

Opening All the Gates

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Opening All the Gates – a legacy of the Gateway Gardens Trust - is a partnership project between the National Trust, the Historic Houses Association, the Royal Horticultural Society and the Association of Gardens Trusts. Supported by English Heritage, it aims to encourage access and new audiences for historic gardens and to ensure that the widest possible cross-section of the community is able to discover and enjoy these special places.

Opening All the Gates is an opportunity address some of the barriers to accessing our historic environment in order to develop a deep, long lasting resonance for all those who participated in the project. Bettina Harden, the project's inventor and champion describes the ethos of the project better than anyone:



“...reach out to every kind of disadvantaged group in the community and engage them with their heritage.”

◀ Bettina Harden:

Growing in the Garden, a paper for Opening All the Gates seminar at RHS Harlow Carr

Between October 2010 and January 2011, we hosted six seminars investigating the potential of gardens to widen their reach, whilst supporting communities. Boughton House (private, HHA) in Northamptonshire, Gibside (National Trust, Tyne and Wear), Saltram House (National Trust, Devon), Anglesey Abbey (National Trust, Cambridgeshire) Spetchley House (private, HHA, Worcestershire), Harlow Carr (RHS, North Yorkshire). The project partners invited a wide range of stakeholders to each seminar so that a broad debate, generating innovative thinking, might take place.

It is hoped that these seminars, now completed, will stimulate and inspire people to engage with gardens and other managed landscapes in new ways. It's also an aspiration that gardens will engage with people they haven't engaged with before. Opening All the Gates wants to continue to connect people with gardens now and in the future.

Those attending the seminars met with likeminded people from a range of backgrounds to discuss ideas and opportunities. There was also expert advice on how to engage with schools, community groups and other potential visitors. Each of the six seminars aimed to stimulate innovative and

relevant partnerships, which could see more people benefiting from, enjoying and taking care of our amazing historic gardens.

The early evidence is that the seminars have already had an impact, as the following testimonies indicate:



“We have introduced a Wildlife Hunt and family activity room. We have enlisted the support of Northumberland Wildlife Trust who have supplied a range of activities and toys and we have used some grant funding to purchase ceramic plaques which have been placed round our newly created Capability Brown lake and can be used to make rubbings.”

Kitty Anderson, Kirkharle Courtyard,
Northumberland <http://www.kirkharlecourtyard.net/>

Wadzanai Project

“I’ve been helping the Wadzanai Project (a young people and families project) develop their engagement with heritage and gardens and the young minority kids in Corby. I’m talking about places the NT looks after, doing some practical gardening and then arranging with them to visit a number of NT properties to introduce them to heritage and particularly gardens.”

Mark Bradshaw, The National Trust

The above contributors were fortunate to attend an Opening All the Gates seminar. All seminar venues operated a reserve list due to their incredible popularity. Work to build on the enthusiasm generated by each seminar continues. Further funding is being sought to ensure that the momentum is not lost because the learning has been great; we now need to develop a sustainable legacy.

There is no doubt that opening all the gates can not be achieved with enthusiasm alone. Seminar delegates, themselves, were able to outline some of the issues and opportunities, which were recorded and transcribed. Some of these issues and opportunities are listed below:

Funding

The current climate means that even statutory organisations cannot be certain of their ability to fund people and resources. In fact all the main players in the heritage sector are, at the time of writing remodelling and reducing staffing. Therefore, managers of historic gardens, whether they be small and traditionally under resourced or large and traditionally adequately resourced need to look at how to develop a financially sustainable future by developing funding strategies which can generate income.

“Audience” development

Those who attended the seminars felt that new audiences, whatever their circumstances or background, may not engage with gardens because of a fear of trying something new, or an ignorance to existence of gardens and the broad attraction they provide. Another barrier to access is that of perception; gardens are “not for me”. One way of overcoming these barriers is, delegates

thought, through effective marketing, yet many people thought that in too many cases there was a lack of effective print, web-based promotion and other marketing tools: A common 'enabler' of a successful access programme is an effective marketing strategy, which includes generating 'word of mouth'.

