

Houghton Hall Park

February 2021 Newsletter

The Houghton Hall Park Renaissance and Renewal Project is being managed by Central Bedfordshire Council in partnership with Houghton Regis Town Council and is supported by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Big Lottery Fund.



Welcome to February and what a cold, frosty and snowy one it's been so far! These brilliant photographs were taken by Justyna Tarnacka and Gemma Bunting, when we first had the snow at the end of January, let's hope we get some equally amazing scenes for our photography theme of 'Snowdrops' this month.

If you'd like something to keep you occupied while we are still in lockdown, Mark's nature notes this month provide you

with detailed instructions on how to build a bird box and where you should put it in your garden depending on what birds you'd like to attract.

Whilst we are limited with the amount of volunteers we can have in the park at the moment, Jenny and Eleanor have been keeping busy behind the scenes, read their monthly update to catch up with what they've been doing. You can also find out more about some of our volunteers and why they find volunteering at the park so rewarding.



A great place to live and work.

What's On

Children's Nature Challenge - Virtual World Book Day

When: 4th March

Cost: £2.75

To celebrate World Book Day join us for a day of virtual activities in association with Social Farms and Gardens and the Stick Man Trail. Various parks across the country are putting together videos of activities you can take part in from home, the videos will be released via social media on World Book Day, 4th March.

Houghton Hall Park will be contributing with a video of how to make a nature mobile, grow some cress and how to grow a bean in a jar, we have put together a kit with everything you need for these activities, plus a few extras, which is now available to purchase online for £2.75.



If you would like your very own Stick Man keepsake we have some Stick Man plush toys available on the website to purchase, the 13" full size toy is £10 and a backpack clip is £4.95.

Go to the link below to make your purchase and collect from the Visitors Centre on Sunday 28th February between 10am and 12pm.

<https://www.houghtonhallpark.org/.../virtual-world-book-day>

We hope you enjoyed last month's nature challenge on birds, thank you to Abeeha and Ayma Umer for sending us a picture of the peacock they created, it's brilliant!



Monthly Photography Themes



Art & Culture Event

great lifestyles

February's Photography Theme

'Snowdrops' at Houghton Hall Park

We look forward to seeing what you capture for 'Snowdrops' at Houghton Hall Park

- Up to 5 entries per person
- Images must be taken in February
- Some images will be featured on our website, social media platforms, notice boards around the visitor centre and in our monthly newsletter
- Send them to us at: hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk
- Deadline 28th February
- Full terms & conditions at our website

Find out more online at www.houghtonhallpark.org

LOTTERY FUNDED

We welcome photographers of all abilities from the age of 16 to get creative, use your imagination and enter our monthly theme. February's theme is: 'Snowdrops' at Houghton Hall Park', there is an abundance in the park at the moment, we are sure you can get some great pictures!

IMPORTANT: Please remember to practice social distancing when coming to the park.

Please send your submissions to hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk. The images must be taken between 1st – 28th February 2021 and each person can submit up to 5 entries. We will not accept any overly photoshopped images that do not represent the reality of the subject in the photo. Some images will be featured on our website, social media platforms, notice boards around the visitor centre and in our monthly newsletter.

Please see our website for the full terms & conditions before you submit your work:
www.houghtonhallpark.org/photography

Thank you to Lesley Cashell and Rita Egan for sending in their pictures of birds, for last month's theme, Rita even managed to capture a woodpecker!



Woodpecker by Rita Egan



Wooden birds of HHP by Lesley Cashell



Wood Pidgeon by Lesley Cashell



Blackbird by Rita Egan



Robin by Rita Egan



Robin by Lesley Cashell



Magpie Singing by Rita Egan



Chaffinch by Rita Egan

Community Ranger Update

Well what a start to the year! I think we've possibly had every type of weather possible this month from snow and ice, to wind and rain and even the occasional sunny moment.

The park has had an interesting month. Storm Christoph in the middle of the month brought down a tree in the East Woodland. Thankfully our fantastic contractors (Allan and his team) managed to get it cleared the next day!

I've been doing some elm clearance in the East Wood. You may have heard of Dutch Elm disease which cause elms to die when they reach a certain height. The aim of coppicing them is to reduce the amount of standing dead elms we have and the hope is that through coppicing the trees will start to develop some resistance.

