

Roots and Records: Managing Garden Archive Data



Welcome to My First Blog as Data Manager at Parks & Gardens UK

Hello and welcome! This is my first blog post as the Data Manager for Parks & Gardens UK, and I am excited to share my journey with you. There is a lot I want to tell you about, but first, a little bit of history.

How did I get here?

My background is not in archives, gardening, or history, but rather in User Experience (UX) Research, a field I have worked in for over 25 years. If you are unfamiliar with what a UX Researcher does, let me explain:

A User Experience (UX) Researcher is a professional who studies and understands how users interact with products, services, or systems. The goal is to gather insights into user behaviours, needs, motivations, and challenges to inform the design and development of user-friendly and effective products. (Thanks, ChatGPT, for that concise explanation!)

Therefore, while I am not an archivist or a historian, I bring a wealth of experience in organising and analysing data, as well as making websites more engaging and user-friendly. When I came across this part-time role in May 2021, during the height of the pandemic, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to apply my skills in a new and exciting way.

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My Role at Parks & Gardens UK

Since joining the team, I have been working alongside a wonderful group of volunteers to enhance the visibility and engagement of the archive. We have updated records to improve accuracy and consistency, optimised images, and made significant improvements to the search facility. In addition, there is more to come—several exciting projects are in the pipeline to further enhance this unique digital archive.

The Parks & Gardens UK archive is a treasure trove of thousands of hours of research, contributed by volunteers from various Gardens Trusts and other contributors. It houses a vast collection of historic and modern photographs, offering a unique perspective on how these beautiful locations have evolved over time.

2024 and Beyond

Here we are in 2024, and I am proud to say that I am still here, over three years later, continuing to help this archive grow and thrive. Our presence on social media, particularly on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram, is steadily growing, and we are constantly working on new ways to improve the site. From enhancing search functionality to finding and uploading research and photographs, there is always something to keep the archive vibrant and up-to-date.

The Challenge of Funding

Managing the archive comes with its challenges, particularly when it comes to funding. The site relies heavily on grants, so I have to be mindful of costs and expenditures, which means that not every project, no matter how great, can come to fruition. Unfortunately, the site currently uses ads to help cover expenses. As a UX Researcher, I find this frustrating because I know that ads can detract from the user experience. I would like to reduce or eliminate the ads. However, they remain a necessary part of keeping the archive running.

A Journey of Learning and Discovery

Working on the Parks & Gardens UK archive has been an incredible journey of learning and discovery. I have gained a deeper understanding of garden design and heritage in the UK, and I have had the pleasure of learning about iconic designers such as Gertrude Jekyll, Edwin Landseer Lutyens, and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown.

Most importantly, my role has given me the opportunity to work at Hestercombe Gardens in Somerset, an extraordinarily beautiful location. Through this work, I have met some of the most wonderful, creative, and interesting people, all passionate about preserving the rich history of gardens and landscapes in the UK.

Thank you for joining me on this journey—I look forward to sharing more insights and stories with you in future posts!

Fiona Baker