SUSSEX GARDENS TRUST

Highlights of our Activities 2024

I am delighted to report that during 2024 more members have become involved in planning and organisation behind the scenes. The Events group created a particularly successful model whereby one or two members take on the work required for a single garden visit. This leaves Jennie Starr, as co-ordinator of the group, with a more acceptable workload. During the year we welcomed Judy Tarling and Barbara Simms onto Council. An increase in numbers has led to a greater variety of views and a more democratic body to make decisions on your behalf.

The Communications group has initiated a number of innovative ideas to raise awareness of SGT's activities, increase membership and keep you abreast of news and activities. We now have an active following on social media, a website to be proud of and regular email newsletters. Particular thanks are due to Sally Ingram and Paul Tosey. Having given notice as Treasurer, Jenny Howard has gallantly continued during 2024, but this really is her swan song and we are most grateful.

Enjoyment in our activities and the pleasure of getting to know more members better has been the real highlight of 2024. At the end of 2023 we had 208 members. Not all renewed but during 2024 we recruited 26 new members and ended the year with 217 members. We are keen to attract new members so if you know anyone who might be interested do encourage them to join.

Penny Vasey, SGT Chair

Events and Garden Visits

While our visits in 2024 explored delightful gardens in Sussex we began the year further afield, when Cherrill Sands spoke to us about gardens in Germany, and Sintra in Portugal, brightening the winter afternoon.

For the first garden visit we found ourselves at Drews Barn, surrounded by the antlers of one of the favourite deer of our host Jonathan Lucas. He shared his passion for the Red Deer and trees in the park that his family have cared for over the past 200 years.



Knightsbridge House



The Beeches, Barcombe



Gravetye Manor

In May we visited the Beeches in Barcombe, enjoying the huge variety of planting in the walled garden. June saw us visit Down Place near Petersfield where the views to the South Downs were magnificent. Also in June, we had a new venture: a summer garden party for members in the beautiful garden of our members Sue and Jim Stockwell. This was a highlight for those attending and something we may do again in future.

On a day in July, we had two visits which offered an opportunity to view contrasting gardens that were close geographically. Our members, Julia Padbury and Christopher Miscampbell, shared new developments in their garden at Turners House. After a picnic lunch there we went on to Brightling Down Farm which had a very different style, but was just as welcoming. The Zen Garden and water gardens were tranquil and inspiring. The garden offered many quiet spaces for reflection. In August Tom Coward, Head Gardener at Gravetye Manor, led us on an enchanting tour of the grounds whilst sharing fascinating insights about William Robinson who originally laid out the gardens. Our final visit to Knightsbridge House saw us enjoy the lush herbaceous borders filled with perennials including many grasses.

At our last meeting for the year, we enjoyed a lecture by Fergus Garrett from Great Dixter. Fergus proved to be an entertaining speaker and enthused us with his passion for the garden and the importance of different planting patterns to maximise biodiversity in all of our gardens.

We would like to thank all the garden owners who welcomed us into their gardens and shared so much of their knowledge and enthusiasm with us. It is their personal efforts that help make our visits so enjoyable. Full details of our visits for 2025 can be found on the Events page of the SGT website.

Jennie Starr, Events Co-ordinator

Communications

In 2024 the Comms team continued to use a wide range of communications to keep in touch with all our members, sharing information about our activities through production of the monthly email and regular postings of news items on the website. One of our key objectives is to raise awareness of the work of the Trust and celebrate the historic designed landscapes of Sussex with a wide and diverse audience, and we now have over 300 followers on Instagram. We have also worked closely with a community group in 2024, the Friends of Marine Gardens in Worthing, as part of an oral history project, which was then shared nationally at a county gardens trust event in Sheffield.

A different project was our collaboration with a local professional photographer to create a portfolio of images, both historic and botanical, that can be used extensively to promote the role of the Trust and newly designed display boards and a banner were on show at the Sussex Prairies Plant Fair in September, where we attracted fifteen new members.



SGT volunteers at the Sussex Prairies Plant Fair in September 2024. Photo ©Sarah Agnew

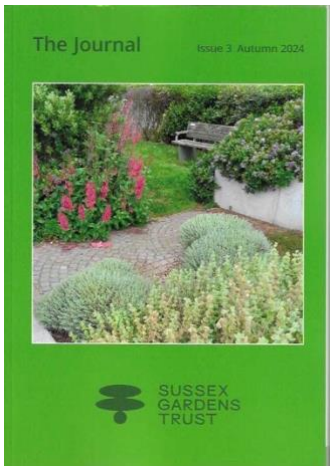
The latest venture to increase awareness of SGT has been creating a set of exclusive greeting cards, featuring six different flowers from a mid-Sussex garden with their history, offered for sale to members at SGT events.

In 2025 we shall be looking for more ways to encourage participation and enjoyment of belonging to a county gardens trust, by holding further promotional events and increasing our profile on social media.

Sally Ingram, Communications Chair

The Journal

The third issue of the Sussex Gardens Trust's academic journal was published in November 2024. It presents a further selection of wide-ranging scholarly articles on new research, notes on ongoing research and subjects relevant to Sussex gardens and landscapes. Topics include Loudon's visits to Brighton gardens, cottage garden societies in Sussex, Rudyard Kipling at Batemans, Reginald Fairfax Wells's rustic cottage development at West Chiltington, the rise and demise of Bristol Nurseries, Kemp Town and more on Captain Bertie MacLaren's contribution to the development of Brighton open spaces. The 2025 issue is well underway with articles promised by seven authors and more being considered.



