

HGT AGM 2019 – Chairman’s Report

1. The Chairman’s Report:

a) After four intensive years of research into the legacy of Brown and Repton in Hertfordshire, the Research team have settled back into routine. This year, six research reports have been completed and submitted to the growing collection in the library at HALS. Congratulations to Anne Rowe whose latest book, ‘Tudor and Early Stuart Parks of Hertfordshire’, was published in March and continues the story of the county’s deer parks which began with her earlier volume on ‘Medieval Parks’. You may purchase a copy, and have it signed by the author, after the meeting. Our team of researchers meet regularly with Anne at HALS to discuss the progress of their projects and would welcome any members who would be interested in joining their number.

b) Moving on to the theme of the Conservation of Hertfordshire’s historic parks and gardens, I stand in awe of the knowledge and leadership shown by Kate Harwood. Without her influential reports and interventions, local planners and developers would pay far less attention to the impact of their plans for development affecting significant historic sites. As a result of her enthusiastic leadership, nationally important parks and gardens, such as the water gardens at Hemel and the Mimram valley at Panshanger, have been saved from urban and industrial development and their future secured with the support of groups of Friends. Kate has ensured that ill-informed local councillors and company management have been made aware of the significance of the landscape for which they are responsible – and of the official consequences that might now follow if they neglect that responsibility. I do urge you all to read the excellent article that Kate has written for the group of activists from Thundridge village near Ware, who are working to save the tower of Thundridge Old Church, which forms a feature in the delightful landscape of the Rib Valley. The diocese of St Albans is giving up its role as owner and custodian and the future of the tower and its environment is very much at risk. In her article, ‘The Rib Valley – Significance and Threats’, Kate sets out the principles of understanding the significance of a heritage site, without a thorough understanding of which any attempt to counter destructive development of the site is unlikely to succeed. I have circulated a link to the article to all the HGT members for whom we have email addresses, the link is on the website and a reminder will be given in the Autumn Newsletter. Do find time to read it. In addition to all this, Kate finds the time to

prepare and deliver educational courses, including her excellent short course of lectures and visits on the theme of Arts and Crafts Gardens for the HGT earlier this year, to give numerous talks and to create awareness of our local environment by leading walks around our threatened sites. There are major battles to come – the Local Plans for Hertfordshire contain intentions to build thousands of new homes, including 8,500 houses on Green Belt land at Gilston as part of the extension of Harlow into Hertfordshire.

- c) I mentioned the HGT website in the context of Kate's article on Thundridge Old Church. You may not be aware that under the guidance of John Craggs the website has recently received a brand new look, and a major revision of the content of its pages and links. It is well worth a visit, which is easy to do. Google 'Herts Gardens Trust' and the website comes up at the head of the list; or enter www.hertsgardenstrust.org.uk to open the website directly. There is a mass of information on the Trust and its various activities, the full programme of coming events and an archive which includes all our previous newsletters and information on HGT publications.

- d) HGT continues to fund garden project work in primary schools. The emphasis has changed from the days when a team of 'Mrs Wheelbarrows' visited schools to enthuse children about the fun of gardening and growing plants. Bella Stuart-Smith encourages schools that are keen to promote gardening and garden projects as part of their curriculum to develop practical plans and apply to her for advice and funding. This year £800 has been awarded for a school garden at Leavesden Green Primary School ; Breakspear School are developing plans for which they will submit for a grant of approximately £500. Bella would love to know of any gardening member with the time and interest in joining her to help with this valuable work.

- e) For the first time in my memory, one of the garden visits planned by Sonja Fillingham and her team had to be called off because of an appalling weather forecast for the day. Two excellent visits, to Suffolk and to Pashley Manor in Sussex were enjoyed, but Trevor Beale's expedition to two outstanding Northamptonshire gardens has been rearranged for Wednesday, July 24th. There are places available on the 24th – please contact Sonja Fillingham, she is here today or visit the website for information if you would like to join the visit.