Another way to attract diverse audiences is to relate to specific themes or to recognise what, in a garden's collection or history, might draw a specific audience. What might 'catch the eye' of the professionals working with groups with particular needs, e.g. nurses or teachers? How might a garden respond to particular disabilities? How does a story associated with a historic garden act as a 'hook' into any particular curricular or topic for learning? These may at first seem like daunting questions, yet at our seminars there were often delegates or speakers on hand to provide support and answers. Of course some of these 'hurdles' are tough to overcome. However, like any obstacle course, although it can be difficult, paradoxically it can also be fun! Moreover, these challenges are made easier when some quite simple things are put into place, such as giving a warm welcome and a fond farewell.

Getting there

Opening All the Gates seminars were a forum for some heated and informed debate.



Delegates at our first seminar at Boughton House in Northamptonshire highlighted some of the difficulties associated group and public transport. One delegate expressed a particular concern that in her experience coach companies were charging more for crossing county borders, which denies access to school groups who may be only a few miles away.

Many of our historic gardens are poorly served by public transport and the escalating cost of fuel further threatens the ability of those who might most benefit from visiting an historic garden, actually doing so. This debate ran through each seminar to varying degrees.

Beyond the Gates

Consultation and dialogue with users and potential users helps to develop ideas and partnerships. Talking to people 'beyond the gates' also helps to generate that all important 'word of mouth' marketing. It is very difficult to develop or improve a programme with a specific audience in mind, without talking to that audience first. If one thinks about, for instance, a major food manufacturer developing a new product, it would be the norm for the product to be road tested on potential

customers through focus groups and such like. Why should a garden visits programme not be developed in the same way?

Working with others helps to make things happen. Many of those that attended our seminars felt that partnerships and networks were important in order to build capacity to deliver activities. Others saw the local community, those who live and work in close proximity to the garden, were an asset and that enthusiasm from the community can be of benefit.

Through the Gates



It's worth recognising that many of the most fascinating and inspiring gardens are the ones that have previously been the most private ones. Once one pushes open the gates to more diverse audiences adjustments may need to be made. For instance a physical adjustment might mean modifying a path to make it easier for a wheelchair to navigate: "ask disabled friends to test drive your garden" was one positive, achievable, solution-focused suggestion our seminar attendees heard.

Seminar at Anglesey Abbey: Bella D'Arcy Reed with Tricia Moxey of Essex Garden Trust and other delegates. © Jane Satchwell NT.

Access issues are important for many reasons, of course there is the small matter of being compliant with the law, but there are what some might call 'softer' reasons, such as the obligation to provide all people with the opportunity to have a comfortable, enjoyable experience that meets their requirements.

Appropriate physical accessibility to gardens needs to be complemented by access provided by people. There may be garden staff or volunteers, who are used to spending the day alone. By opening all the gates people may be expected to interact with individuals or groups some of whom may have specific needs: "can't they be trained at my property that are used to such visitors" one manager suggested. Up-skilling volunteers to support accessibility was of particular debate at Gibside in the north-east, with one delegate suggesting that volunteers are paid with "tea, cake and skills." It was difficult to steer away from debate about volunteering and, therefore, "The Big Society" at each of the seminars.

A team, large or small, requires some form of leadership. This might be from a head gardener, a property manager, an education and outreach officer, a lead volunteer or an owner. Whoever this individual is, Opening All the Gates delegates felt that "passion", "enthusiasm", "vision" and "focus" are key to a well functioning a team and that these attributes and skills can be cascaded down from an effective leader.

Activities

At every seminar, delegates were given a host of ideas for activities to engage different groups. Bettina Harden, MBE talked about refugees, hospices and older people to name but three. She posed the question "what can we do for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012?" 60 garden parties, 60 school visits or 60 bedding plants planted by people with mental health problems, perhaps?

