

# ISLE OF WIGHT GARDENS TRUST

Autumn 2024



*Front cover—our chief photographer, Tim Welstead, captures the wonderful landscape at Gatcombe House*

## **ISLE OF WIGHT GARDENS TRUST**

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# ISLE OF WIGHT GARDENS TRUST

Charitable Incorporated Organisation No. 1165283

Member of The Gardens Trust

## Committee of Management (Trustees) 2024

John Brownscombe (Chairman)

Vicky Basford (Research)

Sheila Caws (Membership)

Susan Dobbs, John Harrison, Susan Giles, Jane Watson

## Newsletter

John Harrison

## Website Editor

John Brownscombe

## Conservation Committee

Vicky Basford, John Brownscombe and James Harrison

**Treasurer** Nalini Singh.

**Minute secretary** Rosie Hill

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## Trustees report

Looking back, it has once again been an active summer for the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust. We were lucky as we enjoyed dry weather for all the visits.

Our full programme of visits started with a mainland day trip to Houghton Lodge and the Longstock Water Gardens, both near Stockbridge in Hampshire ably organised by Trustee Jane Watson. Members were invited to visit Puckaster Cottage, Niton and at our first Marine Villas project progress event, held at Lisle Combe, Trustee Vicky Basford gave an illustrated talk there by an excellent tea. We were pleased to see so many members and project volunteers and their partners attend this event. This project continues and will result in a publication in due course.

The AGM was well attended at Barton Manor, thanks to Dawn and Al Haig-Thomas and was followed by a tour of the gardens led by their Head Gardener. A private visit to Gatcombe House to hear about the restoration of the parkland and garden by new owners Simon and Caroline Laver ended our summer events, with a final autumn treat being the visit to The Newt in Somerset organised by Trustee Susan Dobbs.

Trustees and volunteers once again ran our stall and display at the Wolverton Garden Fair, which remains a useful way for us to speak to lots of people about our charitable work and sell some of our publications.

We continue to provide input into the planning process where proposals have a potential impact on parks and gardens designated for their heritage importance and are keeping a watching brief for any updates on the refused proposals at Norris Castle, the sale of East Dene, Bonchurch and the future of Oakfield Primary School whose site includes St John's House, Ryde. We are in touch with Shorwell Parish Council over plans to replace the alpine bridge across Shorwell Shute which was a designed feature of the pleasure grounds for Northcourt – see report on planning issues by John Brownscombe.

We hope to see you at the **Christmas party at The Garlic Farm** on December 4th at 12.30.



*What our trustees like best – having tea !*

*There were 35 members and friends enjoying Vicky's talk and Sheila's displays at Lisle Combe. Thanks to Frank for technical support, Sue Giles for the bookings and Ruth and Robert for a delicious tea.*

## Trustees Report continued

Many articles and reports on our activities and other garden related matters, which we hope will be of interest to you our members, are found in this edition of our regular newsletter. We hope you will enjoy it.

Finally, it is with great sadness that we mark the loss of two long standing and supportive members. Pamela England, a Trustee and our Membership Secretary for many years, sadly passed away in late spring. Latterly Pamela was very active in the West Wight community, particularly as a school governor for many years. Three of our trustees were able to attend her funeral and support Paul and family. Her enthusiasm and support for our work will be greatly missed. John Gurney-Champion of Standen House, centenarian and another long standing and indeed founder member passed away in April . However we are very pleased to have some new younger members but we still need more help particularly with a future newsletter editor, but we are delighted to have the support of Nalini Singh as treasurer and Rosie Hill as minute secretary.

**AGM report.** John Harrison was appointed president and chaired the meeting. After the minutes of the last meeting were approved the accounts were presented and approved showing funds in hand of £14,162 up £68 on the previous year. The surplus was reduced partly as a result of spending £309 on the Marine Vlla project. Vicky Basford presented a brief report on activities and Susan Dobbs promoted the visit to The Newt which she is organising. Nalini Singh was introduced as treasurer and Rosie Hill was introduced as a prospective minutes secretary. The trustees were reappointed enbloc.



*The AGM was very well attended by 37 members. At the end Susan Dobbs , past chairman presented Moira Sibley with a rose bush and thanked her for her many years as secretary. The meeting ended with a delicious array of cakes and tea provided by the committee.*

## Barton Manor visit.

After the AGM we were led around the garden by the head gardener on a warm summer's evening, and were later joined by Dawn and Al Haig-Thomas, our hosts, who were thanked by our president.

The existing building of Barton Manor is thought to date from 1605 but was added to by Prince Albert with later alterations. It is built on the site of the ancient Barton Priory dating from 1282.

Queen Victoria bought Barton Manor in 1845 for £18,000 as an annexe to Osborne. King Edward VII kept the house after gifting Osborne to the nation as a summer retreat and then finally George VI sold it in 1922 with 745 acres.

The gardens are of particular interest as Prince Albert designed the terraces and oversaw the planting of trees. The terraces remain today and have been recently replanted.



