

# Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust

March 2024 - ISSUE No. 68

# News Letter



# “A PRITTY PLACE”

*‘Betley Court will soon be a pritty place,  
having plenty of woods and water about us’*

*(Charles Tollet, on hearing that his sister-in-law,  
a daughter of John Cradock, had engaged the  
services of William Emes)*





The present house, listed Grade II\*, dates from 1718 and was built by John Cradock, an attorney-at-law. Originally rectangular in shape, it differed from other houses of that period in facing the main road behind gates and a forecourt, instead of being reached at the end of a long curving drive. A typical Georgian country house in design, subsequent owners were to add to it, the most extensive being a three-storey service wing built between 1793 and 1797. John Nash was commissioned to carry out some modifications, extending and re-modelling the dining-room and adding the distinctive bow to the front of the house.

During World War Two the house passed into public ownership, serving first as a hospital, and then continuing after the war as a rehabilitation centre. Returned to its owner, it was left empty for a number of years, gradually falling into a state of dereliction while speculation continued as to its future,

ranging from hotel to old people's flats to a residential hall for Keele University students, until finally it attracted the attention of Professor Godfrey Brown.

After a period of research and consultation, involving planning officers, architects and builders, the estate was, on 21st March 1977, bought by Professor Brown, Emeritus Professor of Education at Keele University, who, supported by his wife, Dr. Freda Brown, and his three sons, Denton, Nigel and Martin, began the challenging task of restoring the house to its former glory.

Fulfilment of the work would see the main house as the Brown family home, while eleven flats in the service wing would provide the income necessary for securing the future of the house.

Restoration continued steadily, as money became available, during which Professor Brown visited



**“Once again, the family were faced with the huge challenge of restoring the building.”**

auction houses and demolition sites in search of panelling, furnishings and paintings which would be in keeping with the style of the house.

A later development was the creation of an antique arts gallery, carved out of the former scullery and brewhouse.

Tragically, just as the fully restored Betley Court had once more become a focal point of community life, in August 2019 a fire, caused accidentally by workmen repairing the roof, ravaged the house; tenants and family alike were left homeless, while Professor Brown himself, now an invalid, was rescued by tenants braving the flames.

Once again, the family were faced with the huge challenge of restoring the building.

Over the years, the gardens have received the attention of three, possibly four, of the country's most eminent garden designers: in 1783, William Emes laid out the garden in the naturalistic style pioneered by 'Capability' Brown; in 1865 William Barron, who, at Betley Court, lived up to his nickname of

'the Great Tree Mover' by planting the Cedar of Lebanon which is now a prominent feature of the garden, created a more formal design for the garden which included an ornate parterre, now gone; while William Nesfield produced designs for a re-modelled forecourt, terrace and parterre which were not implemented. Finally, it is believed that Thomas Mawson was responsible for the design of some of the formal flower beds. In Victorian times there were greenhouses in which exotic fruits were grown, but these too have gone.

Natural features of the garden include a rhododendron arch, a yew screen, planted by William Barron, a thorn screen and an ancient snowdrop tree.

To these attractions have been added, the Gazebo, a small castellated building, built, it is believed, from stone from Stafford Castle, the Temple, built from stone from a recycled porch, and a stumpery, added as recently as 2020. A stream runs along the outer perimeter garden, ending in a pool created by a dam.



(Photo: Su Hurrell)



The garden provides a commanding viewpoint from which the visitor can see Betley Mere, the largest area of standing water in Staffordshire.

A more recent feature of the garden is the Peace Garden, designed by artist and garden designer Su Hurrell, at the centre of which stands the Peace Sculpture incorporating a World War Two air raid siren, which, while it warned of approaching danger also signalled the restoration of calmer conditions.

The Peace Pole is one of a number of similar poles erected in different parts of the world.

While re-building, which began in 2021, continues the family conducts restoration tours of the building and tours of the garden. A Visitors' Hub has been opened, offering refreshment and toilet facilities.

