



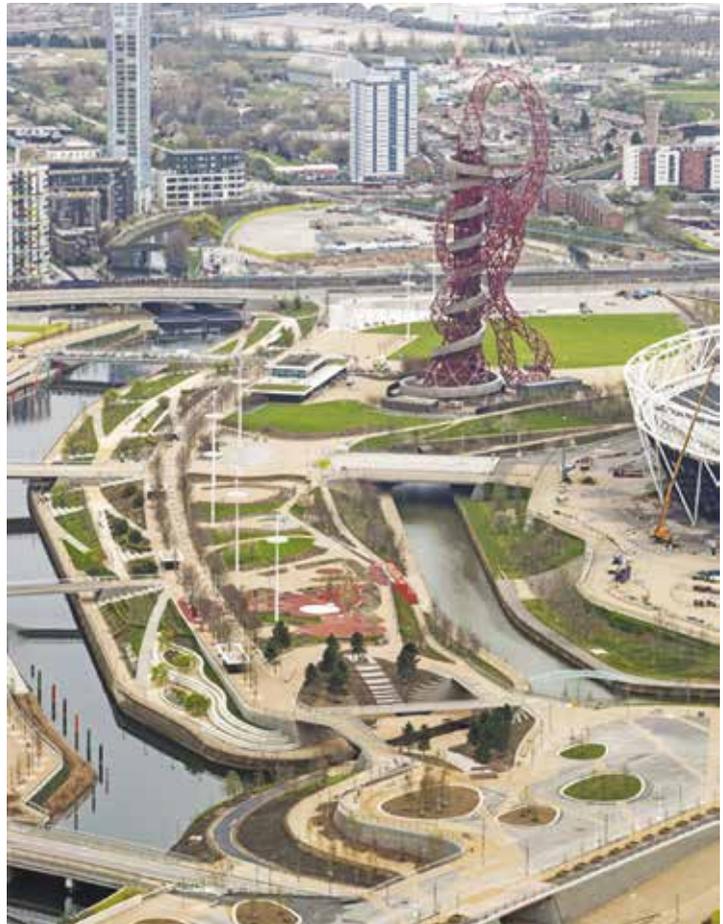
The 2012 Gardens in 2016

At the end of June 40 members of the Worcestershire Group visited the London Olympic Park to see how it's looking, four years on.

It is the largest, new, urban park that Britain has seen for more than a century. Now, the renamed Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park covers around 250 acres, double its size in 2012 and with the addition of nearly 6,000 trees and 120,000 flowering plants.

The park is currently attracting around 4 million visitors a year, including an increasing number of tourists – placing it somewhere between London's V&A Museum and the Science Museum, and streets ahead of Kew Gardens in terms of popularity. Visitor numbers will be boosted in coming years as new housing developments in the area are completed.

For the Hardy Planter, the three main areas of interest are the 2012 Gardens, the



A view of the southern end of the Olympic Park in early 2014, with the edge of the Olympic Stadium (now West Ham's home ground) on the right and the red ArcelorMittal Orbit structure by Anish Kapoor.

## A Gold-Medal park

Mick Dunstan

Great British Garden, and the new Pleasure Gardens – all clustered around the Olympic Stadium, now the home of West Ham Football Club.

**The 2012 Gardens** feature 70,000 plants from 250 different species from across the world, split into four main spaces – Europe, North America, Asia and the Southern Hemisphere. They are the creation of a group of people including Professors Nigel Dunnett and James Hitchmough from the University of Sheffield and Sarah Price, and they bear the naturalistic hallmarks of their gardening style.

For example, the European garden planting includes Silver Spear Grass – *Stipa calamagrostis*, *Campanula lactiflora*, *Centaurea dealbata* ‘Sternbergii’, *Cephalaria gigantea*, *Deschampsia cespitosa*, *Euphorbia palustris*, *Geranium sylvaticum*, *Lychnis chalconica*, purple loosestrife – *Lythrum salicaria*, *Molinia caerulea*, great burnet – *Sanguisorba officinalis*, *Succisa pratensis*, yellow ox-eye – *Telekia speciosa*, and globe flower – *Trollius europaeus*.

