



**FRIENDS OF BOTANIC GARDENS FORUM
NEWSLETTER
EDITION 19**



June 2026

Dear Friends

It is with great pleasure that I write to you as the new Chair of the Forum. Shiona has created a diverse and valuable Forum reflecting a range of 'models', including universities, national governments, local authorities, private and indeed volunteer led gardens. All involving a mixed economy of collaboration and partnership of various kinds, with *friends* playing a critical role throughout. I write *friends* in italics to reflect the broad church the Forum is whether supporters, members, enthusiasts, or volunteers, all giving freely of their time, and working alongside employed colleagues as appropriate.



It is this diversity of approach and engagement that I find so exciting and attracted me to apply to the role of chair. There are many ways of doing things, and in continuing uncertain times this is never more so, flexibility being the watchword. The Forum I believe has a pivotal role to play in facilitating the exchange of knowledge, experience and practice with regard to the contributions *friends* make in helping deliver great botanic, specialist gardens and arboreta.

All our gardens are united by at least three things, first, they are scientific institutions holding, managing and acquiring plants for botanical science, ever more important given the role botanic gardens play in leading and demonstrating responses to the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. Second, they need to be places of joy, inspiration and engagement, connecting people with nature; there should be no contradiction between beauty, art, science, education and engagement. Those that use our gardens should be enthused, enchanted and excited by the collections and landscapes, the messages and stories they tell. Third is volunteering. My experience of volunteering at my garden – Sheffield Botanical Gardens, is one where volunteers have many essential roles and my personal focus has been to try to support and raise awareness of botanic integrity, helping provide towards the care, management and development of the plant collections, particularly acute with the ongoing and long-term absence of curatorial oversight and leadership.

All gardens have circumstances where resource constraints impact on botanic garden services, and *friends* have become willing and permanent fixtures, whether as gardeners, garden guides, trustees, fund raisers, botanists, plant data managers, education and engagement support, to name but a few. All indispensable in delivering the portfolio of botanic garden services and quality visitor experiences that are necessary conditions for a successful botanic garden.

I sense a growing concern in some gardens where decision and policy makers have insufficient domain knowledge of botanic gardens, which might compromise their future as scientific institutions. I note coincidentally, Cambridge University Botanic Garden has launched this summer a new Certificate in Botany 'to address a growing national concern in the erosion of core botanic skills in higher education and professional practice'. That is why the Forum is such an important and necessary group as advocates, champions and 'doers' of botanic gardens. Every edition of the newsletter highlights and showcases the tremendous activities and projects undertaken by gardens with their *friends* contributing in myriad ways to the vitality and viability of those gardens. I am very much looking forward to working with you and being able to contribute where I can as the new chair in supporting your brilliant work.



Lloyd Snellgrove

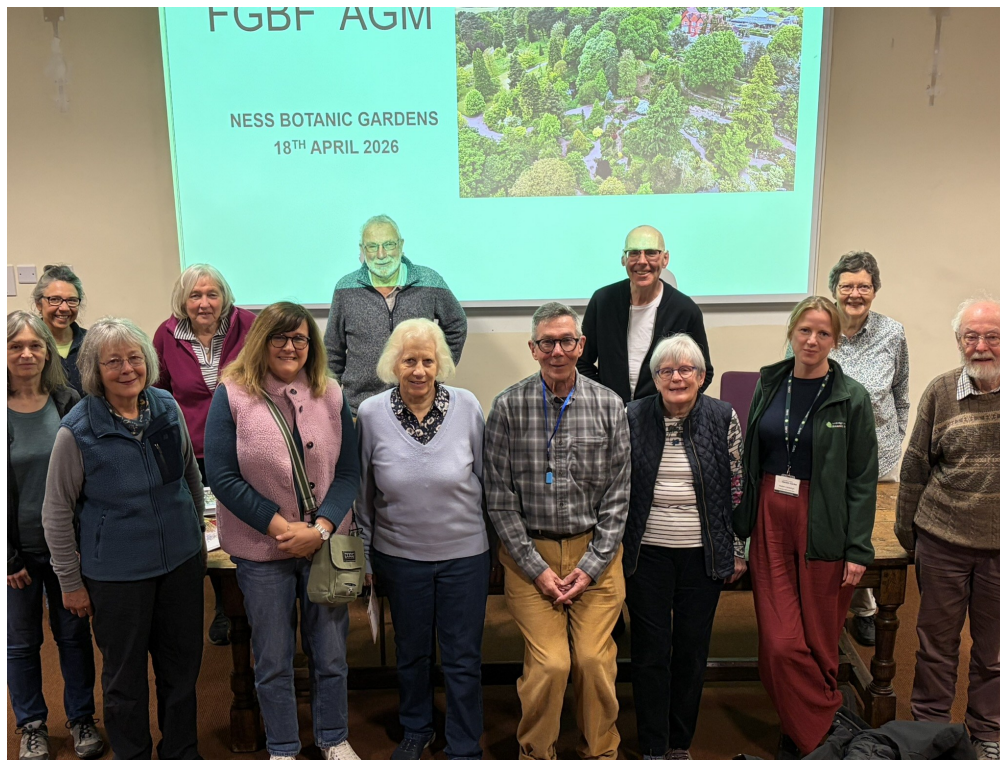
Chair Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum

Photos:

Ness Botanic Garden. Shiona Mackie

Front and back pages: University of Cambridge Botanic Garden.

Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum AGM 2026 report



The biennial face-to-face AGM was held this year at Ness Botanic Gardens (University of Liverpool) on Saturday, 18th April. As a UK wide membership group, we rarely get to meet each other in person, so it was a real delight for us to be able to have the opportunities for proper in person conversations and discussions, both across the day, and the evening for those who were able to stay, as well as those for us lucky enough to stay on the Sunday, with a guided tour of Calderstones Park's trees. We were able to enjoy tremendous facilities at Ness with support from staff especially Andrea Harman and Mike Hopkinson.

It was a pleasure for me to be able to thank and make a presentation to Shiona (Mackie) for her outstanding work over the past 9 years; creating and establishing the Forum, and then subsequently also producing and editing the newsletter.

It was also a chance to hear Shiona's last chair's report recounting developments and progress of the Forum over the last year, the Forum now has 18 members, and to reflect over her time as a very successful chair. Shiona thanked members of the Executive for their support over those years and in addition to Lindsey Atkinson who plays a key role in managing the web site.

Small changes were made to the constitution bringing more clarity to the length of service of the Executive which will be 3 years – Lloyd Snellgrove elected at the AGM (chair), and Executive officers elected to continue in post, Patti Davie (vice chair), Sarah Edgar (treasurer) and Adrian Walsh (secretary). In addition, as the Executive was confirmed to be five in number, a new post of past chair for a year was created. Shiona Mackie agreed and was confirmed to serve in this capacity. In subsequent years a Forum member will be sought to fill this fifth post.

The meeting approved the proposal to join Plant Network (PN) on a year's trial. Many of you will be aware that the Forum have organised a number of webinars with PN in the past, including three successful sessions last year on volunteers, garden guiding and plant sales. The UK networking reach of PN and its cover of a range of relevant topics as well as its weekly informative e newsletter appears to be a great fit with the Forum. The newsletter should be appearing in member in boxes very soon, and the possibility of more webinars later this year will be an active agenda item with the Forum's Business meetings.

Date of next AGM

The next AGM to be held on line Tuesday 18th May 2027 4.00 pm

Lloyd Snellgrove

Photo: Shiona Mackie

AGM Report continued!

Ness Botanic Gardens

Following the formal business, we had a very interesting and stimulating presentation from Mike Roberts, the Plant Records Officer, at Ness, responsible for maintaining the information associated with the living collection, as well as labelling, mapping and accessioning plant material. Mike's presentation covered Ness, past, present and future and set the scene for our guided tour in the afternoon.

Ness Botanic Gardens were founded by Arthur Kilpin Bulley a wealthy Liverpool cotton broker with a love of wild plants. In 1897 he bought 24 hectares of farmland at Ness near Neston on the Wirral. He developed a lifelong friendship with Professor Issac Bayley Balfour, Regius Keeper at RBG Edinburgh and as a result sponsored a number of leading plant collectors including George Forrest, Frank Kingdom Ward, Reginald Farrer and H.E. Wilson. Bulley founded a commercial nursery Bee's Ltd distributing and growing seeds and plants. A remarkable man he passed away in 1942 following which, in 1948, his daughter gifted the Gardens to the University of Liverpool. The Gardens are listed Grade 2.

The Gardens have 24 staff including 7 gardeners, 170 active volunteers/friends and 6,432 members and a plant collection of 8,500 including 7,500 taxa of which about 2,700 are of wild origin. There are three national collections of *Sorbus*, *Alnus* and *Betula*. *Sorbus* (Rowans, Whitebeams and Mountain Ashes, *Sorbus sensu lato*) are undergoing a major revision with a huge contribution made by Ness botanist Dr Hugh McAllister.

There are also significant collections of *Malus*, *Cotoneaster*, *Spiraea*, *Rhododendron* and *Bambusiodaea*. *Malus vernalis* held at Ness is new to science and was first described in 2024.

Mike showed several slides demonstrating the global connections Ness have with a particular concentration in China and East Asia, not surprising given the historical plant collecting and links. Recently a group of Chinese botanists came to study *Betula* spp in the collection.

Ness are undergoing a new programme of plant labelling and mapping using colour coded labelling – black standard, orange/red critically endangered, blue champion status following botanic garden protocol. The plant data is then uploaded to the Iris BG/Collection Management database. Whilst this database is used globally, more exceptional is the use of drones by undergraduate geography students to map accurate plant locations.

After a good lunch in a room with stunning views over the garden, it was time for Mike to guide us round the Gardens, or as much as he reasonably could in the time available! There was so much to see, including the Ness Heritage bed - I had not appreciated that the Gardens had so many plant associations such as *Primula bulleyana* and *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'White-Ness'. This led to an interesting conversation about whether botanic gardens could better monetise some of these plants particularly given the commercial pressures these days.



