

The Gardens Trust Five Year Review

Dr James Bartos, Chairman 2015-2020

The Gardens Trust, formed from the merger of the Garden History Society (GHS) and the Association of Gardens Trusts (AGT) at their AGMs in 2015, had at the outset the advantage of the resources and histories of both those organisations. The Business Plan that formed the basis of the merger stated a number of aims: to speak with a more powerful voice for the protection of designed landscapes; to play a key conservation role in the planning system as statutory consultee and through supporting the conservation efforts of the CGTs; to be an internationally recognised centre of excellence in the research and publication of garden history; and to be financially sustainable over the long term. The principle of voting equality between the two classes of individual members, inherited from the GHS, and County/Country Gardens Trust (CGT) members, inherited from the AGT, was enshrined in the new Articles.

Despite the history of its predecessor organisations, as a new organisation the Gardens Trust effectively started from a standing start, due to two factors: one was that two organisations had to be brought together to function as one, efficient organisation and the other was that a number of key decisions and projects had been deliberately deferred for a number of years due to the upcoming merger; these now had to be dealt with.

Restructuring. The first several years of the Trust involved a number of significant restructurings. On the administrative side, our two administrators inherited respectively from the GHS and the AGT developed separate roles, with Lou Cooper becoming Administrator and Teresa Forey-Harrison becoming Finance Officer and CGT Co-Ordinator; three desks at the Cowcross Street offices were reduced to two; expensive outsourcing of bookkeeping was taken in-house by our Hon Treasurer, Lisa Watson; and new and more efficient arrangements were put in place with regard to online banking, insurance and other matters.

The Conservation effort was also significantly restructured, with the departure of the Principal Conservation Officer and increased roles for the Casework Manager, Alison Allighan, and Conservation Officer Margie Hoffnung, together with a more proactive role being taken by the Conservation Committee. Combined with increased involvement of the CGTs through the capacity building efforts of our Historic Landscape Project (HLP) officers, the conservation restructuring led to a significantly increased number of conservation case responses.

Both the conservation and the administrative restructuring created a considerably lower cost base for the Trust, but by creating smarter ways of working internally also created increased rather than reduced productivity.

Over time, other significant reorganisations occurred. The Admin and Finance Committee took over responsibility for membership that had been the purview of a short-lived Membership Committee and also responsibility for the development and maintenance of our website. The original Events Committee and Education, Publications and

Communications Committee increasingly found the distinction between events and education to be artificial; the Committees began to meet jointly in 2017 and became a single Committee in 2018, titled Education and Events. 2017 saw the creation of a new Trust-wide role of Strategic Development Officer, reporting into the Admin and Finance Committee, and the appointment of Linden Groves, previously heading the HLP, to that role. Tamsin McMillan then took on the leadership of the HLP, assisted by Margie Hoffnung and since 2019 also by Sally Bate. In 2017, we engaged a Communications Advisor, Susannah Charlton, to help the Trust achieve more efficient and effective external communications.

New Procedures and Infrastructure. As a new organisation, the Gardens Trust Board initially undertook some simple but crucial decisions, including notably the selection of a logo and of a three-word tagline, Research Conserve Campaign, both with a view to creating a new organisational identity.

All members of staff were put on new contracts with the same general provisions, and each member of staff was assigned a particular Board member as line manager. We also initiated annual reviews for staff, involving written self-assessments and meetings with line managers, an important process both for the Trust as an employer and for the development and morale of staff.

Crucial to the development of the new organisation was the development of a new website. This involved a new design with the help of an outside firm specialising in charity websites and then a painstaking process of populating the website page by page with material that was either taken or adapted from the old GHS site or was newly written. The population process itself led to certain design changes, and there have been a few design enhancements since. In addition to its smart and up-to-date look, the new site has a huge range of functionality, serving as a platform to announce events and news, to enable the purchase of tickets for events, to be informative about our numerous activities, to serve as an archive for Trust publications, to be a hub resource for a vast range of HLP and conservation guidance and to permit someone to join or support us.

Our unique Conservation Casework Log, onto which weekly planning applications are logged, together with GT and CGT responses, was upgraded to a new platform and serves as a vital tool for us and other organisations.

