

Why we saved an old kitchen garden

The council wanted to build a retail park but Karen Liebreich had other plans for Chiswick House

I was walking my dog in my local park in West London a few years back when I noticed two workmen measuring up a gate in the high brick wall that ran along the park's perimeter. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Measuring up the gate to the new retail park," they answered. "What's on the other side of the wall?" I asked, horrified.

"The old kitchen gardens," they replied. I raced home and rang Hounslow council. The kitchen gardens belonged to Chiswick House, a Georgian gentleman's residence, the first neo-Palladian building in Britain, then owned by English Heritage. Its formal gardens, which belonged to the council, are thought to have started the English landscape movement and inspired the laying out of Central Park in Manhattan. Surely no one would be building a retail park on them? The man at the council refused to tell me what was happening. "It's commercially sensitive," he muttered before hanging up.

The next day I climbed the high brick wall and, dangling on a ledge, surveyed a wilderness of weeds and brambles that had taken over the 2½-acre site that was divided into two walled sections. A small area was still being used. Council contractors had taken it over to store bedraggled bedding plants and trees that no one had got round to planting. Outside the walls were several greenhouses, with buddleia growing through their smashed roofs.

However, in my mind's eye, I saw a beautiful and productive walled garden in this forgotten corner, squeezed between the A4 and the A316, on the main route between Heathrow and Central London: a garden

worked by local schoolchildren and volunteers, a place where old and young could learn about where their food came from, and how to co-exist with their local wildlife. I saw a space of beauty, productivity, education and enjoyment.

I drew up a proposal and presented it to the council. I was told to find interested schools. I did. They asked me for sources of funding. I found them. What about partners to work with? I found them too. After two years I finally got through to the top man, only to be told to ring again in a year or two. Bumping into the park manager soon after, I vented my frustration and he pulled out a key to the huge ornate metal gates that led to the kitchen garden. I snatched it from him before he could change his mind.

This was February 2005. I rang the local school. Soon 28 cold eight-year-olds turned up. I pointed them at a patch of bramble and plastic debris. By the time we had cleared a little area, and planted out some donated raspberry canes, no one was cold. They asked to return the following week. The project began to grow. People seemed to want to get their hands dirty, to work communally, to grow something, to create something beautiful.

We started weekend drop-in sessions for everyone, attracting families, gardening enthusiasts, off-season sportsmen trying to keep fit. They barrowed away gravel, ripped up rotten plastic, dug up bramble roots and hacked back the nettles, before planting vegetables, fruits, herbs and cutting flowers.

A keen glazier pitched in, repairing the greenhouses. A computer geek donated a website. A retired propagator from Kew started to multiply our plants. A lawyer taught himself health-and-safety legislation. Someone offered to co-ordinate the schools' bookings.

A landscape designer created planting plans. Our organisation



Here's some I grew earlier: Karen Liebreich, below, and a young helper in Chiswick House garden



needed a more formal structure, and we applied to become a registered charity. We now had a full timetable. Weekends were drop-in sessions. Mondays we had teenagers path-laying for their Duke of Edinburgh awards. Tuesdays were quiet gardening for anyone who fancied tranquil weeding. Wednesdays we hosted the after-school gardening club for six to nine-year-olds. Thursdays were the big school days, when a whole class would arrive for gardening and art sessions, before picnicking on produce that they had just unearthed. These sessions were so popular that the entire academic year was filled up within 48 hours of booking being opened.

More than 1,000 children a year came through our gates, most of whom had never shelled a pea or scraped the mud from a potato.

One bed became 20. And beside the staples we grew liquorice, goji berries and



khwis, all of this vast enterprise financed by goodwill, donations and the sale of surplus produce, flowers and seedlings at open days that attracted thousands.

But elsewhere in the park things were changing. Chiswick House and Gardens had for many years been neglected and run-down. A new trust was created, made up of Hounslow council and English Heritage, and the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded it a grant of £7.6 million to regenerate the whole park. Under the new business plan, one of the walled gardens was to be gravelled over for use as a car park; the other, our project, turned into a lawned space to be marketed for events.

The kitchen garden was rich in heritage, too. Digging up its history, we found that it dated back to 1682, its red-brick walls older than the main Chiswick House gardens. To save the kitchen garden we were forced to become a campaigning organisation, ▶

20 Gardens



◀ marshalling paperwork, holding endless meetings, mobilising support until we reached a compromise. The northern walled garden was to become a grassy orchard for occasional parking, but the southern garden, where our project had blossomed, would have just one quarter grassed over, the remainder left for horticulture.

The building work finally began last year. The school sessions were suspended, although volunteers still turned up, in one session 25 of them, three in wheelchairs, to plant 50 new fruit trees — heritage apples, pears and cherries from the 17th century — that will form the structure for the new old walled gardens.

The whole project — tools and equipment, an immaculately maintained garden, a large grant guaranteed to fund the project for the next three years, and the volunteers, should they wish to go — is being handed over to the Chiswick House and Gardens Trust. It has committed to continue the work we started in the ruins we discovered behind that high wall.

The Family Kitchen Garden by Karen Liebreich, Jutta Wagner and Annette Wendland is published by Frances Lincoln, £16.99

“Volunteers turned up to plant heritage apples, pears and cherries from the 17th century”

NB. Lady with wheelbarrow is not Karen Liebreich... Karen is on the right, in front of the herbal maze