We moved on and saw an original seed selection, *Pieris formosa* var. *forrestii*, always such a thrill. *Rhododendron luteum* looking wonderful then *Echium pininana* surprisingly we thought growing in the shade of Scots Pine. Overall, there was so much to see and this very short report back does not do it justice at all. A big 'thank you' to Mike for a great presentation and tour. A great botanic garden to visit and we only saw a small part. I for one will certainly be back for another visit.

Lloyd Snellgrove

Photos: Shiona Mackie

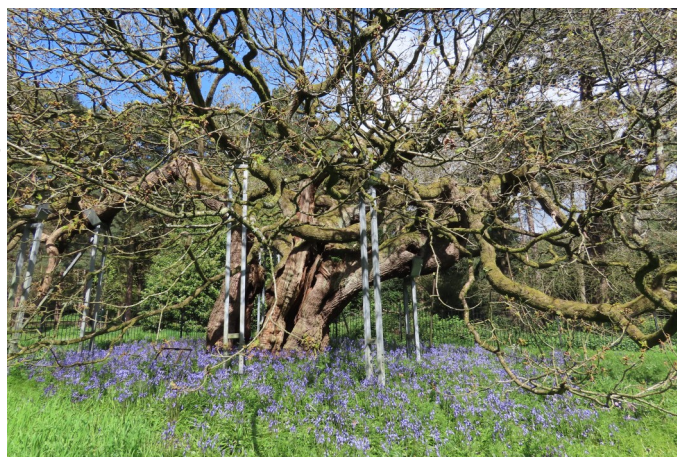
AGM 2026 — Calderstones Park

On the Sunday morning, a group of us headed across the Mersey to Liverpool to visit **Calderstones Park** for a tree tour. Calderstones Park covers over 90 acres in south Liverpool and is one of the city's largest green spaces. It is hugely popular as we witnessed on our Sunday morning visit, and you can see why with a large number of recreational spaces, cultural and leisure facilities along with wild and nature conservation areas. Enough space for everyone including many remarkable trees of which we were only able to see a few. Owen Johnson of the Tree Register described Calderstones as one of best public parks in England for its astonishing trees, with over 100 champions trees at county and some at national level.

That we were able to see to see even just a few these, and learn so much about their history and arboreal characteristics, was directly due to the highly expert and friendly group that guided us. In no particular order but our sincere thanks go to Eliza Bixter and Eric Smith from the Friends of Harthill and Calderstones Park, and Brenda Cameron and Andy Scott who are Verifiers for the Ancient Tree Inventory as well as Woodland Trust volunteers, and trustees of the Friends of Chidwall Woods and Fields.

There follows just a very short selection of their remarkable trees:

Quercus x rosacea (*Q.robur x Q.petraea*) 'the Allerton Oak' a 500-year-old hybrid ancient oak set amongst English bluebells an indicator of ancient woodland, A typical old pollard probably set in woodland pasture. Girth of 7.47m at 0.5m. Of great regional, social, historical and cultural significance and believed at one time to have housed a medieval hundred court. Girth County Champion and winner of the 2019 English Tree of the Year Competition.

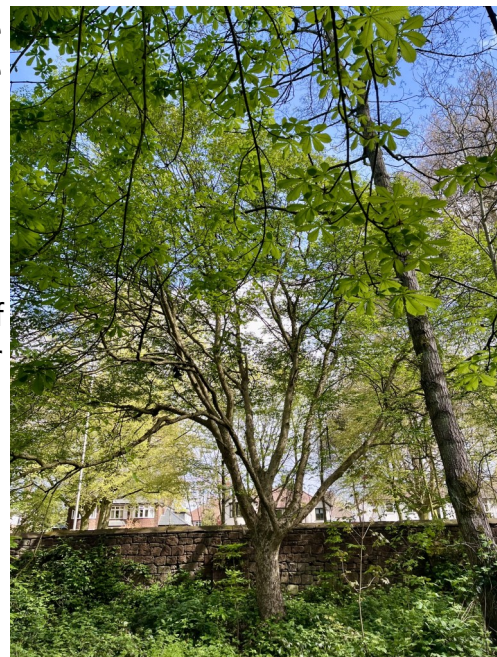


Quercus x hispanica 'Diversifolia' an English champion, a 'Lucombe' oak which while normally evergreen lost its leaves this winter.

Quercus x hispanica 'Fulhamensis' unusual variety, county champion and verified ancient tree. This is a clone which descends from a tree of unknown origin that grew in the nursery of Whitley and Osborne in Fulham, London now long gone. A fine tree.

Micromeles burtonsmithiorum rare *Sorbus* type from China and Myanmar. Large leaf. National champion.

Ulmus lamellosa 'Hebei elm' designated a 'remarkable tree of Lancashire' in the 'Tree Register'. Native to China and Inner Mongolia. Rare in Europe and gifted by seed from Beijing BG in 1980. Seems reasonably resistant to Dutch Elm Disease.



