



HARNESSING PARKS AND GARDENS IN THE 21st CENTURY

How historic landscapes can support and enhance
our today and tomorrow



Our Parks and Gardens Heritage

Our heritage of parks, gardens and designed landscapes is very diverse. It includes urban public parks, town squares, rural parkland on large estates, cemeteries, institutional and industrial landscapes, and gardens both in small domestic homes and in large country houses. Generically, these special places are most commonly referred to as ‘historic parks and gardens’, or ‘historic designed landscapes’.



▲ St James's Park, London, Grade I on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest.
Credit: AntonioVenace on Unsplash

To date, over 1,700 of these sites have been formally protected by inclusion on the *Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest* managed by Historic England. They are included at Grade I, II* and II, with 65% being Grade II.

Historic parks and gardens are crucial not only as a key part of our national cultural story, for which the UK is famed internationally, but also – as this report explains – for the role they can play in economic growth, the health and wellbeing benefits they bring to people from all backgrounds, and the pivotal role they have to play in climate emergency mitigation.

The Gardens Trust

This report has been produced by the Gardens Trust, the UK national charity dedicated to ensuring our heritage of historic designed landscapes can continue to contribute to the quality of life of existing and future generations. We campaign on their behalf, undertake research and conservation work, and encourage public appreciation and involvement.

We work with affiliate County Gardens Trusts and the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust, as well as Scotland's Garden Landscape Heritage and Northern Ireland colleagues, and have been a statutory consultee in the English planning system since 1995, providing specialist advice to local planning authorities on over 1,800 planning applications annually that may impact designated sites.

The Gardens Trust is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2025, having been formed in 2015 from the merger of the Garden History Society and the Association of Gardens Trusts.



▲ The Gardens Trust works to ensure that parks and gardens created and cared for over many centuries can be enjoyed by everyone, today and in future.
Credit: The Gardens Trust Sharing Repton project

Our Vision

The Gardens Trust would like to see parks and gardens recognised for the crucial role they have in creating and supporting a healthy and prosperous society, and for them to be supported to play this role with maximum impact. This can be achieved through:

- ◆ celebrating that we are a nation of gardens and gardeners, recognised and admired across the world;
- ◆ better recognition and protection for our historic legacy of parks and gardens, by improving control and consents and aligning their treatment with other heritage assets;
- ◆ increased awareness that thousands of high-quality parks, gardens and other designed landscapes already exist and require skilled maintenance and management;
- ◆ investment in the conservation and care of historic green spaces, so that they can continue to support communities for generations to come;
- ◆ improving the quantity and quality of expertise available to local planning authorities in historic designed landscapes, through improved training of conservation officers, planning teams and better-connected external advice;
- ◆ new guidance and investment to ensure that historic designed landscapes can be harnessed to fulfil their potential in addressing key challenges of our time such as communities' health and wellbeing, social cohesion, climate change and nature recovery;
- ◆ a more holistic and joined-up role for the Gardens Trust, stretching beyond our work commenting on planning applications, enabling our expertise to fully support positive development, economic growth and conserving our green heritage for future generations.

► RHS Garden Bridgewater in Greater Manchester has been created on the site of the former Worsley New Hall, with its overgrown Victorian gardens being revived and reimagined by landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith. It has attracted investment, jobs and almost half a million visitors a year since opening in May 2021.

Credit: © Jill Sinclair/The Gardens Trust



Noteworthy Numbers

- ◇ Around **£111 million** is saved in NHS costs. Getting out and enjoying parks and gardens reduces the number of GP visits, and there are additional savings with fewer prescriptions and referrals needed.
- ◇ Parks and gardens offer important habitats for threatened species, particularly in older, established gardens.
For instance, there are over **2,300 different flora and fauna species**, with over 100 different types of both lichen and bees, at Great Dixter garden in East Sussex and more than 100 species from the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species at Westonbirt Arboretum, Gloucestershire.
- ◇ **11.4 million overseas visitors** included a visit to a garden or park destination as part of their itinerary in 2022 – 30 per cent of all overseas visitors. £2 billion was spent by overseas visitors in 2023 on parks and gardens – around 20 per cent of the total international visitor spend.
- ◇ **Over 90 per cent of people** are concerned that the government's plan to build 1.5 million new homes could threaten local green open space.



High Brown Fritillary butterfly (*Fabriciana adippe*)
Credit: Andy Jones

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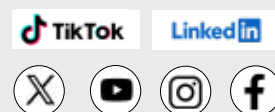
Front cover image: Picnickers on the lawn at Sheffield Botanical Gardens (Grade II Registered), a site to the west of the city originally created in the 1830s as a subscription garden for the middle classes, and now open to all free of charge. In the last five years the Gardens have become a regional hub for heritage and horticultural education, bringing thousands of visitors into the area every year, while an active Friends group encourages extensive volunteering.

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Introduction

A Skilful Creation

The UK's landscape is not 'natural' but instead has been carefully created by dedicated people over hundreds of years. Much of this human-made landscape takes the form of parks and gardens, from vast rural parklands and private gardens to urban public parks and civic spaces. They were created for a range of reasons, including the provision of food, building materials (such as timber and stone), and energy resources (fuel and water), and as places for exercise, relaxation, social interaction, education, celebration and commemoration. Many of them are the work of leading designers from across the centuries. They are accessible living works of art and much admired around the world. These hardworking designed landscapes are at the heart of our national story, as a nation of gardeners and garden lovers, but are often taken for granted or misunderstood. They are not only important because they are old, but rather have survived to become old because they are important. They are heritage assets, but also cultural, natural and health assets.

