SHADOWING THE HEAD GARDENER AT MOTTISTONE GARDENS

18TH – 22ND AUGUST 2025

ROSE GREVES

Acknowledgements

Firstly, thanks to the Merlin Trust for awarding me £550 to cover the cost of my accommodation, the National Trust for covering my travel and subsistence expenses. I would also like to give my thanks for affording me the time out of the garden at Hidcote. Without these grants I would not have felt able to embark on this trip and develop my career. Finally, a massive thank you to Claire for hosting me as the first work placement at Mottistone.

Introduction about me and aims of my trip

I have been a gardener at the National Trust's Hidcote Garden for 4 years and I am currently undertaking the Level 3 Horticultural Supervisor apprenticeship, supported by the National Trust and Plumpton College. Previously, I have been a Professional Gardener's Guild (PGG) Trainee at Highgrove, Windsor and The Garden House. I have also undertaken the Historic and Botanic Garden Training Programme (HBGTP) at Osborne House. I now have 8 years of experience in horticulture and naturally I have been beginning to look to the next stage of my career.

The aim of my work placement at Mottistone was to shadow the Head Gardener, Claire Margetts, to gain an insight on how she has approached the new role and her plans going forward. I specifically wanted to shadow Claire as a young female head gardener as she has had an interesting career path and we have shared similar experiences within horticulture.

Finally, I wanted to gain an insight into working in a small garden within the National Trust with a limited budget compared to Hidcote. Personally, another aim of this trip was to increase my confidence travelling having faced anxiety and PTSD with driving in recent years.

Claire's background

Claire was the first recipient of the National Trust's Sissinghurst Scholarship, preparing gardeners to become head gardeners. She has previously worked at Aberglasney and Iford Manor. In October 2024, Claire was appointed Head Gardner at Mottistone Manor on the Isle of Wight as she has a particular interest in 20th century gardens and the history of garden makers. I first met Claire when she did a week's placement at Hidcote whilst she was on the scholarship. At the time I was impressed and inspired by her enthusiasm and motivation for her career, and I was interested to see where she would progress too. Learning of her appointment to Head Gardener made me keen to shadow her for a week. Claire's contracted hours at Mottistone are 9.30am to 5.30pm, however as the only paid gardener on site she undertakes additional hours to prepare the garden before opening to the public and weekend watering duties.

Mottistone's background

The Elizabethan Manor House that remains today had been partly engulfed by a land slip for more than 200 years since 1703. Charles Seely bought the manor in 1861, and it remained in the family for over 100 years. After the First World War, General Jack Seely moved to Mottistone and his son John Seely and business partner Paul Paget restored the house after the landslide. In the 1960s, Lady Viven Nicholson created the garden that inspires Claire today. Lady Viven's Sicilian upbringing influenced her greatly in the garden, creating terracing in the formal areas. One of Claire's goals is to capture Mottistone's stories and create an inspiring interpretation area for the public to gain a better understanding. During my visit, the history and timeline was still being pieced together for public interpretation.

The Garden

The garden is 6 acres of mixed herbaceous borders, garden rooms, terraces, exotic plantings, a monocot border, meadows and a rhododendron gully. The garden looks out to sea and has a microclimate. Due to it being situated on an island, there is rarely a frost. Prior to my visit a flash flood had caused major disruption and damage to the garden and on top of months of drought. A climate resistant garden is high on Claire's agenda. Due to being on the Isle of Wight there are additional costs to running the garden such as delivery and transportation due to the ferry being the main mode of transport, this has meant that Claire has had to be resourceful with her limited budget. All the plant sales are propagated and grown on site which drip feeds money back into the garden. Below are a few photos and the garden map to provide an insight into the garden.