*We were able to witness much restoration work with paths being restored in the secret garden, the lower terrace beds being replanted and the foundations of a new glasshouse, near the raised beds.*



*Moira Sibley with her rose.*



## Garden news

We are delighted to welcome Claire Margetts as a member and as new Head Gardener at Mottistone. Together with the new Head Gardener at Ventnor Botanic Gardens, Wayne Williams, and Ellen Penstone-Smith at Farringford we have a new generation of enthusiastic gardeners bringing new ideas to our Garden Isle—just as Simon and Debs Goodenough did now nearly forty years ago. We are pleased they were given the Harold Hillier Award by the Friends of Ventnor Botanic Gardens for their outstanding contribution to horticulture on the Island. It is good to know that the last of the VBG apprentices, Ellis Gant, is returning from Wisley to run a garden at Pulpit Rock, Bonchurch, recently redesigned by Bunny Guinness. The Ventnor apprentices have made extraordinary progress in their careers.

We now hear much more about the physical and mental benefits of gardening and it is good news to hear that Farringford now have a good group of volunteers, together with the groups at Ventnor, Osborne and Mottistone (the latter keeping the garden going before Claire was appointed). Volunteering must be the way forward.

## Gatcombe House Visit

By invitation of Simon and Caroline Laver we had a wonderful afternoon at Gatcombe hearing about the ambitious plans for the restoration of the Georgian landscape from Debs Goodenough, consultant, and from Simon Laver. We also heard how it is intended to make the estate sustainable with the vineyard to provide high quality sparkling wine. At a time when there is a big risk that large house owners will be more heavily taxed it is really good to hear about how it should not only sustain itself but also allow public access at times to share the landscape. Gatcombe too hopes to attract volunteers to help both in the garden and as guides and eventually to restore the kitchen garden behind the grand stable block. Initial work has involved contractors clearing woodland to enhance the views, such as the one on the front cover. After the tour 30 members enjoyed tea in the hall.



*An aerial view of part of the park at Gatcombe. The parterre has now been replanted to replace the box. We were able to see the original access which comes up from bottom right over a fine bridge .*

# Visit to Houghton Lodge

## Houghton Lodge, a late 18<sup>th</sup> century cottage orné

Members of the Isle of Wight Marine Villas project have learned that ‘marine villas’ were often also ‘cottages ornés’. Notable local examples include Puckaster Cottage, Sea Cottage and Lisle Combe. It was fascinating to compare these local examples with Houghton Lodge near Stockbridge in the Test Valley, Hampshire which members of the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust visited on 4<sup>th</sup> June. The cottage orné at Houghton was built before 1800 for the Pitt-Rivers family, probably as a fishing lodge. Another Hampshire fishing lodge already existed at Boarn Hill on the shores of the Solent, designed by Lancelot (Capability) Brown in the 1770s within the grounds of Cadland House. The design of Houghton Lodge has been attributed to John Plaw, a Southampton architect and author of several pattern books for ornamental cottages and rural dwellings.

Houghton Lodge is a privately owned Grade II\* listed building. It is possible to visit the house but we viewed it only from the outside, concentrating on visiting the Grade II\* registered park and garden. Equipped with an informative map of the grounds, we were free to explore individually or in small groups. Sheila Caws and I started by visiting the late 18<sup>th</sup> century walled garden to the north of the house. This is surrounded by rendered chalk cob walls (listed Grade II) on flint plinths with a wide tiled coping. A range of glasshouses and a vinery run along the 4m high west wall. The other three walls are 3m high and have large, espaliered fruit trees growing on them. Wide grass paths run around the perimeter of the garden and the centre is laid out as a potage to a late 20<sup>th</sup> century design, centred on a 19<sup>th</sup> century well.





## Houghton Lodge continued



*The pear Beurre Diel has won the award as being the longest espalier pear tree 53 feet 11 inches wide—a champion tree.*

Exiting the walled garden by a gate on its east side, we viewed the extensive lawns with specimen trees sweeping down to the banks of the Spring Ditch, a tributary of the River Test, with water meadows beyond. From the lawns there was an excellent view of the house which is a one and a half storey white-rendered yellow brick building with yellow brick additions and a plain tiled roof (originally thatched). A large bay with a beehive roof projects on the east or garden front of the house and a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century cast-iron verandah runs around the length of the garden front, which has gothic windows and gabled dormers.

After viewing the house, we did not have time to explore the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Serpentine Walk to the south of the house, terminating at an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Grade II listed grotto in rustic flint which, like the house, is attributed to John Plaw.

Vicky Basford.



*Vicky Basford and Sheila Caws enjoying the thatched summer house and winding paths at Longstock. The staff of John Lewis are very fortunate in having this as a place for relaxation. However with John Lewis partnership having to cut costs one hopes at least this will be retained.*

# Visit to Longstock Water Gardens

John Spedan Lewis who founded the John Lewis Partnership in 1929 bought Longstock House and the surrounding Leckford Estate amounting to some 4,000 acres in 1945. Longstock Park Water Garden was originally owned by the Beddington family in 1914. Channels were dug to and from the River Test enabling a continuous flow of fresh water through the area that was a former kitchen garden and orchard. By the 1930s the water garden consisted of a central channel flanked by two lagoons with extensive beds of water loving perennials.

John Lewis expanded the gardens with plants imported from all over the world. Among these were over 40 varieties of water lilies. After his death it was bequeathed for the benefit of John Lewis staff.