Dutch Elm Disease is a fungal disease of elms carried by the Elm bark beetle, this fungi attacks the tree and in response the tree blocks the xylem (the way that water and nutrients are transported around the tree) this stops water and nutrients from travelling around the tree and eventually kills it.

Elms can regrow from the existing root stock so will start to regrow in the next few years and in around 15 years will be back to the same height. By coppicing the elm it opens up the canopy and allows different flora and fauna to grow and thrive.

As we head into February remember to keep safe and keep warm in the cold weather!

Eleanor



Habitat pile created from the material from elm coppicing

Nature Notes

Words and photographs by Mark Bolan Houghton Hall Park Volunteer.

It seems lockdown in one form or another, will be continuing for some time, so this month I thought, with spring just around the corner, making bird boxes would be timely project to do. Nest boxes are simple to make and can be exciting for children to paint and decorate.

Just like us, birds are choosy and different species have their preferences as where to build a nest. And it's knowing what they like and don't like helps you decide which type of box to make.



Great tits the day they fledged last May

Robins for instance often build their nests in sheds and outbuildings which have easy access, such as a gap in the wall, the traditional miniature house type box with a hole in the front isn't going to attract them. But on the other hand a blue tit would find this type of box perfect for raising their young.

Birds have lots of predators, from both domestic and wild animals, to other birds taking either the eggs or chicks. Therefore, if you want to get them to take up residence, there are a few factors to consider, so that they feel safe. The area in front of the box should be free of obstacles so birds can fly directly to their nest.

Although I have had blue tits regularly using a nest box with a tree about three metres away from it. They would fly with food to the tree first and check the area before flying across to the nest. They also used the tree as cover when the young birds fledged. For each of the last two years I've also had Great tits nesting in a hole in an old apple tree just a few feet from the house. This was surprising as great spotted wood peckers regularly used the nearby feeders and will take chicks from a nest.

The third bird to leave the nest calling to its parents



The height from the ground and the direction a box faces also needs careful thought. It needs to be in a place out of direct sun so it doesn't heat up like an oven. It should also be placed so that the front is sheltered from driving rain. If you can, it is best to locate the box is facing anywhere between north and east. As for height above ground, this will vary between species. Robins and wrens prefer to nest below 2 metres (6.5 feet). House and tree sparrows like nests above 2 metres (6.5 feet) Blue and great tits are happy nesting anywhere between 1 and 5 metres (3-15 feet). Starlings above 2.5 metres (8 feet).

Birds also have preferences for the size of hole in the nest box, robins, pied wagtails and wrens tend to nest in open boxes hidden amongst vegetation, as do blackbirds. Even so the height of the front panel matters. Wrens like the front of the box 140mm high. For robins and pied wagtails the front should be 100mm high.

If you are making a typical type box, the entrance hole should be 25mm for blue and coal tits, 28mm for great tits and tree sparrows, 32mm for house sparrows and 45mm for starlings.

Finally the distance between the floor of the nest and the hole also varies between species. House sparrow 38mm, blue tits 50 -150mm, tree sparrows, great tits and starlings 150 – 200mm When constructing your box the area below the hole on the inside should be rough, so the young chicks can climb up when they are ready to leave the nest.

I know it seems birds are pretty fussy but I suppose if you want them to use your box, it's better to

to give them as near to what they like as possible. It is also a good idea to make a box to suit the birds that are already coming to your garden. That way you'll increase the chances they'll use it. Birds will investigate several places to nest before making their final choice. They may even start to prepare a nest then change their minds and go to another site. One way to encourage them is to keep feeders topped up. Feeders are best placed away from the nest box site, as they will be used by lots of other species and some nesting birds may feel threatened by this. Having a reliable source of food close by will save the parent birds lots of energy. I've drawn a plan of the pieces required to build a simple bird box. The dimensions are not critical and can be adjusted slightly to suit your own ideas and the size of wood you are using. The roof is hinged to the back so you can clean the box out ready for the next time. If you don't have hinges to hand, you can use any flexible material such as rubber from bike inner tubes or strip of roofing felt. But do remember birds often will have more than one brood a year, so leave your box undisturbed until September and you can be sure the birds have gone, before cleaning it and putting it back ready for them to find it again. It's not a good idea to use bleach or disinfectants to clean a box. If it is soiled use a little bit of washing up liquid, then rinse and dry thoroughly before putting it back.



