

Waterperry Newsletter 2023



January this year seemed to be all about hard graft. After the usual mind-numbing insanity of stock-take in the shop, helped by using hired-in scanners (we came crashing into the 21st Century this year), the garden team started on two large projects. Renovating the Virgin's Walk and turning it into a Winter border was one and completely re-doing the Rose Garden was the other. The simple plan in the rose garden was to swap the paths for the beds and the beds for the paths to combat 30 years of accumulating rose plant sickness. This involved weeks of double digging (that is just what it sounds like: at least twice as much digging as any normal person would ever want to do). We cut off the turf from the old paths and laid out the new ones. On some days it was so cold that, instead of being able to roll the turf up, we moved great slabs of it, laying it like paving slabs. Another project was to cut in half one of the old wind-breaks in the orchard which involved a lot of tricky chainsaw work from the cage on the forklift. Happily there were no fatalities involved. The snowdrops put on a grand display in February and we celebrated a Ukrainian birthday and took cheesy photos.





March and April are the months for the bulbs and we were well pleased with the results of all the planting that had been done in the autumn. This year, as well as the narcissi, we had a new bluebell area.

The most exciting thing for the teashop staff, after a year long saga of rearranging the whole electrical system, was getting new ovens.

The rose garden progressed with paving slabs cut to size and laid. Custom made obelisks were put in place.

The first of the car rallies arrived and children searched for Easter bunnies in the gardens.

I met Andrew, the director of a film company called Flabbergast, in the teashop. He was interested in filming Make It At Market Series 2 here. I showed him around the site and fed him scones, jam and clotted cream. He seemed really keen. I gave him another scone to eat on the long drive back to Scotland.





May was a busy month. The gardens were taking off with colour everywhere. We managed to remove the vast old baker's oven from the teashop with millimetres to spare and a new smaller, better one was installed. The new oak pergola arrived and was erected very quickly and the marquee for the other side of the teashop went up as usual. Within weeks someone from the village objected to both on planning grounds and I had difficulty subduing deeply murderous intentions toward them. We started to install our rainwater catchment tanks in May and these have proved to be really successful delivering large quantities of the best kind of water at above mains pressure to our thirsty plants in the nursery and plant area via built in pumps. Meanwhile, in the house, Jennie made some serious progress with private house hire.

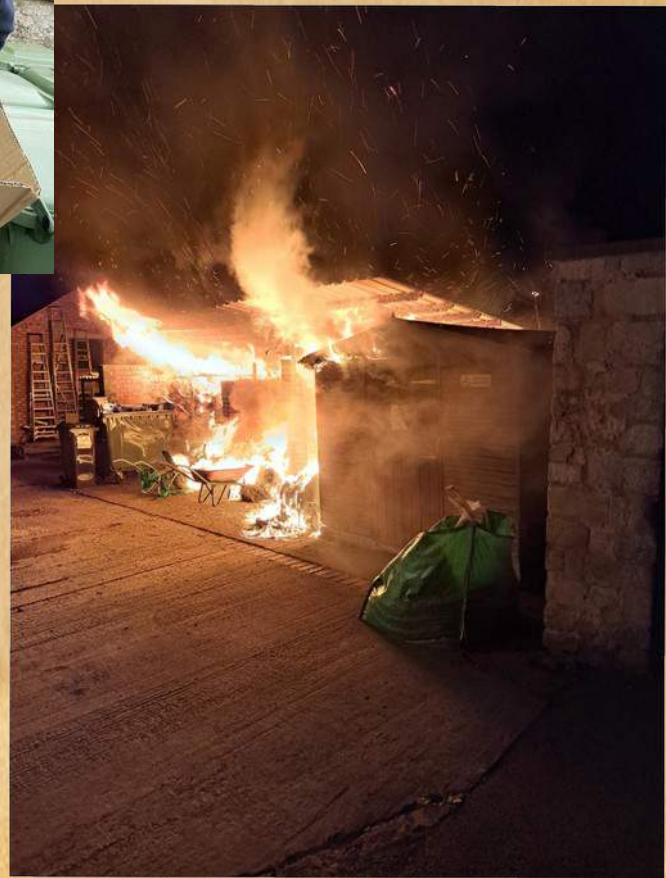




May continued with Pat Havers, the head gardener, and I going on our annual visit to the Chelsea Flower Show. I carry her bags and pay for everything and she hugs celebrity gardeners. Fair I guess.

On a rare weekend when I wasn't at Waterperry the kitchen stores and wood shed burnt down.

The Bugattis turned up, we had some stonking lupins in the gardens and I managed to fit in a chainsaw refresher course.





In June the events all start to happen. Childrens shows like Peter Rabbit in the amphitheatre were well attended. The Rare Plant Fair in the gardens was very popular.

Meenwhile the roses in the gardens were doing their thing with Pauls Himalayan Musk shaking his funky stuff, cascading all over with scented flowers, Rosabanksia competing in yellow and Dublin Bay, with flowers as red as blood, won all hearts.

Handmade in Oxford, the first of the visual arts shows went well and the weather was kind. Piyush Suri, the director of Handmade, had introduced me to Andrew Snowball, the director of Flabbergast TV and it was now confirmed that they were coming to film in July and September. Many more planning meetings occurred and I kept feeding Andrew and his team scones and nodding wisely while hoping there would be no last minute change of venue.