Mottistone looking out to sea

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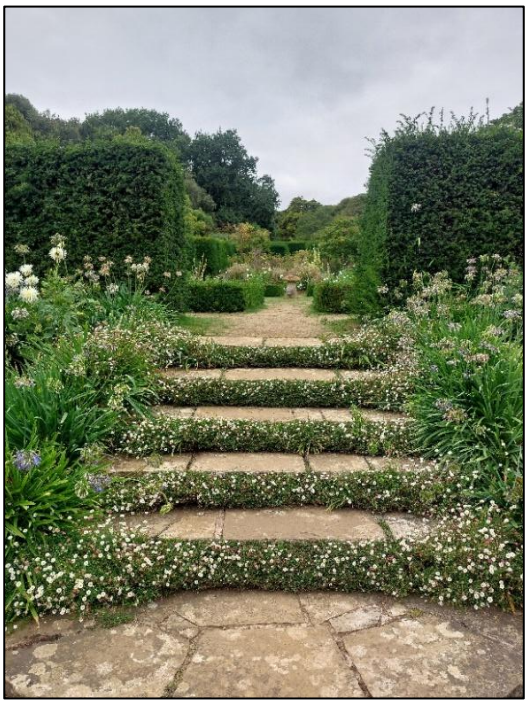

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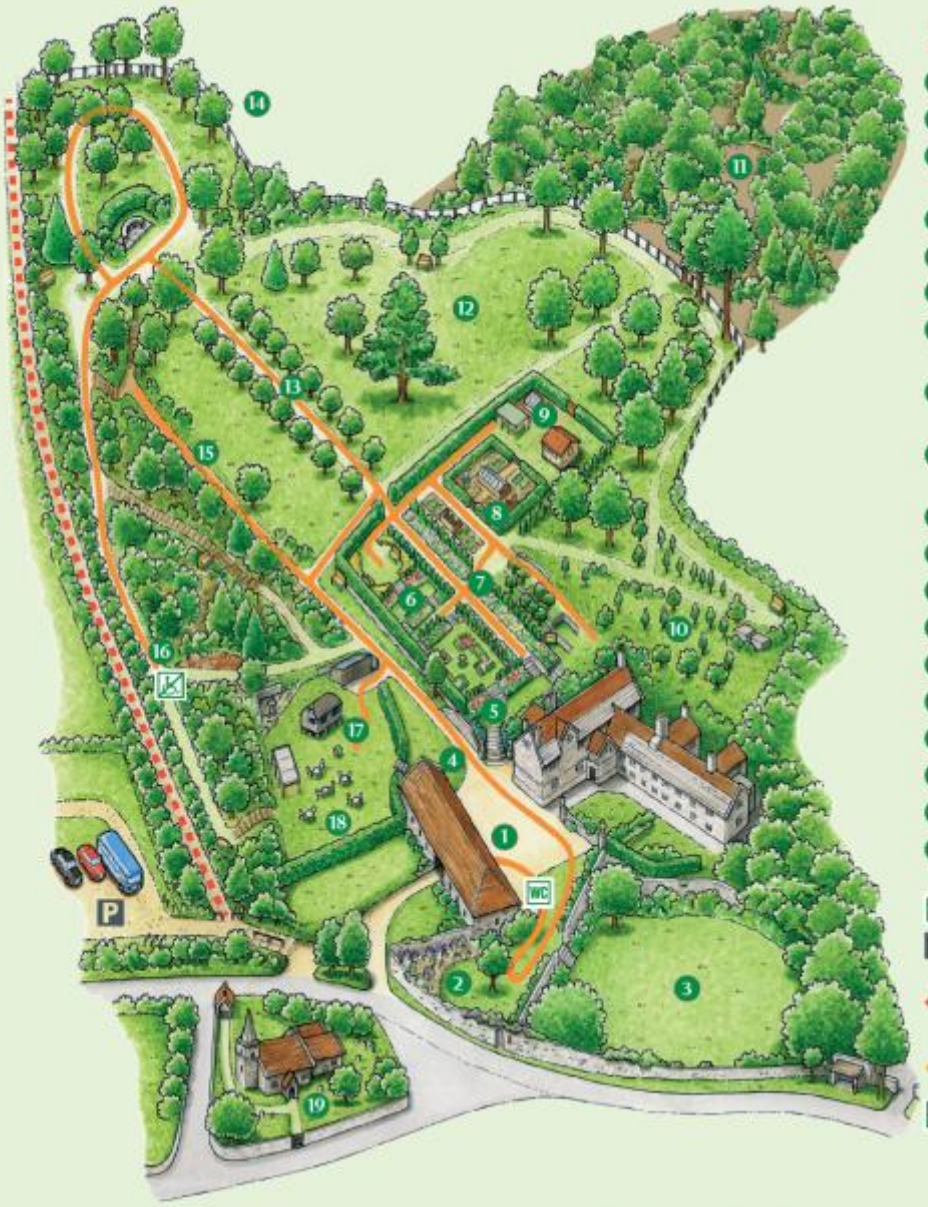
Rose Greves

