at Wicksteed Park, Northamptonshire

## Sharing Repton

Always going the extra mile, Northamptonshire Gardens Trust decided to repeat this excursion in 2019, this time working with a multicultural group of people living with dementia.

Our public Open Day took place the following weekend, at **Catton Park** in Norwich. We linked with the national Heritage Open Day scheme, and local groups such as the Friends of Catton and Norfolk Gardens Trust, and particularly benefited from the organisational talents of Broadland District Council's Tourism Officer, Chloe Griffin. Under her stewardship, our request for an open day that would attract sixty people from varied cultural and economic backgrounds became an immense extravaganza ultimately entertaining some 600 visitors! I will always remember this day for the conversation I had with an Egyptian born gentleman who had lived only minutes away from Catton Park for many years, but had never come in because he had seen the Lodge House and gates and assumed therefore that it was a private residence still. That conversation was a two-minute masterclass in how cultural assumptions can affect someone's ability to engage with our heritage, and a reminder to always question the *status quo* by viewing situations through other eyes.

Wondering how much harder it would be for a smaller group to organise a Heritage Open Day without professional expertise and budget, in 2019 we linked the Gardens Trust's annual Family Picnic with a Heritage Open Day organised by a small but determined group of volunteers from the Friends of **Grovelands** in London. Some posters, an open air exhibition and some children's games later, and we had ourselves 300 friendly park users

call by. An experience that I can wholeheartedly recommend!

At **Warley Woods** in the Black Country we ran a research and recording project for new volunteers, hiring a professional engagement consultant, Suzanne Carter, to give this potentially familiar format some fresh ideas. Suzanne branded it as the 'Warley Woods Big Red Book Project', presenting it as a community activity to find out more about Repton at Warley Woods, and produce a huge 2019 version of the famous Repton Red Book. We promised four workshops, in 'reading' a landscape on the ground, using archives, presenting

to become the routine with our **Sharing Repton** pilots, it far exceeded our expectations, with the new volunteers not only fulfilling all our challenges, but going the extra mile so that their simple leaflet became a game-changing piece of work that combines serious garden history information with fun activities such as a **#viewselfie** phone photography challenge, the 'Statement of Significance' began to be drafted before the training was even complete, and the public presentation evolved into a huge community open day with hundreds of local guests. Best of all, these guys have carried on working as a group even now the Big Red



Learning about Humphry Repton at Kenwood, before exploring the landscape with fresh eyes.

research in a leaflet and 'Statement of Significance' and sharing their knowledge through a public presentation and these were delivered over many months to a small group of a dozen adults, with the help of Gardens Trust volunteers Gary Webb and Neil McLean, and David Whitehead from Hereford and Worcester Gardens Trust. As was starting

Book Project is over, continuing to research, and running guided tours for other locals.

Perhaps the giggliest part of the Big Red Book Project came out of Suzanne's addition of links with the local primary school, so that we found ourselves dashing from the adult workshops in the morning, to complementary ones for ninety children aged 10-11 years in the

afternoon. Through autumn 2018, these children were shown that Warley Woods is not simply a piece of nature but rather the result of a careful design, to read old maps, and how to think about what parts of Warley Woods and its story were important to them. We now look forward to bundling this experience into a schools' package that others can redeliver to inspire a new generation.

In October 2018, London Parks & Gardens Trust delivered a super introductory conservation workshop at **Kenwood** for groups of refugees and women originally from Bangladesh, thanks largely to their fantastic volunteer, Barbara Deason. The Gardens Trust regularly trains volunteers to undertake conservation work, but with this activity we were eager to find a way to engage people who hadn't previously thought of themselves as having an ownership stake in our national heritage, or a role in helping look after it. Echoed by many interpreters covering the guests' linguistic rainbow, Emily Parker from English Heritage gave a brief talk on Repton's work at Kenwood, and together we pored over copies of the Red Book. Then we all grabbed our umbrellas and went out on a brief tour of the gardens. At lunch, our guests surprised us with a sequence of speeches on how much the day had meant to them — a moving experience for all of us involved.

To complement the Kenwood visit, we reconvened in April 2019 at **Russell Square**, thanks to the support of its Commissioners. On this joyous occasion the guests were able to plant roses in one of the beds, important as many of them had chosen to get involved in the pilot because of their previous horticultural experience in their countries of origin. We



Enjoying the Castle at Blaise, July 2019.

are delighted that many of them are now joining the gardening volunteer groups at both Kenwood and Russell Square (as well as being consulted on the new interpretation panels in Russell Square).

We were keen to see whether this format could have produced volunteers for LPGT's research and conservation work, had language barriers not been an issue. To test this, Barbara mustered herself once more and we ran a single afternoon of the same format for people living close to Repton's **Barn Hill** near **Wembley Park** in Brent. The result? A small group of new research volunteers for LPGT!

The final activity took place in July 2019 at **Blaise Castle** in Bristol, with Avon Gardens Trust and volunteer groups attached to Blaise. Here we welcomed a coach full of families from a Somali community group to a day intended to teach them a little about garden history in a way more fun and accessible than the standard fare of a lecture and guided tour. This had been planned as something aimed primarily at adults, but in order to make it easy to attend we had let it be known that children were welcome also. Imagine our surprise when in the days before the visit we learnt that around 40 children would be accompanying

the group! Adapting the format somewhat, we nevertheless made it up to the castle eye-catcher, where we all had a fantastic time running up and down the castle's stairs and peering over its castellated roof. Later, over lunch provided by the Blaise Community Garden scheme volunteers, we launched the **Garden History Lucky Dip**, in which props are pulled out of a bag in order to prompt chat and the sharing of information, in an interactive alternative to the traditional lecture format.

The **Sharing Repton** project has been inspiring and reinvigorating for those of us directly involved, and it is clear that the Gardens Trust and its supporters must work with vigour to improve inclusion within garden history if the subject is to remain relevant for generations to come. Success is dependent on continuing the momentum the project has begun, so the final act of **Sharing Repton** was to create a stash of free online materials to help you repeat these pilots and find new supporters in your own areas. Perhaps you might like to give one of the activities a go as part of our new **Unforgettable Gardens** celebration?

Take a look at our website: [thegardenstrust.org/conservation/hlp-hub/networking-materials/sharing-repton-2/](https://thegardenstrust.org/conservation/hlp-hub/networking-materials/sharing-repton-2/)