

Sheffield Park, a Garden for the Future

Final report for the Royal Oak Foundation, June 2025

Sheffield Park and Garden, East Sussex is a historically designed landscape, shaped over centuries by successive owners for recreation. Once the country seat of the Earls of Sheffield during the 18th and 19th centuries, it later became the home of Arthur Soames in the early 20th century. In the 1950s, the estate was divided and sold, with the National Trust acquiring the garden shortly thereafter.

Now a Grade I Registered Historic Park and Garden, Sheffield Park is internationally renowned for its spectacular autumn colour and rare plant collections.

This project aimed to continue the legacy of horticultural innovation and beauty that defines Sheffield Park. Through a thoughtful and sensitive new design by three-time RHS Chelsea Flower Show gold medallist Joe Perkins, the garden enters a new chapter of development. This is the first major renovation since coming under the National Trust's care and marks a transformative moment for the property.

The result is a welcoming and inclusive "garden within a garden," designed to respond directly to the challenges of climate change. Blending science, innovation, and high horticulture, this space both honours Sheffield Park's rich heritage and inspires a new generation of garden enthusiasts and visitors.



Site before development Autumn 2021. Image ©National Trust Images/John Miller

Responding to an urgent need

In recent years, the team at Sheffield Park recognised the urgent need to respond to the growing impact of climate change on plant and tree health. Many significant specimens within the historical collections have been affected by increasingly extreme temperatures and rainfall, while others are reaching the end of their natural lifespans. A sensitive revitalisation of the garden was essential to build resilience to climate change and sustain long-term interest in this beautiful landscape.



Site before development, Aug 2022. Image ©National Trust/Jo Grocott

This project was created to demonstrate the powerful role plants and green spaces play in improving quality of life, addressing environmental challenges, and inspiring a conscious connection between people, nature, and future planning. The newly designed space is intended to be a catalyst for change. It showcases how horticultural innovation can respond to the climate crisis while respecting the integrity of a historic landscape. Insights and data gathered from the new plant collection will inform future planting decisions at Sheffield Park and guide wider horticultural practices across the National Trust, helping to shape a more resilient and sustainable future.



The new planting scheme brings texture, structure and colour palettes not seen elsewhere in the garden. It also includes trees and shrubs from temperate global zones to test species typologies which might prove better adapted to future conditions at Sheffield Park and Garden. Image ©National Trust Images/James Dobson

A successful transformation

The Garden for the Future project is now complete, successfully transforming the space with high-quality, accessible and sustainable horticultural that is in keeping with the significance of the surrounding heritage landscape.

A phased delivery was necessary to allow for a 12-month quarantine of new plants to protect the existing collection from new pests and diseases, in line with best practice. The project took 17 months to complete with landscaping, pathways, boardwalks and a seating area between January to June 2025. The new collection was planted in spring 2025, with approximately 4,500 botanical specimens, including 60 new species selected for their climate resilience. Inspiration was taken from the existing conifer collection, with the exoticism of the many species reflecting Sheffield Park's progressive and innovative horticultural heritage.



April 2024. Landscaping work in progress using no-dig methods and light weight machinery outside the root protection zone of the veteran oak at the centre of the design. Image ©National Trust Images/Laurence Perry

The new space has been warmly received by visitors, particularly the thoughtfully placed seating areas which offer moments for pause and reflection within nature, supporting mental wellbeing. More than just a garden enhancement, the project has enabled the Sheffield Park team to shift towards a proactive, solutions-focused approach to climate adaptation. Collaborating with award-winning industry experts has provided the team with valuable professional insights and learnings, with benefits extending across the National Trust and the wider horticultural community.

Challenges Along the Way

During the planning phase, rising material costs required a revision to the original design. This led to a reduction in planting, the removal of a proposed shelter, and a reconfiguration of the space within the initial scheme. Despite these adjustments, Joe Perkins' final design remained true to the original vision, emphasising sustainability, climate resilience, and wellbeing through engagement with nature.

Repositioning of planting and seating provided natural shade, helping to compensate for the absence of the shelter. In the end, the revised layout was seen as an improvement, integrating more harmoniously with the surrounding landscape and aligned more closely with the property's broader plans.

The result is a garden experience that not only upholds the tradition of horticultural excellence by Sheffield Park's former owners but also offers a beautiful and welcoming space for the community to enjoy and connect with nature.

Celebrating Sheffield Park's Legacy

Garden for the Future is a tribute to both Sheffield Park's rich legacy of high horticulture, and bold design and innovation. This new space enhances the historic collection we care for, helping to ensure its preservation and accessibility for generations to come.

