

Abbey Gardens Friends

Newsletter, Spring Edition 2025



"Helping keep the Abbey Gardens a joy to visit "

AGM REPORT : Our annual general meeting was held on 12th February in the Unitarian Meeting House. About 35 members attended and wine and nibbles were enjoyed. We heard reports from Lynda Seldis, (our volunteer gardener/Bury in Bloom coordinator) on work undertaken in the past year; Simon Hobson (pictured speaking below, Manager Abbey Gardens, Green Space and Heritage, West Suffolk



Council), on the developments in the Abbey garden, including how the £5000 Margaret Wilkin legacy has enabled the planting of a winter garden to brighten the central flower beds in the colder, darker months. Damien Parker (Green Space and Heritage Manager, West Suffolk Council) spoke on progress with works enabled by Lottery funding

to enhance the visitor experience in the Abbey Gardens and St Edmundsbury Cathedral precincts. Doug Beardon gave the Treasurer's report (standing in for Debbie Bateson, our new Treasurer) which went through the AGF accounts for the past year and revealed AGF has £14636 in the bank.

On a sadder note, Libby Ranzetta announced that she was stepping down, both as chair of AGF and also from the committee. Libby was presented with an engraved glass memento on behalf of the Abbey Garden Friends as a thank you for the time she had devoted to us. Libby was surprised but delighted with her unexpected presentation! Thanks to all our speakers; Rob Cunningham for refreshments; and everyone who helped make the evening a success.

AGF has around 90 members ! Let's try to reach 100 before the next AGM.

THE ABBEY GARDEN FRIENDS COMMITTEE

Chair - Paul Marsh

Secretary - Ian Hobley

Treasurer - Debbie Bateson

Membership Secretary - Margaret Steavenson,

Committee members - Rob Cunningham-Snell, Simon Charlton (elected at AGM).

All can be contacted via the AGF secretary : abbeygardens.bse@outlook.com

WALK AND TALK IN THE ABBEY GARDEN ON 29TH

JANUARY. Simon Hobson and Paul Marsh hosted another successful walk around the garden for 15 Abbey Gardens Friends. It was a cold but beautifully sunny winter day which provided gentle exercise and some stimulating conversations.



"As a new member of the Friends of Abbey Gardens I attended a walk and talk on a sunny Wednesday in

January. It was a very interesting hour, a mixture of horticultural information and history of the gardens. Snippets of information included that in the past the gardens housed a collection of mainly donated exotic animals and on one occasion hosted a tightrope walker. The plants in the garden have changed over the years but many of the trees have survived the different owners. Some of the trees are extremely old and unusual. It was a very informative talk and I am looking forward to the next one. Thank you Simon and Paul "

Karol -volunteer gardener

We will be organising more walks in the springtime, with booking through Ian Hobley, AGF secretary:

abbeygardens.bse@outlook.com



VOLUNTEERS Margaret Steavenson Is looking for help, to propose text and generate ideas for a new information board for the 19th century fountain & sundial gifted by the Marquess of Bristol. The board would tell their history and functions and explain how they came to be in the garden.

Contact Margaret via: abbeygardens.bse@outlook.com

Historical Notes No 5: Cutting the grass before 1900. by Paul Marsh

The Abbey Garden, all 14 acres of it, has its fair share of grass. People walk on it, picnic on it, play on it, admire it, smell it, put-up notices to tell you to keep off it! Lets explore a bit about grass and how it would have been cared for until the advent of the first powered lawnmowers.



As a rule of thumb grass needs a temperature of between 8-10 degrees Celsius to grow. Wind, rain, soil condition, and sun are also factors which influence its rate of growth. In favourable conditions grass can grow 2 or 3 cm per week, so think of the challenge of stopping the garden becoming unkempt. So how did the gardeners of the 19th century keep control?

