



OXFORDSHIRE GARDENS TRUST

Contents

Editors

Roundup of visits & talks:

Visit: Bruern Abbey 2

Visit: Nuneham House 2

Lecture: Justine Hopkins 3

Lecture: Malcolm Airs 3

Blue Plaques: Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin 4

'Oxfordshire Parks' book reprint 5

OGT Archives 5

The OGT Interview 6

Postcard from Menton 7

Research & Recording: Pilot Project 2026/7 7

Book: Rush Court Estate 7

Up and coming events 8

Courses 8

OGT useful contacts 8



Narcissus Poetica - Pheasants Eye

From the editors - Vanessa & Felix

Reflecting on last year we had a series of very successful garden visits and excellent talks and in this new year we have a lot to look forward to - all the reports and news are in this newsletter, alongside an interview with Sarah Rutherford and an article on the progress of Blue Plaques for Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin.

For some people spring is the best time of year. Carpets of snowdrops to start with, then sheets of bright yellows and purples of crocuses to be followed by glorious yellows of daffodils and narcissus. However the Narcissus Poetica has always been worth waiting for - the bright white elegant petals set around the small red-rimmed cup are so eye-catching. It has a sweet and fairly powerful scent. Although the bulb originated from western and southern Europe, by the 1500s it had started to naturalise in woodlands and fields around northern Europe. The two varieties 'Actaea' and recurvus both flower a month later than others and compete with the first bursting of tulips.

Happy spring gardening everyone.



Nuneham Courtenay terrace at rear of house looking towards Carfax Conduit

Visit to Bruern Abbey, 9th July

Upon arrival at Bruern Abbey, we were greeted by parking ushers and catering staff serving cold drinks. Such attention to detail and hospitality gave us some clue as to this garden's style: elegance and organisation. We were welcomed by Martin Ritchie, its co-owner, who gave us a succinct account of the property's history, dating from its Cistercian ecclesiastical origin, to its more recent transformation by himself and Lord Glendonbrook when they acquired it in 2012. While each garden room had its own characteristics, from the endorphins-boosting wildflower meadow to the formal parterre with a 42m lotus pond (canal) and the Mediterranean-inspired courtyard, simplicity and symmetry were the over-riding themes of the designs, according to designer Angel Collins. We noticed the repeated motifs, the harmonious palette of complementary colours, and planting symmetry. As a biblical symbol of love, the number 16 is used in the garden to instil balance: 16 Irish yews, 16 hornbeams . . . We finished this wonderful visit enjoying delicious coffee and cakes, while sitting in a shaded corner of the courtyard, admiring the 16 jets of water dancing atop the glistening rills.

Ivy Ng



View of the Abbey from the end of the canal @ Vanessa Fell

Visit to Nuneham House and Park, 19th July

In July OGT visited Nuneham Park, an exceptional Grade I Registered Park and Garden. The park embraces a Grade II* listed, 18th century Palladian style villa by Stiff Leadbetter and James 'Athenian' Stuart for the First Earl Harcourt. It also features a functional, now redundant, church in the form of a classical temple. The church, grotto and other listed, classical, garden architecture remain within the footprint of the First Earl's pleasure ground. Later additions by 'Capability' Brown and poet William Mason for the Second Earl, skilfully transformed elements of the villa and landscape from classical to his favoured picturesque. The villa and gardens are now leased by The Global Retreat Meditation

Centre and administered by Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, UK.

Our visit began with a rare, guided tour of the interior of the villa by Douglas Stephenson. The villa had recently undergone a £6m refurbishment including fixtures, fittings and plush new carpets, necessitating the removal of our shoes. The imposing first floor reception rooms reached by Henry Holland's



Nuneham Park House © Felix

3-storey, oval, cantilevered staircase offered tantalising views of the gardens and beyond. Particularly, the view of Brown's intended eye-catcher ruin from the westerly window of James Stuart's octagonal salon. The ruin was never realised but replaced in the scheme after his death by Otto Nicholson's redundant Carfax Conduit. The tour of the house concluded with a Q & A session in the conference room, focussing mainly on the operation of the Retreat, followed by a delicious offering of tea and cake served by our hosts in the service wing.