A baby carrion crow the day it fledged from a nest at the top of a tree at the bottom of the garden



Looking nothing like its parents, a young starling starts feeding on its own.

Some species will start investigating possible nest sites before Christmas so leaving nest boxes up over winter is a good idea. Tits though usually leave looking for nesting sites until February.

Whilst it is exciting as birds start to make a nest in your bird box, keep watch from a distance and don't disturb them or they may well abandon it and not return.

It seems birds aren't so fussy about the colour of their home, so you can paint your box any colour you like. Use low odour nontoxic paint, water based paints that are waterproof when dry are best as they will protect your box and not wash off in the rain! You can if you like embellish it with any stick on craft items you have. I'll leave it up to your imagination. When choosing wood for your box avoid pressure treated timber and do not be tempted use spirit based wood preservers, as apart from the smell they are not always safe to wildlife.

Most species are territorial so it is unlikely you will get more than one nest box in use by a particular species. The exception are birds like sparrows or starlings who are quite sociable and happy to share a particular space and use several boxes close together. But all that said, it is worth if you want to have more than one box, placing them in different places in your garden, as I mentioned earlier, birds investigate several locations before finally deciding where they want to build a nest.

Wherever you put your box think about cats. They are one of the biggest predators of garden birds and once they have discovered a nest, they won't leave it alone until they have completely destroyed it.

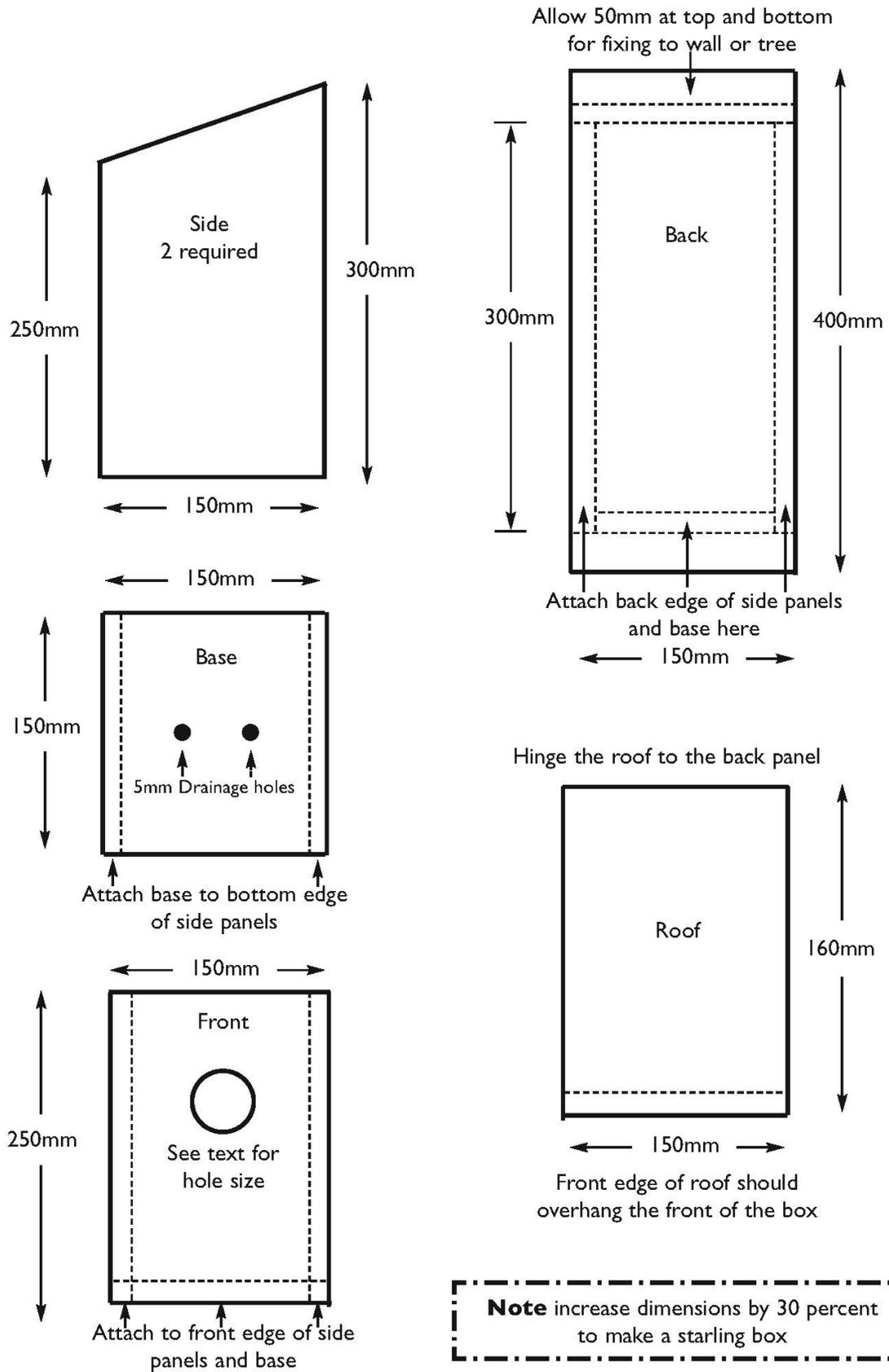
Enjoy making your nest box, the anticipation of birds investigating it and the excitement as the birds make their nest and raise the next generation.