Fresco tours continued to grow in popularity throughout the year with coach loads coming sometimes.

In July Adrian won the prestigious Brixell award for his work on the National Collection of Saxifraga.

The walled garden with Brie in charge produced lots of veg and fruit used in the house and teashop. Cutting garden flowers sold well in the garden shop.

Lili Shaw took on the challenge of making fun artworks for the kids to find on the summer trail in the gardens. It was the best trail ever.

Celebrating Ceramics as was a great show this year though it had to contend with windy and wet weather and car-parking became a boggy challenge at times.

I found time to go to a sustainability conference at Wisley: it is high on my agenda these days.





Make it at Market landed at Waterperry in mid-July and we did our best to make them feel at home. We trailered kit around the site for them, let them use the house as a base and even stopped a clay pigeon shoot for them on a neighbouring farm when it got difficult to film with gunshots in the background. I think Pat particularly enjoyed meeting celebrities such as Dom Chinea from the Repair Shop. The teashop catered for them brilliantly. The whole experience was enjoyable and the mutual cooperation and respect was marked.



Gordon Dempster, that national treasure, has not been well this year and it became necessary to find help to staff the museum. After a slow start we have managed to build up a team of volunteers who are now so enthusiastic that the messages on the WhatsApp group we started for them is the busiest thing on my phone.





In August the Waterperry Opera Festival hit. Frenetic, creative, energy culminated in ambitious performances and rave reviews.

As soon as that whirlwind departed we had the Oxford Story Telling Festival and a different kind of energy was around. I deeply enjoyed coming back from a day at work and taking the time to sit in a tipi and listen to a beautiful story surrounded by happy people.

Once the story tellers had driven their multicoloured vehicles into the sunset we had our own Open Day. It was really nice and boosted the enrolments for the Oxford School.





At the beginning of September we started clearing all the furniture from the loft and the top floor of the house. Endless streams of wardrobes, tables, chairs, beds and mattresses cascaded down the stairs and lift. The Round Room looked like the Room of Requirement from Hogwarts. Pretty soon the builders were in to start work on the top floor converting dormitory accommodation to en suite.



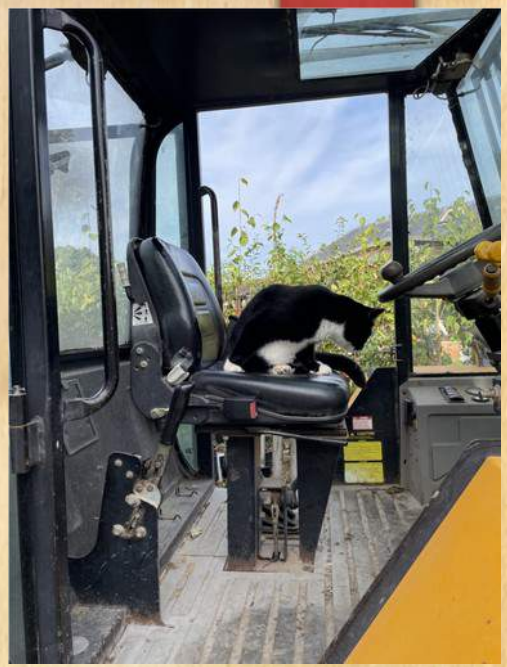
Meanwhile picking and juicing started in the orchard. We had a very disappointing apple crop due to blossom weevil but a good pear crop made up for some of the losses.



The gardens looked sumptuous with asters and dahlias exploding both sides of the walled garden wall.

The Make it at Market team returned to film the final part of the show capturing the gardens on film looking at their best.





Autumn came. The leaves changing later than usual this year. More Ukrainian landmark birthdays came as David turned 16. We were approached by the council and took on a young intern called Sebastian, who has a brain injury, for a day a week. The last of the panels in the orange tree house went up. Children shrieked as they chased the pumpkin people around the garden. The plumber shrieked as he battled with the seemingly impossible job of finding a route for the waste pipes for twelve new bathrooms on the top floor, through a listed Georgian building, down to below ground level . I encouraged him with pearls of philosophical wisdom but he still looked like he was going to cry.





At the end of November Make it at Market went on air on BBC1 and iplayer and we were pleased to see that the show was fun and the estate looked wonderful. Sure enough, Pat popped up in many of the 15 episodes of Series 2.

The reindeer came bringing the crowds and the usual uninformed animal rights people. Jennie and her staff did us proud with sumptuous Christmas displays and Rob gave his Christmas lecture to the Waterperry Garden Club in the ballroom in December. The Ukrainians helped decorate the tree for the last time as both families have now found accommodation in Wheatley. We wish them well and will always treasure the special bond that was built between two worlds that would normally not have collided but for a war.





As we reach the end of the year the building work continues with expected completion at the end of March next year. The builders are a good bunch. More big tree work is going on in the gardens down by the stone bridge: felling two very large dangerous poplars. It seems that Waterperry Gardens Limited will most likely be making a loss at the end of the year with increasing wage costs, bad weather at key times, rising overheads and people just not wanting to buy expensive items being the main reasons. I worry about the future. The house team of Jan and David Hockley, Jennie and Lili have done amazing work this year not just doing their usual jobs, which seem to expand all the time, but caring for Doreen and Gordon too. Gordon has been very well looked after here and has a live-in carer called Dudu (or Lumbidzani). They get on very well. Merry Christmas to you all. Simon.