Sally Worsley

Lecture: 16 October: Cornard Wood to Fangorn Forest: British Trees in Art and Literature presented by Justine Hopkins

This was a lively and entertaining talk on the way in which trees have caught the human imagination throughout history. Justine Hopkins began by highlighting the theme of her talk, with Thomas Gainsborough's *Cornard Wood* (1748), a 'useful' wood that provided firewood and a pathway to a distant church, thus associating trees with God/the spiritual.

This mixture of the need to be close to woodland but also its slightly alarming quality pervades paintings of woodland over history, from Ucello's *The Hunt in the Forest* (1470, Ashmolean), where trees are shaped to avoid riders being swept from their mounts, emphasizing the fact that the forest was a site of potential danger to 'communing with trees' in Wright of Derby's *Sir Brooke Boothby* (1781, Tate). In the 19th century, oaks and other species became associated with Englishness as well as God. There was also a growing tradition of painting remarkable trees, such as Nasmyth's *Sir Philip Sidney's Oak Tree* (1820-30, V&A) depicts the oldest tree at Penshurst.

In contrast, the pre-Raphaelites' meticulously observed trees are the background to emotion. We also see more atmospheric images of forests, where people are once more entwined with nature, such as in Millais' *Dew-Drenched Furze* (1889-90, Tate). The two World Wars brought abrupt change. Nash, Nevinson and others used trees to show the devastation wrought by bombing. In the Second World War, the twisted trees of Ayrton and Sutherland reveal their fear of a broken world. Artists have continued - and continue - to explore the experience of being in, walking through and interacting with trees, as we see in the abstract creations of Hitchens *Forest Edge No. II* (1944, Tate).

A wonderfully engaging, illuminating lecture, which I suspect means many of us will look at paintings and sculptures of trees in new, and deeper, ways.

Jaqueline Mitchell



At Binsey, Nr. Oxford, George Price Boyd (1826 -1897)
© The Higgins Bedford, CC - BY-NC

Lecture: Nuneham Courtenay, one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world

As a follow up to our visit earlier in the year Prof. Malcolm Airs' lecture on Nuneham Courtenay brought our 2025 programme to its conclusion. He masterfully talked us through the successive plans of the Earls of Harcourt from their first purchase of the estate in 1712 until its sale to Oxford University in 1948. His account of the history of the aristocratic house, its designed landscape and estate village touched on the contributions of a succession of nationally known designers such as Stiff Leadbetter, William Mason and Capability Brown in creating what Horace Walpole called "a paradise on earth".

Finally he discussed the significance of recent attempts to restore and conserve this outstanding example of an 18th century aristocratic designed landscape in which he was, and continues to be, personally involved. This process began in the 1960s when Mavis Batey lived on the estate and began her career as a garden historian. It was her research into its history which eventually led to the registration of the park and landscape at Grade I in 1984, under legislation which she had been instrumental in putting on the statute books.

A new guidebook "Nuneham Courtenay: the House, the Landscape and the Village" by Malcolm Airs & Geoffrey Tyack is available (£5) from All Saints Church in Nuneham Park.

OGT website has a link to Historic England's documentation for the registration of [Nuneham Courtenay Park and Garden](#)

Pete Edwards

Blue plaques for Brenda Colvin and Sylvia Crowe

Members will know that Oxfordshire was home to two of the most successful and sought after landscape architects of the 20th century: Dame Sylvia Crowe CBE and Brenda Colvin CBE. There is little recognition of their achievements in Oxfordshire at present and, as a way of addressing this, applications to the Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Scheme have been made for both.