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A Hard-Won Legacy with Unfulfilled Potential

Historic designed landscapes have a key role in meeting the challenges we face when delivering the country's need for growth and housing while supporting healthy communities and a just

society; helping nature recovery; and combatting the effects of climate change. However, the overall cumulative benefits that they offer can often be overlooked, as they span so many fields of work, areas of interest, government departments, and supporting organisations.

This report aims to raise awareness of the role and potential of historic parks and designed landscapes in the government's long-term mission 'to improve the lives of working people and strengthen our country'. Our nation's historic parks and other designed landscapes were created for enjoyment, recreation and wellbeing and continue to serve us and our many communities, while also having an important role in climate change adaptation and nature recovery.

The social, environmental and economic values and benefits of these landscapes need to be properly understood and enabled to contribute fully to the key challenges of our time.



Historic designed landscapes have great potential to further serve communities by addressing the key issues of today and tomorrow. Our rich, diverse and valuable collection of parks, green spaces and other designed landscapes must be well conserved so that they can continue to be available for the discovery and enjoyment of everyone.

▲ Grade II* Registered Blaise Castle, Bristol, provides free access to mature landscapes and cultural storytelling within an important designed historic setting.

Credit: The Gardens Trust Sharing Repton project

Landscapes Valued by All

Research commissioned by the Gardens Trust in 2021 showed that historic parks and gardens are immensely valued for the access they give to nature, and health and wellbeing benefits. 75 per cent of those consulted, who are not involved in the Gardens Trust, said 'I'd be devastated if local historic sites/ green spaces in my local area were built on'. A 2025 Omnibus survey found that over 90 per cent of people were concerned that the government's plan to build 1.5 million new homes could threaten local green open space (Launchpad Research, Omnibus – May, 2025).

People in 'levelling up' areas significantly value local parks and green spaces: they were ranked as the factor that most helps foster pride in their local town, city or village, according to the Public First survey commissioned by Historic England in 2022.

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Conservation in Support of Growth

Maximising the Contribution to be Made by Historic Parks and Gardens

Change is under way, with the government committed to raising living standards, building more housing, and securing home-grown and clean energy supplies through new infrastructure – all of which is to be supported by planning reforms. Development needs to ensure appropriate account has been taken

of historic parks and gardens as set out in national planning policy. Conservation is the process of maintaining and managing change to a heritage asset in a way that sustains and, where appropriate, enhances its significance. Long-term economic growth also relies on protecting and enhancing environmental resources such as historic designed landscapes, recognising the contribution they make to society, the economy and the wider environment.

▼ Gnomon and Autumn Trees at Grade II Registered Campbell Park, Milton Keynes, by Phillip Jeffrey.

Credit: Gnomon and autumn trees by the cricket pavilion by Philip Jeffrey licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



Historic Parks and Gardens are the Foundation of our National Landscape

Historic designed landscapes are important components of both urban and rural environments. As towns and cities grew in the 19th century, the new infrastructure included public parks and green spaces as well as schools, hospitals, libraries, museums, roads and sanitation. Meanwhile, much of our lowland countryside character and our national identity of a green and pleasant land is shaped by historic parkland, particularly from the 18th century and some perhaps existing since medieval times, and surviving features such as ancient trees and boundary woodlands. A further layer of more contemporary 20th century landscape designs has been added in towns, cities and the countryside.

A focus on the potential of urban brownfield and grey belt land for new developments is logical but parks and gardens can sit awkwardly and vulnerably within these areas, with their past, and scope for future contributions, often poorly understood. Landscape character assessments and a thorough understanding of significance and impact can help ensure that the necessary development is supported and designed landscapes protected.

New Development: An Opportunity for Improvement

New development affords opportunities to restore and conserve designed landscapes as well as creating a 21st century legacy that will be treasured by future generations.

Better Quality New Development Thanks to Historic Parks and Gardens

Quality new building and landscape design is key for successful long-lasting development. Existing parks and green spaces are great assets for new neighbouring developments, offering ready-made mature landscape settings and amenities for residents, and places to relax and exercise in the outdoors. Designs of new development need to integrate with their



▲ Visitors to the Penrhos Country Park in Anglesey. The park receives 100,000 visitors annually and was voted 'UK's Favourite Park 2022' in a poll organised by the charity Fields in Trust (<https://fieldsintrust.org/about-us/news/your-uks-favourite-parks-2022-revealed>). Planning permission has recently been given for 500 holiday lodges in the park.

Credit: Joanna Davison, Welsh Historic Gardens Trust



▲ National Play Day hosted at Wicksteed Park in Kettering (Grade II Registered). The park provides 147 acres of open space free of charge, with around 600,000 visitors annually.

Credit: Wicksteed Charitable Trust

► The Pasmore Pavilion in the Grade II open space created in the mid 20th century as part of the Sunny Blunts residential development within the New Town of Peterlee, County Durham.

Credit: Historic England Archive



▲ The success of new development is often linked with the history of place. This high-density mix of new houses at Accordia in Cambridge won the Stirling Prize for Architecture and has been hailed by Historic England for the way its 'retention of large historic trees dating from the nineteenth century Brooklands House gardens ... helped to bed the development into its existing context.'

Credit: Photograph by John Sutton and licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



settings and the local historic character, and thoughtful contemporary design works well.

Drawing inspiration from historic features and local histories can help create a sense of space and cohesion with the surroundings and in turn development can contribute to conserving historic parks and green spaces through funding for repairs and ongoing management. The best historic public parks, garden cities and new towns of the 19th and 20th centuries provide us with models of maturing and attractive leafy environments to emulate in designing quality 21st century homes and growing new communities. Our oldest historic public parks represent great Victorian investments that have served their communities for over 150 years and continue to do so.