The Trust visited Betley Court last July and were taken on a tour of the

restoration work by Dr. Nigel Brown, the present owner, afterwards visiting the garden before availing themselves of the Hub's facilities.

Understandably, resources have been focussed on restoring the house, and, as a consequence,

It has not been possible to give the garden the attention it would, in normal circumstances, receive, but in due time it will, without doubt, be brought back to its former beauty.

The visit was judged a great success in spite of the showery weather, and members unable to take part in this visit may like to know that tours are still possible by visiting [betleycourtgardenco.uk./story/restoration\\_tours](http://betleycourtgardenco.uk./story/restoration_tours).

Sources consulted in the preparation of this article: "This Old House: a domestic biography", by Professor G. N. Brown; various websites, including "Reviving Arcadia", also by Professor Brown.



# PROGRESS AT SHUGBOROUGH



On an unexpectedly warm and sunny day Saturday in October twenty-four members of the Trust and two members of the Cheshire Gardens Trust met at the entrance of the walled garden to hear the Head Gardener, Caroline Beacall, and two of her staff, Derek and Lizzie, tell us about, and show us, the progress made in the ambitious plans to move the car park, at present in the eyeline of the view of some of the monuments, to re-open the original main entrance and to restore the eight-acre walled garden, plans for which had been developed over the last eight years.

Work is planned on undoing some of the unsympathetic alterations such as reinstating the garden wall where a 1970s vehicular gateway had been installed under County Council management, rehanging some outside doors from the Head

Gardener's house into the walled garden the right way round and redecorating the outside of the house.

Both the removal of plant growth covering the walls of the walled garden and the heated spaces between them, and clearing temporary buildings and debris left by neglect in the two main sections have been completed, ready for bed creation and replanting.

Work on the outer sections of the walled garden, last re-organised when the railway was built in the 1840s, will be carried out.

There is archaeological evidence and some old plans of the pineapple house, but there are no plans to reinstate it because of the high cost of maintenance. Similarly, only a small proportion of the original greenhouses will be rebuilt because the



cost of maintaining them would exceed the capacity of the four full-time staff and 120 active volunteers,

A one-acre orchard containing 144 fruit trees to include old species and varieties such as medlars, in addition to modern hybrids capable of withstanding modern climate conditions with no watering planned after initial establishment, has been completed.

The National Trust is acutely aware of the need to reinstate to a level which can subsequently be maintained properly with

the resources available, which include the volunteers. Shugborough has the benefit of the £21 m. Surrender value of the 99-year lease which Staffordshire County Council forfeited about halfway through the lease. The money is being used sparingly and generally kept in reserve for future capital work.

Following Caroline's introductory talk, the party were taken to a room adjoining the mansion to hear Lizzie describe the project to create a one-acre Forest Garden funded by HSBC. Work would begin in 2024 and must be completed by 2025.



# National Trust



# WHAT IS A FOREST GARDEN?

When answering his question, I always start by saying: "It is not a garden!"

Despite the title leading you to assume it is a garden predominantly consisting of trees, a forest garden is packed with a diverse range of plants of all sizes, which work together to create a sustainable ecosystem.

Forest garden has been standard practice in the tropics for generations. Here, gardeners mimic the rainforest with productive plants assembled into symbiotic layers. It was not until the 1960s that forest gardening emerged within the UK. In response to his personal time constraints, an amateur gardener called Robert Hart



developed his own experimental forest garden in the Shropshire hills. Whilst he described this as "something of a hobby", its influence became something of a catalyst to inspire others and ignite the creation of forest gardens within our own temperate climate.