Mentioning only 5 trees out of over a 100 is not very good, so Ness BG is not the only place to be revisited. Of course, we did see many other trees each with their own fascinating stories and histories but there is only space here to report on a very few. Once again, a big thank you to our guides.

Lloyd Snellgrove

Photos: Quercus x rosacea—Eliza Bixter

Ulmus lamellosa - Lloyd Snellgrove

Cambridge Botanic Garden

Celebrating Public Support and Investing in Botanical Skills at Cambridge University Botanic Garden

This spring brought welcome affirmation of the power of public engagement, as Cambridge University Botanic Garden was named **Best Tourist Attraction** in the *Cambridge Edition People's Choice Awards* for the **second year running**. Voted for by readers and visitors, the award reflects not only the Garden's beauty, but the sustained effort of staff, volunteers and supporters to keep it welcoming, relevant and inspiring throughout the year.



As Friends groups, such as us, will appreciate, this kind of recognition matters. Being judged by public vote underscores the value of investing in excellent visitor experience alongside scientific and educational excellence. At Cambridge, year-round seasonal interest, accessible interpretation, exhibitions, guided tours and family activities all play a role in building a sense of shared ownership between the Garden and its community. The result is not just footfall, but loyalty, advocacy and pride.

Alongside this celebration, the Garden is also looking firmly to the future with the launch of a new **Certificate in Botany**, taking place **6 July – 1 August 2026**. Hosted entirely within the Garden, this intensive month-long course aims to address a growing national concern: the erosion of core botanical skills within higher education and professional practice.



Designed for advanced students, early-career researchers and practitioners, the course reconnects modern plant science with first-hand knowledge of plant diversity. Teaching is grounded in close observation of living collections, particularly the historic Systematic Beds, and draws inspiration from Cambridge's own botanical heritage, including the teaching philosophy of John Stevens Henslow.

For botanic gardens across the UK, the certificate represents a powerful example of how living collections can function as true learning laboratories. Together, these two milestones – public recognition and renewed investment in botanical training – highlight the vital, evolving role botanic gardens play in both society and science.

Helen Llewelyn

Photo: Cambridge Botanic Garden

Hello from the South coast of Wales where we in Friends of Clyne Gardens have just completed our annual May in Bloom where generally on Sundays we have music, walks, talks and children's activities.

Clyne has always been known for its May blooms rhododendrons, azaleas and some of the tallest magnolias in the UK.

One of our concerns is the effect of global warming. To be honest the park is at it's absolute best at the end of April – but weather uncertainties even in the milder south could be problematic – so we'll see how it goes – but there are still many trees /shrubs flowering.



One of the big selling points of this early summer event is that it's totally free. Clyne has always been free entry and we have tried to bring back the old ideals of a family day out in which you can bring a picnic, drinks of your choice and listen to lots of different music in the afternoon from jazz, country, big band, rock and choirs of course, something for everyone. In the morning we have guided walks with a variety of leaders including our ex head gardener Teifion Davies who gives an insight to the park from his forty years experience. We also have bird walks and specialist wildlife photography walks. For the little ones we have storytelling round the story tree in English and Welsh.

Also, as it's proved so popular – downhill boarding for youngsters on the upper slopes of the park – of course as it's Wales we are not short of hills!!

The spread of this festival is going farther afield and quite often we'll get a group of musicians or dancers who are on a tour and they'll get in touch to see if they could perform for us – so of course we love having them. This year Pennyroyal Garland and Clog dancers from Leicestershire did exactly that – and they were great.



To fund May in Bloom – we are reliant on grants and donations but mainly from The National Lottery Community Fund for which we are indebted and as long as we can continue to get funding – the days out will always be free. So if you are in the area in May 2027, please come and see us

Richard Orme

Photos: Richard Orme/Clyne Gardens

Friends of Sheffield Botanic Garden

Sino-Himalayan project - 2026

Tropical/exotic style plants and gardens have been a passion of mine for over 40 years. Focus of interests have varied over those years and included bamboos, palms, ferns, tropical style summer displays, rhododendrons and scheffleras. However, I have steered increasingly over the years to the hardier plants of SouthEast Asia and Himalayan regions. My own garden in South Sheffield certainly reflects these themes.

As a Friend of SBG I put forward a proposed project in late 2024 to introduce a few schefflera species along with a limited range of other primarily Sino-Himalayan plants including large leaved rhododendrons. The exact site for such a planting scheme had not been finally confirmed at that time although several sites within the garden had been suggested. Sheffield Botanic Gardens has 42 rhododendrons on its Iris data base but hardly any large leaved species. However, the increasingly hot and dry summers are becoming a growing problem as although historically we receive 32/33 ins of rain a year this seems to be significantly reduced during summer months over recent years. Large leaved rhododendrons I recognised would prove to be a challenge!



To my great delight my detailed proposal submitted as a powerpoint presentation was very well received by our FOBS executive committee and our head gardener and her team. FOBS very generously allocated me a budget of £5000 for the project.