- f) Our programme of winter talks and summer walks is into its second season and has been well supported. I am most grateful to Liz Carlin who has agreed to lead the organising team for these events, and to Helen Leiper who is drawing up the programme for their next season. Speakers for the coming programme of winter talks include Anne Rowe, who will speak about the subject of her new book, Tudor and Early Stuart Parks; Andrew Sankey, who will speak about memorable women gardeners of the 19thC, Kate Felus, who will talk about Georgian Gardens, and Kate Harwood, who will talk about the history of Welwyn Garden City which will be celebrating the centenary of its foundation. All of these will be advertised in the Autumn Newsletter.
- g) I should like to take a little of your time to speak of the work of your committee and of our parent organisation, the Gardens Trust. The Gardens Trust was created a couple of years ago with the amalgamation of the Garden History Society and the Association of County Gardens Trusts. The Gardens Trust maintains a small professional office of garden historians, conservationists and planners, who work with a committee of representatives from the former Garden History Society and the County Gardens Trust – Kate Harwood is an active and provocative member! The Gardens Trust are the official consultees for planning applications involving Grade II historic parks and gardens. In practice, these are delegated to the appropriate County Gardens Trust, with the Gardens Trust team available to give advice and guidance. We are fortunate in Hertfordshire – Kate reviews and comments on far more than this bare minimum. The Garden Trust runs meetings and training for members of the County Gardens Trusts and maintains an active website with an archive of training material available to our members. A focus of this work is their ‘Historic Landscape Project’, run by Tamsin McMillan and a short article about it by Tamsin will be published in the Autumn Newsletter. The Gardens Trust are funded by a levy on every member of the Country Gardens Trusts, by grants from bodies like Historic England and by a direct membership subscription, largely associated with members of the defunct Garden History Society. The grants have been diminishing over the past few years and the old Garden History membership is declining. If the Gardens Trust is to provide training support and advice to the County Gardens Trusts in the future they must take steps to boost their income, which is my reason for raising this today. As a first step they would like to persuade us, the individual members of the CGTs, to join the Gardens Trust as full members at a special concession rate of £25 per annum for a joint membership. Members would receive the Garden History Journal and full access to the programme of their talks and visits. The income would ensure

the sustainability of supportive activities like the Historic Landscape Project into the future. I have asked the Gardens Trust team to prepare a persuasive article promoting this appeal for County Newsletters, pointing out that this is the only way that they will reach every CGT member and put across their case. If the article is forthcoming, you will be aware of what it is about.

- h) As an example of advice to County Gardens Trusts, the Gardens Trust has recently circulated a 'CGT Handbook' which gives information on a range of issues, including Governance and the role of Trustees. Your committee has reviewed our responsibilities in this respect and as a result has made changes to our Health and Safety protocol. Risk assessments have been prepared for all HGT events and we now conform to recommended standards. Common sense will still have to prevail when the weather is wet, the grass is slippery and the banks to ornamental waters are steep, but our insurance cover will be valid if you fall in!
- i) I am pleased to report that your committee has co-opted two new members. Deborah Spring has joined the committee as editor of the Newsletter and Liz Carlin will be looking after our educational events – talks, summer walks and study days.
- j) I would like to close these remarks with an appeal. The Hertfordshire Gardens Trust is in good fettle. The quality of our research and conservation are something of which we can be really proud. Our membership numbers are buoyant and we have an interesting and well supported programme of events throughout the year, which our finances are able to support. But, and it is a significant 'but', these events, and particularly future events, depend on members who are willing to volunteer their time and energy as potential event leaders and organisers. This year I have appealed in vain for members to help Sonja Fillingham and her team with the organisation of garden visits, for a member who might be willing to take over as Treasurer from Sally Pool and for a volunteer to work with Bella Stuart-Smith on our schools programme. The role of treasurer does require some expertise but we would be willing to pay for a professional to assist with queries and computer expertise. The garden visits team have a wealth of experience to offer a newcomer and give them the confidence to organise just one garden visit per year. The schools programme has been simplified and Bella would love to have a little help from a practical gardener willing to share their garden knowledge with a primary school developing a garden for their children.

I would like to increase the scope and variety of our educational events – study days, visits and talks – but it is not fair to keep relying on the same leaders. We have a small but wonderful team of volunteers who run our events, and they would love to share their experience with new blood. This team is getting steadily older and we cannot expect them to soldier on for ever. Now is the time to step up – would you ask yourselves ‘Could I help?’ I can promise you it is satisfying to be involved in a successful enterprise and fun to be part of a go-ahead team. What about it?