

Northamptonshire Gardens Trust

REPORT OF THE COUNCIL OF MANAGEMENT for the year to 31st December 2016

The year 2016 marked the first twenty five years of the Trust's history and I think it deserves to be remembered as one of the most successful of those years and one where the work that has been undertaken has been recognised well outside the County. I am delighted to present this report on our activities which I do under the following headings.

CAPABILITY BROWN

The year has been dominated by the events celebrating the anniversary of Capability Brown. Thanks to the splendid work of Carol Fitzgerald and Elaine Johnson the Trust received a grant to organise a programme of events to celebrate the anniversary and in particular to encourage a wider recognition of the importance of gardens and promote a wider participation in all things to do with them. Carol and Elaine then went on to play the lead roles in planning and delivering this programme. In this they were greatly helped by our partners in the programme. In particular we should thank the Castle Ashby Estate without whom hardly anything would have been possible and also the Wyevale Garden Centres whose support and help was a great encouragement.

There were several strands to the programme. In the previous year we had looked at earlier landscaped parks and their designers and so this year we were well placed to concentrate on the work of Brown himself. We had a series of formal lectures and in the Spring we were able to hear from Jane Brown and Steffie Shields both of whom have written full scale works about Brown. Later in the year we had two lectures approaching the subject from different angles. Victoria Perry came during Black History month to reflect on the commercial background to many of Brown's patrons and especially their relationship to the slave trade. This was followed at the end of the year by Susan Campbell who talked about Brown and the Kitchen Garden.

These lectures went alongside our programme of visits. Three were to particularly important Brown sites. The whole programme was launched at a truly memorable event at Castle Ashby where we not only had a tour of the grounds but were able to enjoy the film that had been made about Brown's connections with Castle Ashby and also to see the excellent display panels that had been made about his work in Northamptonshire as a whole. The whole evening had the atmosphere of a party including a celebratory birthday cake and we were especially delighted to welcome Gilly Drummond, a vice president of The Gardens Trust. It was Gilly who developed the whole idea of a national festival and who played an enormous part in ensuring that it took place. It was through the Association of Gardens Trusts that we received our grant and so it was especially gratifying that Gilly had made the very long journey to be with us and also to hear the kind words of congratulations with which she thanked us.

Other visits to Capability Brown sites included our Summer Party which this year was held at Wakefield Lodge. Here the great man himself (aka Mike Brown) made one of several surprise visits to our county and was delighted at the reception he always received. Another visit was to Aynhoe Park and a third was to Burghley Park near Stamford where Brown spent more time than anywhere else.

The display panels have subsequently been on show at many places including Wyevale Garden Centres and the Chichele College in Higham Ferrers and which have been a great success. We are very grateful to Chris Addison who played a major part in preparing them. The film too has been shown many times and is always very well received. One of the events where the panels were shown was a special recording of Radio Northampton's Gardeners Question Time which also came from Castle Ashby and brought the Trust to the attention of a wider audience.

For many the highlight of the year was the week that saw school children brought to Castle Ashby to join in the celebrations. For them this was their first opportunity to experience the wonder of such parks and we are very grateful to all the volunteers who made it all possible.

Elaine and Carol have since made several presentations about our festival to other Garden Trusts and on various seminars and teaching days. They have also visited other local societies and amenity groups. This has greatly raised the profile of our Trust both locally and nationally and we are immensely grateful to them and all those involved who helped them for the huge amount of time and effort which they all put in.

The programme this year was not entirely devoted to Capability Brown. We have always attempted to have a structure to our programme and we do this in several ways. One is by having an overarching plan and for the last few years this has simply been to look at the history of gardens chronologically. This year we reached the eighteenth century and landscaped parks and that of course fitted in well with the Capability Brown Festival. A second approach is to have a particular subject on which we concentrate and of course this year that was indeed Capability Brown. However we do also have other approaches which link from one year to the next and recently we have taken a different writer each year and see how they relate to the story of gardens. This year the writer was the poet William Cowper. He made a particularly interesting study as he did not always approve of what Capability Brown did

and had himself a much more intimate approach to the subject. We had an introductory talk about him and this was followed by a visit to the house where he lived in Olney which is now a museum and we were given an excellent tour of both the house and garden. This was to have been followed by a walk through his favourite countryside but sadly we chose the wettest day of the summer so this had to be cancelled.

