

“To Cheer the Hearts and Delight the Eyes of All”

By Linden Groves

The first Englishman to call himself a landscape designer inspires a multicultural historic garden adventure.



English landscape gardener Humphry Repton urged “For the honour of the Country, let the Parks and Pleasure-grounds of England be ever open, to cheer the hearts and delight the eyes of all, who have taste to enjoy the beauties of Nature.” This statement, in his *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816), can be read in many ways, but at its heart is a call-to-arms to do away with boundaries, divisions and distinctions, and simply to share an enjoyment of what parks and gardens have to offer.

Inspired by this, the Gardens Trust marked the bicentenary of Repton’s death in 1818 by successfully applying to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) for a grant to support a project called ‘Sharing Repton: Historic Landscapes for All’. The aim was to help engage people with

historic parks and gardens who had previously had little connection with them.

The Gardens Trust is a small charity based in England and Wales (and with important affiliations to Scotland) which incorporates individual members but also – and this was critical to the project – 36 independent County Gardens Trusts. It publishes an academic journal, and is a statutory consultee in the English planning system when historic parks and gardens may be affected. Its audience-base had traditionally been heavily rooted in the elderly, white and affluent, but now it was eager to share its passion for historic parks and gardens with younger people from different cultural and economic backgrounds.

‘Sharing Repton’ was based on the concept of piloting five simple activities to engage new supporters with historic parks and gardens, and then share what was learnt amongst volunteers and professionals so that we can all benefit from being more inclusive in future. We believe that this kind of outward-looking approach is going to be essential in the years to come if garden history is to be valued and therefore conserved by future generations.

The five activities were to be 1) a sociable and fun garden history workshop; 2) an organised family excursion; 3) a public open day; 4) a research and recording project for new volunteers; and 5) an introductory conservation workshop. All were to take place in landscapes designed by Repton that were now open to the public. In each case we were fortunate to work with a local partner relatively confident, or at least enthusiastic, about reaching out to new people. Acutely aware that they were a small bunch nervously aiming to achieve great things, this group bonded into a fantastically warm and supportive team, and we quickly nicknamed them the ‘Repton Buddies’.

Our grant application was the first that the Gardens Trust had made to the NLHF and, to be perfectly honest, we hadn’t expected to be successful. The funds come from the

Opposite page: Somali community families visiting Blaise Castle in Bristol with local volunteers.

Right: Using a picture frame to admire designed views.

Far right: Visitors from a multicultural community centre with Northamptonshire Gardens Trust volunteers at Wicksteed Park.

Below: Painting a Repton view during a Heritage Open Day at Catton Park.



sale of lottery tickets, many of which are bought by people living in challenging circumstances, and the Lottery places great emphasis on the need for projects to demonstrate significant public benefit to people of greater social diversity than the average garden history aficionado. We were amazed and delighted therefore to learn in January 2018, with Repton’s bicentenary year having already begun, that NLHF had recognised the potential for our project to have a broad impact.

The early months were spent celebrating Repton himself, building support, and planning the activities. Then in September 2018 we kicked off with the first activity, a visit to Wicksteed Park with Northamptonshire Gardens Trust, who are passionate about working with varied groups. For this day, we hired a coach and invited families from a multicultural community centre in nearby Wellingborough to join us on a day out.

Wicksteed is now an amusement park, with rides and roundabouts (one of the earliest in England, see *HGR* 22) but in the late 18th century the estate, then known as Barton Seagrove, was much larger and owned by Charles Tibbit, who in 1793 invited Humphry Repton to redesign the landscape.

At this first activity we learnt some valuable lessons, such as the suggestion to ‘bring a picnic to share’ doesn’t necessarily mean as much to all cultures as it does to the British. Fortunately, one of the volunteers had foreseen this and brought an icebox filled with egg sandwiches. Together, we larked around doing activities targeted at



the children but also enjoyed by the adults, such as tree measuring and spotting designed views, but my favourite moment from the day was being politely admonished by a father from Afghanistan for offering him coffee during the introductory talk, as he was “trying to learn about Humphry Repton”.