**The Great British Garden** is a smaller, calm, more domestic area, slightly off the beaten track. It also involved Sarah Price’s work along with two amateur gardeners, Rachel Read and Hannah Clegg.

**The Pleasure Gardens** are on the site of the main pedestrian plaza at the Games. They’re designed by Dutch garden designer Piet Oudolf and landscape architects James Corner Field, responsible for New York’s famous High Line linear park built 30 feet above the clamour of Manhattan.

**The gardeners** The Landscape Group (TLG) is two years into a 10-year contract to run the park, with a possible 5-year extension at the end of that time. None of its staff wear TLG branded kit – their badges say ‘Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park’. A total of 23 gardeners look after the park and, as with many such spaces, their



Construction is under way all around the Park.



The people here give some idea of the scale of the project.

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main duties are garden maintenance – including grass cutting, weeding and litter picking. Their average age has risen slightly after recent recruitment and is now in the low 30s – still on the young side for such a place. In London’s Regent Park the average age of the gardeners is in the high 40s, according to Alastair Bayford, regional

operations director of TLG. In charge of day-to-day operations is 33-year-old contract supervisor Chris James, who’s worked at the park since 2010. “I love the whole park, not just the open spaces but a lot of the iconic buildings, like the Aquatics Centre, as well. Not many people can say they not only helped to construct an Olympic park but also help to manage the legacy.

“The best part of my job is the reaction of visitors. It’s always positive – I can’t honestly remember a single negative in the last 18 months or more.”

Chris and his team see designer Nigel Dunnett, and his colleague James Hitchmough, on occasional visits. “Nigel will be here every few weeks or so to take a look at how things are going, to give us advice, and so on. He points us in the right direction. Since the gardens were put in during

2011 there have not been any major issues, and we have certainly not had any failures with anything.”

The soil at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park is artificial, slightly sandy and with low fertility to suit the planting, which has grown and matured a lot since 2012.

“The soil is the same right across the park and is not the most productive. You won’t see many worms, bugs and other creatures. In the natural course of things, of course, it will become more fertile as years pass. It suits the plants we grow. We have irrigation systems in some areas but by no means all. The soil, despite being slightly sandy, does retain water. None of the water in the system is drinkable. It’s reclaimed dirty water from our on-site wastewater treatment facility.

“I remember putting the plants in all those years ago – it had to be done efficiently and fast – but look at it now. It’s very pretty, though I say so myself.”

The park’s grass looked green and healthy when the Worcestershire Group visited. “It’s normal amenity grass – it’s not posh Wimbledon stuff that would be destroyed by the numbers we have visiting – and it doesn’t get a lot of fertilizer,” says Chris. “But with the irrigation we keep it looking pretty good. Virtually all of the planting here is perennials with very few annuals at all.”

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The planting is well established, despite the imported low-fertility ‘soil’.

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The 2012 Gardens

Chris has been interested in plants from childhood, looking after his Nan's garden in the school holidays. One of his favourite gardens, where he once worked, is Down House near Sevenoaks, the home of Charles Darwin, now run by English Heritage.

Recruiting staff can sometimes pose challenges. "We still try to take on local people to work in the park, but they need to have some sort of background or interest in horticulture or gardening. If they have horticultural qualifications that's even better. But if not, and if they are hard-working and willing to learn, we will train them."

Two members of his young team are 25-year-old Alex Turner, a horticulture graduate from Essex's Writtle College, and 22-year-old Lee Young, who spent three years studying horticulture, forestry and arboriculture at Capel Manor College in nearby Enfield.

Lee, who lives locally and has the job title of grounds maintenance operative, says that for many local residents the park is their garden. "They might have a small balcony but that is about it for many people. I don't think many of the people who work here have a garden either."

Lee's worked there for 2½ years. "Gardening started as a hobby when I was only about 12 and it's grown from there, I suppose. Working in an office just wouldn't suit me. I like the atmosphere between colleagues. The Great British Garden is my favourite area.

It's usually quiet, hidden away around the back of the stadium, and it attracts wildlife such as bees and butterflies.

