



2020 Newsletter from Waterperry House and Gardens.

Dear Friends,

After what was a stonkingly good year for Waterperry Gardens in 2019 I started 2020 with a cocky grin and an air of assured self-confidence

Then mother nature bowled a curve ball that was as unexpected as the idea of a leafy goddess playing cricket; and we had the Corona Virus to contend with.

I won't dwell on the difficulties of securing loans and the trauma of redundancy procedures but I have learnt a lot of positive and useful lessons from this year.

1. Clear direction and good communication are essential.

I, like my father before me, tend to expect people to read my mind and to understand the entire reasoning process behind decisions made.

It has become increasingly apparent to me that even intelligent people may need some help, care and explanation when exploring the unseen regions of my mind.

I have also found that I am not always right and therefore debate has a value.

Listening seems to really pay off.

Good communication with the public, the staff (both furloughed and at work), the board of WGL and the EC of the School is challenging. Managing expectations and pre-empting questions before they are asked is ideal. I often found that just as I thought that everybody knew everything necessary there was someone, somewhere, justifiably mortified that they did not know what was happening.

However many signs, posts, tweets, videos, blogs, emails or letters we make people still ask us the three fundamental questions of life: "How do I get into the gardens?", "Where is the teashop?" and "Where are the toilets?"

Talking of communication, I have deeply enjoyed watching the lovely relationship that has developed over the year as Allan Gardiner has patiently and carefully, with no criticism for having to repeat instructions again and again, taught Gordon Dempster how to find his way around a

computer, use Zoom, watch you-tube videos, answer emails and search online for museum items. A world that was closed to Gordon is now open.

2. Health and Safety, including Risk Assessments are important.

For each one of the events in the time-table at the bottom of this letter a set of questions had to be asked.

Stuff like:-

“How do I keep the staff safe?”, “How do I keep the public safe?”, “What am I allowed to do?”, “How would I expect to be treated?”, “What is reasonable/sensible?”, “What is guidance?”, “What is the law?”, “How can the business best function with these measures in place?”

Top down risk assessments done with a sense of care for the welfare of others and in consultation with staff, who then read them, agree to them and give feed-back, is necessary and useful.

They are not static documents that once done never need to be looked at again.

They are “just” common sense but that is a great and rare virtue.

Nor should they be a butt covering exercise. Our NFU representative has told me clearly that, however many risk assessments I write, if someone gets run over by the fork-lift truck I will probably go to jail. Sometimes I dream of the peace and quiet: bouncing my tennis ball against the wall like Steve McQueen in The Great Escape.

So we juggled our way through perspex spit screen suppliers, hand sanitiser delivery hold ups, laying out the shops, teashop, staff room and queuing areas, painting 2m white lines and making one way routes, modifying and reviewing every week with experience and as guidelines changed. The result was overall that both visitors and staff felt safe and cared for.

We have been blessed and lucky that so far, as far as we know, none of our staff have caught the virus.

3. People need and love to work.

I guess we all know this but it is interesting to see how much work is missed when it is taken away from people even when pay is not.

Most staff were very happy to return to work when asked to, even with very short notice.

The mental health aspects of enforced isolation and lack of meaningful work should not be overlooked and I think the teashop staff found this year most difficult. Moving the teashop to the house in October presented challenges. All concerned rose to them. Losing it again just a month later was tough.

Gordon was an example to us all keeping himself usefully busy around the estate when the museum was closed.

The gardeners and the fruit department all worked on tirelessly, their daily work almost untouched by the change all around.

4. Who our customers are.

During the first period of lock-down for almost 3 months I spent much of my time doing deliveries, whilst in the shop Jennie and Mike answered the phones and got the orders together. My daughter Sofia would help often and got good at plotting multiple drop routes with google maps throughout the county and beyond.

We would swear in unison at Cynthia the SatNav when she once again sent us down a rough track leading nowhere at the back end of another new-build housing estate.

We spent long days delivering tons of compost, plants and furniture to Thame, Haddenham, Aylesbury, Cowley, Garsington, Wheatley, Brill, Headington, Stanton St. John, Ickford and the

narrow streets of suburban Oxford City.