Our public open day took place the following weekend at Catton Park in Norwich, which in 1788 had been Repton’s first commission. We linked up with the national Heritage Open Day scheme and with local groups such as the Friends of Catton and Norfolk Gardens Trust, and were immensely fortunate to have huge support from Broadland District Council and, most specifically, its Tourism Officer Chloe Griffin. Under her stewardship, our request for an open day that would attract 60 people from varied cultural and economic backgrounds became an immense extravaganza ultimately entertaining some 600 visitors!

Chloe’s great masterstroke in attracting Norwich’s multi-ethnic residents was to invite their cultural groups to run stalls on the day, resulting in Asian women demonstrating sari wrapping, teenagers offering henna hand painting, and an African drummer who brought his fan base. I think

Humphry, and Jeremiah Ives the then owner of Catton, would have been much amused to see the parkland used as the backdrop for a belly-dancing class!

The Historic Gardens Foundation, publishers of *Historic Gardens Review*, collaborated with Norfolk Gardens Trust to produce an exhibition of gardens from across the world.



Left: An exhibition of schoolchildren's posters describing why Warley Woods is important to them.
 Opposite page, top: Volunteers from refugee and women's groups gardening at Russell Square.
 Below: Traditional English rain for a tour of Kenwood.

changing piece of work that combines serious garden history information with fun activities such as a #viewselfie phone photography challenge. The Statement of Significance began to be drafted before the training was even complete, and the public presentation that we had envisaged as a brief evening talk became a huge community open day with hundreds of local guests. Best of all, these individuals have carried on working as a group even now the Big Red Book Project is over, continuing to research, and run guided tours for other locals.

Perhaps the biggest delight of the Big Red Book Project, however, came out of Suzanne's idea that the best way to engage local people was to get the local primary school to participate, hoping the children's parents would then become involved. What we discovered was that the parents were far too busy to join in, although they did attend an exhibition and the open day, but the school element created a buzz to the project that really inspired us all. Somehow, to our surprise, we found ourselves sprinting from the adult workshops in the morning, to complementary ones for 90 children aged 10-11 years in the afternoon. Over the course of the autumn, these children were shown how to understand that Warley Woods was not simply a piece of nature but rather the result of a careful design, how to read old maps, and how to think about which parts of Warley Woods and its story were important to them.

The introductory conservation workshop was held at Kenwood, in north London, where Repton laid out the park from 1793 for the 2nd Earl of Mansfield. The day was run with London Parks & Gardens Trust and organised by a fantastic LPGT volunteer, Barbara Deason, who had good links with groups of refugees and women from Bangladesh, so they formed our target audience. The Gardens Trust regularly trains volunteers to undertake conservation work, but with this activity we were eager to find a way to engage people who hadn't previously thought of themselves as having an ownership stake in our national heritage, or a role in helping look after it.

Our workshop was run in October 2018 in typical English torrential rain. Echoed by many interpreters covering the guests' myriad of languages, Emily Parker from English Heritage, which now owns Kenwood, gave a brief talk on Repton's work there, and together we pored over copies of his designs for it in one of his Red Books. Then we

I will always remember this day for the exchange I had with an Egyptian gentleman who had lived close to Catton Park for many years, but had never come in because he had seen the lodge house and gates and assumed therefore that it was still a private residence. For me, that conversation was a two-minute masterclass in how cultural assumptions can affect someone's ability to engage with our heritage, and a reminder always to question the status quo by viewing situations through others' eyes.

Our research and recording project for new volunteers involved Warley Woods, which is now a public park in Smethwick near Birmingham, but in 1795 was a farming estate owned by Samuel Galton, Jr., who asked Repton to create a new park from what were agricultural fields.