Prior to the invention of the "push along" lawnmower the two ways of controlling grass were scythes and ruminant animals such as sheep and cattle. Scythes have been used for 100's of years to cut crops such as wheat, make hay and to create lawn (derived from the French for a glade and/or smooth cloth). From the late 16th century onward to have a wide expanse of lawn around your residence told

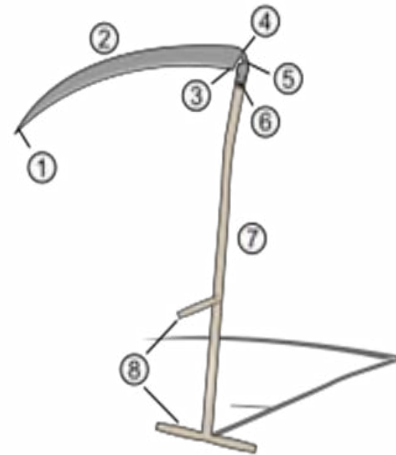
everyone that you had money: for “mowers” to scythe the grass or someone to manage the animals

Parts of a scythe:

1. Toe 2. Chine 3. Beard

4. Heel 5. Tang 6. Ring

7. Snath or snaith 8. Grips



6 things that you might not know about cutting grass with a scythe: (1) Better to cut grass when damp (versus dry for lawn mowers), early morning or evening is best (2) Scythes work using a slicing action (rather than chopping action). (3) The blade of the scythe must stay in contact with the ground as it slices. The balance point is one third of the way back from the toe (tip). (4) Blades need to be sharp and sharpened (honed) frequently, perhaps every 4 or 5 minutes, using a sharpening stone. (5) An experienced “mower” can scythe up to 1 acre in a day (depending on weather, type of grass, landscape etc). (6) Raking up cuttings to prevent them turning an unsightly brown is essential and very time consuming.

Ruminants: a quick note on a sheep and their eating habits! Sheep need to eat about 2-3 % of their own body weight each day and it seems about 6 sheep per acre of grassland is about right. So they would have been very useful in keeping the grass in check, particularly in and around the ancient ruins. But sheep do not a smooth lawn make, and their pooh/ticks/behaviour may have proved a bit too close for comfort for the genteel subscribers of 19th century Bury when the new fangled

lawnmowers became available. (Picture below - sheep grazing in garden c1900. Courtesy of the Jarman -Spanton Photo Collection).

The human powered “push along” mechanical lawnmower arrived in 1830, invented by Mr Edwin Beard Budding of Stroud, a self-trained engineer and inventor (he also invented the adjustable spanner), who



repaired machines in the textile industry. He realised that the method of shearing used to remove excess nap on cloth could be applied to cutting grass. He went into partnership with John Ferrabee, owner of Phoenix Ironworks, who became the business brains behind the invention, looking after the patents, finance, sales, franchises etc. The Budding / Ferrabee 19-inch grass mower had a wrought iron frame, a big and small roller, a set of spiralling blades on a metal spindle and wooden grass box. It continued to be made in various forms by several manufacturers well into the 20th century. It had to be pushed along (usually also pulled by a second person) to rotate the blades, cuttings were collected in the removable tray. It seems early adopters of these machines were Kew Gardens and Regents Park Zoological Gardens, where the foreman Mr Curtis said, “It does as much work as six or eight men with scythes and brooms... performing the whole so perfectly as not to leave a mark of any kind behind.” (Right: Budding’s 1st lawn mower)

I can find no trace (as yet) of Bury Botanic Garden having one of the early “push along” grass cutters and can only speculate that it did acquire this new technology for the grass



promenades of the garden where the clean cut of a Budding/Ferrabee would have been a great improvement on scythes or sheep. However, there is evidence that Nathaniel Hodson, and his successors, Latimer Hooper and Robert Pettit, employed grass cutting machinery from the 1850/60's, as contemporary newspaper adverts have endorsements from the Botanic Garden. As push mowers became popular companies making them proliferated. Shanks of Arbroath, Ransomes of Ipswich and Greens of Southwark were all rival manufacturers. Mr Charles Beard with premises at 7 & 8 Cornhill, Bury seems to have been the supplier of lawn mowers to the Botanic Garden . Between July and September 1861 Beard has adverts in the Bury and Norwich Post and The Botanical Magazine which state that he is the agent for Shanks of Arbroath and that the Botanic Garden uses mowers supplied by him. Whilst we don't know exactly which mowers these were, I have included a picture of a horse drawn contender. The picture (above) dates from 1909 but the Shanks machine behind the horse is a design from the 1850's.