Morning Glory vine in the kitchen garden

Phoenix canariensis in the lower garden

Meadow

Monocot border



Key:

1. Entrance Barn and shop
2. Monocot Border
3. Lower Garden and Turf Maze
4. Plant Sales
5. The Steps
6. Rose Garden
7. Double Herbaceous Border
8. Organic Kitchen Garden
9. Potting Shed and Propogation Area
10. Olive Grove
11. Wild Area
12. Wildflower Banks
13. The Avenue
14. Shearn Place
15. The Gully
16. View Point
17. The Shack
18. Tea-garden
19. The Church of St Peter and St Paul

WC Toilets

P Car park

Footpath to the Long Stone

Suggested Wheelchair route

No wheelchairs beyond this point.

Top 5 things to see at Mottistone

- **The colourful double herbaceous border** 7
- **The tranquil lower garden** 3
- **The Shack** 17
- **The view from the View Point** 16
- **The flowerpot people - for you to find!**

How much time do you have?

1 hour: See the double herbaceous border, enjoy a treat in the tea-garden or visit the shop in the entrance barn.

2hours: Wander around the garden and explore the hidden pathways leading to the higher levels.

3+ hours: Have a leisurely stroll around the garden then take a short walk up to the Long Stone.

What to do when it's wet

- Borrow an umbrella from the entrance barn.
- Look around the Shack.
- Shelter undercover in the tea-garden.
- Run around in the rain in the orchard.
- Browse inside the shop.

My week at Mottistone:

- **Monday**
  Working in the mixed double herbaceous borders I learnt about Claire's vision to edit the colour palette back to pastels so that the garden rooms have defined characters. In the photo the yellow rudbeckia really sticks out, *Cephalaria gigantea* is a potential option to replace it with. We tidied through the borders removing any browning material that had been affected by the drought.

- **Tuesday**
  Claire asked me to mow the terraces and surrounding lawn areas so that the tree pits and hedge line could be weeded and edged. We worked with the volunteers and I learnt about their experience. I learnt about Claire's planting plans for the banks where an olive grove is being established. We also talked about difficulties of mowing/strimming the banks due to the steep incline and the potential of working with the countryside team with more suitable machinery.
- **Wednesday**
  I started the day by watering the nursery plants. Then shadowed Claire in a Visitor Experience meeting which included staff representatives from across the Isle of Wight National Trust portfolio. The meeting mainly focused on maps and accessibility across the island and the National Trust Sustainable Management Programme (restructure). It was interesting to hear about similar challenges and solutions that are also faced at Hidcote. After this I lead the volunteers in clearing the plinth garden border in preparation for hedge cutting.
- **Thursday**
  I trimmed the yew hedge behind the plinth garden and cleared up the debris. In the afternoon I joined the volunteers clearing the rhododendron valley. Claire described the plan to increase the number of rhododendrons along the gulley. One of the volunteers showed me the dead hedge that had been created in the woods to separate the works areas from the main garden, it looked very smart.