It was a great experience for me, and something that would not have ever happened otherwise, to be able to go and meet our customers where they live. We would drop anything from a bag of John Innes no.2 and a little tray of bedding plants to an old lady in Jericho to a full set of galvanised furniture to the Manor House in Great Milton. We delivered pallet loads of organic compost to community allotment organisations and gift wrapped single plants to old peoples' homes. Many people were hungry for human contact and social distancing was often quite an issue. We really felt like we were providing an important service to the local community.

5. People love Waterperry.

When we re-opened the gardens in June we actually had people crying with gratitude that they could enter again. Visitor numbers steadily increased from then on and, although we never had any crowd issues, before long we were busier than ever.

The garden shop made record sales and almost all our google reviews were 5 stars.

The only out-door events we managed to host 'socially distanced' on the front lawn sold out within days. These were very carefully and bravely done by the Waterperry Opera Festival and IKProductions.

When we opened up the house as a teashop in October visitors loved it and stood in the artists hall for ages staring in wonder at the frescos.

The School of Philosophy and Economic Science is a temporary custodian of this National Treasure of an Estate. We have looked after it in our own way for the last 50 years, just as long as the redoubtable Beatrix Havergal before us. When you look around the place you can see the marks made by the three great families that lived here and the gardeners and architects employed by them.

For most of our visitors it is the gardens that are the key attraction. Many of our visitors say it is their favourite garden.

Imagine being a painter and having to use paint that changed colour all the time. Imagine being a sculptor and having to work with a medium that expanded at different rates in different places and at different times. Then throw into the mix the unpredictability of your working environment and that you are surrounded by enemies large and small that want to destroy your work. Also appreciate that the commission is never finished. That's the job of a garden designer, head gardener or garden manager. It's a high art form.

In this small 8 acre garden we have the unusual combination of long pure herbaceous borders, informal river walk, visible stock beds, orchards, yew enclosed formal rooms and much more. There is no dramatic landscape feature to work with as in many other gardens but there is some lovely borrowed landscape over the water meadows.

Even the visitors that come here for pure horticultural reasons remark on the access to peace that they find here. I have no doubt that the many years of spiritual work and meditation done by members of the School have contributed to this.

For others it is a meeting place: well situated halfway between London and Birmingham. Parking is easy and the scones are soft and freshly baked. It is unthreatening, beautiful and has something for everybody from children to the retired elderly. We are, after all, in the happiness business and everyone comes here to be happy at whatever level of permanence it is sought.

This year that was more obvious and necessary than ever. 'All be happy' is the mantra.

Whatever happens in the future the School has a responsibility to pass on this Estate in the best order it can so that it may be enjoyed by future generations. True wealth should be measured by what is given rather than that which is accumulated.

On behalf of this large, slightly dysfunctional, but essentially warm-hearted and hard-working community that work on your behalf, I wish you all a safe, healthy and happy end to this extraordinary year and best wishes for the next.

Thank you all for your support this year and the great service you give.

Simon Buchanan
2nd December 2020

The Concise Covid-19 Year Timetable

- 23rd March The whole site closed to the public. Most staff were furloughed. The core garden staff and fruit department remained and three of us on the retail side ran a local delivery service.
- 13th May Garden-shop re-opened to the public. Most shop staff back.
- 5th June The Gardens re-opened.
- 13th June Teashop re-opened as a take away. Then gradually opened up more.
- 20th June Gift-Shop re-opened. Most office and other staff back.
- 3rd July Gallery re-opened on a 4 day week.
- 28th August Museum re-opened.
- 1st October Teashop moved to the House with table service.
- 5th November Teashop, Gallery and Museum closed to the public again. Take-away opened.
- 2nd December Teashop, Gallery and Museum open again under Tier 2 rules.

Useful links:-

Website:

<https://www.waterperrygardens.co.uk/>

Faecebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/Waterperrygardens/>

Video of the snowman hunt:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_DzrzVNXAY&t=7s