If cutting grass tickles your interest try these sites : for mowers <https://www.hdtrust.org> & <https://oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk> & for scythes: <https://www.scythecymru.co.uk>



RHS COMMUNITIES: In mid-January we received an invite to complete the Royal Horticultural Society Communities national survey. Abbey Garden Friends has been linked with the RHS via the Britain/Anglia in Bloom scheme and the RHS "My Neighbourhood" network. Apart from describing our gardening activities we will be entered into a prize draw to win £125 of garden supplies and some free consultancy (focused on being a successful community gardening group). Read more at: communities@rhs.org.uk

A warm welcome to volunteer gardeners Karol,Lainey and Linda who have joined us since the last newsletter.

ARE YOU A SUCKER?

In mid-January the volunteers and professional team descended on the Great Churchyard and removed the epicormic growth (suckers) from the bases of the many majestic 19th century lime trees which line the historic pathways. 3 hours work, 7 pairs of secateurs and a chainsaw made fairly short work of them.



Question: *Why would you bother to remove suckers you might ask?*

Answer: *if the suckers are allowed to sprout some arboriculturists argue they will drain vital nutrients and energy from the main tree, which of course will hinder its growth and health. Others argue the suckers are a stress response to heavy pruning, a regeneration mechanism for the tree's survival strategy. However, suckers also spoil the look of the tree (to the minds of most people) and if left unchecked they will sprout in short order, creating a sort of ragged bush at the base of the tree. That's why they had to go!*

USING THE MARGARET WILKIN LEGACY FOR THE NEWLY CREATED WINTER GARDEN



The plant varieties in the new winter garden, planted by the West Suffolk team and AGF volunteers

Callicarpa bodinieri "Imperial Pearl" (top left)

Cornus alba "Eligantissima"

Cornus alba "Gouchaultii"

Cornus sang "Midwinter Fire" (centre left)

Cornus alba "Baton Rouge"

Cornus sang "Anny's Winter Orange"

Cornus sericea "Flaviramea"

Rubus cockburnianus (bottom left)

Salix daphnoides



Common names : **Cornus** = dogwood, **Salix daphnoides** = violet

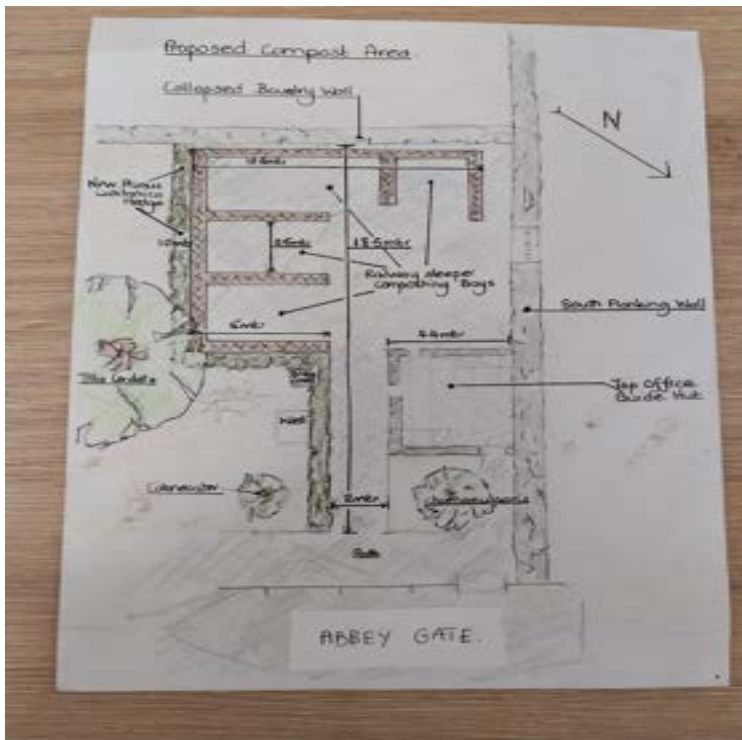
willow, **Callicarpa** = Beautyberry, French mulberry = sour-bush. **Rubus cockburnianus** = white stemmed bramble . (image right - newly planted cornus in the central beds)