Investing in the enhancement and conservation of existing landscapes can help create a sense of place for new homes and other developments, and every community needs public green space for recreation and exercise.

The English Planning System's Recognition of Historic Parks and Gardens

For over 40 years, the planning system has recognised the cultural importance of historic parks and gardens, and in 1995 the Gardens Trust (as its predecessor, the Garden History Society) was given a special role as a statutory consultee to advise on development proposals and help to balance development and conservation. The status of designated historic parks and gardens was reinforced in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (s. 102), where provision is made for local planning authorities to have special regard to the desirability of preserving or enhancing registered parks and gardens or their setting. The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that heritage assets such as historic parks and gardens are 'an irreplaceable resource, and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations'. The Gardens Trust explains its role in *Parks and Gardens in the English*

Planning System, 2024. Copies have been sent to every local planning authority in England. The Gardens Trust publishes other guidance and also offers training.

Over the last 10 years, the Gardens Trust, with the help of volunteers in the County Gardens Trusts, has strengthened its contribution to the planning system. This has included appraising large numbers of planning applications, contributing to local plans, providing research and advice to support Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs), and engaging with national policy changes. The Gardens Trust's support for positive development is apparent in its track record as a statutory consultee.

In the 2024–25 financial year, we responded to almost 1,300 planning application consultations affecting registered parks and gardens. Of these, 372 were bespoke, detailed responses of advice, with only 69 (6.6 per cent of responses) objecting to proposals.



Creating a New Community – Harlow, Essex

The 1949 masterplan for Harlow by Sir Frederick Gibberd, the town planner and landscape designer, clustered the new town into four distinct areas integrated with the local landscape of valleys and open countryside. Recreational green space and a network of green routes is at the heart of the masterplan along with an impressive collection of public sculpture. Landscape architects Dame Sylvia Crowe and John St Bodfan Gruffydd were involved in preparing detailed design plans for features such as the new 160-acre public park which is now registered Grade II. Gibberd's own garden is also registered. Two generations on, Harlow is a vibrant town of 93,000 people. "My favourite spot in Harlow has to be the town park and pets' corner. A beautiful place where friends, families and communities can come together" (Christopher Vince, leader of the Labour Group at Harlow Council, 2022).



▲ Harlow Town Park, a public park Registered at Grade II for its Special Historic Interest as a post-war design.

Credit: Photograph of the Water Garden, Harlow Town Park by Mutney from Wikimedia Commons licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Addressing the Challenges of Climate Change

Parks and gardens in both towns and countryside have a critical role to play in addressing climate change, particularly those which are mature. Their longevity enables them to provide established habitats to help nature, including pollinators, to survive in an increasingly challenging environment. They are also highly effective for carbon capture and sequestration, absorbing carbon from the atmosphere to help reduce climate change. Properly managed, they can help regulate air, water and climate, increase soil health, and offset hazards such as flooding.

These places make up a substantial land mass able to make a real difference: a survey carried out for Historic Houses by Saffery, Champness and Nordicity in 2022 found that its member properties alone collectively care for 600,000 acres of parkland and 9,600 acres of gardens. Parks and gardens need to be conserved so they can continue to play this role. Owners and managers need to be supported in caring for them so they can fulfil their potential. A rounded and progressive conservation approach is needed to ensure historic parks and gardens are enhanced and climate change and nature recovery addressed, and people reconnected with our designed landscape heritage.

Habitats to Assist Nature Recovery

Nature and habitats are in a state of crisis: the UK's *State of Nature* report produced by the UK government highlights that 60 per cent

of UK species are in decline, with massive loss of habitats over the last century, including 98 per cent of our wildflower meadows. Fragmentation of habitats is one of the key issues, as they become more prone to environmental impacts such as drought and flooding and species cannot move between these habitat fragments easily, particularly fungi and plants.

The UK's new *National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan* for 2030 is a blueprint for halting and reversing biodiversity loss. Many historic parks and gardens are not only designated for their historic and archaeological interest but also increasingly recognised for their wildlife importance and protected species. Historic designed landscapes are valuable habitats, and their stewardship needs to be integrated into this plan.

The large open parkland associated with country houses, such as those famously designed by Capability Brown in the 18th century, typically with mature woodland and clumps of trees, large swatches of open grassland, and open water. The continuous and gentle traditional management of designed landscapes, in some cases over hundreds of years, has created very special mosaics of different habitats. This is reflected in so many parklands being designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) because of their biodiversity importance, as well as being designated as heritage assets.

The UK is recognised internationally for its historic wood pasture and parklands



▲ Research carried out as part of the Capability Brown tercentenary celebrations showed that wood pasture and parkland priority habitat is 30 times denser in sites designed by Brown compared with the landscape as a whole. There is extensive wood pasture at Grade I Registered Syon Park, London, for instance, where Brown worked between 1754 and 1773, as well as tidal meadows that support a wide variety of habitats and species, reflected in its designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Credit: **View of Syon House from the Thames Path** by Robert Lamb licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0



▲ Moccas Park is a medieval park reshaped by Capability Brown in the 1770s. As well as being Registered at Grade II* for special historic interest, it is designated as an SSSI and a National Nature Reserve for its many ancient oaks and rare beetles, insects and bats. Natural England and the Landscape Institute ran a design competition to generate ideas to restore Moccas Hill Wood as habitat in keeping with the Brown landscape.

Credit: **Photo of deadwood at Moccas** by Natural England/Peter Wakely licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

habitats and in the UK this habitat is a conservation priority. The particular biodiversity value of this habitat rests in its veteran and ancient trees and the plants and animals that they support. Legends in their own right, ancient trees are hundreds of years old.