It was not easy to source plants of a reasonable size but eventually I managed to purchase several 15/20 litre plants of *Rhododendron sinofalconeri*, *Rhododendron suoilhenense* from a commercial nursery and four quite tall *Schefflera nova* from a private grower. I obtained these in early 2025 and nursed them at my home through the punishingly hot summer. Recently I have sourced 3 larger *Schefflera rhododendronifolia* but have yet to transfer these to Sheffield Botanic Gardens. In addition during 2025 I obtained a range of mahonia species and hybrids/cultivars, *Mahonia confusa* "Narihira", *Mahonia nitens* "Caberet", *Mahonia* "Volcano", *Mahonia eurybracteata* "Sweet Winter". I added several reasonably sized *Trachycarpus wagnerianus* and 3 smaller *Trachycarpus fortunei* x *T. princeps* hybrids. Three large *Fatsia polycarpa* were also added although they originate from Taiwan but are good complementary plants. Three small *Brassaiaopsis dumicola* were also included. *Metapanax davidii* and *Schefflera delaveyi* are under consideration.

Sheffield Botanical Gardens Continued

My choice of plants has been significantly influenced by the characteristics of the available site chosen from a few areas that were available to me. The final plot is in a sheltered part of the gardens, a boarder of about 40 feet wide by 70 ft long fronted by a 12ft high south facing wall i.e. the plot is north facing. There is a large ginkgo tree already there which provides some dappled shade and a large 25-year old ceanothus. The latter is rather incongruous but remains. In reality a third of the plot behind the wall is permanently in shade while the rest of the plot receives sun for most of the day in midsummer but decreasing amounts in autumn, winter and early spring. The options for my chosen plants being either exposure to full summer sun, permanent shade or limited smaller areas of dappled shade. I have opted for virtually permanent shade for my large leaved rhododendrons. I dug the plot over to remove weeds and spirea plants earlier in the year and the gardeners delivered a good mulch of partially decomposed bark soon after. The plants for the most part were over wintered in the cool glasshouse at SBG and tended by me. They were moved out in late spring and hardened off. Support from the head gardener and her team has been excellent. My planting was rather delayed due to several factors but eventually I planted out in late/mid May just before the hot weather struck! The pH of the soil tested at 6.9, so not as acid as I would have liked although the soil is of a well drained medium loam. I obtained 180 litre of good quality ericaceous compost for the rhododendrons and also ericoid mycorrhizal supplement to add to the planting hole. Having planted up quite successfully, we were then subject within a week to a series of very hot sunny days including a 29C and two days at 32C. The new emerging leaves on the scheffleras received significant scorch but it could have been worse. Only time will tell how things develop but a summer of regular watering is a given.



Dr Simon Olpin

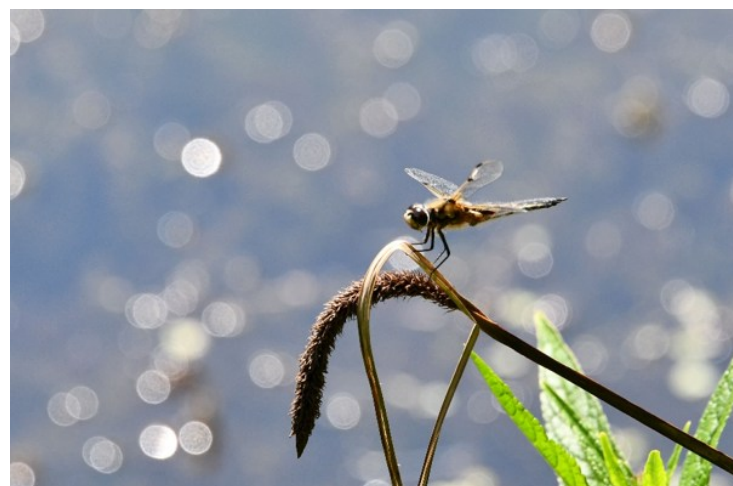
Photos: Dr Simon Olpin

National Botanic Garden Wales Dragonflies at the NBGW

It has now been 5 years since the restored regency landscape and lakes were completed. This has given visitors a new exciting dimension to the Garden and its history. Care was taken during the construction to protect and recreate the historical landscape but inevitably the construction and repair of the dams on the lakes did leave some areas a little bare. The landscape has now had chance to mature with many native marginal plants establishing at the lake edges. This has also encouraged Dragonflies to thrive with 20 species being recorded at the site and recognised by the British Dragonfly Society [The National Botanic Garden of Wales - British Dragonfly Society](#)

On warm summer afternoons, the park comes alive with the gentle buzz of insects and the cheerful songs of birds. Among the most fascinating are dragonflies, colourful insects that glide gracefully over the lakes, streams, and wildflower meadows. Their shimmering wings catch the sunlight as they dart through the air with incredible speed and precision, bringing drama to the lake surface providing greater interest for visitors. Dragonflies are important to the NBGW's ecosystem. They are skilled hunters, able to change direction quickly while flying. Some species display brilliant shades of blue, green, and red, making them a beautiful sight for nature lovers and photographers alike.

