

Report for the July 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 8th July the National Gardens Scheme (NGS) Worcestershire County Organiser David Morgan gave us an informative and entertaining talk about what the organisation does and why, how it is structured and the criteria it uses to assess gardens put forward to be part of the scheme. The talk was well illustrated, showing us beautiful gardens that the public can visit each year, also covering local gardens like The Dell House in Malvern Wells.

The origins of the NGS go back to a philanthropist, William Rathbone, in 1859 when he first paid for a nurse to look after his sick wife and then extended this to form a system of paying for nurses all over Liverpool. This led to the establishment of District Nurses, evolving into the Queen's Nursing Institute (QNI) in 1926. Private gardens that were only seen by their owners then became part of a system of opening to the public for a shilling entry fee to raise money for the QNI. There were 160,000 visitors in the first year. One of the first to open was Spetchley Park and Gardens. In 1931 the yellow book or yellow list first came out as a directory and in the 1970s garden owners were allowed each to set their own charge. In 1980 the NGS became a charity in its own right and is now the biggest annual contributor to several charities as a result of money raised by the public visiting the gardens.

The NGS is the most significant charitable funder of nursing in the UK, giving a total of £2.7 million to charities like Macmillan's, Carers Trust, the QNI and the Multiple Sclerosis Society. Gardens are seen as promoting health and wellbeing to make patients' lives better. As a result of the death of Horatio Chapple, son of a surgeon, enough money was raised to create a garden at the Duke of Cornwall Spinal Unit at Salisbury Hospital. Donations from the NGS to charities are all made by the public enjoying other people's gardens between March and September. They can have a cup of tea and cake as part of the visit, sometimes buy samples of the plants and generally come away with ideas for their own gardens. Garden owners are covered by insurance as long as the NGS does a safety check.

David explained the structure of the organisation for each county and the duties for each role, including County Support Officers, the County Organiser, Treasurer, Publicity Officer, Leaflet Coordinators and Assistant County Organisers. As County Organiser, David's main task is assessing potential new gardens. He has to check gardens a year before opening but there is also scope for last minute entries that are not in the yellow book. Gardens can be open any number of agreed times or can be open by appointment only. They vary tremendously in size because it is the content that is important rather than size; they have to be interesting with not necessarily only plants on view but also items like water features and quirky displays, e.g. in one property there is a stark-looking tree with coloured teapots hanging from the branches. David visits gardens with a checklist to tick off the required elements of a garden and then has an acceptability checklist. The latter includes the fact that a garden must have good plants and thirty minutes of interest, secure access such as not having to go through the owner's house, car parking, help needed for provision of refreshments so as to free up the owner to talk to visitors and the confirmation that health and safety considerations have been made, e.g. no steep drops or loose bricks. Gardens can open as a group in order to meet the criteria.

In an interesting question and answer session David advised that money taken either from refreshments or plant sales can go to a local charity and the entry fee all goes to the NGS. There are 3,800 gardens open this year nationally. David's own garden, Oak Tree House at Marlbrook, Bromsgrove, is open on Sunday 21 August between 1.30 and 5.30 pm as part of a group of two listed as Marlbrook Gardens in the 2016 Worcestershire Gardens yellow book.

Chairman Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this delightful talk. He encouraged us to submit ideas for the Civic Society's 2017 programme (email: programme@malverncivicsociety.org.uk). After a summer break the next talk will be at 7.30 pm on Friday 9 September, entitled "*The Landmark Trust's restoration of Llwyn Celwyn*" by Ian Cawood. It will be held as usual at the Eden Church Conference Centre, Grovewood Road (off Townsend Way, next to the Malvern Spa Hotel). Entry is £1 for all.

Denise Preston, Press Officer, Malvern Civic Society
10 July 2016