The UK particularly hosts a large proportion of Europe's veteran trees, many of which are within historic parkland. These have often survived specifically because of the private ownership of such land. The Woodland Trust estimates that around 2,000 insects and other invertebrates spend part of their life cycle in ancient and veteran trees, and decaying wood. Some, including the well-known stag beetle, are very threatened. Where parkland has been designed to be naturalistic, there is likely to be scope to leave deadwood in situ as habitat for beetles, insects and fungi and to aid nature recovery.

Historic parklands include large areas of semi-improved grassland which is often an important habitat, with healthy soil, having experienced little negative intervention for many centuries. Additionally, many country house lawns that have been mown for centuries can be havens for flora and fauna, for example the now rare small colourful waxcap fungi.

Open water such as rivers, lakes and ponds are also an important national priority habitat, supporting amphibians, dragonflies, and other aquatic insects. However, there are few natural large standing open water bodies, so the lakes and other large water features created in historic parks and gardens are important assets in this regard.



▲ Waxcaps (*Hygrocybe*) at Down House, Kent (Grade II).

► The Hazel Leaf Roller weevil beetle (*Apoderus coryli*), one of 2,300 different species found during a biodiversity audit at Registered Grade I Great Dixter garden, Sussex.

Credit: Photo by Dimităr Boevski, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

of plants in a colourful English country garden provides a rich source of nectar for insects over many months and in turn these pollinators help fertilise fruit, vegetables and crops in the surrounding fields.

At Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire there are more than 100 species that are included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, another



▲ The lake and its surrounds at Grade I Registered Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, designed in 1764 by Capability Brown and now part of an SSSI, is an important site for overwintering waterfowl and provides habitats for bats, water voles and otters, as well as many species of nesting bird and rare insects. It is carefully managed both to preserve the historic authenticity of the design and to enhance its ecological condition and support for biodiversity, with a major recent dredging project restoring the lake to its optimum depth.

Credit: Photo by Simon Q, licensed under <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/deed.en>

Changing Management for a Changing Climate

Managing parks and gardens for their cultural and natural heritage should not be a preservationist approach. It needs to be a conservation-based approach that aims to retain and enhance both cultural and natural significance. For example, there are looming challenges about choice of trees to restore or replant key historic design features such as avenues. The Gardens Trust promotes an informed approach based on a thorough understanding of each site and its design through conservation management plans.



Credit: AndyScott, CC BY-SA 4.0
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Wikimedia Commons

example of designed landscapes being able to support high levels of biodiversity and to address global extinction risks. In addition, the established exotic trees and shrubs held at arboreta and botanical gardens offer insights into the performance of potential successors to native species threatened by climate change.



◀▲ The Wollemi pine (*Wollemia nobilis*) is categorised as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. It is one of the world's oldest and rarest plants, dating back some 90 million years. Fewer than 100 adult trees are known to exist in the wild, where it is found only in a remote gorge of the Wollemi National Park, Australia. The Wollemi pine is threatened in the wild by exotic diseases and weeds, wildfires and climate change and is now the focus of extensive research to safeguard its survival. Several are grown at the Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire (Grade I Registered).

Credit: Photo © Jill Sinclair/The Gardens Trust

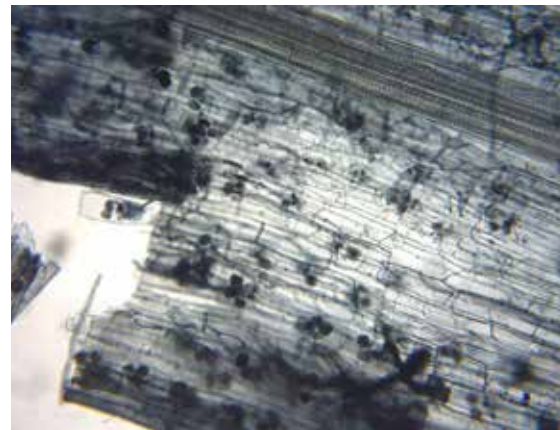
Carbon-Locking Landscapes to Combat Climate Change



Park and gardens features such as species-rich grassland and trees, and the soil and mycorrhizal fungi underneath the ground, are great for 'carbon locking'. They absorb atmospheric carbon emissions, lock it away and help reduce the carbon dioxide that drives climate change. Disturbing these places through changes such as new development inevitably releases the carbon back into the atmosphere. Conserving existing historic parks and gardens is important for climate mitigation alongside more attention-grabbing measures such as planting more trees. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Climate Change and Land (2019) found that soil carbon regeneration carried a potential impact of an estimated 1–3 gigatonnes of CO₂/year by 2030, with reforestation and afforestation at 3–8 gigatonnes.

▲ The National Trust's Woodmeadow Project at the Grade II* Registered gardens at Nymans in West Sussex aims to make positive changes to the Wealden landscape across 280 acres, restoring lost habitats and creating new ones, with measurable benefits for species, carbon, water and soil quality.

Credit: © National Trust Images/Clive Nichols



▲ Microscope view of mycorrhizal fungi in plant roots. The network of mycorrhizae help plants take up nutrients from the soil and boost their resistance to pathogens and resilience to stresses such as drought.

Credit: Public Domain

The Importance of Urban Green Infrastructure in Positive Development

Urban public green spaces, as well as mature street trees and private gardens and hedges, are critical to tempering the effects of increased temperatures, airborne pollutants and heat-related health issues. This green infrastructure is vital in making our towns and cities more resilient to climate change, and pleasant places to live and work. Historic public parks, cemeteries, garden squares and public walks are often the largest features in this green infrastructure.