Children are fascinated in the way dragonflies skim across the water's surface, while adults appreciate the peaceful atmosphere they create. Their presence is also a sign of a healthy environment, since dragonflies thrive in clean water habitats.



Julie James

Photo: A four spotted chaser. NBGW

University of Dundee Botanic Garden

The Friends of the University of Dundee Botanic Garden were one of the founder members of the FBGF. The Royal Caledonian Horticultural Society awarded the Chair of the Friends, Mark McGilchrist and their volunteers Certificates of Merit at their AGM in March 2026



Mark was elected Chair of the Friends of the University of Dundee's Botanic Garden in 2013. He has led the group in achieving a number of significant achievements – for example, the erection of the Green Gallery in the garden – from which there is an impressive view over the River Tay. The Gallery is used for exhibitions and small gatherings. Mark also chaired a group which produced a book about the Botanic Garden - A Place to Bloom – an Anthology of Our Botanic Garden. Mark was very keen to promote the garden as a place to improve the health and wellbeing of visitors. Prior to Covid, he liaised with groups at Ninewells Hospital, encouraging them to visit the garden. He had also initiated a Children's Gardens Group

Mark has once again been re-elected as Chair of the Friends Committee and will be leading the group as it continues to support the garden at a time when Dundee University face serious funding issues. The university has already indicated that it wishes to withdraw from its commitments to the Botanic Garden. The FBGF hope that it is possible to consider alternative options to ensure the Botanic Garden will continue to thrive into the future, providing a peaceful green space for Dundee residents and visitors.

The volunteers at the University of Dundee Botanic Garden make an exceptional contribution to supporting this important 23-acre site. With only two full-time staff members and one apprentice on rotation, the ongoing care and presentation of the garden would not be possible without the invaluable support of our volunteers. Gardening volunteers play a vital role in the upkeep of the grounds, ensuring areas such as the car park entrance, educational plots, and herb garden are immaculately maintained. They assist with a wide range of tasks including hand weeding, grass cutting, and wood chipping, all of which are essential to keeping the garden looking its best for visitors and students alike.

Beyond horticultural work, the front-of-house and guided tour volunteers provide a warm welcome to visitors, sharing their deep knowledge of the garden's history and plant collections. Many have been involved for years, beginning in the gardening team before progressing to visitor engagement roles. Their long-term commitment and experience form an invaluable bridge between the garden's heritage and its future, ensuring knowledge and passion for horticulture continue to be shared with the public and the University community.



Shiona Mackie

Photos: RCHS

Mark McGilchrist

Treborth Botanic Garden

This summer the top part of the Paxton Cascade in the Garden has been restored. This is one of the features that remains of Sir Joseph Paxton's Britannia Park project. In 1849 the land opposite Anglesey, between the Menai Bridge and the Britannia Bridge (land now owned by Bangor University for Treborth Botanic Garden and the sports fields), was owned by the Chester and Holyhead Railway Company. They wanted to create a suburban development of villas and terraces, and a large hotel, with 25 acres of pleasure grounds, and they commissioned Sir Joseph Paxton to design this. The work commenced in 1851 but was never completed because of financial difficulties.

However, several features remain from that period, including a cascade. This uses water that runs underground from outside the Garden and emerges through a tunnel; it then drops into a waterfall down to the Menai Strait. The stonework and brickwork had deteriorated over the years, but the upper part has now been restored, funded by The Woodland Investment Grant scheme. The photograph shows the tunnel entrance and the upper pool.

The cascade lies close to the Wales Coast Path, which runs through the woodland in the Garden, and is a popular spot for long distance walkers, as well as locals, to stop and take a breather, to enjoy the waterfall and views of the Menai Strait and the Menai Bridge.



Another historical feature at Treborth, but a much more recent arrival, is the Bishop's Gate. This gate, dated 1848, had stood on what was originally part of the Bishop's Park in Bangor, associated with the Bishop's Palace, near the Cathedral. This area became College Park when it was part of Bangor University's campus. When the Park was redeveloped in 2025, there was no space for the gate and it was refurbished and moved to Treborth Botanic Garden, where it now forms one of the entrances to the Forest School area. Children enjoy spotting the bishop's mitre in the centre of the design, then pushing open the heavy gate to discover the secret winding path into the Forest School!

Sarah Edgar

Photos: Sarah Edgar

Friends of Cruickshank Botanic Garden

Stargazing in the Botanic Garden

On the evening of 21 October, University staff and students and external guests gathered for Stargazing in the Botanic Garden. The event marked the birthday of Anne Cruickshank, the founder of both the Cruickshank Botanic Garden in 1898 and the Cruickshank Lectureship in Astronomy in 1924. The indoor programme included an interactive hands-on experience with the new 16" aperture advanced University telescope (shown below right) via a gaming-style mobile device with live celestial data and visualisations. There were a series of cross-boundary and inclusive short talks reflecting the Cruickshank family's lasting contribution to the University, fascinating applications of the telescope in astronomy and its 'cousin' microscope in biology. Guests were able to talk with the speakers afterwards on a variety of University subjects including the new Astrophysics course and many enjoyed visiting the Zoology Museum. Meanwhile, outside in The Rose Garden, guests were excited to meet several astronomers, who not only shared their amazing telescopes but also their invaluable experiences. Finally, like playing a game, the outcome does depend a bit on luck ... Unfortunately, the stars had mostly decided to hide behind the clouds until towards the end of the event when the sky cleared up and some of the last guests got a glimpse of Saturn's Rings! The University organisers wish to thank the Aberdeen Astronomical Society, STEM Ambassadors and student volunteers for their time and support. Special thanks to the Friends of the Cruickshank Botanic Garden for providing refreshments.



