

FRIENDS OF CAVERSHAM COURT GARDENS

Chair's report 2019-2020

Not only did Caversham Court Gardens win the Green Heritage Award and the Green Flag again in 2019, it also got a special mention from the judges who awarded Reading a prestigious Gold Award in the Royal Horticultural Society's (RHS) annual Britain in Bloom competition. The gardens certainly looked their best. The planting outside the stable block was stunning all summer long, and the display in the vinery border was a glorious splash of colours and textures, designed by the Parks Dept and funded by the Friends, who also planted up the wheelbarrow in the vinery, the font in the carriage circle and the trough by the Tea Kiosk.

I should also mention that not to be outdone, the Tea Kiosk was awarded 5 for hygiene, top marks. Monitoring the cake output of the organizations running the Tea Kiosk - Ways & Means, Sue Ryder/Duchess of Kent, The League of Friends of the Royal Berkshire Hospital, The Women's Institute and Compass Recovery College – is of course an important task that falls to the members of the Friends, one which we are pleased to say is zealously performed.

To mark the 10th anniversary of the refurbished gardens in 2019, the Friends ran a photography competition which produced some superb entries, many of which now feature on our website. Thanks to John Evans and Les Gibson for organizing and judging the competition, and to all the entrants. A delicious-looking slice of Victoria sponge, a toddler learning to walk, a youngster leap-frogging and a group quietly enjoying the sunshine by the river and many more, all captured the theme of "the spirit of the gardens" that we know and love.

No sunshine on 16 December, however, when the wet weather and slippery paths drove us indoors for the Christmas carols evening. But what a warm welcome we received from the St Peters team! It was a pity we were unable to be in the gardens with the floodlit trees; we'll hope the weather is kinder on 21 December 2020. The Friends are grateful to Linda Humphreys-Evans for masterminding the carols event, and to the generous local sponsors who make it possible. It's a very expensive event to stage because of all the sound and lighting equipment needed. The Easter Nature Trail, in contrast, is very low-tech, but our young visitors flocked in nonetheless.

For much of the year the carriage circle resembled a building site as the stone masons reinstated the house footprint, which had suffered serious frost damage. By December, Bulgarian Vraca limestone and composite concrete had been laid, and to make the interpretation clearer, rough-sawn oak was used to delineate the thresholds. Thanks to the stone masons, and to the Parks Department for getting the work done and returning the carriage circle to its proper role as the entrance to our own "private" garden.

An important theme raised at the 2019 AGM was that of climate change and the consequences for historic gardens. The Friends have followed this up, hosting sessions on climate change and gardens for pupils at Caversham Primary school, the St Peters' Youth Group and Beaver Scout groups. Thanks to John Evans and Anne Latto from the Friends, and Katie Livesey, Revd Judith Ryder and Nicola McGoff for their enthusiastic work on this. We will continue our campaign to raise awareness and seek strategies for meeting the challenges.

In the 2019 season the Friends added new activities as well as guided tours on the First Sunday of the month. In May and in September for Heritage Open Days, Gemma Solanellas ran an architecture workshop for families with young children, based on the 17th century summer house: an inspired use of the heritage assets we have in Caversham Court. In June, Mark Sullivan organized a very successful Family Croquet afternoon, and Hester Casey offered children's crafts in September. In August, the Friends of Reading Museum and the Friends of Reading Abbey came along for a busy and enjoyable day, starting with Ways & Means running the Canine Capers Fun Dog Show, and ending with the Salvation Army Band playing foot-tapping favourites. During the year, our two speakers, John Evans and Linda Humphreys-Evans, delivered illustrated talks to local groups, many of which followed up with a tour of the gardens. Thanks and congratulations to the members of the Friends' committee and to all who put in so much time and effort.

Working with other community organizations such as the Caversham and District Residents Association, Caversham Globe, the Reading Civic Society, the Berkshire Gardens Trust and the Conservation Areas Advisory Committee, over the year the Friends' committee has commented on a number of planning applications which it was felt would affect the views into and out of the gardens. Concerns have also been raised regarding the tree cover in and around the gardens, which is vital in helping mitigate the effects of the heavy traffic moving through St Peters Conservation Area: FCCG has also commented on RBC's draft Tree Strategy. Many thanks to all these organizations for their advice and support.

Most disappointingly, one of the lime trees at the entrance gates to the court has to be felled because of damage caused to the listed wall. A replacement tree is to be planted on the grass just forward of the entrance, and RBC will plant another tree outside the stable block wall.

The New Year brought the sad news of the death of Mike Eggleton OBE, a founding member of FCCG, to the end a committee member and stalwart supporter of the gardens. Donations in his memory were generously given to the Friends at Mike's funeral: these funds will go towards a gorgeous display in the vinery border this summer. The best way to remember him, though, will be to continue to preserve and protect the gardens which Mike and his late wife Sheila enjoyed so much.