The most noted are a series of forest gardens created by Martin Crawford, a significant figure in forest garden

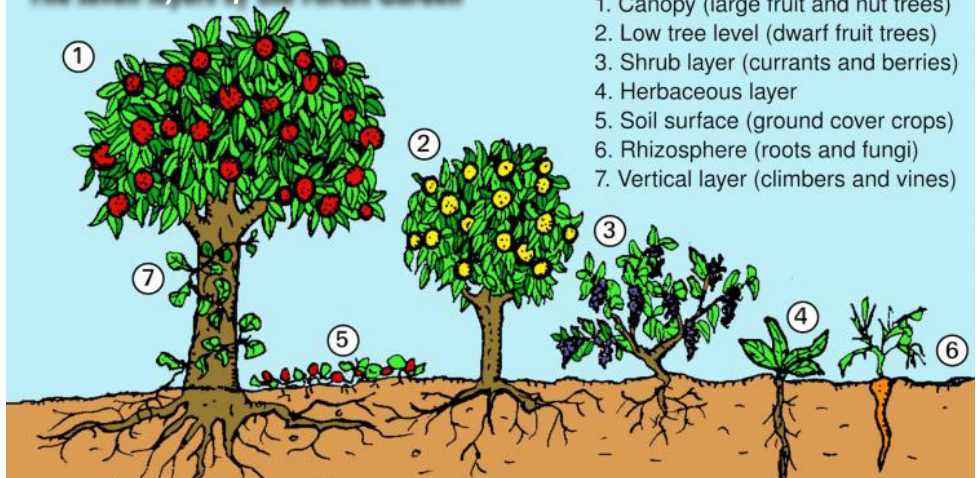


research, who is based near Totnes, in Devon. With the support of the Dartington Hall Trust, he created a charity called Agroforestry Research Trust in 1992, and, through this, set about establishing several types of forest gardens as environmental and analysis projects.

These included gardens of varying sizes and aspects, fruit and nut orchards and a sustainably warmed greenhouse garden. As well as anecdotal evidence and learnt understanding, his thirty years of research into the environmental impact and food production of forest gardening has generated an insightful set of robust data. This offers quantifiable evidence for an impressive cropping capacity, increased wildlife diversity and notably high capacity for carbon capture compared to other woodland or green spaces.



## The seven layers of the Forest Garden



1. Canopy (large fruit and nut trees)
2. Low tree level (dwarf fruit trees)
3. Shrub layer (currants and berries)
4. Herbaceous layer
5. Soil surface (ground cover crops)
6. Rhizosphere (roots and fungi)
7. Vertical layer (climbers and vines)

Due to lower light levels forest gardens in northern Europe are more akin to a woodland edge ecology. Hung with vines and climbers, the upper levels include fruit and nut trees or large-scale nitrogen fixers such as *Alnus cordata*. Underneath follow a series of small trees, shrubs and herbaceous perennials, sprawling ground-cover perennials, fungi and, finally, root crops.

It is important to note that not all the plants are cropped in a forest garden. Some encourage beneficial insects; others aid fertility by fixing nitrogens or accumulating minerals from deep within the soil, and there are also those that offer protection from pests such as aromatic plants.

The forest gardener promotes the beneficial qualities of wildlife by creating a diverse habitat with a rich food source. This is done overtly to optimise the work done by wildlife. An example of this would be bird droppings, which are a brilliant fertilizer packed with nitrogen. The ethos is that "everything gardens" and, through

a collaborative approach, everything benefits, with a fair share to humans and wildlife,

The key to a strong and successful forest garden lies within your plant selection. Diversity in plants results in resilience, self-sustainability, high yield and subsequently low maintenance. The opposite to this approach is monocrops, where one variety of plant is grown on mass, often in rows, with a single point of harvesting. Due to volume requirements, mechanised





harvesting and shelf lives the majority of modern food production is grown in monocrops.