Sylvia Crowe (1901-1997) was born in Oxford Road in Banbury. She lived there with her parents until 1911 when her father, Eyre Crowe, left his business as a cabinet manufacturer and bought a fruit farm in Felbridge, Surrey. Sylvia Crowe maintained her connections with Banbury throughout her life and is buried at Hardwick Hill cemetery.

Brenda Colvin (1897-1981) was born in India and spent her childhood there. Brenda later attended various schools in England and France. Her Oxfordshire connection began in the 1950s when she moved from London to Little Peacocks in Filkins. She moved her practice, now Colvin and Moggridge, there in 1965. She is buried in the churchyard at St. Peter's Church, Filkins.

There was a small age gap between Crowe and Colvin but their careers followed similar paths and they had much in common. They both studied at Swanley Horticultural College and then, with similar success, each set up their own garden design practice.

"It should be the aim of each of us to leave our chosen corner, not more vulgar and submerged, but lovelier and more dignified, after we have gone."

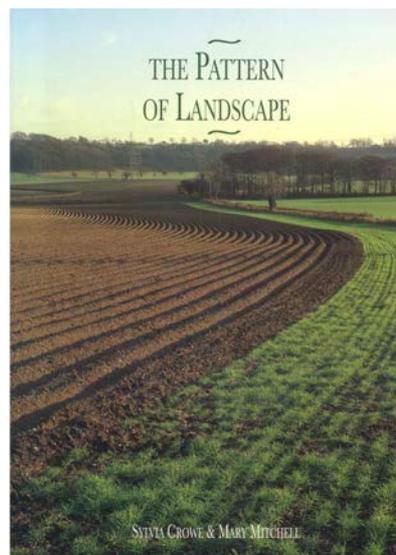
Dame Sylvia Crowe, quoted in *Landscape Design*, 1997

Crowe won a gold medal at Chelsea Flower Show in 1937 and by 1939 Colvin had designed and advised on about 300 gardens. They never worked together as partners but they shared an office in Gloucester Place in London until 1965. They both had garden design and public space design commissions in Oxfordshire for example The Penicillin Memorial Rose Garden at Magdalen College, by Crowe in 1953 and Sutton Courtenay Manor, by Colvin between 1948-51.

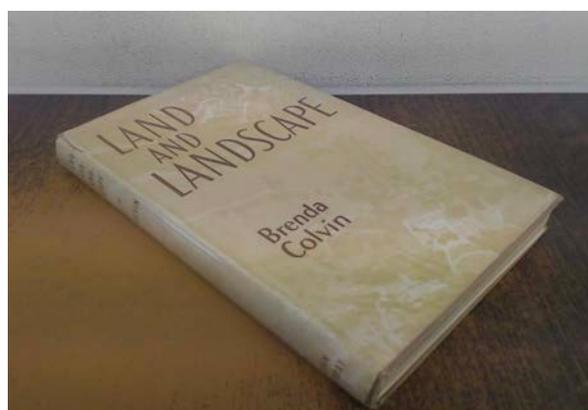
By the end of the Second World War landscape architecture - with the encouragement of architects and town planners - had become an important new profession. Crowe and Colvin

were pre-eminent members of a small group of garden designers who began to take on design responsibilities on a vast scale in the context of post-war reconstruction, rural land utilisation, industrial development, national parks and new towns.

They were in demand from the 1950s onwards as landscape architects who could make new industrial installations and twentieth century public infrastructure - power stations, nuclear power stations, reservoirs, motorways, hospitals and pylons - sit well in their surroundings. Crowe completed several commissions for agencies such as the Central Electricity Generating Board, Harlow and Basildon new towns and Rutland Water. She later became the Forestry Commission's first landscape consultant giving advice on planting schemes for vast tracts of woodland, especially in Scotland, using mixed native trees rather than rows of conifers in their plantations. Colvin's high profile commissions included Trimpey Reservoir and the new University of East Anglia, now a designated historic site, and the redesign of Aldershot military town. Their



The Pattern of Landscape by Sylvia Crowe and Mary Mitchell.
Chichester: Packard 1988



Land and Landscape by Brenda Colvin. John Murray, 1948.