Dr Charles Wang Reader in Physics and Cruickshank Lecturer in Astronomy, University of Aberdeen

New observatory built in the Botanic Garden

A new Astronomy Facility has been established within the grounds of the Garden in 2026. It marks the bicentenary of the University's original observatory, the Cromwell Tower Observatory (CTO), built in King's College in 1826. The CTO served as a distinguished centre for teaching, research, and public engagement in astronomy. Among its notable contributions, Sir David Gill (1843–1914) - renowned for capturing the first photograph of the Great Comet of 1882 – used the CTO to synchronise his clock with celestial time, providing precision timekeeping to Aberdeen City Centre. This service was highly valued locally and played an important role in the city's scientific and civic life.

However, the CTO has not been operational for more than two decades due to limitations in accessibility and the space required to accommodate a modern, larger telescope. Additionally, increased light pollution and thermal turbulence from surrounding buildings compromised the quality of deep-space observation.

The new observatory is situated within the Nursery area of the Cruickshank. The facility has been designed to a high architectural standard, using materials that are sensitive to both the natural landscape and the historic character of the Garden. The facility will strengthen the University's longstanding scientific legacy in astronomy, foster interdisciplinary research and teaching in areas such as Data Science and AI, and broaden opportunities for public and educational engagement in science. Importantly, it will enhance the Garden's role as a site of experiential learning.



Photos: University of Aberdeen

A Story of a Palm



Sometime between 1820 and 1823, a Sabal palm, believed to be a *Sabal bermudana* was moved from the RBGE, Leith Walk to a new home in the new botanic garden being established on Inverleith Row, Edinburgh. Initially it was housed in a Palm Stove – described by James McNab, the curator of the RBGE, in a presentation to the Botanical Society of Scotland in 1870. It was then given a permanent home in the new Tropical Glasshouse in 1835. Cared for by skilled horticulturists over the ensuing 181 years, it grew into a tall, graceful and ultimately elderly palm – fronds eventually reaching the roof of the elegant palm house.

In 2021, the Biome project commenced with the first phase being the restoration of the Victorian glasshouses. All the plants in these glasshouses had to be transferred elsewhere in the glasshouse complex. The Sabal palm was the final specimen to be removed on 28th September 2021. Given its age, it was recognised that the palm would not tolerate a move – it was beginning to fail and was too frail. It had also reached the roof of the glasshouse. It was with much sadness, that

the palm was taken down piece by piece – the process recorded for posterity – and at the same time a celebration of its life with pipes playing and botanical artists on hand to paint portraits of the tree and its fronds.

Extensive examinations of the palm took place subsequent to its felling and to everyone's surprise, it is now understood that the Sabal Palm is, in fact *Sabal mexicana* – not *Sabal bermudana*. How it got to Edinburgh is not known, but it may have come from Germany during the time that Daniel Rutherford was Regius Keeper of the RBGE in the later 1700's. It was the oldest tree in the RBGE living collection. And to end on a positive note – viable seed was collected from the palm. These have germinated and a young Sabal palm has just been planted in the Temperate Glasshouse – beneath the highest point in the roof. It will be able to grow happily and excite future generations as it reaches for the sky.



Image of the Sabal taken in 1874 after its move and 'retubbing' by James McNab and his team.

Photographer: ?

Image: Archive of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh

Shiona Mackie

Photo of new Sabal mexicana being planted in the Temperate Glasshouse 2026—RBGE

Ness Botanic Garden

Suzhou Botanical Garden partnership with Ness Botanic Gardens

For some 20 years a partnership has existed between the University of Liverpool and Xi'an Jiaotong University in Suzhou, China which provides exciting study options to students in China and Liverpool. We are delighted to report that Ness Botanic Gardens has now partnered with Suzhou Botanical Garden, to further promote cooperation and exchange between our institutions.

Located in the southwest corner of the ancient city of Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, Suzhou Botanical Garden currently opens its main area as the Shangfang Mountain National Forest Park. Their team is responsible for animal and plant conservation, as well as popular science and scientific research, and serves as an important platform for South China tiger breeding and ecological conservation.

Earlier this year our two gardens exchanged gifts – we received a generous present of Chinese New Year gifts, and in return sent a number of gifts including a copy of Kenneth Ashburner and Dr Hugh McAllister's *Betula* monograph, in part based on the collections at Ness, and a print of *Malus vernalis*, an apple tree from China named by the team at Ness recently.

Professor Gavin Brown, the University of Liverpool's Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education, recorded a video message to welcome this new and exciting partnership.