Dr Barbara Simms, SGT Journal Editor

Conservation

A key role of SGT is to review planning applications affecting historic parks and gardens, particularly those included on the register maintained by Historic England (HE). During 2024 the SGT responded to some 31 planning applications. This was considerably more than the 15 cases commented on in 2023. This increase reflects changes to the process co-ordinated by the Gardens Trust – in particular we are now able to access consultations through an online database managed by the Joint Committee of the National Amenity Societies (JCNAS).

Documents associated with all 31 cases were studied by SGT volunteers and our responses submitted to Local Planning Authorities. Of the 31 cases, 17 were inconsequential when viewed from SGT's perspective, but for 14 more substantial responses were submitted. The full list and the substantive responses can be accessed via the SGT website. Notable cases considered in 2024 include the following:

- **Royal Pavilion Gardens Brighton.** We were pleased that Heritage Lottery funding has been approved to implement a major restoration programme that we commented, although we were disappointed that our advice to close the Gardens to the public at night was not accepted
- **Wispers (St Cuthman's School) Stedham Nr Midhurst.** SGT learned very late in the planning process of a major proposal to convert the main building, demolish others and build nine new dwellings. Although the site is not included on the HE Register, the historic landscape is relatively intact and possibly designed by Robert Marnock. Hence SGT submitted an objection supported by a detailed analysis. Despite our objection the application was approved. Sadly, this is one of many sites that ought to be added to the HE Register, but resource constraints within HE itself and across the Garden Trust movement continue to inhibit the addition of new sites to the list
- **Stanmer Park Fountain Garden.** In recent years SGT has objected to several intrusive developments (car park, marquee, children's play equipment) in this part of the Grade II listed park, adjacent to the Grade I listed Stanmer House. Thus, we

were pleased to see a planning application for a sympathetic restoration, although we made suggestions for a better design. The application was approved.

- **Borde Hill** – **Developments in South Park**. In 2022 SGT was pleased to support Borde Hill's submission for a Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) grant for "Reinventing Borde Hill". A planning application for associated works in the South Park was reviewed by the Trust and comments submitted broadly supporting the proposals, although various concerns were raised such as the size of the proposed Eco Lodge (the plans for this were subsequently reduced in size). Both the HLF grant application and the planning application have now been approved
- **Leonardslee Gardens – car parking**. We have been pressing for several years for the new car park built without planning permission to be revised and for planting to be reinstated. During 2024 representatives of SGT met the owners of the gardens together with their advisors to discuss these issues. Significant progress was made and revised planning applications now provide for a reduction in the size of the carpark and for new planting adjacent to the road. When fully implemented these changes will significantly improve the position.

Jim Stockwell, Conservation

Research

The research group met on several occasions during the year. We focused on finalising reports on our project to research and record parks and gardens along the Sussex coast. When completed we will add these to our website and to the Historic Environment Records for East and West Sussex.

We had a fascinating visit to the Mint House in Pevensey in June. This grade II* listed building dating from the Tudor period has been added to and altered over the centuries and remains a significant building in Pevensey's historic High Street.

The Friends of the Mint House gave us a guided tour of the Victorian glasshouse which survives from a range of glasshouses erected behind the house in the later part of the nineteenth century when the site was run as a nursery, The glasshouse was in a poor state of repair and with encouragement from us, the Friends applied to our Small Grant Scheme for help to support its renovation. The successful outcome of this is described in the report on Small Grants.

Our new area of research began with exploring the idea of recording the history and distribution of the many nurseries that once occupied Sussex's landscape. After initial investigation, the range and diversity of potential archive sources suggested we broaden the focus to all types of commercial horticulture. We are grateful to Council member Barbara Simms for putting together an exciting research proposal entitled *'Fertile Ground - Nurseries and Nurserymen in Sussex 1800 to the present day'.* Development of this theme will take place in our meetings throughout 2025 and beyond. We invite any members interested in this topic to get in touch and become involved.

Finally, the research group would like to thank Virginia Hinze for all her work supporting us in recent years. She will continue to support us and our work but mainly 'behind the scenes' for a while.

Jennie Starr, Research Co-ordinator

Small Grants

This last year gave SGT the opportunity to grant aid two very different Sussex projects, both managed by a local community, trust or Friends group.



Baxter's Field, comprising four acres of sloping, open grass and meadow fringed by mature trees, sits in central Lewes. Owned by the Baxter's Field charity and run, managed and maintained entirely by volunteers. it contributes significantly to Lewes's urban landscape aesthetically, as a recreational and health facility and to the town's biodiversity.

The Field is fenced for the safety of users and protection of the asset (it closes from dusk to dawn) but much of the current iron fencing is corroded and bent. The trustees were able to demonstrate a good track record of raising funds for the fence repair from both the charity's members and major funders (e.g. Lewes DC, the national Park), so SGT was happy to make a £1000 grant towards the work which will be carried out in sections as more funds are raised.

Our second grant was made to The Mint House in Pevensey High Street, a grade II* listed building dating from the mid C16 but which, in the mid C19, had its rear courtyards and stables converted to nursery use (commercial flower-growing) with a range of glasshouses. These are now lost or replaced by other uses with the exception of one, now known as The Orangery.



Work in progress restoring the old frames of the Mint House glasshouses and the new windows in 2025

The Friends' Board of Trustees wish to widen the contribution that the House can make to the public so a restored Orangery will be a key element as one of several rentable (and income-generating) spaces.

SGT gave a grant of £1000 towards a total of £1800 for urgent repairs to the rotten wood and iron opening mechanisms of the Orangery's long south-facing window. This was completed in December 2024 and will be followed in 2026/7 by planned work on the main building.

Virginia Hinze, Small Grants Coordinator