The garden also contains hundreds of different species of trees and plants. A deep seam of naturally occurring acidic peat runs through the rear of the garden allowing azaleas and rhododendrons to grow and thrive. Along the water's edge we saw plants grown in large blocks providing beautiful seasonal colour textures. Huge swathes of Primula Candellabra, day lilies alliums and monarda take over from the herbaceous perennials. We saw the resident ducks that assist the war against slugs and snails. There is a deciduous conifer swamp cypress which towers over the gardens and in autumn has brilliant deep orange foliage and is an impressive sight. The water lilies are the highlight of the garden seen as the jewels in the garden's crown. They provide a valuable component to the aquatic ecosystem with their large leaves providing shade and shelter for the fish and help to reduce the algae and blanketweed.

A further highlight was the adjoining Leckford Estate Garden centre where members stocked up with plants, healthy organic produce and an excellent lunch. *By Jane Watson*



## Marine Villa project update.

### Update on Marine Villas Project

Project volunteers attended site recording visits at Marine Villa and the Old Cottage on 17<sup>th</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> March. Fourteen people attended one or both visits. Following the visits, digital photographs of Marine Villa and research information on both properties were received from several volunteers. Research on other sites has also been carried out independently by volunteers and uploaded to the IW Gardens Trust digital inventory. Sites researched by volunteers include Steephill Castle, The Priory, Castle House, Seafield House, Buckingham Villa, properties in Cowes and in the Yarmouth area

On 21<sup>st</sup> July a social visit to Lisle Combe took place. This was planned as a thank you to volunteers for their work on the project but other IWGT members also attended the event. The weather had been unsettled for a few days but the afternoon of our visit was warm and sunny. Lisle Combe, located in the Undercliff, has been owned by the Noyes family for about 100 years but was earlier associated with the Yarborough family and originated as 'Captain Pelham's Cottage' in 1839. It is one of the best examples of our marine villas. The afternoon started with a presentation by Vicky Basford on work done by volunteers. We then sat outside on the terrace to enjoy tea and cakes before some people explored the wider garden area.

We are planning to write up the results of the Marine Villas Project this autumn with the aim of producing a popular publication in 2025. We also hope to have a final celebration event next year, bringing the project to a formal conclusion.



*Lisle Combe for our social event on a really warm day with 35 members and guests.*

## Visit to The Newt

After nearly two years of planning, Susan Dobbs arranged a very successful visit on October 8th for 16 members to what is undoubtedly the largest commercial garden creation of this century.

The hotel, based on Hadspen House, was a former farmhouse bought by William Player in 1687 but substantially expanded by the Medows family in 1767 and then by the wealthy Hobhouse family who bought it in 1785. Henry Hobhouse, head of the Bar, made a fortune with his brother as Bristol merchants. We did not see the house except from a distance. The gardens were laid out in a formal French style by the Players but Henry Hobhouse introduced picturesque vistas. Penelope Hobhouse who opened the garden to the public in 1970, transformed the walled parabola vegetable garden into an arts and crafts garden. From 1987 Canadians Nori and Sandra Pope created famous colour themed beds and a nursery, until the Hobhouse family finally sold it in 2013 to the South Africans Karen Roos and Koos Bekker who created The Newt.

We wandered around (with plenty of rain falling) to marvel at what money could create. A labyrinth of beds, gazebos and wonderfully built new buildings and walls from their local Hadspen quarry of an orange Cary stone. Some visited the incredibly well recreated Roman Villa and garden, some visited the Four seasons gardens and half the party enjoyed an interesting delicious sharing menu at the garden restaurant, or sampled The Newt cider.

For garden historians, one has to accept that layers of garden history can be replaced, but it might be considered a shame that those layers of history were not appreciated and explained. The Roman Villa again would benefit from more written interpretation.

For visitors, especially those down from the London, this is a wonderful introduction to gardens, with the best of garden designs in an attractive landscaped setting. We were privileged as RHS members to enjoy the free access (and “friends” at a discounted price) to this amazing creation, with no expense spared.



*The surviving parabola, walls covered with numerous varieties of cordon fruit trees for their cider.*

# Report on Planning activities April 2024 to September 2024

## Planning applications

We have provided comment on one planning application since the last Committee Meeting. This related to the proposed changes to the conditions to the approval for the works associated with the onshore connection of the Perpetuous Tidal Power scheme at Flowers Brook, Ventnor. (Planning reference 24/01040/RVC). We had been invited to provide our comment by the IW Council as we had submitted information on the original application due to the links with the landscaped gardens and grounds of the former Steephill Castle Estate which are still in evidence on the site, but which are unaffected by the planned works. We raised no objection to the proposed condition changes which largely were to enable phased works to commence rather than having to fulfil all conditions before any work.

## Proposed changes to NPPG

Our national body The Gardens Trust advised us of proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG) being suggested by the new government elected on July 4<sup>th</sup> 2024. Having reviewed the suggested changes which largely relate to the easing of regulations in relation to house and infrastructure building on Green Belt and Grey Belt (previously developed Green Belt) and in the knowledge that we have no such designated land on the Isle of Wight, we decided not to provide comment. The Gardens Trust was seeking to combine comments from County Trusts to have a unified single voice on the matter.