However, monocrops are incredibly vulnerable to the spreading of pests and diseases, in competition with the same nutrients and water levels due to their similar root patterns, and often exposed without protection from other plants,

In a forest garden, every plant is selected or rejected by its value to others. Plants are placed in proximity to plants with symbiotic benefits, and together they form the building blocks of a forest garden. Like an engine, each plant has a job to do, and the success of the garden hinges on each plant doing this with the utmost efficiency and accuracy, as there is no space for carrying weakness or unnecessary dependency.

Don't get me wrong! Forest gardens are visually breathtaking, but, whilst all plants bring with them an intrinsic beauty, looks alone won't get you an invite to the forest garden party.

So how do you pick your guest list? Luckily, it's reasonably easy if you follow a simple set of guidelines.

### ***Celebrate the land***

Select plants that will thrive in your garden's aspect, location and soil. Resist those gorgeous specimens strategically placed at your local garden centre's entrance, because, no matter how lovely it looks, a plant in the wrong location won't thrive.

### ***Who's mates with whom?***

Select plants which support each other and place them in groups so they can do this with ease. Some plants accumulate minerals from the soil which they share with other plants, some fix nitrogen into the soil, some deter pests, some increase carbon capture, some increase crop yields and some water your garden for you. By selecting collaborative groups, the forest garden engine ignites.

### ***Let the soil grow***

Just beneath the surface, harmonious cycles of magic are at work. Choose perennial over annual so that soil cultivation is minimal, and the soil can build networks of support which will enable your plants to flourish. Each time we dig we damage these networks.



## ***Root Power***

Select plants for their root system. We tend to pick plants by how they look above ground level and yet the work their roots do underground is essential to the success of any garden. Varied root patterns not only reduce competition for water, they increase the network of communication between plants whilst increasing the volume of carbon held in the soil. Once a forest garden is planted, nothing should leave, and nothing needs to come in. It is a self-supporting system, with no need to dig, water, feed or fuss. There is no such thing as a maintenance-free garden, however, and even a flourishing forest garden needs our support to maintain levels of competitive dominance, increase its capacity to capture and hold carbon and ensure a fair share is in place.

Whilst forest gardens are not a quick option, they offer an immense opportunity to connect with nature and build relationships with a space whilst nurtured by the satisfaction of knowing that all good things come to those who wait,

Forest gardening also opens our thoughts to what is food! Scientists estimate that there are more than 400,000 species of plants on earth, at least half of which are edible for humans, but only a few hundred contribute significantly to food supplies. Just fifteen crop plants provide ninety per cent of the world's food energy intake, with the big three of rice, maize and wheat making up two-thirds of this. We

are surrounded by edible food crops, yet, somewhere along the way, with the demands of a busy, modern society, our connections with what is food and nature's bounty have got somewhat lost.

To offer clarity, forest gardening is not foraging!





Foraging is the act of searching widely for food or provisions, whereas forest gardens are defined spaces which have been purposefully planted with a selected range of plants which are harvested with a predetermined approach. Many of these plants are familiar to us for aesthetic reasons and yet we are unaware of their edible provision qualities. Who knew that we were surrounded by trees with edible leaves, including Lime, Beech, Mulberry, Birch and Maple, or that Hosta leaves make for wonderful salads, or that dried Day Lilies are used in the Far East to thicken soups, or that Monkey Puzzles produce thousands of edible nuts? The list of edible, medicinal or provisional plants which surround us is literally enormous, and they are right here waiting to be discovered.

I hope I have gone some way to encourage readers to investigate the wonderful world of forest gardening. Forest gardens don't need to be large; even the smallest of spaces have the capacity to become a thriving forest garden. As Senior Gardener at Shugborough National Trust, I have immense support and opportunity to share my passion for sustainable gardening and hopefully encourage others to take up its principles at home or in a community space. Therefore it was a real pleasure to talk to members of the Staffordshire Gardens and Parks Trust, and I look forward to making more connections and having more opportunities in the future.

Lucy Pellowe

## *Lichfield Cathedral Christmas Tree Festival*

The Trust once again contributed a decorated tree to this event, and we are again indebted to Julie Hall, who used her considerable artistic talent to create a truly beautiful exhibit.