Here, we hired a professional engagement consultant, Suzanne Carter, to keep this complex project on track. Suzanne branded it the 'Warley Woods Big Red Book Project', presenting it as a community activity to find out more about Repton at Warley Woods, and produce a 2019 version of the Red Books in which Repton famously presented his designs.

We had promised four workshops – in 'reading' a landscape on the ground, using archives, presenting research in a leaflet and Statement of Significance (a specific format for research currently key to conservation in the UK), and sharing knowledge through a public presentation. These workshops were delivered over many months, to a group of some dozen adults, with the volunteer help of David Whitehead from Hereford and Worcester Gardens Trust, and Gary Webb and Neil McLean from the Gardens Trust.

As was starting to become the routine with 'Sharing Repton', it far exceeded expectations, with the new volunteers not only fulfilling all our challenges, but going the extra mile, too. Their simple leaflet became a game-

all grabbed our umbrellas and went out on a brief tour of the gardens, in which the photographer we had hired was put to full service as we all posed endlessly in its beautiful views. Having met Kenwood volunteers in the kitchen garden and admired some of the park's mature trees and the view from the terrace, we adjourned for lunch and a small exhibition of 18th-century plants from across the world. Here, guests surprised us with a sequence of incredibly moving speeches on how much the day had meant to them – an unforgettable experience for all of us.

At Kenwood the guests were able to see the historically appropriate planting that English Heritage and its volunteers maintain. To complement this, we wanted an activity where the guests would choose plants, perhaps from their home countries, that they could then plant; but English Heritage understandably has strict rules about historic authenticity in planting at its properties, so we moved this activity to Russell Square, in central London, where Repton worked from 1806 for the 5th Duke of Bedford.

This was a joyous occasion when the guests were able to plant roses in one of the beds. Many of them had chosen to get involved because of their previous horticultural experience in their country of origin, and their enthusiasm at undertaking even this small spot of gardening was breathtaking. One commented that they were immensely moved by the symbolism of being allowed to plant something right at the heart of the British establishment. We are delighted that many of them are now joining the gardening volunteer groups at both Kenwood and Russell Square.

The final activity took place in July 2019 at one of



Repton's finest landscapes, Blaise Castle in Bristol, created in 1795-6 for John Scandrett Harford. Here, working with Avon Gardens Trust and volunteer groups attached to Blaise, we welcomed a coach full of families from a Somali community group to a day intended to teach them a little about garden history in

a more fun and accessible fashion than the standard fare of a lecture and guided tour.

This had been planned as something aimed primarily at adults, but in order to make it easy to attend we let it be known that children were also welcome. Imagine our surprise when in the days before the visit we learnt that the 20 or so adults would be bringing around 40 children! As they tumbled off the coach, many of the children dressed in adorable smart suits for their big trip, we quickly revised our schedule to include a brief stop at the playground to burn off some energy. The timings were revised again when the children realised that a visit to the toilet allowed them entry to the mansion itself, which we had not planned for. So the event had to be paused whilst 40 children availed themselves of the toilet one at a time.

Eventually, we made it to the walled garden for tea and biscuits with volunteers from the Blaise Community Garden scheme, before heading up through the Repton landscape to the castle eye-catcher at the top of the hill, where the children (and their parents, if we are honest) had a fantastic time running up and down the castle's stairs and peering over its castellated roof. Later, over lunch, we launched the Garden History Lucky Dip, in which props – a brick, a pineapple, a seed packet – were pulled out of a bag in order to prompt chat and the sharing of information, in an interactive alternative to the traditional lecture format. The best part of it? The feedback that said: "We couldn't stop smiling."

The 'Sharing Repton' project has finished, but it produced a treasure trove of free online materials enabling others to use our experiences to find new supporters in their own areas. To find out more, please visit <http://thegardenstrust.org/campaigns/sharing-repton/> 🌿

Linden Groves is Strategic Development Officer for the Gardens Trust and led the 'Sharing Repton' project.