The control which modern man is able to exert over his environment is so great that we easily overlook the power of the environment over man ... We should think of this planet, Earth, as a single organism, in which humanity is involved. The sense of superior individuality which we enjoy is illusory.

Brenda Colvin, *Land and Landscape*, 2

contributions often went unnoticed: the public could not always see that a landscape architect had been at work and this was their great skill. Their designs made a permanent contribution to the protection of the UK countryside alongside the successful integration of twentieth century infrastructure.

Both women were interested in education, paying great attention to the development of their profession. In 1929 Colvin was a founder member of the Institute of Landscape Architects. Colvin served as president in 1951, Crowe in 1957-59. Crowe was also president of the International Federation of Landscape Architects.

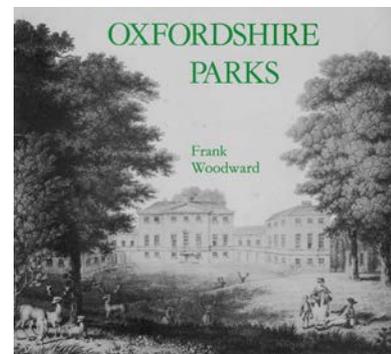
Their books are seen as classics within the discipline. The most influential were *Trees For Town and Country* (Colvin, 1947), *Land and Landscape* (Colvin, 1948), *The Landscape of Power* (Crowe, 1958) and *The Landscape of Roads* (Crowe, 1960).

While their relationship was not a close one, it seems that they had much respect for one another's work. In present day language, I think we could say that they shared the same values. They were both very good at explaining their designs to clients and, using charm, sketches and sometimes forthright remarks, they made few compromises. They shared a love of the natural world and the British countryside and had a clear understanding of where and how it needed to be protected. Indefatigable and witty, they both continued working until well into their 80s.

Jane Beverand

Oxfordshire Parks – new edition

This account of Oxfordshire parks was originally published by Oxfordshire Museums Service in 1982 and has been long out of print. It is based upon a pioneer research study undertaken by Frank Woodward in the 1970s. Sadly, he died before he could complete the project and his papers were subsequently edited and brought to publication in 1982 by James Bond. The resulting booklet was among the earliest attempts to focus upon the parks of an individual county and to investigate their distinctive characteristics. We are fortunate that James has agreed to update the text and incorporate the research findings that have come to light since the first edition, a mere 44 years ago! We have obtained permission in principle from Oxfordshire Museums Service and from the family of Frank Woodward to revive this work and hope to launch the new edition in the second half of 2026 in a fully illustrated format.



Will Holborow

Archives for past OGT research projects

Have you wondered where our research documents end-up? Summaries of individual projects are available online on our Research pages, divided into the five county districts, then by research topic. Chronologically our past projects have been: Walled Kitchen Gardens, Capability Brown tercentenary (CB300), Recreational Parks, and Quaker Meeting House Gardens. The archived detailed records for the first three projects are available at Oxfordshire History Centre, St Luke's Church, Cowley, OX4 2HT where they are available to view (but see their visitor information). Accession numbers are: Walled Kitchen Gardens (Acc. 6685), CB300 (Acc. 22_51) and Recreational Parks (Acc. 22_52 some of which have their full research report available as a PDF at the end of their online summary.)

Vanessa Fell

The OGT interview

Sarah Rutherford is a Kew-trained gardener with an MA in the conservation of historic parks and gardens from York University. She worked for English Heritage assessing sites across England for the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens, becoming Head of the Register. During this time she researched and completed her doctoral thesis on the landscapes of nineteenth-century lunatic asylums. She is now an enthusiastic freelance consultant researching and writing conservation plans for parks and gardens. She lives in Buckinghamshire.