## Island Planning Strategy

The Isle of Wight Council initiated another consultation on the latest iteration of their Local Plan known as the Island Planning Strategy. This, when finally adopted, will replace the current Island Plan. We provided comment on the Historic Environment Policy and explanatory text, via their online form. In essence we have requested greater clarity on and explicit reference to the designated status of the Local Heritage List in the explanatory text as the protections are higher for designated sites than non-designated heritage assets. We also corrected their assertion of nine registered historic parks and gardens on the Isle of Wight to ten due to the recent addition of East Dene, Bonchurch and requested that this should also include the number of the relevant grade of listing in a similar way to that already shown for Listed Buildings in their document.

## Planning report continued

Members will no doubt be aware of the proposals from Exxon Mobile (in relation to their operations based at Fawley in Hampshire) for options for the creation of a pipeline across the Solent via either Hampshire (New Forest) or the Isle of Wight (including areas of the Isle of Wight National Landscape formerly known as Isle of Wight AONB). Two options are shown crossing the Solent and then travelling from the northwest coast of the island to then leave on the southwest coastline either close to Freshwater Bay or in the area of Brook. The option for the Brook line would include potential impact on the registered park and garden at Northcourt (in the area of Mount Ararat on its eastern boundary). Deadline for the submission of comment, which can either be made via their online form or by direct email, has been extended to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2024 due to concerns that it clashed with the summer holidays and recess of the Parish Councils. The Isle of Wight National Landscape have submitted their comment which expresses strong concern over the impact of the scheme, and we understand that the IW Council Archaeology and Historic Environment Service have also been contacted and are providing detail of heritage assets that would be impacted on the two options.

We provided our comment by email rather than the online form as their form requires you to rank the options in preference. Our comment is a caution to ensure that impact on registered Parks and Gardens and Local Heritage List sites with a designed landscape value is avoided, or mitigated for if they are able to satisfactorily demonstrate that the people benefit of their proposals will outweigh the environmental damage that they will incur. I also alerted Tamsin MacMillan at the Gardens Trust in their role as Statutory Consultee. It is important to note that this proposal is being deemed to be of a scale to make it a national infrastructure project and as such, its application for approval will be considered directly by the Secretary of State via the Planning Inspectorate. —

*By Chairman*



*The alpine bridge connected one half of the Northcourt Estate to the other without the family or guests having to “mix” with the locals. It was part of the picturesque landscaping of Northcourt by the Bulls in 1800 leading to “Mount Ararat”, The Mount named probably after Richard Bulls’ business visits to Turkey is now threatened by the Solent CO2 pipeline and the bridge by decay.*

# A Short Review of Trees in the Landscape

## Setting the Scene

Trees unlike most other groups of plants have an impact on landscape for decades extending over centuries in many cases. A living continuum through history. Trees in landscape be that natural, man-made parklands, estates, and gardens are awe inspiring. It is a privilege to stand in front of a great oak or redwood and muse on their longevity and magnificence.

In a series of articles, I would like to examine how treescapes have changed over the centuries from the use of native species to the increasingly important use of introduced, new and “exciting” species, coupled with the selection by nurserymen of clones, cultivars and hybrids.

Early parklands, estates, and woodlands relied almost entirely on our native species and naturalised species. Gradually through the modern era travellers have been bringing home trees and other plants to beautify gardens and the wider landscape. We can think of the Tradescants in the 1600s, the line of collectors continued through the likes of John and William Bartram to Robert Fortune, David Douglas, Phillip von Siebold and into the twentieth century with names such as Ernest Wilson, George Forrest and David Fairchild. Plant hunting reached a crescendo during the first four decades of the twentieth century when the interior of China was extensively explored.



*View of Nunwell Park showing retained oak trees not lost through arable ploughing.*

*140 acres is now being re-wilded by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust*

There are sixty or more native trees in Britain. Thirty-five are considered widespread and only three are conifers – juniper, Scots pine and yew. In Britain the time boundary used to define native is about 8,200 years ago when the land bridge linking Britain to mainland Europe disappeared.

Many tree species often considered native are in fact introduced and are now described as naturalised or if present before 1500 as ‘archeophytes’; time is the only distinguishing factor between native and naturalised. These include beech (in much of Britain), horse chestnut, sweet chestnut and sycamore. The confusion is compounded by the British propensity to brand trees, as in the London plane, English walnut, both of which were introduced.

New species having been introduced over thousands of years have added to the diversity of our forests, parks, gardens, estates and city streets. Some introductions may prove more resilient than natives to environmental changes such as new pests and diseases and climate warming. These ‘new species’ pose a challenge for those conservationists who, traditionally, have focused on preservation rather than adaptation.

### **Considering the Trees**

In my following articles I would like to review some of the trees that have been instrumental in creating the landscapes we see today and consider the evolution of planting natives and then modern selections of them through to entirely new introductions obviously this is a massive role call of trees and it is not my intention to cover all bases but merely to look at some arboricultural highlights through personal choices. I make no apologies for omissions and after all there are many books that identify the huge number of trees that can now be found in these Isles. Some of which I will reference at the end.



*Sycamore Gap tree now perhaps the most famous and remembered tree in the landscape— destroyed by human force. 200 years to grow , five minute to destroy.*



## More Walled Gardens news

In the last newsletter we paid tribute to Susan Campbell who died earlier this year, being the founder of the walled kitchen garden network. Our own publication *The Walled Kitchen Gardens of the Isle of Wight* booklet is still available from us, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund.