Parks and gardens offer critical shading, screening and air conditioning to temper the effect of increased temperatures. They are often the major mature treescapes in an urban area as the trees planted in, for example, the 19th century public park creation programmes are now established and large.

Green spaces with mature plantings such as those in long-standing parks and gardens can also help mitigate rainfall run-off and flood risks and maintain water quality by helping to drain away surface water. Leaf cover significantly interrupts rainfall before it hits the ground, through both capture and absorption. It also captures pollutants and helps to filter air by absorbing carbon dioxide and other pollutants.

Additionally, green spaces can offer key habitats for wildlife in urban areas, their design often mimicking historic designed landscapes in rural areas, such as parkland. Many are protected for their contribution to biodiversity, such as Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol which is a Grade II* Registered Park and Garden and a designated Site of Natural Conservation Interest.

It is essential that existing parks and gardens are considered, conserved, supported and utilised in improving green infrastructure in new or growing urban development. They are critical community infrastructure and 'we need to ensure they are adequately funded and resourced with skilled teams.



▲ Arnos Vale Cemetery is a 45-acre Grade II* Registered cemetery in Bristol. It is the resting place of over 300,000 people, including notable residents such as social reformers Mary Carpenter and Rajah Ramohan Roy, who helped shape the city's history. The landscape contains four listed buildings and 25 listed monuments. Over time, nature has turned the site into a diverse nature site which is open every day and free to access.

A dedicated group of volunteers help to care for it, and are piloting a new six-week 'Green Skills Muddy Boot Camp', bringing in a group of young people who are experiencing difficulty entering the job market and who have an interest in working in the green sector. The Gardens Trust has been proud to recently support them with its Community Grant.

Credit: Courtesy of Arnos Vale Cemetery Trust



▲ The meadow plantings at the Queen Elizabeth II Olympic Park in Stratford, East London, were designed in 2012 by James Hitchmough and Nigel Dunnett to promote the appeal of wildflowers, both for visual spectacle and for their role in supporting pollinators and increasing biodiversity. The opportunity to create more large new parks probably only comes round once in a generation, but these will become the 'historic parks and gardens' of the future.

Photo by diamond geezer licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Improving Our Wellbeing and Social Cohesion

Local Places for Healthy, Happy Communities



Social historians, environmental scientists and academics in countless universities across the globe have studied the benefit of parks and green spaces to our many diverse communities. They have all concluded that urban public parks are critical to health and wellbeing, and contribute to social cohesion.

Between 2006 and 2016, the UK Heritage Lottery Fund through its Parks for People Programme contributed £245 million for the restoration of 135 historic parks and gardens across the UK. Evaluation of the programme demonstrated that other significant social benefits derived from this investment in many places, including improved community wellbeing and reduced isolation, reductions in social inequality and initiators for urban regeneration.

▲ Urban green spaces, such as Grade II* Registered Waterlow Park in London, provide city dwellers contact with nature. Some green spaces and features such as orchard trees are vestiges of lost countryside now locked into townscapes. The green infrastructure network also helps connect neighbourhoods and gives access to the outdoors for recreation and relaxation. Parks such as these also contribute to public health, reflected, for example, in Waterlow Park's inclusion in Camden and Islington London Boroughs' Parks for Health strategy.

Credit: Paul Rabbitts

Benefits to Health

In 2004, the milestone report *Natural Fit: Can Green Space and Biodiversity Increase Levels of Physical Activity?* concluded that there is evidence that green space in an urban environment can improve life expectancy and decrease health complaints. Public spaces are recognised as essential in creating healthier cities according to various global agendas and their associated goals and targets. A 2016 study published in the scientific journal *Preventive Medicine* suggested that outdoor exercise in green spaces delivered £2.2 billion worth of health benefits annually in England. For example, in London, it has been estimated that £950 million was being saved in healthcare costs because of the city's green spaces, according to the *Natural capital accounts for public green space in London* report prepared for the Greater London Authority, National Trust and Heritage Lottery Fund in October 2017.

In 2018, the charity Fields in Trust published the report *Revaluing Parks and Green Spaces: Measuring their Economic and Wellbeing Value to Individuals*, which provided a robust economic valuation of parks and green spaces in the UK as well as putting a value on improvements in health and wellbeing associated with their frequent use. This was the first research study on parks and green spaces to use welfare weighting methodology, allowing for more informed evidence-based policy decisions. Its headline findings are remarkable:

- ◆ The wellbeing value associated with the frequent use of local parks and green spaces is worth £34.2 billion per year to the entire UK adult population.

- ◆ The total economic value of parks and green spaces is £30.24 per year per person (£2.52 per month), and includes benefits gained from using their local park or green space and non-use benefits such as the preservation of parks for future generations.
- ◆ Parks and green spaces are estimated to save the NHS around £111 million per year based solely on a reduction in GP visits and excluding any additional savings from prescribing or referrals.

In 2020, the Social Market Foundation's Briefing Note *Recreating parks: securing the future of our urban green spaces* concluded that 'international evidence and NHS pilots have shown that using parks as a healthcare resource can improve outcomes for patients. Green prescribing could save NHS resources.'

We have seen the evidence out in the field. Parks managers have told us that since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been an unparalleled increase in the use of public parks through sport and physical activities, whether formal or informal. A few of the many examples include the growth in padel tennis in many parks and the continued proliferation of skate parks. There has been a huge uptake in parkruns across the country; they now take place in over 800 park locations with more than 3.5 million participants supported by nearly half a million volunteers. Outdoor gyms are springing up in parks and the number of Friends of Parks groups across the UK now totals over 6,000 and is growing.

