



Celebrating 400 years
1621 - 2021
Oxford Botanic Garden
& Arboretum



OXFORD BOTANIC GARDEN PRESS PACK

25th July 2021

Oxford Botanic Garden celebrates 400th birthday

Oxford Botanic Garden, the oldest in the country, is 400 years old today (**25th July 2021**). To celebrate, the Garden is announcing a full year of events and initiatives designed to place a spotlight on the Garden's world class work over four centuries, and its critical role in the future of botanical science, art and culture.

University of Oxford Chancellor, Baron Patten of Barnes, marked the day by planting a handkerchief tree (*Davidia involucrata*) in a commemorative ceremony performed fifty years ago (1971) by former university Chancellor and Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. He said: "As we commemorate four centuries of botanical science here today, it is tempting to dwell on the past and all this Garden's great achievements. However, I see this very much as a celebration of the future, and of the botanists who will help shape it. The world's flora is under threat and it is up to botanical centres of excellence like this one to meet the challenge. I applaud our Garden for everything it is doing to conserve rare and endangered plants and to raise people's awareness of the importance of plants in helping tackle some of the grand challenges facing our planet. And I'm delighted to contribute in some small part by planting this tree here today".

Botanic Garden Director Professor Simon Hiscock revealed a new rose created by acclaimed rose breeder Peter Beales Ltd to celebrate the 400th anniversary. In the afternoon, the public were invited into the grounds, to enjoy displays, poetry, music and refreshments.

At 2pm, the bells of Magdalen College rang out to mark the precise time when, on the day in 1621, the founding stone was laid, botanical sciences at Oxford began, and an immense source of literary and artistic inspiration for writers such as Lewis Carroll, JRR Tolkien, Evelyn Waugh, Philip Pullman and Colin Dexter was created.



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Professor Hiscock said: “We are thrilled to be able to celebrate the 400th anniversary with our visitors, our supporters and the Oxford community. The Botanic Garden is much-loved by Oxford residents and is appreciated now more than ever as people seek to enjoy the wellbeing benefits that beautiful outdoor spaces bring. The Garden has an incredible history, as a place of scientific endeavour and discovery and an inspiration to writers and artists. We hope the anniversary year provides an opportunity for people to discover more about this unique garden and our plans for its future.”

History

The Garden’s founder, the first Earl of Danby, Henry Danvers KG wanted a ‘Physic Garden’ for teaching medical students about medicinal plants. He leased the five acre site from Magdalen College and, at 2pm on July 25th 1621, the founding stone was laid by the University of Oxford’s Vice Chancellor.

Over the next 20 years the level of the land, which sits within the flood plain of the River Cherwell was raised with “four thousand cart loads of mucke and dunge” and a wall with four gateways built to enclose the Garden. It was planted in the 1640s following the appointment of the Garden’s first Keeper Jacob Bobart the Elder in 1642. In 1648, Bobart created a catalogue of all the plants which he grew, now preserved as a treasured ancient manuscript at the Garden.

The Physic Garden was renamed the Botanic Garden in the 1830s by Sherardian Professor Charles Daubeny to reflect its growing focus on experimental botany and taxonomy. In 1946 the Garden was expanded with the lease of a further three acres from Christ Church at the southern end adjacent to Christ Church Meadow.

In 1963 the Botanic Garden expanded further by taking on the management of eight acres of pinetum at the University’s Nuneham Estate at Nuneham Courtenay which then expanded to become the 130 acre Harcourt Arboretum.

Today the Botanic Garden and Harcourt Arboretum is a year-round oasis of biodiversity. It cultivates 5000 different plants used in research, teaching, conservation, and engaging with the public.



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The Garden today

Today the Garden's mission is to 'share the scientific wonder and importance of plants with the world'. Botanic gardens play a crucial role in the conservation of the world's flora at a time when this has never been more important, because two in five of the world's plant species are threatened with extinction.

Oxford Botanic Garden carries out work around the world with local botanists, for example in Ethiopia, Japan and the Canary Islands, to conserve and protect rare flora. Recently botanists at the Garden described a new species from the rainforests of Malaysia on the cusp of extinction. Research carried out at the Garden focusses on the evolutionary processes by which plants form new species, and the potential for plants to inspire technological design. For example the Garden's work on a carnivorous pitcher plant, shows potential in applications such as inkjet printing.

The Garden's vision for the future is to develop new infrastructure, most notably new glasshouses, to expand the plant collections to support this internationally important research and conservation work, and to inspire people with the vital importance of plants at a time when this is needed urgently.

A Year of celebration

July 25th 2021 will mark the launch of a year of events and activities to celebrate the history and activities of the Botanic Garden, and its ambitious plans for the future (see: <https://www.obga.ox.ac.uk/>).

Highlights will include: a new song cycle at the Oxford Lieder Festival, performances of new work by Oxford Professor of Poetry Alice Oswald, concerts by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and the official launch of the celebration rose at the Chelsea Flower Show in May 2022.

A special celebration whisky has also been produced in collaboration with the Oxford Artisan Distillery. An exhibition at the Weston Library, *Roots to Seeds: 400 years of Oxford botany*, runs until October 2021.



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The Same Blackbird – a birthday poem from Alice Oswald

To mark the quatercentenary of the Oxford Botanic Garden, Oxford Professor of Poetry Alice Oswald is publishing a 'postal performance' of new music and poetry.

The Same Blackbird contains two excerpts from Strathmore – a scrupulous transcription of blackbird song by Stevie Wishart – and Blackbird Rhapsody, a response by Alice Oswald. The reverse of the wrapper shows a mezzotint by Sarah Gillespie, which she has engraved and edited as part of the wider artistic collaboration.

Male blackbirds start singing in late winter. At first they practice a series of subsongs, which they edit and combine into a complex final melody. Alice Oswald's rhapsody observes the same structure. It begins by attending to the blackbird's rehearsal, then searches through various forms to find the right sound. It is a fanfare to awaken the Oxford Garden, whose own response will be heard in July 2022, a year from now.

The Strathmore blackbird was recorded by the zoomusicologist Geoff Sample in Sutherland in May 2015. A snippet of Stevie Wishart's transcription and notation are shown here along with a representation of the song's sonic 'heartbeat' in the form of a spectrogram.

The Same Blackbird – Sarah Gillespie's mezzotint envelope and, as separately printed enclosures, Alice Oswald's Rhapsody and two extracts from Stevie Wishart's Strathmore score – is being published by The Letter Press in an edition of 500, 250 of which are offered free to subscribers.

– ENDS –



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A range of **high-resolution photography** is available here:

<https://tinyurl.com/OBG400th>

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