Nick Lightfoot,

Curator, Ness Botanic Garden Photo: Ness Botanic Garden



University of Bristol Botanic Garden

At our AGM in March the Friends had the chance to reflect on another successful series of activities. We are coming to the end of a year of celebrating our fiftieth anniversary as a charity and are delighted to continue to help the Curator and the team at the Botanic Garden to run events, raise funds for projects and maintenance of the Garden. The University is currently running a massive capital project at the Temple Quarter Enterprise Zone in the centre of Bristol and we look forward to seeing how we can use the new facilities to continue our work.

Our recent series of lectures, although not as well attended in person as online (perhaps due to the difficulty of facing Bristol traffic in the evenings) covered a pleasing range of topics ranging from the planting at Tresco Gardens (by 'Curator at Large' Mike Nelhams) to the story of commemorative gardens around the globe, managed by the Commonwealth War Graves commission.

Individual members have spearheaded profitable fundraising ventures this year. Enterprising volunteers have managed very successful plant sales both on and offsite for many years and we have had a surprising but welcome sideline in glove sales which has raised a healthy sum in the chilly spring.

To finish our fiftieth anniversary celebrations, we are holding an evening reception for our Benefactor members who will be able to view some of the superb paintings by local Botanical artists which form a visual record of the rare and threatened native species at the Garden. They are retained in a special collection by the University. The Curator will be providing an accompanying lecture. In common with many other Botanic Gardens, we find the space is uniquely inspiring for artists as well as scientists.

In July we are saying goodbye to the current, very supportive Botanic Garden Scientific Director, Professor Jane Memmott, who is stepping down after ten years as she will be reducing her hours with the University. We welcome as her successor Heather Whitney from the School of Biological Sciences. They both conduct different aspects of important pollinator research, and we look forward to Heather's inaugural lecture on her latest projects.

Pat and I very much enjoyed meeting you all at the Forum AGM in Ness and we were delighted to be able to take part in the thanks to Shiona at that meeting and we both look forward to sharing ideas and experiences under the new stewardship of Lloyd.

Lucy Davies

Photo: Chris Radford

A final note from Shiona

Having now stood down as Chair of the FBGF, I have been looking for a volunteer to take over as Editor of the FBGF newsletter. I am delighted to be able to introduce you to Peta Sams, a Friend of Ness Botanic Gardens who will be taking over as Editor in the autumn. I asked Peta to share with you her background and how her interests and skills will enable her take on this role.

'A recent house move has brought me back to the Wirral after 20 years away, with the opportunity to revisit Ness Gardens and renew engagement that stretches back to the early 80s, helping to give me a lifetime interest in plants great and small.

My background is in IT systems- first at Unilever then the University of Liverpool where I implemented 3rd party commercial systems. However, I had never really wanted to work in an office so have always been keen to explore other interests.

I was a volunteer gardener at Ness for a while and also helped to catalogue the herbarium at the World Museum in Liverpool. A garden at home has always been important and, ever on the lookout for 'real' plants, many a specimen has been bought at a plant stand at the side of the road to be brought home in cycle panniers.

Early days in Ludlow found me involved in secretarial work with both the Friends of the Library group and Ludlow 21, a long- established voluntary group promoting sustainable living through projects in the local area. I soon realised that communication with the members is vital and so found myself setting up and writing newsletters to complement websites that I have also written.

The swifts that came - and still do come although sadly in reduced numbers - to the town each summer became a particular interest and a Ludlow21 project. We set up a swift group with the aims of knowing more about the birds, where they nested and how we could create new nesting opportunities. Practical work included the design/installation of swift boxes behind the louvres in the church tower, a long-term project now home for several pairs of swifts.

Swift conservation work has become a major part of my life in recent years. I am a founding member and co-ordinator of the Swifts Local Network - a loose association of swift groups across the country all working for the birds in their community. We now have in excess of 140 groups and I continue to keep people in touch with one another as well as acting as joint co-ordinator for the annual Swift Awareness Week at the end of June.

Whilst in Ludlow I was part of the volunteer group that started the work to rescue the garden of plantsman John Treasure at Burford House Gardens. The gardens had fallen into a sorry state following his death - the succession of garden companies that traded from the site also had responsibility for the gardens but had neither time nor money for them. The manager there set up a team of volunteers and it was a privilege to help rescue these beautiful gardens. During this time, I also helped care as a volunteer for the 30 acres of riparian meadows that are part of the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre, and for a time was membership secretary for Shropshire Botanical Society.

So I believe that my somewhat eclectic portfolio of gardens, wildlife and importantly communications across widespread networks will be useful in taking on the role of editor for the FBGF newsletter.

I look forward to working with you all on future newsletters and although this is going to be virtually to start with I hope that we can meet face to face in the future.'

Peta Sams June 2026

So thank you Peta—I will continue in an advisory capacity over the next few months. And I must thank all the contributors over the years who have made the work involved in pulling together the thrice yearly newsletter such a pleasure—so much of interest to share across the UK.

Shiona Mackie June 2026