The use of parks in contributing to wellbeing and good health is now well established and recognised by the Department of Health and community GPs, with the latter prescribing green gym sessions and exercise activities in parks as a response to health problems.

IMPROVING OUR WELLBEING AND SOCIAL COHESION

Healthy childhoods too are nurtured by parks, with playgrounds providing unique outdoor spaces where children can exercise to improve their physical health and develop the social skills essential for good mental health.

► The parkrun at Eastville Park. Located in north-east Bristol, the park was created in the 1890s, after the publication of the pamphlet 'The cry of the poor: a letter from sixteen working men to the sixteen aldermen of the city' which argued for improvements to the quality of life for working people, including the creation of public parks in the working-class areas of the city. It is now on the Register at Grade II.

Credit: Photo by Suncloud83 licensed under CC BY-ND 2.0



The Invention of Public Parks

The need for public parks grew out of the desire to improve the lives of the working classes in the early 19th century. With the rapid growth of towns and cities and the impact of the industrial revolution, there were concerns about the increase of unhealthy and antisocial behaviour. The 1833 Parliamentary Select Committee on *Public Walks* highlighted the benefits parks could bring and how the provision of parks would lead to a better use of Sundays and the replacement of 'debasing pleasures'.

Government recognised the value of a park for the East End, where mortality rates far outstripped the rest of the capital, when the 1839 Annual Report of the Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages said that "a Park in the East End of London would probably diminish the annual deaths by several thousands ... and add several years to the lives of the entire population". Victoria Park was created in Tower Hamlets in 1841.

Further parks were to follow throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, with many developed by local authorities, via benefactors' gifts to communities, and through public subscription.



▲ Queen's Park, Manchester, opened in 1846 to improve the health and wellbeing of Victorian industrial workers. Credit: Postcard – Linden Groves

Social Cohesion

Parks are places where people come together, experience and participate in leisure activities, attend events or let off steam, all with a shared community focus, bringing a feeling of comfort.

Urban parks connect people to certain places and to the other people who use those places. This is seen particularly in playgrounds in parks, which ensure that at an early age children spend time with others from different backgrounds but linked by place, while their watching parents also meet others.

Research has shown that social cohesion is positively influenced by the presence and quality of urban green spaces in creating a sense of community. In 2017, the University of Manchester published *The Value of Public Parks and their Communities*, which found that parks confer value on to place: their existence as assets has appeal over and above their immediate use value as part of the landscape of the city. They are important resources for families, as managed spaces of order and safety where people can be together with their children and grandchildren. It is



▲ A community coming together at Maurice Lea Memorial Park, Swadlincote, Derbyshire

Credit: South Derbyshire District Council

notable too that people do not need to know, understand or care about the history of a park to value its practical and aesthetic benefits and to see it as a great source of civic pride, as found by the Historic England and Public First *Heritage and Civic Pride* survey in 2022.

CABE Space in *The Value of Public Space: How High Quality Parks and Public Spaces Create Economic, Social and Environmental Value* described the social dimension of public space as open to all, regardless of ethnic origin, age or gender, and as such representing a democratic forum for citizens and society. These spaces shape the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities. When properly designed and cared for, they bring people together, provide meeting places and foster social ties of a kind that have been disappearing in many urban areas but are vital for successful communities.

◀ Parks are important for healthy childhoods, such as at Grade II Blaise Castle, Bristol.

Credit: The Gardens Trust Sharing Repton project

Much Valued by Local People – the Covid Experience

In 2020, the world was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and public appreciation of the UK's parks and gardens during successive lockdowns and beyond was witnessed and well publicised nationally and globally. Historic England and Public First's *Heritage and Civic Pride* survey in 2022 found that: 'Parks ... are a modern amenity that has come of age because of Covid.'

The value of local parks is captured in the Covid memoir *Alexandra Park – an Oasis in Lockdown* by Julie Boyd, written in 2021. She says, "When the Prime Minister then said we could go out for exercise once a day, I was alarmed and angry. 'No!' I shouted at the TV screen. 'I will go out 100 times a day!' Such was my initial natural rebellious reaction to the idea of being told the limit of how many times I could go out to be in the fresh air! ... I calmed down and accepted that I could go out to the park once a day for an hour maybe." The park was allowed to remain open as it was considered essential for people's health and wellbeing even though all sporting and event activities were halted.

Natural England carried out a survey into the impact of COVID-19 on engagement with green and natural spaces and found that during the Covid lockdowns urban green spaces were consistently the most visited location compared with areas of water such as

canals or beaches, or rural green space such as forests. They were also the most prominent in social media discussions in terms of both total volume and growth of volume of discussions. It also found that Asian or Asian British respondents were most likely to have visited an urban green space (54 per cent) (as well as the grounds of a historic property or country park (17 per cent)). The survey found that the main reasons for spending time in parks and green spaces were for fresh air, health and exercise, with adults from higher income households most likely to visit for physical health, while those from lower income households were more likely to be there for mental health and wellbeing. Similarly, those with higher wellbeing scores for happiness, satisfaction and feelings of life being worthwhile were more likely to visit green spaces for physical health and exercise or to connect with nature. Those with lower happiness, satisfaction and feelings of life being worthwhile wellbeing scores or high anxiety scores were more likely to visit for mental health benefits.

However, as lockdowns continued through 2020, the focus on social activities became more prominent, seen in social media discussions, with a high volume of people talking about the mental health benefits of spending time with others in green spaces.