"Away from work, I do have a garden and I've started growing some edible plants – rhubarb, gooseberries and tomatoes plus four types of chilli – there'll be more chilli next year – and herbs. I'm really into trees and woody shrubs. I think my favourite gardens are the ones at Capel Manor – especially the

woodland walk – and at Kew."

Heligan Gardens in Cornwall are South Park team leader Alex's personal favourite. "They're unlike any other I've seen in the UK," he says. "I like the tropical feel of the place, and its unique areas such as the bamboo groves."

At the Olympic Park, he says his main work since joining two years ago is a mix of basic maintenance and more skilled work like turf laying and lawn care. He also works off site, leading a contract



The Great British Garden is a tranquil area, tucked away.



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in Hackney and other sites in central and west London. He became interested in horticulture while working at Regent College doing a range of jobs including portering, decorating and gardening.

“In the Park, one or two plants have grown really well”, he says. “The achilleas have gone mad this year, as have the persicarias in the Asia garden, but not to the point where they have taken over. If that happens, we tend to dig out the excess and replant them

somewhere else in the park. Flowering tends to start off with a lot of purple-spectrum plants and a lot of yellows to follow, symphytums and rudbeckias for example. We don’t have many reds though.

“As gardeners, we don’t know the names of every single plant in the park. There are just so many. In terms of maintenance, the perennials get cut down in winter, around January. We start at one end of the park and work our way through

slowly. Then, through the year, if something dies back we remove it. And other than that, there’s a lot of weeding. Literally we leave the plants to their own devices.”

Alex sees the prospect of career progression and hopes to be a park ranger or head gardener somewhere in 10 years or so.

And we’ll leave the final word to Alastair Bayford. “We genuinely believe the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park is a resource for people from all walks of life, be it people with an interest in plants or people who simply enjoy open spaces. We think there’s a benefit to everyone who comes to see it.

“And we’re not finished yet. The transformation project we’re involved in aims to stitch the local community to the park even more strongly in future – as the new West Ham involvement in the stadium exemplifies.”

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The Pleasure Gardens – people were sitting on the lawned areas, chatting, playing with kids, having picnics. It was a wonderful atmosphere.

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## The Worcestershire Group's verdict

The visit had been arranged after Alastair's talk about the park as part of the Group's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration last autumn. Several members enjoyed it so much that they asked if a visit could be arranged.

Worcestershire outings organiser Stella Sullivan takes up the story. "Our visit to the Olympic Park in Stratford was perhaps a bit of a departure for the HPS, in that it is a public park rather than a garden, but the feedback and discussion after Alastair's talk indicated there was a lot of interest in seeing it for ourselves.

"On the day unfortunately Alastair was unable to meet us as planned to give a bit more information, but the Park was looking good, with the 2012 gardens just getting into their stride and the Pleasure Gardens on the former spectator areas were full of colour and interest.

"I'm not normally a fan of prairie planting – I've seen examples that seem to feature a lot of brown grass – but this was an exception. The Great British Gardens, themed in gold, silver and bronze, were also looking good with many native plants blending into the canal hedgerows.



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Three of the Park's 23 gardeners – (left to right) Lee, Alex and Chris.

"I walked over to the velodrome (I'm into cycling!) and was impressed by the way the verges along the road that cuts through the park were full of wildflowers, and also by the number of people using the park: cyclists, runners, children playing,

families having picnics, all taking advantage of this colourful environment.

"There were lots of positive comments. And on our way back the lovely gardens of E A Bowles at Myddelton House provided us with a complete contrast." 🌸



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Natural planting characterises much of the southern end of the park, with a lot of annuals. This area is a sloping bank that leads down to the River Lea which runs through the park. It was quite lovely.

**Mick Dunstan** is Speaker Secretary of the Worcestershire Group.

To arrange a visit contact Chris on [CJames@thelandscapegroup.co.uk](mailto:CJames@thelandscapegroup.co.uk) or Kevin Stott on [KStott@thelandscapegroup.co.uk](mailto:KStott@thelandscapegroup.co.uk)