Perhaps the most spectacular restoration on the Island is the walled garden and lake at Haddon Lake House, a joint project 20 years ago by Philippa and Steve Lambert. This was on the site of the former tropical bird park, and before that the kitchen gardens to Old Park, once occupied by William Spindler who built the glasshouses, including the Orchid House as well as attempting to build a small harbour which was soon lost to the elements. The main house and stables are listed but the walls not specifically so.

The Isle of Wight Gardens Trust were highly supportive of the application to build a Japanese low maintenance house and the adjoining orchid house as a new glasshouse look-a-like house, subject to restoration of the lake and walled garden. Philippa was a founding committee member of the Isle of Wight Gardens Trust, designed our first logo and prepared the newsletter for some years. The gardens were nationally acclaimed and the Trust visited several times. She is a well respected local garden designer.

Now sadly as you may have read in the *County Press* the site has suffered badly from landslides and failed to sell at auction, the elements too taking it away after the heaviest rain-fall recorded. Huge sympathy for the creators from us all, with the likelihood that rewilding could happen again— overhanging sycamores that should have held the land together no doubt could become the dominant invader but lets hope something can be salvaged. At least the memory of the place and the choice of plants will last with us for our lifetimes.



*Above Haddon Lake House garden in 2002 and 2014 – courtesy of Steve and Philippa Lambert before and after restoration, reproduced from our publication. The Trust recorded the site in 2000 in its derelict state.*

## Plant of the Month

*Ceroidiphyllum Japonicum* or Katsura is a tree that should be planted in every medium sized garden. It is also known as the toffee apple tree or caramel tree as in the autumn as the leaves turn it emits a strong caramel or burn sugar smell on a warm day. It is also grown for its timber for construction or woodworking.

In our gardens it is an elegant tree, offering gentle shade, and only growing maybe 20 feet over 30 years, preferring rich well drained moist soil in full sun or partial shade but not tolerating drought too well.

As well as the autumn colour the spring leaves are equally attractive with pinkish tinges.

My photo below was taken on September 24th in Gloucestershire. With the lack of a scorching summer this year, autumn colours may not be great but what is notable is how early autumn seems to be coming this year, maybe with a frost recorded in mid - September in some parts of the country.

Supposedly the tree can be propagated easily by cuttings and being considered in danger in China, there is a further good reason for us to be planting it.



*Below the young leaves before turning a dark green. There are few forms listed, the weeping one being the most common.*



## The development of Central Park – origins and influences behind a Public Park for New York City.



*Skating pond after painting by Charles Algernon Parsons 1862.*

*Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*

In April of 2023, I had the good fortune to spend a few bright spring days in New York City, my first visit to the 'Big Apple'. It's hard not to be awestruck and overwhelmed by the towering skyscrapers populating the grid pattern of the busy, noisy and fast-moving streets and sidewalks.

In 'the city that doesn't sleep', the need for open space to escape, slow down, recharge and recreate surrounded by greenery and nature is perhaps more essential for wellbeing and cohesion than in any other community.

In our Autumn 2023 newsletter we included a short report from John Phibbs on Frederick Law Olmsted and his 1850 visit to England which included the Isle of Wight and a recent visit John had made with members of the US Olmsted Society. It is thought that Olmsted's 1850 visit influenced his and his business partner Calvert Vaux's design submission for the proposed new Central Park in New York. This previous article and my own visit to Central Park prompted me to research more into the history of this arguably internationally important public park.

In this and the next newsletter, I will explore the history and challenges that the creation of the first large public park in New York faced. Now internationally renowned and popular with local residents and tourists, it has a fascinating history reflecting the political, economic, cultural and social changes and ambitions of New York City.

**Central Park**— continued. As with many emerging metropolises, the population of New York City quadrupled between 1821 and 1855. The city had historically been established largely in the south of the island of Manhattan but the increase in population with its chaos, noise and associated industries, trade and activities had seen many upper middle class and wealthy residents relocate to the more ‘rural’ areas of mid and upper Manhattan. The only existing substantial public open spaces in Lower Manhattan at this time was the 10-acre Battery Gardens at the southern most tip of the island. Located on a former site for Dutch, British and then American fortifications to protect the city, in 1823 the federal government decommissioned the military base, and the site was leased to the city as a public space with open ground and former fortification structures. The site went on to become a hub for arts and culture for New York City. In 1850 over 5000 people seeing enjoyed the ‘Swedish Nightingale’ Jenny Lind perform. Battery Garden became increasingly crowded and more diverse, with a mix of social classes reflecting the growth in the population.