Oliver Birch, Lichfield Cathedral's Development Manager, writes: "The Cathedral was incredibly busy over Christmas, the busiest we have known it for a few years, just shy of 40,000 people visiting between 2 December and 7 January."

As Julie commented, "Hopefully, a few more people noticed our name/presence".





A hand holding a red pen is pointing to a site plan or map overlaid on a photograph of a green landscape with trees under a blue sky. The site plan shows various rectangular plots, some with hatching, and a network of paths or roads.

# PLANNING CONSULTATIONS IN 2024

There are three principal areas of threat to historic parks and gardens. First is decay and neglect of maintenance. Second is unsympathetic change and management of the landscape (for example ploughing up grassland or introducing conifer plantations), while third are planning proposals for insensitive built development or change of use within or close to the boundary of the site. There is little the Trust or indeed a public authority can do about the first two issues other than seek to influence and persuade an owner to adopt a different approach. The third falls within the realms of town planning law, where it is possible for local planning authorities to intervene and exercise a degree of control. County gardens trusts do not, of course, have any statutory powers in this respect, but national legislation requires The Gardens Trust (the national amenity body to which SGPT is affiliated) to be consulted on all planning applications affecting sites on the Historic England Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. SGPT's articles of association envisage the making of representations on matters affecting garden land (in other words commenting on town planning proposals), and we undertake this important and under-reported area of work in partnership with The Gardens Trust.

For historic reasons the area covered by SGPT (this includes the former Black Country boroughs) is under-represented on the national register, having barely 25 sites in total, so that dealing with 18 planning applications in just over a year in 2023 (some schemes overran from previous years) is a fair percentage of the country's parkland heritage. Some of the projects were well considered and relatively benign in terms of any impact on historic significance – for example, an extension to Stapenhill Cemetery in Burton-upon-Trent, or installation of childrens' play areas at Trentham and Himley. SGPT did not object to the National Trust's very ambitious proposals for reconfiguring access to the park at Shugborough, although we understand that the project has run into difficulties with the Highway authority and Stafford Borough Council's design advisor, remaining undetermined at the time of writing.

After submitting an initial objection for proposals for new safety rail around the Bandstand at Biddulph Grange, and the creation of a new access stair into Mrs Bateman's garden, SGPT was able to join in negotiations with the National Trust, resulting in much improved and acceptable revised designs. A sustained

objection to two proposals for installing a 20m high mobile phone transmitter in the grade I landscape at Shugborough (in which we were joined by the National Trust, local authority and Historic England) has fortunately led to withdrawal of the proposals. An unusual scheme with which we were involved was for the installation of a beaver-proof fence around the lake at Trentham Gardens to deter the newly reintroduced animals from escaping into the surrounding locality. Aligning the fence to minimise its visual impact presented some interesting challenges, not least ensuring its height was sufficient to prevent the beavers swimming over the top in periodic flood conditions! Careful on-site inspection with the applicants and council officers and the agreement of some practical compromises resulted in an acceptable amended project.

Unfortunately, despite the Trust's best endeavours our views (and those of other influential commentators such as Historic England) on several highly contentious and intrusive schemes were disregarded. At Keele, planning permission was granted for two wind turbines and a large solar array within the registered park, together with a separate permission for a kind of mini power station near the main drive. In Lichfield, planning permission was granted against widespread opposition for an intensive multi-storey residential development overlooking Beacon Park and intruding into longstanding open views towards the cathedral. At Patshull, permission appears to have been granted in principle (it is difficult to be definitive because not all relevant papers are available on-line) to site approximately 100 park homes masquerading as holiday chalets across open grassland (until recently used as a golf course) at the centre of the Capability Brown designed landscape. This saga continues with a reduced number of chalets

now proposed. The Trust along with other objectors maintains its vigorous objection in principle to this harmful intrusion into the historic park.