Contributing to Our Tourism Economy

Historic Parks and Gardens as Visitor Destinations

A rich multi-layered legacy of high-quality parks and gardens has been created by our nation of gardeners and garden lovers over many centuries that today draws visitors to seek both inspiration and enjoyment. It is a diverse and rich 'living museum' for a growing number of visitors, both domestic and international, today and in future.

There has been a boom in garden tourism and visiting over the last 35 years and historic parks and gardens have become increasingly popular destinations. In the last two decades, led by private and public investment, both direct and indirect, a strong garden visiting economy has also emerged and is making a significant contribution to the national economy.

What Gardens Offer to Tourists

The diverse and complex mix of garden destinations varies greatly in terms of size, accessibility, management, funding, visitor offer and promotion. They include: portfolios

▲ The South Front and Emperor Fountain at Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, which is Grade I Registered. The UK's historic parks and gardens are famous across the world.

Credit: Courtesy of Chatsworth House Trust, Simon Broadhead

of many hundreds of parks and gardens owned by the National Trust and English Heritage; around 1,400 sites represented by Historic Houses, of which around 900 have public access; the Royal Horticultural Society's five 'flagship' gardens; dozens of Botanic Gardens; 27,000 free-to-access public and municipal gardens, parks and squares; new contemporary garden attractions. The National Garden Scheme gives visitors unique access to over 3,500 exceptional private gardens and raises over £3.5 million for charities. More than 100 private green spaces are accessed annually by some 42,000 people during London Open Gardens, organised by London Parks & Gardens, part of the Gardens Trust.

A mixture of organisations influence the growth, development and management of

garden tourism and visiting in the UK. These include governmental, public, charitable organisations and private owners, including DCMS, Visit Britain, the National Trust, and Historic Houses. They have a range of aims and priorities including promoting visitor experiences, managing sustainable and commercial businesses, ensuring heritage and environmental conservation, supporting scientific research and education, and providing charitable and community benefits. There is no overriding national organisation that co-ordinates and represents the full range of players, promoters and influencers of garden tourism and garden visiting. The Gardens Trust does, however, uniquely provide a national overview of the extensive collection of designed landscapes and gardens and the need for the raised awareness of their protection, value and importance as visitor destinations.

The Scale of Historic Parks and Gardens as Visitor Destinations

Visit Britain estimates that approximately 38 million overseas visitors were attracted to the UK in 2022 and 30 per cent (11.4 million) of these visitors included a visit to a garden or park destination as part of their itinerary. Heritage sites provided six out of the ten most popular UK visitor attractions for both overseas and domestic visitors, including 'flagship' gardens such as Royal Botanic Gardens Kew.

Visit England's Annual Survey of *Visits to Visitor Attractions* published in 2024 showed that the previous year's top free garden attraction was St Edmundsbury Abbey Garden and Ruins, with 1,345,058 visitors.



▲ The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, are Grade I Registered and attracted 2.3 million visitors in 2024, making it the second most visited paid attraction in England, behind only the Tower of London. A World Heritage Site, the historic gardens have been open to the public since 1840.

Credit: Engraving of the Palm House, Kew from *The World's Metropolis, or, Mighty London* (1855). Public domain



CONTRIBUTING TO OUR TOURISM ECONOMY

◀ The Abbey Gardens in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk (Grade II Registered) are adjacent to the city's cathedral and include the ruins of an 11th century Benedictine monastery. Laid out as a botanical garden in the 1830s, today the gardens include bedding displays, a wildflower labyrinth, a rose garden and an aviary. The site is one of the most popular free tourist attractions in England.

Credit: **The Gardens Trust**

Historic England and Visit England's *Visitor Attraction Trends in England 2023* showed that the most popular historic sites are historic gardens and parks, comprising some 40 per cent of all visits. These figures are compelling and clearly demonstrate the considerable contribution our collection of historic gardens and parks makes to the UK's tourist economy.

The 14th Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on UK Garden Tourism in 2019 acknowledged the economic potential from the garden visiting boom but recognised that this had not been fully exploited. The Committee report recommended historic and other gardens should be put at the heart of the UK tourism offer and acknowledged that their contribution to the economy was undervalued.



◀ The Grade II gardens at Lowther Castle in Cumbria are a popular visitor attraction, having been restored and reinvigorated in the 21st century.

Credit: **Photograph by Andrew Maybury**

Who are the Garden Visitors - Now and in the Future?

Garden destinations, both historic and contemporary, report that the majority of their visitors are still those aged over 60 years but there are increasing numbers of 45–60-year-olds and those aged 30–45. The Gardens Trust's engagement and learning work is focused on younger audiences to increase awareness and a better understanding of historic parks and gardens. These generations seek a wide range of garden-related and outdoor landscape experiences and learning. This is accompanied by a push on achieving access for all, and encouraging family visits.

The digital access offered by social media platforms makes historic gardens more accessible than ever before, as they can be explored from the comfort of a phone on a sofa. However, the younger generation of visitors will also visit sites in person and follow their innate sense of curiosity to experience history and the sensory and spiritual connections to plants, soil and water that cannot be fully satisfied virtually. Similarly, physical presence on site is essential to gain the real benefits for mental health and exercise gardens offer.



▲ Visitors exploring the extensive parkland at Lyme Park, Cheshire, a 1,400-acre estate accessible from Macclesfield, Stockport and Manchester. It includes a medieval deer park as well as gardens and pleasure grounds designed from the 17th century onwards. Donated to the National Trust in 1946, the gardens and parklands are registered Grade II*.