STOP PRESS : ***From April 1st 2025 Abbey Garden Friends will be corporate members of the Suffolk Gardens Trust. Check out the website for invitations to private gardens not open to the public.....***

<http://www.suffolkgardenstrust.org/index.html>

NEW COMPOST BAYS BEHIND THE ABBEY GATE & TOURIST GUIDES LODGE .

SIMON HOBSON HAS BEEN HARD AT WORK PLANNING A NEW FACILITY FOR THE GARDEN AIMED AT IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY AND REDUCING COSTS. LOOK OUT FOR DEVELOPMENTS BEHIND THE ABBEY GATE WHERE WEST SUFFOLK COUNCIL ARE CONSTRUCTING MULTIPLE BAYS FOR COMPOSTING. THIS WILL USE ALL THE "WASTE" VEGETATION FROM THE GARDEN TO CREATE COMPOST - DRASTICALLY REDUCING THE TRANSPORT MILES AND REDUCING THE NEED TO BUY LARGE VOLUMES OF EXPENSIVE GARDEN COMPOST. SEE BELOW FOR A PICTURE OF THE NEWLY REFURBISHED TOURIST GUIDES' LODGE AND NEARBY COMPOST BAYS :-



←TOURIST GUIDES LODGE↑

← THE ABBEY GATE SIDE WALL

"A Garden is the purest of human Pleasures"

William Curtis, 1787, was the founder and editor of Curtis's Botanical Magazine, the oldest botanical journal in the world, still published today by the Royal Horticultural Society. Nathiel Hodson supplied specimen plants for the

magazine, between about 1815 and 1830. These were then drawn and coloured (by hand) for inclusion in the magazine.

SPEAKING OF TALKING.....

Paul Marsh continued his series of talks on behalf of AGF, about the history of the Abbey Gardens : **PROBUS GROUP, BURY ST**

EDMUNDS, AT THE CATHEDRAL ON 9TH JANUARY: a talk to a

packed room of attentive PROBUS members. Apart from a few technical hitches the talk went very well and PROBUS donated £50 to the work of AGF and invited Paul to return to speak again in their

2025 -2026 lecture series. **SUFFOLK GARDENS TRUST AT STONHAM HOUSE MUSIC ROOM ON 22ND FEBRUARY:** a

talk to a large audience of receptive and knowledgeable garden history buffs. Paul made some new revelations about the history of the garden and offered to host a visit from Suffolk Gardens Trust members during their 2026-2027 season of open gardens. The trust has made a generous donation to Abbey Garden Friends. **FORTHCOMING TALK AT THE ODDFELLOWS**

HALL ON 1ST APRIL AT 10.00am, TICKETS £5



6000 *is a magic number when it comes to planting bulbs in January!*



Children from the Guildhall Feoffment School assisted by teachers, AGF volunteers and the professional gardeners, helped plant 6000 assorted bulbs beside the walkways just inside the Abbey Gate. The bulbs are hidden under a covering of bark chippings and will be a joy to see in the spring and summer for

many years to come. Thanks to everyone involved, especially the schoolchildren for coping well with a very cold day.