Our final case is an application to erect a battery electric storage facility literally just over the hedge along the northern boundary of the grade II park at Great Barr, Walsall. The BESS will occupy a site about the equivalent of four football pitches and can best be described as a cross between a container storage yard and an electricity substation. It is a most unsightly and unsuitable neighbour for an historic park (the presence of which is barely acknowledged by the applicant) and for its location within the Green Belt and a conservation area. An appeal against refusal of permission for an initial scheme was withdrawn in summer 2023, but a revised and enlarged proposal was in the autumn and remains undetermined. SGPT has objected to both schemes and was intending to appear at the appeal.

All the cases discussed in this article have come to the Trust's attention through The Gardens Trust's national scheme of notifications relating to registered historic landscapes. There may well have been other planning proposals in the year affecting unregistered sites of which we were unaware, but where an informed comment from the Trust might have been of benefit. If you become aware of any such cases in the future please let us know and we will see if we can or should make an intervention.

**Alan Taylor - Chairman**

*The Editor wishes to place on record his very real appreciation of the support given to him in the preparation of this Newsletter by Michael Faarup, John Hyde and Alan Taylor.*



# PROGRAMME OF EVENTS 2024

*Thursday, February 13th, 10.30 a.m.*

***John's Garden, Ashwood,  
Lower Ln., Kingswinford DY6 0EA***

Escorted tour of the wonderful eight-acre private garden created by nursery owner John Massey VMH. This garden is truly spectacular in winter. After the garden tour there will be time to have a hot meal or drink in the warm and welcoming Tea Room and to visit the Garden Shop, The Gift Shop, Greenhouses and Plant Sales Area.



*Thursday, May 16th*

***Hagley Hall,***

***Hagley, Stourbridge DY9 9LG***

Major restoration of Hadley Park, considered one of the greatest eighteenth-century English landscape gardens. Owned by Viscount Cobham, restoration was completed in 2023 under Joe Hawkins, Head Gardener of Landscape, and a past member of the SGPT.



*Saturday, June 15th, 2.00 p.m.*

***Numbers 12 and 19,  
Waterdale, Compton WV3 9DY***

Number 12, owned by Colin and Clair Bennett, is a quintessentially English garden. Number 19, owned by Ann and Brian Bailey, is a romantic garden of surprises which gradually reveals itself on a journey through deep, lush planting full of unusual plants.

*Wednesday, July 3rd, 12.00 p.m.*

***Millichope Hall and Park,  
Munslow, Craven Arms SY7 9HA***

The house and gardens were owned by Lyndsay Bury, who was chairman of The Staffordshire Water Company and who carried out radical restoration of the gardens and the house which have more recently been changed by his son and daughter-in-law to remarkable effect. We shall tour the gardens, then take lunch before touring the house.



*Saturday, August 3rd*

***Little Onn Hall,***

***Stafford ST20 0HU***

A.G.M. followed by tour of the garden, laid out by Thomas Mawson.

*A date in November during  
daylight hours at a location  
to be decided.*



## **OFFICERS OF THE TRUST (2023/24)**

**President:** Dr. David Jacques, OBE

**Chairman:** Alan Taylor

**Treasurer:** Francis Colella

**Membership Secretary:** John Hyde

**Newsletter Editor:** Bryan Sullivan

**Assistant Editor:** Richard Sullivan

**Website Manager:** Julie Hall

**Company Secretary:** Catherine Thorpe

### **Members of Council of Management:**

Alan Taylor (Chair)

Francis Colella

Michael Faruup

Julie Hall

John Hyde

Bryan Sullivan

Visit the Trust's website [www.staffs.org.uk](http://www.staffs.org.uk) for information about the aims of the Trust, its activities and its publications, including past issues of the Newsletter.

*This Newsletter is published by Staffordshire Gardens & Parks Trust*