Where did it all begin?

Here in my cottage garden, immersed in history! And I have never looked back. I am totally unqualified for anything else. I did year course at Oxford Botanic Garden - a City and Guilds course, then a part-time course at Waterperry and then Kew, where they wanted to know what aspect of gardening I was interested in. I replied Historic Parks. That was 1981.

How do you see the meaning of gardens and designed landscapes in the public realm today? An essential part of the UK's cultural life and individual well being.

What do you see as the most exciting ideas and approaches happening today? Climate change. We have to address the issue - adapt not resist. We must learn to evoke the historic character of a landscape, not replicate. That applies to both plants and materials.

Favourite tree? Paulownia

Most hated imported plant to the UK? Knotweed. (The European adventurer Philip Franz von Siebold brought a specimen from a Japanese volcano to Leiden in the Netherlands. By 1850 a specimen had been donated to Kew. Ed.).

Favourite season? Spring

Favourite historic landscape/garden designed by a dead person? Rousham

Favourite underrated landscape/garden designer and landscape/garden? The garden designed by Philip Webb, in the Arts and Crafts genre - Great Tangle Manor in Surrey. Ask this question tomorrow and it will be something else!

(<https://www.greattangleymanor.co.uk/our-manor/our-gardens/>)

Yellow flowers? Lots!

How many books? Even more! My favourite book of the ones I have written, is the Shire book (No 807) on 'Botanic Gardens'

What do you bring back from your American tours? Go and visit the gardens along the Hudson river in upstate New York

(<https://www.hudsonriver.com/hhrt/things-to-do-along-the-hudson-river/gardens-hudson-valley/>)

What are you most passionate about? Everything concerning significance and character of historical parks and gardens

What is the most interesting site/period of design/built feature in park/plant in landscape or garden? All of them!

Do you have a pet hate of a pest or disease? Pernicious weeds! And deer - a close second!

Sarah Rutherford interviewed by Felix October 2025



A Postcard from Menton

Val Rameh Botanic Gardens are situated on a 1-hectare site above Menton Garavan and its marina. The gardens are tropical, with exotic trees and a pond with aquatic plants including Amazonica Victoria water lilies - you would be forgiven for thinking you are in the Caribbean rather than the South of France.

The gardens were created 150 years ago and they did not extend much further than the terrace, until Miss Maybud Campbell transformed the site in the 1950s. She created gravel paths below the formal garden which follow the lie of the land where she grew bromeliads, succulents and bulbs between the trees.

Despite being open to the public Val Rameh maintains the spirit of a private garden full of English charm and is well worth visiting.

Claire de Carle



Giant Waterlilies,
Jardin Botanique Val Rameh, Menton, France

Research & Recording - Pilot Project 2026/7

After the successful training workshop in November 2025, a series of further workshops have been planned over this year. At the workshop in January the following sites were selected for research:

Glympton Park; Lower Dornford; Wootton Place; Adderbury Park; Home Close, Sibford Gower; Braziers Park; Brightwell Park; Waterperry Garden; Woodeaton Manor.

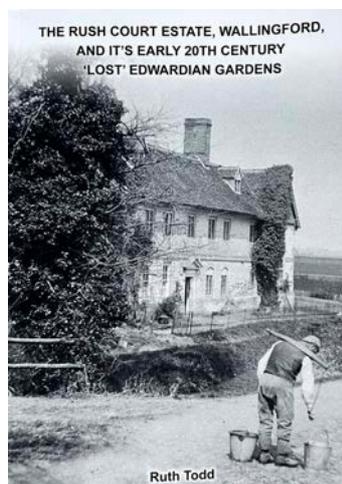
Further workshop dates are Thursday:

9th April; 21st May; 30th July; 29th October and will be run in The Soldier's Room at the Oxford Museum, Woodstock, (10 00am - 1 00pm) led Claire de Carle, Chair of Buckinghamshire Gardens Trust. Each meeting will examine one aspect of researching landscapes and gardens before discussion and sharing of research.