- **Friday**
  I spent the morning refreshing the plant sales displays and watering. All the plants are grown in house. The pots used are made from rice husk and they will hopefully breakdown in the compost after 2 years use – they've only been in used for a year so this has not yet been confirmed! Claire and I also created 2 pot displays with spare plant sale plants to be displayed at the front of the manor. In the afternoon Claire showed and discussed a project in the planning stages which will be a huge benefit to the garden and Isle of Wight if it all goes ahead.

Rose Greves

Learnings and approaching a new role and new garden

During the week Claire and I discussed how she had approached the role, and she asked me questions to get me thinking on how I would take on a senior/ head gardener role. Claire and I had honest conversations about our experiences, naturally some of the information shared was confidential. In no particular order, below are some of the key takeaways I learnt from Claire. Some of the documents Claire showed me were work in progress, so I couldn't photograph them.

- **Priorities and mapping**
  Mapping the garden into zones of high, medium and low maintenance helps to identify where to prioritise and where to put immediate time and effort. It also highlights areas that may need fundraising for. Logging time taken on a job or specific area of a garden can also be used in evidence for increasing a team size, budget, machinery.
- **Climate resistant garden**
  Claire has identified clear areas, such as planting, water capture and shade cover to focus on to create a sustainable future for Mottistone going forward with climate change. Some of these projects would be funding dependant and in long term planning however, it is good to begin planning to be proactive rather than reactive to adverse weather. The water is currently used from the mains water system and there is currently no underground irrigation system.
- **Identifying hazards, rectifying and improving**
  One of the first priorities was to make sure equipment, machinery and tasks carried out by staff or volunteers were safe and up to date with current legislation. For Claire this meant upgrading tools, purchasing professional grade ladders and replacing an RTV (rough terrain vehicle) and Tractor. Additionally, it is good to review garden tasks and whether they are appropriate and safe to be carried out by volunteers.
- **Inheriting volunteers/ team**
  Inheriting volunteers can have its challenges. Having the support of your line manager or property staff can be important to help communicate changes. Implementing changes such as improving health and safety can cause backlash from those that do not understand the need for improvement or change. This can be taken as an opportunity to refresh training, risk assessments and e-learning where appropriate to ensure everyone is on board. Using recruitment to bring new volunteers into the team can also help to balance out team dynamics.
- **Historic records**
  Claire has reached out to the family that donated Mottistone to the National Trust. She is keen to tell the stories of the 'Garden Makers' from Mottistone's history and make this part of the visitor experience. Working with a Visitor Experience team is an important part of the job role as this can directly impact visitor numbers which subsequently has an impact on the income the garden generates and budgets.

Reflecting on my week with Claire, I have found a newfound enthusiasm and drive to steer my career progression forward. I have identified areas that I should develop to help gain experience and knowledge for the next stage in my career. Claire and I have agreed for her to be a mentor help guide my career path in the direction I would like it to go. With the areas identified (bullet pointed below) I plan to use my current apprenticeship to gain this experience. I really enjoyed

my week and found it very valuable. I would recommend to others considering their next steps in their career to undertake work placements in other gardens to gain experience and broaden their horizons.

- General garden history and historic landscapes
- Improve knowledge on risk assessments
- Garden design
- People management and people skills
- Personal confidence
- Awareness of the national trust's volunteer framework
- Creating workplace connections

Claire Margetts and Rose Greves

Rose Greves

Budget Summary

When arranging my ferry travel, I was able to book through Mottistone's business account which reduced the expected cost of the ferry significantly. I also extended the stay by one night at my own cost.

Expense	Amount	Sponsor
Car Travel	**£35.70** 238miles x 15p per mile	**National Trust**
Ferry Travel	**£63.80 return**	**National Trust**
Accommodation	**£550 for 5 nights**	**Merlin Trust**
Food	**£132.79**	**National Trust**
Supplementary Food	**£50**	**Personal Contribution**
Total	**£832.29**	