

A Year in the Life of the Old Pond Garden : February 2020-21

At the AGM a year ago, I nervously stood in front of the packed Long Gallery at Charlton House and gave a talk about the Old Pond Garden walled garden.

The Society has been meeting once a month at Charlton House for over 30 years, and yet a large proportion of our members (myself included until a couple of months prior to that) had no idea the walled gardens existed. Local Charlton members knew of course, but our membership is drawn from a wide area of South East London, so this was news for many of them.



We proposed that a volunteer scheme should be set up to help renovate and maintain the gardens, since the RBG gardeners were too stretched to do more than trim and mow. We had the support of **Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust**, and with their help had applied for some funding from the **Greenwich Neighbourhood Growth Fund**.

But it was a bit of a leap of faith - CABAHS has only ventured into volunteering once in its history, back in the 1990's, when members helped run the garden and greenhouse at Greenwich Hospital.

So in February we launched the volunteer scheme in the garden, on the weekend of Storm Dennis, with our carefully prepared flyers flying about everywhere, and everyone taking a quick look at the garden and running for cover (and coffee and cakes) in the House. But apart from the weather it was a success as we had 34 interested people sign up on the spot.

The volunteers started work very enthusiastically on a lovely sunny Sunday in late February, tackling the early weeds and brimming with ideas of what should stay, go or could be donated from their own gardens. So many discussions about what is a weed, whether the giant Phormiums should be kept, and whether forget-me-nots are invasive! We developed an Old Pond Garden committee, to administer and run the scheme (and deal with the interesting Health & Safety issues - eg don't eat the plants). Volunteer sessions were very well attended, even as the nastier weather set in, and a tea and homemade cake routine developed alongside the weeding.

While enjoying our time in the garden, of course world events were catching up with us and we had to close the scheme on March 21st as the first Covid-19 Lockdown hit.



During that first Lockdown, the weather decided to become unseasonably hot, which was nice for all of us stuck at home, but totally fried the primroses and snowdrops we had planted in the garden. Behind the scenes, the Old Pond Garden committee carried on planning. Melanie and Kay filmed a 2 minute clip of the garden for the Greenwich & Bexley Hospice Open Gardens, which raised our profile tremendously and helped with funding for the Hospice.

June 30th and we were back on track! But by now we had even more volunteers, and they included local **garden designer Jason Carty**. The very professional and lovely planting plan that Jason came up with was quickly adopted and the Volunteers set to with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

After the March-June shortages of compost and seeds, it was great to be able to swap plants again, and the garden became a useful exchange point. We had to add antiseptic hand gel to our Health & Safety rules, but most gardeners wear gloves anyway and we learned all about the importance of hand cream after a grubby planting session! Homemade cakes were replaced with cellophane wrapped biscuits, and work carried on.



By August the garden beds were clear enough to be able to hold a Plant Sale with all plants grown and donated by members (THANK YOU!). There were also displays of the gardens in past times and our plans for the future. The public turned up in droves and we sold out by 2pm. Even the Mayor of Greenwich visited just in time to pick up the last of the plants, and we made over £1,000, for the garden fund and Hospice.

Other creative achievements: Some volunteers cut the remaining lavender in the garden, to dry, and other volunteers made bespoke CABAHS Charlton House Lavender Bags (applying for copyright!) for sale. The old cherry tree stump was dug up, after Herculean effort from David, and made into a wildlife area for the Stag Beetle larvae we disturbed. A leaf store was built, in readiness for Autumn leaf fall, to recycle the goodness back into the garden. A “Grand Designs Luxury Shelter” has been built, unbelievably from old building hoardings though you would never guess, and is now hidden in one corner of the garden. With coat hooks for volunteers’ coats, so practical!

In September we received £6,000 funding from Greenwich Neighbourhood Growth Fund, a huge boost for our planting plans. The committee negotiated a 50% trade discount with **Provender Nurseries** and went on a shopping spree.



In October we took delivery of a new bench seat, to commemorate **CABAHS 70th Anniversary**, kindly funded by members subscriptions. We also received interest and some practical help from students from the University of Greenwich Landscape Architecture department. By November the second Lockdown had hit, but this

time the weather was being more normal and plants were becoming dormant anyway. We got back to work in December, and carried on planting in the mild weather. There was a wonderful surprise from the **Worshipful Company of Gardeners**, who awarded us £500 to buy some special plants for the garden (big thank you Melanie for applying!). In the week before Christmas, volunteers fashioned stylish wreath decorations for



the gates from leaves and berries from the garden itself and a socially distanced mince-pie-fest, courtesy **Charlton Bakehouse**, concluded the year.

January came and brought the Third Lockdown, but the garden is coping fine with two local volunteers a week popping in to check it over. The tree surgeon **Amber Treecare** paid a long-awaited visit in the first week in February to give the garden a haircut. So much better and lighter, with a lot of overgrown Pyracantha removed and the ivy trimmed to the top of the walls. You can see the House properly again!



As we await the vaccine roll out, lots of virtual planning has been going on, with a new application for funds to extend the Volunteer scheme into the Long Borders garden in 2021. We hope to include the fabulous ancient Mulberry Tree enclosure in our care too, keeping it weed and rubbish free. Such a lot to look forward to and be grateful for.

See you in the garden soon, more volunteers always welcome!

Kathy, February 2021



Grateful thanks to all our Volunteers. And the Old Pond Garden committee: Vija, Terry, Kay, Angela, Mandy, Melanie, Juli and Jason.

Also to Tracy, Edward and the staff at Charlton House.