There is no charge for the meetings, but bookings **must be** made on Eventcube. This is an opportunity to learn new skills, update old ones and work with group of people who have similar interests.

OGT have been fortunate enough to be awarded a grant of £800 from The Gardens Trust, to be met with matched funding from OGT. This will enable the R&R group to have further training to research the sites and complete the write-ups.

Booking for the workshops on [Eventcube](#).



The Rush Court Estate Wallingford, and its Early 20th Century 'Lost' Edwardian Gardens

Ruth Todd, a long-time member of the Oxfordshire Gardens Trust, has just published a booklet of the history of the garden around her former family home 'Rush Court Gardens'. Rush Court and its gardens are situated near Wallingford. Apart from two walled gardens, a river front, a lake, and a moat, the garden also contains the remains of a designed Italianate garden to the rear of the house. The booklet also includes history of the families who lived and worked in the house and surrounding area.

Ruth completed an MA in Garden History at Birkbeck University of London and has been involved in research projects for OGT for many years, including the Walled Gardens Project and CB300. As well as researching for OGT she is also a garden guide for Chiswick House and gardens in London. The publication illustrates the importance of

research in documenting and recording gardens that may be completely lost in the future.

If anyone would like to buy the booklet, please get in touch with Ruth at abc123rit@hotmail.com The book costs £5 + postage (approx £2).

Forthcoming events - Spring 2026

Lecture: Thursday 12 February - *Asthall Manor Walled Kitchen Garden*, presented by Tim Mitchell, Head Kitchen Gardener

Lecture: Thursday 12 March - *HMP Bullingdon Prison Visitors' garden - Inside Out*, presented by Laura Burt, Director of The Nature Effect and Laura Burt Garden Design

Visit: Thursday 21 May - *Oxlease Farm, Lechlade*. A plantsman's garden, set among traditional farm buildings, including a guided tour by Chipps Mann, a history talk by Charles Mann and a delicious home-made tea

Visit: Tuesday 23 June - *Burford Priory, (Priory of our Lady) Burford Lane, Burford*. A garden combining old with new in the grounds of the 16th century Mansion House.

Summer Social: Thursday 30 July - Bridewell Gardens. A therapeutic walled kitchen garden with adjoining vineyard. A glass of wine and canapés provided.

Bookings can be made via OGT website or directly to Eventcube at <https://ogtevents.eventcube.io>

Have you ever thought of enrolling on a garden history, landscape design or specialist garden course?

The MA at Buckingham University, course director Twigs Way, can be completed in one year or spread over two. The seminars are in London and include lecturers well known to OGT members - Tim Richardson, David Marsh and Oliver Cox.

<https://www.buckingham.ac.uk/courses/research/ma-garden-history/>

Or at Oxford Lifelong Learning (formerly Continuing Education CONTED), Oxford University, running from 6th May - 17th July, *English Landscape Gardens 1650 to the Present Day*.

<https://lifelong-learning.ox.ac.uk/courses/english-landscape-gardens-1650-to-the-present-day-online>

Or a one day Rose Pruning Course at Waterperry Gardens led by Horticultural Manager Rob Jacobs.

<https://www.waterperrygardens.co.uk/shop/rose-pruning-6th-march-2026-M133913>

Useful OGT contact details:

Secretary: Jane Carlton Smith - email secretary@ogt.org.uk

Treasurer: Will Holborow - email treasurer@ogt.org.uk

Membership secretary: Vanessa Fell - email ness.fell@gmail.com

Events: events@ogt.org.uk

Website: <https://ogt.org.uk>



Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this newsletter. If the photographs are not attributed, they will be either the authors own or were taken by one of the editorial team. Details correct at the time of printing, February 2026.

Cartoon: Thelwell's Guide to Gardening, *Up the Garden Path*. Methuen, 1967