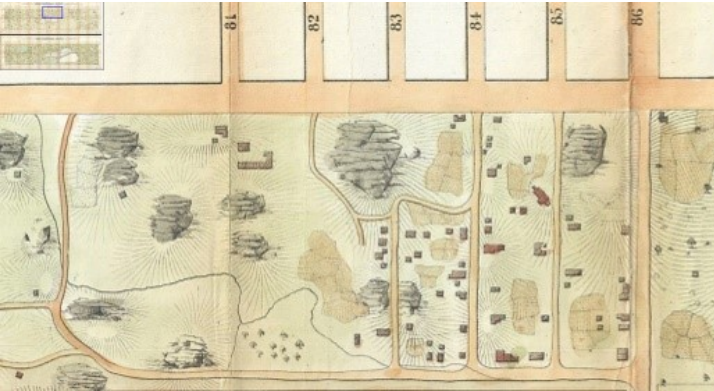
As early as 1840, the New York elite were starting to discuss the need for a new substantial public park. Largely driven by their own visits to Europe where the gentility of the old-world parks such as Hyde Park in London and the Bois du Boulogne in Paris, attracted growing support for a similarly valued greenspace to be established in New York City at a ‘new world’ pace. Wealthy residents of Manhattan wanted the same ability to drive carriages for leisure through pleasing landscapes and to be able to promenade for open air recreation.

Inevitably, political, financial and social considerations and motivations became more instrumental in the drive to bring the idea to fruition. Jones Wood, an existing area of rural, wooded and pastoral land on the upper east side of Manhattan was mooted. This was in the ownership of a few old New York families and the location of their summer estates. This met with resistance from these families but with support from immediate neighbours who no doubt saw the potential increase in their own property and land value as a result. Various legal cases ensued as it was intended to use eminent domain (compulsory purchase) as a means of acquiring the land and paying appropriate compensation. It was also suggested that the system for raising money for public works should change to an island-wide taxation rather than a property tax on those in the immediate vicinity of the benefit of such investment. This was controversial and led to many middle-class tax paying residents in Lower Manhattan objecting to potentially having to pay for works which would be of less immediate benefit to them, as the proposal was some distance from their neighbourhoods

## Central Park—continued.

A more central site in Upper Manhattan was suggested and gained wider public support than the now successfully legally challenged Jones Wood scheme. Increasingly referred to as 'Central Park' the intended 750-acre area was between 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues and bounded by 59<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Streets. Part of this land was already in quasi-public ownership due to the creation of the Croton Receiving Reservoir built in the late 1840s on land taken out of Yorkville and this and the remaining area were formally confirmed as the new site for a 'Central Park' in 1853.

*Viele's survey of Senegal village taken from Wikimedia 1856*



Some, 1600 people were to see their land interest (whether owned or leased) acquired for the new park. These consisted of individuals with small holdings of a largely subsistence nature growing crops and keeping pigs, and the established African American communities at Yorkville

and Seneca Village who had first started to live in the area as early as 1825. Seneca had taxpayers and three schools and a church for their community. Alongside the significant African American community, German and Irish immigrants also lived in this area.

Tanneries, slaughterhouses and other such industries had been forced out of Lower Manhattan by ordinance due to the nuisance they caused to residents and many were now sited in the western area of the planned new park. Finally, institutions for the poor and orphans, as well as asylums had also been built in the then more rural Upper Manhattan and some would be impacted by the new park.

Between the agreement to create the park in 1853 and the last of the eviction orders which were served in 1857, those present were able to stay provided they paid rent and abided by the new laws. This meant that previously unregulated activities like the gathering of firewood and stone from the landscape were now banned and resulted in fines and enforcement. This became more stringent from 1856 onwards with the formation of a nineteen-strong Central Park Police force.

**Central Park**— continued. In 1856 a consulting board of seven people was created to help inspire public confidence in the ambitious project. The Chair of the Board hired Egbert L Viele, a military engineer as the Park's Chief Engineer. However, the state legislature passed a bill in 1857 to create a new Board of Commissioners, of a mix of Democratic and Republican persuasion, who would have exclusive control over planning and construction. By this stage Viele had undertaken a complete topographical survey and had presented a plan of a proposed layout for the new park which sought to work with the natural landform to minimise costs. It seems that he was not best liked by the new Board, and they were persuaded that his plans were aesthetically flawed (largely by Calvert Vaux who highlighted its failings). The main reason being the lack of protection of the new park from views and influence of traffic despoiling the *Rus in Urbe* character that seemed to be the vision most agreed upon.

Vaux also persuaded the Board of Commissioners to run a competition for ideas for the laying out of the new park. They published their brief for this in 1857 and incorporated many of the suggestions included in the Viele plan. In particular: four or more cross streets to connect 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues; a 20 to 40 acre parade ground with space for spectators; three playgrounds of three to ten acres each; an exhibition or concert hall; a flower garden; a winter skating lake; a prominent fountain and a lookout tower. They wished for the plan to have a coherent aesthetic but were open to ideas from four particular aesthetic approaches: Republican simplicity (vernacular to the already emerging New York design style and commerciality); popular eclecticism (appealing to what it was believed the population would like to see and make use of); Romantic naturalism (based on the



now established pastoral and picturesque approaches seen in European and in particular English public parks) and artificial civic display (more formal and geometric design usually including sculpture and built features).

*Lithograph of work being undertaken by some of the 700 labourers to clear and landscape the park 1858 to create the Mall.*

## Central Park— continued.

The latter two received significant favour in the local newspaper coverage .

Thirty three entries were received of which only two were non-American. Half the remainder were from businesses and practices based in New York and of those nine were from practices where personnel were already involved in the potential Central Park development in one form or another. One anonymous entry (Plan 2) was for a single large pyramid over the whole area and was thought to be a cynical protest entry over the way in which the whole development was being managed.