Until the next time

Mark Bolan

Volunteer at Houghton Hall Park

Plans for a simple bird box



Plant of the Month - Snowdrop

The Snowdrops Greek name is Galanthus, it was named in 1753 by Swedish Botanist Carl Linnaeus and is also known as the milk flower. The snowdrop is symbolic of Spring, Purity and Religion – the latter a reference to the three outer petals - representing the trinity.



There are more than 2,500 varieties of Snowdrop. They vary in height from 7cm to 30cm and are divided into approximately 20 species. However, they are not native to the UK. The first record of plants found in the wild was in 1778 but Botanist John Gerrard is said to have described the snowdrop in his writings from 1597.

One of the first flowers of the new year, the snowdrop is one of our most endearing flowers. It reminds us that spring is just around the corner.

Irene Copperwheat
Houghton Hall Park Volunteer

What's the latest in the Gardens?

What a strange start we have had, another lock down, extremes of weather and the roll out of vaccines. It is nice to hear so many of you have been getting them, my volunteers included.

It is only when I read back my old newsletters, I realise that the weather seems to dictate a lot of how we feel and respond, especially in these challenging times.

It governs what I will sow, how much I will water and when I might harvest. That's why all the guidance in books or online will only help to a point but some of it will be down to instinct. Use this to your advantage, as there will never be two identical seasons. Make notes, keep track of what you do in your garden as they will become invaluable year on year.

I am a little behind in some respects, but ahead on others this year. The ground is far too wet to be working on, so I made a big job list instead.

They have included moving work areas around in the yard, clearing out the pot store, the greenhouse and the yard in general. Putting in new covered work areas, covering in the compost bags, new lights in sheds and more taps. Believe me the list is bigger than that!!

Progress behind the scenes will make for a greater working space for 2021. The things that lurk because they might come in useful, eventually you have to decide if you really need to keep them, cluttering up. Once you start it becomes quite cathartic!

It also makes areas clearer and more defined so as a team we are more likely to keep areas clean in the future,



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Normally at this time I would be worrying about not being in a certain place with bed preparation, but this last year has shown us what is important in life, we will catch up, a few warm spring days, a shift in restrictions and we will be on top of things once again.

I have been watching the daffodils emerge from around the cedar tree and one or two have just started to form flower buds. A wonderful splash of colour on these gloomy grey days.



We have just started to sow sweet peas in pots as they do not mind being sown in an unheated greenhouse. It is important that they are protected from mice who are rather keen to eating the new shoots.

You can sow sweet peas anytime between November to March. The earlier you sow them the sooner they will flower, so for a longer picking time stagger your sowings. Some people soak them overnight or scratch the coating from the seed to aid germination. Having experimented with both, I find that sowing them from the packet has never impeded growth or germination.

Once they have produced three pairs of leaves, I will remove the tips with a pair of scissors. By removing the apical tip it will force the growth hormone lower into the plant to produce stockier and more robust plants.