Credit: © National Trust Images/Chris Lacey

Emergence of the Garden Visiting Economy



► Following thorough research, the Elizabethan Garden at Kenilworth Castle in Warwickshire was reconstructed by English Heritage. It was completed in 2009 at a cost of approximately £2.5 million and now attracts some 120,000 visitors per year. Credit: © English Heritage

Visitors now want more diverse experiences at gardens, including shopping for products beyond plants and gardening goods, and facilities for eating and drinking. The garden destinations' response has been to be more businesslike, typically including investment in visitor infrastructure, and often to create a more family-based attraction. Flagship sites like the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew in London and RHS Wisley in Surrey have invested heavily in major new visitor infrastructure, while others such as Alnwick Garden in Northumberland and The Newt in Somerset have created new visitor gardens blended with existing historic features. Much has additionally been invested in the reconstruction and restoration of historic

gardens and parks as part of their new role as paying visitor destinations, or as public parks with income-generating facilities such as cafés.

The direct contribution that garden visiting makes to the overall visitor economy is very significant. For example, in 2023, £2 billion was spent directly by overseas visitors on gardens and parks, which is some 20 per cent of the total national spend by international visitors. Meanwhile, capital investment in garden visitor infrastructure for boosting visitor numbers by flagship gardens and other sites has hidden benefits to the construction and other employment sectors.

About the Contributors

Christopher Blandford OBE

Chris is a landscape architect, master planner and heritage specialist. Until 2017 he was Chairman and CEO of the award-winning CBA Studios, which he founded in 1977. Working nationally and internationally, he gained a broad range of technical experience in both the conservation and development fields, as well as considerable managerial and commercial expertise. He is a Fellow of the Landscape Institute, President of World Heritage UK, Vice Chairman of the South Downs National Park Design Review Panel and a past trustee of ICOMOS. He has regularly advised government on design, heritage and environmental matters. He is a Trustee of the Gardens Trust.

Linden Groves

Linden is the Gardens Trust's Head of Operations & Strategy. She has worked in the landscape conservation sector for 25 years, starting as Assistant Editor of *Historic Gardens Review* before becoming part of the conservation team of the Garden History Society, and then taking a role with the Association of Gardens Trusts on its volunteer capacity-building project in 2013. She has additionally worked as a freelance specialising in children in the historic environment for organisations such as English Heritage, the National Trust and Historic England. Her co-authored book *The Gardens of English Heritage* won the Garden Media Guild's 'Inspirational Book of the Year' award in 2010.

Dr Paul Rabbitts

Paul is currently Environmental Services Manager for Norwich City Council, responsible for their Parks and Open Spaces. He is also an author of 39 books, covering the subject of historic urban parks, the Royal Parks, architecture and local history, and lectures regularly on the subject.

Jill Sinclair

Jill is a garden historian, author and lecturer. She is a tutor on the history of the English landscape garden for the University of Oxford and is advising a Sheffield charity on restoring a significant garden by Percy Cane. Jill is a Trustee of the Gardens Trust.

Dr Victoria Thomson

Victoria's professional background is in town planning and historic conservation. Her work has included stints in local and national government, a government agency, academia, and the third sector. Victoria's personal and research interests are very much focused on historic parks and gardens, and particularly on their protection. She is a Trustee of the Gardens Trust.

John Watkins

John was until 2025 Head of the Gardens & Landscapes team at English Heritage, providing specialist advice and technical guidance on the maintenance and management of historic gardens and designed landscapes. He is a professional horticulturist with some 47 years' experience, awarded the RHS Associate of Honour in 2016. He both writes and lectures on plants and historic gardens and their management and has served as an examiner for the RHS examinations and represented English Heritage on the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's Green Flag Board. He is the Chair of the Gardens Trust.

Tim Webb

Tim is Interim Director of London Parks & Gardens. He is a conservationist passionate about access to quality public green space. Alongside his role as Director of London Parks and Gardens, he is a co-founder of the National Park City Foundation, and Secretary of the UK Urban Ecology Forum.

Jenifer White MBE

Jenifer has been involved in the protection and designation of landscapes and especially historic parks and gardens for 35 years. She collaborated with the Register of Parks & Gardens Team after the 1987 Great Storm on the landscape rehabilitation grant programmes and joined English Heritage's Historic Parks and Gardens Committee as the Countryside Commission's Deputy National Heritage Adviser. In 2000, Jenifer moved to English Heritage and over the next 23 years worked closely with the Historic Parks and Gardens Register inspectors on the Register Upgrade Programme and later with Listing teams on the publication of the Register and guidance; led on thematic reviews and related research; and advised on casework, policy and strategy. Jenifer is a Trustee of the Gardens Trust.

Imogen Wood

Imogen is a member of the Gardens Trust's Conservation Committee. She is the National Trust's Senior National Consultant for Heritage & Climate, specialising in the conservation of heritage assets, places and landscapes, while leading for delivering positive action in response to the nature and climate crises. She has a broad experience of working with community groups, local authorities, charities, private owners and partner organisations. Her background is in archaeology, masterplanning, Conservation Management Plans for parks and gardens, and land management advice for the historic environment and environmental consultancy. Imogen has been joint leader and founder of the Ironbridge Young Archaeologists Club. She is a fellow of the Landscape Institute, and full member of the Chartered Institute of Archaeologists (CIfA) and the Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC). She is Chair of the West Midlands IHBC.

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This report aims to raise awareness of the role and potential of historic parks and designed landscapes to address the key issues of today and tomorrow. Our nation's historic parks and other designed landscapes were created for enjoyment, recreation and wellbeing and continue to serve us and our many communities, while also having an important role in climate change adaptation and nature recovery. This rich, diverse and valuable collection of parks, and gardens must be well-conserved so that they can continue to be available for the discovery and enjoyment of everyone.



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