THE BULBS PLANTED WERE PURCHASED BY THE ABBEY GARDEN FRIENDS



MEMORIAL ROSE GARDEN NEWS - THE ROSES HAVE RECENTLY BEEN PRUNED BY THE VOLUNTEER GARDENERS AND THE WEST SUFFOLK PROFESSIONAL GARDENERS IN THE PREPARATION FOR THE ARRIVAL OF SPRING. IMAGE RIGHT IS THE DISPLAY IN PREVIOUS YEARS AND IMAGE LEFT SHOWS THE NEW GROWTH SPROUTING IN LATE FEBRUARY. PRUNING IS ALWAYS OUTWARDS FROM JUST ABOVE THE SELECTED BUD/LEAF JOINT.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE ABBEY GARDEN – 14 CLUES. GOOD LUCK!

1. SMALL HAND TOOL FOR PLANTING/WEEDING (6)
2. THE BURY ST EDMUNDS LEADSMITH/ENGINEER WHO INSTALLED HOT WATER IN HODSON'S GREENHOUSES, FAMOUS FOR AGRICULTURAL MACHINES (THE ROAD WAITROSE IS ON!) (10)
3. SURNAME OF THE "FATHER OF BRITISH GARDENING " – JOHN CLAUDIUS (6)
4. CREATOR OF THE BURY BOTANIC GARDEN (6)
5. THE MAN LOOKING AFTER THE ABBEY GARDEN NOW (6)
6. HODSON'S HYBRID PLANT, ITS 1ST LETTER IS M (7)
7. FIRST NAME OF HODSON'S FIRST WIFE (8)
8. FIRST NAME OF HODSON'S SECOND WIFE (5)
9. HALF THE SUBSCRIPTION TO THE GARDEN IN 1820, FIRST LETTER G (6)
10. SOUTH AMERICAN PLANT POPULAR WITH VICTORIANS, WITH RED FLOWERS, LAST TWO LETTERS IA (6)

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11. POPULAR SUMMER PLANT INTRODUCED TO ENGLAND FROM MEXICO, VIA SPAIN (NAMED AFTER ANDREAS DAHL) (6)
12. SURNAME OF MAN WHO RAN THE BOTANIC GARDEN FROM ABOUT 1865-1891, (STROKING A FAMILY ANIMAL?), FIRST LETTER P (6)
13. THE KING WHOSE CORONATION PROMPTED THE REARRANGEMENT OF THE CENTRAL BEDS IN 1935 (8)
14. THE NAME OFTEN GIVEN TO A HEATED GREENHOUSE IN THE 19TH CENTURY, LAST LETTER E (5)

CAN YOU HELP IDENTIFY **MYSTERY MAN?**



Can you help identify the man who spends his time recovering pennies from the river Lark and the water garden? Mystery man has donated over £40 of his watery finds to AGF and we would like to thank him in person. Contact the AGF secretary if you can tell us the mystery man's identity !

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- **QUIZ ANSWERS:** 1.TROWEL 2.ROBERT BOBY 3.LOUDEN 4.HODSON
5.HOBSON 6.MIMULUS 7.CAROLINE 8.BETSY 9.GUINEA
10.FUSCHIA 11.DAHLIA 12.PETTIT 13.GEORGE IV 14.STOVE
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 - **SCORE 10-14:** TIME FOR YOU TO CONSIDER LEADING A GARDEN TOUR
 - **SCORE 5-9 :**KEEP READING THE NEWSLETTERS AND THE ST EDMUNDSBURY CHRONICLES
 - **SCORE 0-4 :** OH DEAR! LAMENTABLE! LEAST SAID THE BETTER!
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THE ABBEY GARDEN FRIENDS COMMITTEE

JUST IN ON THE GRAPEVINE! ...JUDGING DAY FOR BRITAIN IN BLOOM FOR
BURY & ABBEY GARDEN IS 4TH AUGUST 2025.

Thanks for that news from Lynda Seldis