Gail Bromley, MBE gave an insight into the sheer scope and scale of Kew's offer, much of which was transferable to any garden. Gail also made specific links to National Curriculum areas, stating that Kew can link to any part of the National Curriculum and currently does, with the possible exception of Modern Foreign Languages.

Gail and Bettina were both determined to point out that even the smallest garden can do something that will be of value to it and to the community that any activity might serve. Similarly,

the largest, better resourced and supported gardens should always be looking to develop new and innovative opportunities to broaden access and widen participation. (see *article about the Access Forum at Kew go to..*)

The link between the arts and gardens often came to the fore: arts as inspiration, as interpretation and as celebration. A good story was often seen as an effective 'hook' into gardens, e.g. relating to the heritage of the garden and/or the heritage of the visitor, (Saltram has developed a Chinese plant trail which is popular with Plymouth's Chinese community).

Our gardens and the people that care for them are genuine assets to the nation. The concept of 'an English Country Garden' is prominent within our wonderfully diverse culture. So why should we seek welcome more people to learn, work and play in gardens? There are perhaps three broad reasons:

The economic argument:

Horticulture generates over £1bn to the economy. Public gardens, domestic gardens, botanic gardens and parks, nursery trades, market gardens and historic properties employ over 200,000 people in horticulture alone. Yet it is estimated that forty percent of those who were working in gardens in 2004, will have retired by 2015. At our seminars, we posed the question 'who will wear the wellingtons?'; a serious question which we must all consider.

The health and well-being argument:

The health benefits of gardens and green space are the subject of massive research. Countless studies have been conducted which assert that pain thresholds are increased when there is an intervention which involves plants and horticulture. Likewise, health problems which cost the exchequer millions per year such as stress, anxiety and depression are, evidence tells us, improved when sufferers are given access to a garden.

The educational argument:

Learning out of the classroom in any context is inspirational, no more so when learning in gardens. As seminar attendee learnt, the education guru, Mick Waters, has identified three components of an irresistible learning experience, these being **aspiration**, **pride** and **responsibility**. Previously (above) I have identified a need to encourage others to **aspire** to develop a career in horticulture; the economy and our heritage depend upon this need being met. Gardens are places of inspiration and creativity, both of which breed **pride**. For instance, creating a piece of art inspired by a garden or indeed, creating a garden in itself will engender a sense of pride. Concurrently learning about spatial awareness, sensory awareness, perspective, geometry, history, geography, science, maths or even Latin might be taking place! Finally, what can elicit a sense of **responsibility** more than protecting and nurturing a plant, a bed or a whole garden?

During Opening All the Gates the most inspirational aspect has been meeting people who care for *our* gardens and feel the sense of responsibility to the heritage and to future generations. Finding ways of passing on this inspiration can only be of benefit to communities and to gardens. To aspire to 'opening all the gates' may be setting oneself up to be knocked down; yet to enable garden managers, owners and enthusiasts to develop knowledge, confidence and motivation to share their passion with each other and with others is achievable. Opening All the Gates is a typical 'capacity building' project: it may sound corny but those involved in the project see people as bees, birds and bugs (i.e. pollinators) and ideas as seeds.

In short, Opening All the Gates discovered that our historic gardens are as diverse as our country; together they tell a fascinating history and individually they hold captivating stories. Gardens have the potential to improve health and well-being, to support communities socially and financially, to engage children and adults in new ways of learning and to simply provide 'time-out' from the hectic lifestyles of the 21st Century.

However it is done, whoever it is for, on whatever scale, by opening all the gates, we open up possibility of improving lives.

Also see the article on activities at Hestercombe Gardens, Somerset, go to....

Association of Garden Trusts www.gardenstrusts.org.uk/

Historic Houses Association www.hha.org.uk/

National Trust www.nationaltrust.org.uk/

Royal Horticultural Society www.rhs.org.uk/

English Heritage www.english-heritage.org.uk/