As we know from our previous article, the winning entry also known as the 'Greensward Plan' was from the partnership between Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux; Olmsted already being the Park's appointed Superintendent and Vaux being a known city architect. Their prize was an award of \$2,000 and they had estimated a budget cost of \$1.7 million for the completion (around \$65 million or £50.6 million pounds today). Even though the competition, award and agreed scheme coincided with the 'Financial Panic' and resultant economic downturn in 1857, after much debate, it was agreed that the ambitious scheme should continue as planned.

Works commenced and the first area of the lakes in the southwest corner of the site, was opened to the public in late 1858. In 1859, the city agreed to purchase further land to the north of the original planned area to increase the parks size to 843 acres, 2.5 miles from north to south and 0.5 miles from east to west. It opened in its entirety to the public in

Olmsted and Vaux had a somewhat tempestuous relationship with their employers, the Board of Commissioners. Concerns were voiced over the serious underestimate of costs and length of time for works to be completed. The 'Greensward Plan' as its name suggests included pastoral areas such as the large open 'Sheep Meadow' which was their approach to providing the 10-acre parade ground in the scheme. Rather than a hard surfaced area, they wished to evoke a rural idyll by creating a relatively level pasture which would be grazed by the introduction of a flock of Southdown sheep which were later joined by Dorset sheep. This required the infill with material imported from New Jersey and the removal of rocky outcrops using dynamite. Also, a major expense was the lowering of the required cross streets to minimise the visual impact of traffic on the tranquility of the park, a concern that had been raised regarding the less ambitious Viele proposal.

*Editors note : Birkenhead Park -"The People's Park" near Liverpool was a major influence. See Autumn 2023 newsletter for information . Wirral council last month awarded £1.5m towards the Park.*

**Central Park** - continued. At one stage there were 700 day labourers employed in the construction of the park, Olmstead preferring to utilise this method rather than having contracted labouring employees for the construction.

In 1860 the Board of Commissioners were faced with an estimated overspend of \$4 million (\$151.5 million or £118 million today). This led to some simplification of the plans by the Board and to the subsequent resignation of Olmsted in 1862 and Vaux in 1863. Chief Commissioner Green took on the Superintendent role and accelerated the rate of construction whilst also micromanaging the budget. Both Olmsted and Vaux returned in 1865 but resigned again in 1870 following a political change to the composition of the board. When it was established that there had been financial irregularities and embezzlement by senior politicians of the now ruling Tammany Hall group (Democrats), Olmsted and Vaux returned again in 1871 but then dissolved their partnership in 1872 before the park was fully completed and opened to the public in 1876. At the final reckoning, the cost of the delivery of the vision of the new public park for New York City was shown as \$7.39 million dollars (equivalent to \$242 million or £188.6 million today).

In my next instalment in our next newsletter, I will explore the changes to Central Park since the late C19th before moving on to look at some more recent public open spaces which have been developed in the very late C20th and early C21st.

For detailed account on the history of Central Park, I would recommend the very detailed book [\*The Park and the People – A history of Central Park published 1992 by Cornell University - authors Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar\*](#) which has provided much of the historical information in this article. By John Brownscombe.

*Perspective map of the park with pictorial relief 1860. Library of Congress..*



*Autumn in the park. today*





## Rewilding parks and gardens

There is no doubt rewilding has reached its peak interest both with farming, public spaces and gardens but has it gone too far? The wilder gardens of RHS Chelsea are a case in point, but one thing not recognised is the urge of each and every plant species to dominate its environment.

As a student biologist one learnt how evolution was led by the survival of the fittest—plants have such a strong propensity to propagate whether by seed (sexual propagation) or asexual through spreading rooting systems or layering.

In our gardens, just as we have been thinking we have the fast spreading bindweed under control, another “weed” appears like the enchanters nightshade in a very prolific form, spreading both by rhizomes and sticky seeds that attach to wild animals. Many of us are now plagued by it preferring moist shady spots but a good foodstuff for many insects.



*Enchanters nightshade (circaea alpina) is found in moist upland woodlands but there seems to be a very virulent form spreading throughout our gardens. Several times I have been asked how to be rid of it. Digging and remove every little piece of root is best, although I admit to using herbicides where I am desperate. It is even planted by some.*

It has undoubtedly been a good year for uninvited plant guests, bindweed spreading fast and high and creeping buttercup spreading metres away from lawns into our beds. Last year it was thousands of ash seedlings but this year even more sycamore seedlings, parachuting great distances. My first task at Northcourt as a teenager was to dig out sycamores from the main lawn after five years of dereliction.



*Sycamore ( Acer pseudoplatanus) thickets above Northcourt in ungrazed grassland, only ten years old and already 14 feet tall. Only introduced in about 1500 it is in fact a fine tree in maturity, like the one at Sycamore Gap. In ancient Greece it was associated with the goddess Hera, as a symbol of fertility. There is no doubt about its fertility here on the Island !!*

**Rewilding continued** - Vicky Basford attended a presentation by the Hampshire Gardens Trust on rewilding and is taking a keen interest in the rewilding of part of Nunwell Farm , managed by the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust. This is important parkland with a number of mature oak trees surviving intensive farming practices. (see image on page 15).

I know for certain that if our gardens were freely rewilded in 10 years we would have a thicket of sycamores everywhere, not to mention the brambles which would cling to anything and suffocate the undergrowth and the ivy which would grow up the trunks.