Next month we will begin sowing a few brassicas, peas, tomatoes, aubergines and chilli flowers and lettuces.

With light levels much lower at this time of year it is imperative to ensure that polytunnels and greenhouses are washed to remove any build up of dirt and algae. This will help provide a brighter environment for the seedlings to grow stronger.

Another tip that I would like to share with you, although at first it appears to go against the grain; ensure that greenhouses are left ajar with a small amount of air flow in these winter months. Temperatures taken on a frosty night will be *colder inside* an unventilated greenhouse than outside. It will also prevent grey mould and some fungal infections.

Reduce watering and keep plants on the dry side and certainly don't allow them to sit in water.

Looking forward to seeing you around the park, and I will be sharing with you some plans for the year ahead next month. In the meantime I hope you enjoy reading about our volunteers on the following pages.

Happy Gardening, stay safe

Jenny

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Meet the volunteers

Mark



How long have you been volunteering at HHP?

Almost 18 months, I started at the beginning of June 2019

What do you do for a living?

My core business is producing Energy Performance Certificates for both the rental and sales property market. Although I do a wide range of other things which makes my job both varied and interesting and along the way I've met lots of interesting people.

What are your most enjoyable jobs in the garden?

I love being outdoors so when I'm gardening, I'm happy. Like my job I enjoy variety, so I don't have any specific favourite jobs. As in my own garden if it needs doing, I'm happy doing it.

What is your favourite season and why?

The summer can be too hot, winter cold and wet and although spring weather-wise can be pleasant with the beauty of new life and emerging growth for me it has to be early autumn. The days are warm, with the colours and bounty of the gardens at their peak, it's the icing on the cake and the reward for the effort that has been put in.

What have you enjoyed or found the most rewarding thing about volunteering?

There are so many aspects to volunteering at the park and gardens, There's the camaraderie, support, friendship and sharing amongst the volunteer group, which is very much like an extended family. The pleasure we bring to the park visitors with well-tended gardens, displays and events. The knowledge we learn and share with both the public and amongst the group. The new ideas and skills we gain. Then there's working with special needs people and the difference we can make to their lives. The pleasure for me is in the giving and being part of something much bigger than can be achieved alone.

What is the most inspirational garden you have visited?

It was one of the first gardens I visited and had a big impact on me, Geoff Hamilton's garden in Rutland.

Who is your gardening hero?

I hate being pinned down to just one, because I like variety and have been inspired and picked up different ideas from several gardeners. Adam Frost is definitely high on my list, a down to earth gardener and designer of more practical and simple gardens. Diarmuid Gavin for his extrovert designs, not perhaps what you may want in your own garden, but it's the small elements and ideas you can take from them. But I also like the big bold style of Andy Sturgeon, the warm naturalistic designs of Mark Gregory, and the Rich brothers for their use of trees in many of their designs, also the Japanese gardener Kazuyuki Ishihara's attention to the smallest detail is incredibly inspiring.

Heather



How long have you been volunteering at HHP?

Since January, I met Jenny and some of the volunteers at the table decoration workshops last December and they all seemed a lovely bunch of people so I decided to join and see if I could help in anyway.

What do you do for a living?

I had been working for South Beds District Council before we became Central Bedfordshire Council and I stayed with them for 18 years, my first role was as a Secretary which I hated, I had never worked for Local Government before and they work in a completely different way to the private sector. I then moved into Human Resources which I really enjoyed.

This role changed when we became CBC and the job moved to Bedford so I then moved to a new role and became the Manager for Redhouse Court Supported Living in Houghton Regis.

I really enjoyed this role and working with the elderly, we had some fantastic times and I met many lovely and grateful residents during my 7 years there. I still help out and volunteer for those residents that don't have close family nearby.

What are your most enjoyable jobs in the garden?

I am really enjoying volunteering at the gardens and I have met some lovely people since I have been here. We always have a good laugh and carry out a real vast range of jobs, it's not always gardening sometimes it's arts and crafts. Jenny our manager is fantastic, and she loves to see straight lines when we are planting out, but I must admit I don't always get that right and earn my gold star!

I love talking to people and I am quite often found standing at the fence chatting to those that walk past. We get some really lovely compliments from the public who love to visit the gardens and park.

What is your favourite season and why?