We initiated a new annual budget and planning process, involving separate meetings between the Chairs and Vice Chairs of each committee with the GT Chair and Treasurer, leading to a balanced budget being produced at the beginning of the year. We also created much more detailed and precise management accounts that are now presented to the Board quarterly and that also feed into improved and more transparent annual published accounts. These changes took several years to implement.

Expanded and New Activities. The first five years of the Trust saw both expanded and new activities across all areas in which the Trust engages.

The core logic of the merger was the working together of the Trust's professional conservation staff and the volunteers working on conservation and planning applications in

the CGTs. Through the capacity building and training activities of the HLP, which substantially increased CGT volunteer involvement, and through a successful partnership between the Trust's conservation staff and CGTs, the amount of planning responses increased considerably---in 2016, the first full year of the Trust's operations, which itself benefitted significantly from the new structure, 257 written planning responses were submitted by the GT and CGTs plus 128 no comment responses; in 2019, 466 written planning responses were submitted by the GT and CGTs plus 604 no comment responses. Over the years, both Committee members and staff have been particularly involved in certain key sites of national importance, at pre-application stage, in negotiations to reach sensitive solutions or in campaigns to block harmful development. The Committee has also published various forms of guidance, including for local planning authorities with respect to their statutory responsibilities.

Early on, the Trust's Board took the decision to be a campaigning organisation, both with respect to particular sites and more broadly, hence the inclusion of the word 'campaign' in the three-word tag line. The Trust has campaigned for the protection of public parks, particularly in light of local government funding cuts, participating in a parliamentary enquiry on this topic as well as launching a report on the subject and acting as one of the founding organisations of the Parks Charter, a wake-up call to government. In 2017 we launched a campaign called Compiling the Record to highlight important but overlooked designed landscapes of the post-war period. This has resulted in 2020 in Historic England adding 24 new entries for gardens and designed landscapes made between the 1960s and 1990 to its National Heritage List for England, thereby doubling the number of such sites that are now protected. This received a considerable amount of national publicity.

Also under our campaigning banner, in 2018 we organised a year-long celebration of the bicentenary of the death of Humphry Repton, involving CGTs and other groups around the country researching and publishing articles and books about sites where he worked and organising related events. With a very significant grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we also launched a campaign in 2018 and 2019 called Sharing Repton: Historic Landscapes for All that enabled us to pilot activities around the country to introduce new people and wider audiences to historic parks and gardens, accompanied by skill sharing amongst volunteers and written materials to help similar initiatives in the future. Both of the Repton campaigns were conceived and project managed by Linden Groves, in her role as Strategic Development Officer, as is our current campaign for 2020-22, Unforgettable Gardens. This will focus on what gardens and designed landscapes mean to people, the threats they face and how people can get involved to help save them for future generations. These themes have become particularly urgent with the advent of Covid-19 and its consequences.

Alongside and helping to enable our conservation and campaigning activities, the Trust's HLP has energetically pursued and expanded its mission to train and support CGT and other volunteers in conservation and planning issues. This involves multiple CGT networking meet-ups around the country; planning and research training days; one-on-one support of CGTs; and the provision of training and guidance materials. Beginning in 2016, the HLP has hosted an annual Historic Landscapes Assembly with attendees from the GT, CGTs and external organisations. The Assembly has been held in London, Birmingham and York and has

become an important hub event for the landscape heritage sector; in 2019 representatives from 19 external organisations attended. Beginning in 2018, the HLP has also facilitated an annual Chairs' Meet Up amongst CGT Chairs and GT Board members. The HLP has also attracted training contracts from externally funded projects, demonstrating that the GT is viewed as a valued training partner.

The Events team has developed a very extensive and varied range of activities over the years that offer academic and more popular events illuminating garden history as well as conservation efforts. These include a Winter Lecture series, held variously in London, Bath and Birmingham; day-long study tours to important and interesting sites around the country; and longer trips to places as near as Scotland and as far away as Japan and Australia. We have also hosted major conferences with partnering institutions, including a two-day conference on Chinese gardens and landscapes at Sheffield University and a joint symposium with the Garden Museum in London on new Repton research, to name but two. The annual Conference and AGM has settled into a two night and two day conference held in a different place each year that includes lectures, local visits and research papers presented by students at our New Research Symposium.