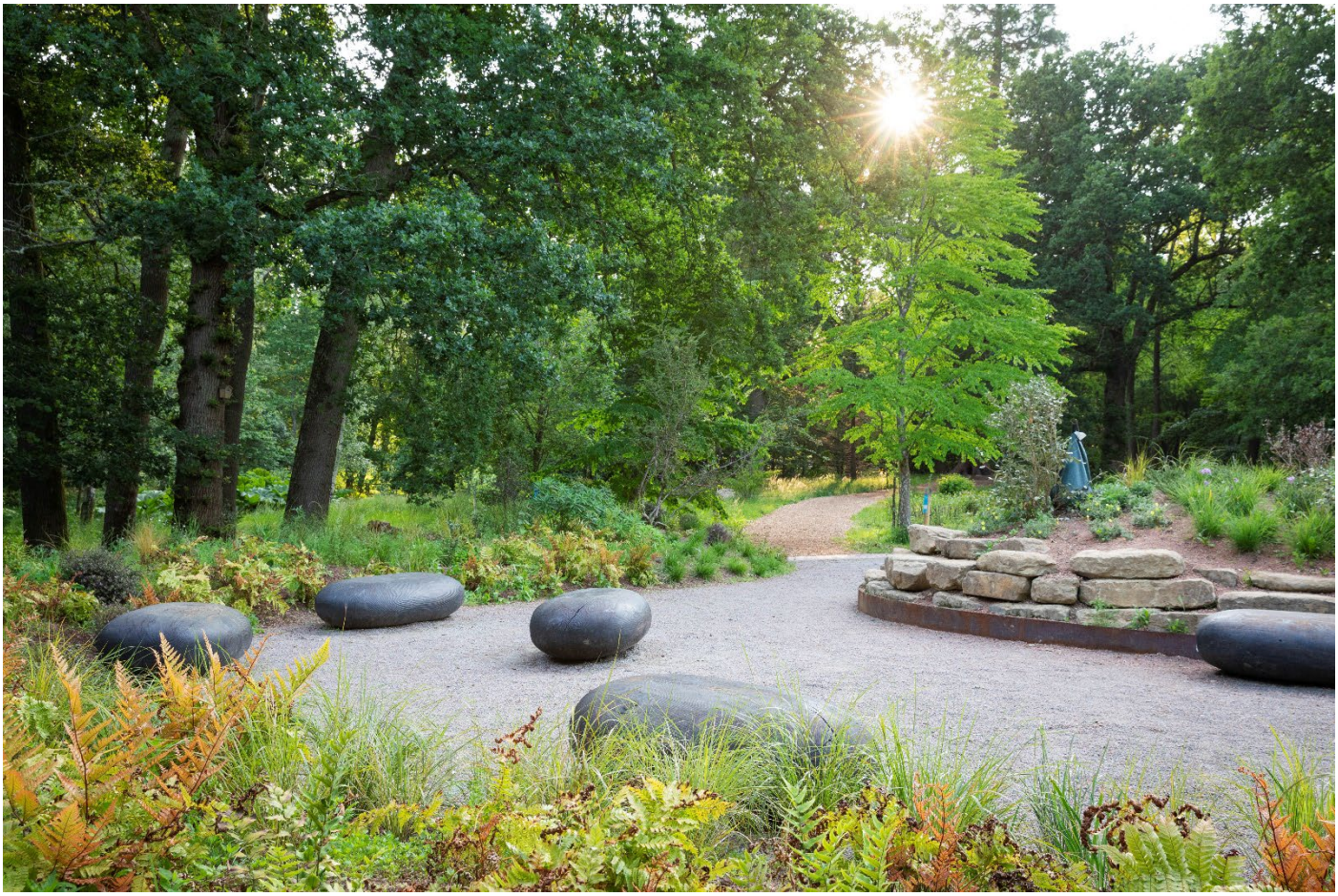


July 2024. During developments, visitors explore the new pathways and seating, enjoying the temporary wildflower planting. Image ©National Trust/Kate Sharpe

Designed to offer vibrant horticultural displays throughout the year, the garden brings new life to the landscape and encourages more community use across all seasons, helping to ease pressure on traditional peak times which are increasingly affected by extreme weather.

The project phases were intentionally shared with visitors and stakeholders as a work in progress, allowing them to connect with the evolving vision and observe its transformation over time. Positive, solutions-focused communications about the Trust's climate adaptation efforts have been well received, strengthening engagement with visitors, supporters, and donors alike. This growing support is vital to our mission of protecting Sheffield Park's historic landscape through forward-thinking innovation and sustained investment in our living heritage.

Looking ahead, a programme of guided tours, talks, seasonal events, and fundraising initiatives is planned for the coming year. As the garden matures and we begin to gather valuable data, it will not only inform horticultural approaches across the National Trust but also spark conversations with supporters about climate action, stewardship, and our ongoing efforts to shape the gardens of the future while honouring the past.



The total project cost was £821,572 of which the Royal Oak Foundation contributed £249,128.

This project would not have been possible without generous support from the Royal Oak Foundation and a legacy donation.

Thank you for helping to bring Garden for the Future to life.