The desire for each plant species to dominate means rewilding requires active management. Even at Knebb Estate, perhaps the earliest big rewilding project, scrub and trees now must be removed to maximise diversity. If we adopt No Mow May dandelion and daisy seedlings will spring up everywhere. Do we really want them in the beds? The definition of a weed is a plant growing in the wrong place but our visitors certainly do not expect our paths to be strewn with unwanted plants.

We lost our 1835 box parterre to box blight, but left the roses in and then allowed nature to take hold. Poppies, lychnis and foxgloves took hold. This year *Verbena Bonariensis* is everywhere and now the smaller *Verbena Officinalis* “Bampton” is seeding everywhere in the path. Just how far do we let our gardens rewild?



*Self seeded verberna , tobacco plants and the white Erigeron Annuus happily flourish in our own rewilded parterre.*

*And how do we tell gardener helpers and the willing volunteers what is welcome and what is not ?*

## Rewilding continued.—plants that may become dominant.

The Saturday *Telegraph* supplement on October 5th has an article by Tom Brown of West Dean gardens tackling the subject of weeds and naming his worst ten. One of these is the Japanese knotweed introduced into our Victorian gardens, and a lover of damp riverside conditions. However it is edible and the flowers are attractive to bees and being, rich in vitamin A and C, it is used for a medicine for cognitive disorders. Maybe one to slow down our natural forgetfulness, so highly recommended for our members but not one to be introduced or one's home might be unsaleable!

Another on Tom's list is ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria*), a member of the carrot family with an attractive umbellifer flower. Also once a highly desirable plant, as it was planted in Victorian gardens as a leaf vegetable being like celery and probably introduced by the Romans. Known as Goutweed, it is still a treatment for gout but also for sciatica, rheumatism and arthritis. Maybe another to recommend to our members?



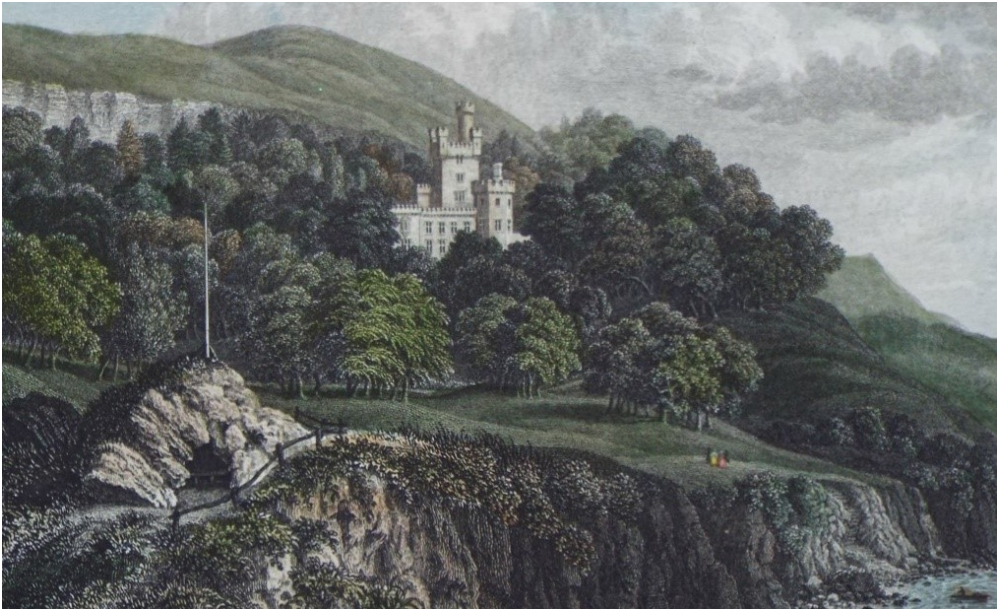
*Why grown Ammi Majus when we could grow ground elder with much less care needed and its infusion curing our aches and pains !*

*At Northcourt, my mother's old bed became abandoned 20 years ago, through lack of resources so it is interesting to see what has survived. The most successful plant has been a reverted Michaelmas daisy. Wonderful for the bees at this time of the year. But just how do we decide on what to allow to spread ? Nettles for butterflies and bindweed for hawk moths ? We must be selective.*



*On a garden wall at The Newt was this poem by Rudyard Kipling 1911.*

*Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not made  
By singing:— 'Oh, how beautiful,' and sitting in the shade  
While better men than we go out and start their working lives  
At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with broken dinner-knives.*



One of our research teams has been carrying out further research and taking photographs of the remains of **Steeple Hill Castle**. We will be writing a separate article about Steeple Hill in the next newsletter.

*Above is a Brannon print of 1842.*

**Christmas party** - don't forget to complete the reply slip. December 4th 12.30

## **Stenbury Manor, Whitwell.**



We have the offer of hosting next year's AGM at Stenbury Manor which has been subject to very extensive restoration over seven years by Ian and Clare Welby. Like Gatcombe it was also a Worsley property but used largely as a farm. It was probably built in the early 17th century. It was left to English Heritage by Audrey Russell on her death in 2014, who sold it as soon as they possibly could.

*From Percy Stone -Architectural antiquities of the Isle of Wight (1892)*