We usually also try to include more recent gardens in our visits. This year we were welcomed by the broadcaster Johnnie Amos to his own garden at Flore. Johnnie has been a big supporter of the Trust over the years and so it was especially nice to be able to see his own garden. I think everyone was amazed at what he had been able to fit into his garden without losing the feeling of space. He was very happy to share his deep knowledge of plants with us and we had a lovely evening.

I do think that our programme and the approach we take to it is a strong feature of the Trust's work and compares very well with that of other trusts. We can usually rely on the support of the members who show a very healthy refusal ever to be put off by the weather. We owe an enormous debt in this as in so many things to Jenny Burt who has the unenviable task of turning our chaotic suggestions into a coherent programme and then the even more unenviable task of persuading owners to allow us in. It is good to be able to say that we are hardly ever turned down and we should thank all those owners who do make us so welcome.

RESEARCH

Research continues to be a very important aspect of the Trust's work. At present there are three ongoing projects. One is the recording and eventual publication of a number of the major surviving Walled Kitchen Gardens in the County. A team of volunteers is undertaking this work under the leadership of Elizabeth Taylor and they are making steady progress. It is too early to say when this work might be completed and fresh and exciting discoveries are constantly being made but this does promise to be a considerable resource for the future. It is clear that the team are thoroughly enjoying what they are doing and that should encourage other members to engage in research in one way or another.

A second area of study has been the work to identify and write up the known works of Capability Brown in our county. It had been hoped that we would publish the results of this in time for the 2016 Festival. This has not proved to be possible but much of the work has been completed and discussions are under way to see what is the most appropriate manner to make the research available.

The third area of interest currently being worked on is to do with War Memorials. This of course is going to be a timely matter with the approaching anniversary of the end of the First World War. Discussions about the best form for Memorials to take had already begun before the end of the war although in many cases it was several years before anything concrete was actually made. Many memorials involved gardens or parks or open spaces in one way or another. Our aim here is to make a list of the most significant examples of these in the County. We certainly aim to produce some results in time for 2019.

THE GARDENS TRUST

The planned merger of the Association of Garden Trusts with the Garden History Society has finally taken place. So far this has been successful. It has not made a great deal of difference to the way we work nor to what we do. It has however probably increased the resources and expertise available to The Gardens Trust. Our own Trust always tried to support what the Association did and this is continuing. Our main link is through Chris Addison and we are delighted that she has been elected as a Trustee of The Gardens Trust Board where she will be able to make a considerable contribution.

We continue to support the new Trust as we did its predecessor. The normal full complement attended the Annual Conference which this year was organised by our neighbours in Cambridgeshire. It has been said that Northants very often has more people attending than any other county apart from the host. In 2017 the conference is to be held in Plymouth and we hope to have members attending despite the travel distance. Members have also attended various events and study days throughout the year and it is always good to meet people from other Trusts and learn how they approach things.

It was through the Association of Garden Trusts that we became so involved in the Capability Brown Festival and it looks as though we may well be invited to join in making other applications for grants to undertake projects. It is very good that we are involved in this sort of work but everyone should recognise that this puts a very large amount of work on a small number of people. Again we are hugely grateful for all the work they do.

CONCLUSION

There are many other areas in which the Trust continues to work including Education and Conservation. We also strive to publicise both the number and significance of the County's historic gardens and the work of the Trust in general. The number of talks and presentations by members of the Trust has risen steadily. We have never made a

formal record of these but there are a number of members who undertake this sort of task and such presentations are usually well received. We are grateful for all of this work.

Clearly 2016 has been a very successful year and I would like to thank ALL the members of the Trust for making this possible. So many people help in so many ways and it is impossible to mention them all. I must however particularly thank the members of the Council of Management for their unfailing support and encouragement. In particular Jenny Burt and Rod Conlon work tirelessly to keep everything in order and most people will not realise just how much they do. I think also a special word of thanks is due to Isabel Gillett for the way she and her helpers provide the refreshments that help make our meetings so enjoyable.

Finally yet again I would like to thank our President Susie Pasley-Tyler for her constant support and help. Sometimes Presidents are purely figureheads who take little real interest in the organisation. This is emphatically not the case with Susie. She is always available and is ever ready to give calm, sensible and thoughtful guidance whenever asked and to assist in any way possible with what we do and we are fortunate in having such a caring person as our President.

David Bond, Chairman
March 2017