My favourite seasons are Spring when everything is coming into life and the warmer weather is on its way, well hopefully, and Autumn with the beautiful colours of the trees.

What have you enjoyed or found the most rewarding thing about volunteering?

I had a go at growing some fruit and veg at home this year and my favourite was the golden beetroot it is delicious especially roasted. I can't wait to grow that again next year.

I look forward to coming every week and I will look forward to chatting to you when I'm there.

Jenny



How long have you been volunteering at HHP?

A couple of months, I'm the newbie

What profession/job do you or did you do?

Scheduler for BBC2, also worked in production for some time

What are your most enjoyable jobs in the garden?

Tea and cake! Plus being part of a team.

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What is your favourite season and why?

Spring, a new beginning – and my birthday!

What have you enjoyed or found the most rewarding thing about volunteering?

Being part of a team and learning.

What has been the funniest thing that you've been asked to do or has happened?

Putting clothes on bits of sticks!!!

What has been the most inspirational garden that you have visited?

Don't know, I have visited many gardens around the world, the beauty is that they are all unique

Who is your gardening hero?

Do you count David Attenborough? Worked with him as part of a production team for Blue planet. Otherwise my grandfather who could say the alphabet in apple varieties

What is your favourite vegetable and recipe using it?

I like all vegetables, particularly roasted, gratin dauphinoise, sing potatoes and onions, is a favourite.

Carol



How long have you been volunteering at HHP?

I've been volunteering since you did the storybook garden in Summer 2019.

What are your most enjoyable jobs in the garden?

Doing seed trays and potting on.

What is your favourite season and why?

Summer, because I love the feel of the sun on my face.

What have you enjoyed or found the most rewarding thing about volunteering? Knowing I have helped to make a difference.

What has been the funniest thing that you've been asked to do or

has happened?

Painting "stick man" faces by the hundred.

What has been the most inspirational garden that you have visited?

Cornwall's: Lost Garden of Heligan just after I lost my mother and a Robin insisted on following us all around the garden.

Who is your gardening hero?

Monty Don

What is your favourite vegetable and recipe using it?

Kale and doing Roast crispy kale to go with my Sunday dinner.

Is there anything else you would like to say

I love volunteering at the Kitchen garden, terrific atmosphere and friendship especially under the leadership of Jenny, Head Gardener.

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Pat



How long have you been volunteering?

Two years.

What profession /job do you or did you do?

Children's nanny

What are your most enjoyable jobs in the garden?

Planting bulbs harvesting vegetables and flowers. Seeing what a difference my little bit of effort makes

What is your favourite season and why?

Spring, seeing new shoots peeping through the soil and Daffodils moving in the breeze.

What have you enjoyed or found the most rewarding thing about volunteering?

I volunteer for something to do for myself and to help others. The journey has been more rewarding than I ever thought. It has given me confidence and I have also made new friends.

What has been the funniest thing that you've been asked to do or has happened?

Repairing a hole in the net covering of the cabbage plants so the pigeons didn't eat them.

What has been the most inspirational garden that you have visited?

Abbotsbury.

Who is your gardening hero?

Jeff Hamilton.

What is your favourite vegetable?

Carrot, roasted with a little balsamic vinegar.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

Thank you to all for all the fun and expertise that everyone has shared.

Some of our other volunteers.....







Keep in touch

Facebook

HoughtonHallPark

Instagram

HoughtonHallPark

Twitter

@BedsCountryside

Website

www.houghtonhallpark.org

Email

hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

Current Opening Times

The Visitors Centre, café and toilets closed until further notice.

Become a friend of Houghton Hall Park

Thinking of joining the Friends of Houghton Hall Park? Then get in touch with us to see what you can do to get involved. Here are some ideas below:

- Observational Surveys
- Community engagement
- Weeding and clearing
- Cleaning
- Watering
- Growing food and encourage healthy eating
- Teach younger generations (if you have a skill or qualification, let us know!)
- Become a community leader
- Support other volunteers
- Contribute to the annual park events calendar
- Volunteering assistant at events running at the park
- Curate local history talks at visitor centre
- Habitat enhancement work in the woodland and meadow

There are many opportunities to take part. If you would like to volunteer and join the Friends of Houghton Hall Park, please email hhp@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk



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