Volunteers are at the heart of everything we do, including volunteers in the CGTs, on the GT Board and Committees and otherwise supporting our activities. The annual Conference also provides an opportunity to present an annual Volunteer of the Year Award.

In addition to the New Research Symposium, the Trust has continued to support excellence in research and its dissemination through our leading peer-reviewed semi-annual journal, *Garden History*, through our newsletter, *GT News*, now a revamped 48 pages in colour that is issued three times each year and through the annual Mavis Batey Essay Prize.

A new educational initiative was begun in 2017 by Dr David Marsh, co-Chair of the Education and Events Committee, under the brand name Grapevine, designed to increase the range and spread of garden history courses across the country. Grapevine has proved extremely popular and has held one-day introductory courses to garden history across the country and more specialised courses at the Institute of Historical Research in London.

Over the years, our communications effort has expanded into different media and has become much more organised and influential. We can now communicate on a rapid and organised basis through the website, through *GT News*, through a monthly e-news that began in 2018 sent to email lists vetted under GDPR and through organised social media postings on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram which are allocated to particular staff and volunteers. Additionally, Dr David Marsh publishes a weekly Gardens Trust blog, which can be accessed through the website.

Financial Stability. Subsequent to the first year of restructuring, our financial statements from 2017 onwards have consistently shown a small surplus each year, despite supporting hugely expanded activities. Our main on-going sources of income are grants from Historic England and membership income (individual and CGT), but we also have a diversified set of other important income sources, including: events; education; investment income; publications (back issues, JSTOR and royalties); and third party contracts where we benefit

from a margin on the time worked. Additionally, we have had very significant project income from Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund and other bodies where the amount of work we do is tailored to the project grant.

Investments have grown very significantly over the years through legacy giving that we have added to investments. It is a strategic objective of the Trust that investments should continue to grow in the future and, aside from the annual income that is generated, not be spent on annual expenses or projects.

Individual membership had shown a long decline over many years, both the original GHS membership and then the Gardens Trust membership. We have both a strategic and financial imperative to increase individual membership. As part of a membership drive, in 2018 we undertook an on-line membership survey, and in 2019 we launched a special offer to CGT members to also become GT members to support the work we do jointly. Through this and other general membership efforts we have seen an overall reversal in the trend to a positive trend in individual member numbers over 2019 and 2020. Various targeted drives will continue in coming years.

Succession planning. After five years, I stood down as Chairman of the Trust and as Board member at the 2020 AGM, held on September 5th, having come to the end of my current term on the Board. The Board elected Peter Hughes QC as Chairman, Peter having been elected to the Board and the Admin and Finance Committee in 2018. A number of other Board members will come to the end of their terms in 2021. During 2020 we had a very successful advertisement and interview process, which resulted in the election of a new Board and Conservation Committee member to fill the Board vacancy created by my standing down and six additional highly qualified members to the Conservation and the Education and Events Committees.

2020. In 2020 we experienced the shock of Covid-19, the shutting down of events and the cancellation of our annual Conference, scheduled for early September. However, the Gardens Trust is in the fortunate position that most of our income streams remain intact, and we are not reducing staff hours or our level of activity. Most of our staff were already working from home, and our conservation effort effectively continues as before. The HLP staff together with our Strategic Development Officer have seized the opportunity to further develop online training materials, to hold virtual meetings and to continue capacity building outreach through multiple platforms, including social media. The New Research Symposium was held through a webinar, and Grapevine courses moved on-line, proving to be hugely popular. Although coming together in person can be invaluable, and we look forward to the day when that will again be possible, we believe that these new internet-based methods of working will prove to be of lasting benefit.

I believe that the Gardens Trust has well fulfilled the aims of the merger that created it and that in the next five years it will come to even greater national prominence as an important heritage organisation, finding new ways of doing things and new audiences as it continues to research, conserve and campaign.

5 September 2020