



**IN FOCUS:**

# Understanding the unique challenges of heritage landscapes

When being tasked with redeveloping a beloved National Trust garden there's a great deal of weight and expectation that comes with it. Founder of the Garden Company, James Scott MBALI FSGLD, examines the unique challenges such a project presents, with reference to their reimaging of the Long Garden at the Cliveden Estate.

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Heritage landscapes require a different design mindset from private gardens, and that difference becomes most apparent when you are immersed in a live project. When we were appointed to reimagine the Long Garden at the National Trust Cliveden estate in 2024, it was very clear that this was not simply a scaled-up domestic garden with additional planning constraints, but a working public landscape shaped by historic significance, environmental responsibility and operational demands. The site carried layers of history, long-established patterns of use and strong public expectations, while also needing to function safely, inclusively and sustainably for contemporary visitors.

Our role was therefore not to 'impose' a new design identity or merely refresh a tired garden, but to act as temporary custodians - interpreting what already existed while carefully introducing the modern, environmentally responsible requirements needed for the garden's continued public use. In other words, our role was one of stewardship rather than pure design, balancing conservation with the careful adaptation required for modern use.

### History of The Long Garden, Cliveden

The Long Garden is a formal historic garden with strong associations to the Astor family and to Norah Lindsay, a pioneering early 20th-century garden designer. Despite remaining much loved, the garden had lost clarity by the time we were approached. Planting was tired, accessibility was limited and artificial surfaces undermined both character and sustainability. In addition, annual bedding displays were being created, which wasn't a sustainable approach or particularly beneficial to biodiversity. With year-round public access, the site was also under constant physical pressure.

From the outset, it was clear that any successful intervention would need to balance conservation, accessibility, sustainability and long-term maintenance - without diminishing the spirit of Lindsay's original work.

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### Research first – understanding significance

Our first task was research. On heritage sites, this underpins the entire design process. Estate plans, early Ordnance Survey mapping, archival photography and original drawings can all help reveal lost paths, spatial hierarchies and historic sightlines. At Cliveden, this meant looking beyond the garden itself to the wider estate, its historic function and its relationship to surrounding buildings and routes.

Crucially, the research also extended to Lindsay herself. Studying her original plans and reading her biography\* gave us insight into her design philosophy: strong formal structure softened by immersive, rhythmical planting. This understanding shaped every subsequent decision. Visitors instinctively sense when a place “feels right”, and that coherence often comes from reinstating historic movement patterns rather than imposing new ones. In many cases, the layout already exists - it has simply been obscured over time.



### Choosing the period of interpretation – Lindsay, reimagined

One of the most important early discussion topics with the National Trust team centred on the period of interpretation. Like many historic landscapes, Cliveden is layered, but there was a clear desire to focus on Norah Lindsay's era of influence. The design challenge was how to do this without turning the garden into a replica.

The guiding question became: what might Lindsay have done today, with modern plant knowledge, environmental awareness and public access requirements? This approach allowed us to celebrate her legacy while avoiding pastiche. Once that period of significance was agreed, decisions around materials, planting and detailing became far easier to discuss with all stakeholders.

## Designing with, not for

Consultation and careful listening were central to the project's success. Extensive discussions were held by my design team (Anna and Molly) and I with Head Gardener Anthony Mason and his team to understand horticultural preferences, maintenance capacity and long-term pressures. Their practical knowledge of the site was invaluable, and their enthusiasm for Lindsay's legacy helped shape realistic, workable solutions.

The process was highly collaborative throughout. We worked closely with the General Manager Robert Miles, the National Trust Architect, and its Heritage and Archaeology team members. Archaeologists were actively involved in the removal, restoration and repositioning of several historically significant sculptures, ensuring changes were managed sensitively and without risk. The shared ethos was one of no surprises – a principle that proved essential on a complex heritage site.

## Planting with integrity – honouring without replicating

Original drawing plans and planting lists by Lindsay, provided by the National Trust, became a key reference point. Rather than recreating her planting verbatim, we focused on the principles behind it. Only around 15% of her original planting palette was retained. The remainder was adapted to prioritise biodiversity, resilience and year-round interest, while a no-dig approach has been adopted to reduce soil disruption.

We studied the plants Lindsay would have had access to in the early 20th century and interpreted them for contemporary conditions. The use of grasses was significantly expanded, reflecting modern sustainable public planting while maintaining the softness and movement she valued. In some areas, Victorian-style bedding and specimen trees informed the structure, creating continuity without imitation.

## Access without visual compromise

Historic estates were obviously never designed for pushchairs or mobility scooters. At Cliveden, accessibility was addressed through widened paths, smooth paving surfaces and discreet electric gates, allowing mobility vehicles to pass comfortably without altering the garden's visual language.

When considered early, accessibility measures can reinforce historic circulation rather than undermine it. Done well, they are barely noticed.

## Outcomes

Success was judged by a combination of the garden's restored function and aesthetics. Visitor movement is now easier, while the garden offers a modern, immersive experience that encourages people to slow down, linger and observe rather than simply pass through. Long-term maintenance demands have been reduced through more robust planting. Overall, the space feels settled and natural, rather than newly made.

Head Gardener at Cliveden House, Anthony Mason explained:

*"This restoration is about more than preserving a beautiful garden – it's about reinterpreting a historic design for the future. We've designed the garden to be relevant to the changing climate. The new planting will attract a wider range of pollinators, and by allowing plants to die back naturally, we're creating shelter and food sources for insects and birds throughout the year. Norah Lindsay's bold vision has guided us, and we've worked to ensure the Long Garden remains a place of inspiration, biodiversity and accessibility for generations to come."*

Even the strongest heritage designs carry risks if maintenance is overlooked. At Cliveden, working closely with the Head Gardener and his dedicated team allowed us to develop a maintenance strategy alongside the design. Their knowledge and experience ensured that planting choices were realistic to manage over time. This collaboration significantly increased confidence that the garden will thrive.



## Reflections for fellow professionals

The Long Garden reinforced several lessons regarding heritage projects: research deeply, define the period of significance, collaborate early and often, and design with those who will care for the landscape long after the designers have gone. Heritage projects are most likely to succeed when expertise is shared and decisions are made collectively.

Heritage landscapes are held in trust for future generations, not shaped to reflect individual designers. Our involvement is temporary within a much longer continuum of care and change. The measure of success is an intervention that feels natural, as though the landscape has been revealed rather than redesigned. In heritage work, stewardship – not authorship – is the true achievement. Our approach was affirmed when, following the completion of The Long Garden, we were reappointed by the National Trust to work on another site within the Cliveden estate – an outcome that, for us, signalled a shared confidence in both the process and the result.

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## Summary: key features of the redesigned Long Garden

- Replanted central flower beds, now subtly enlarged to enhance the scale and dynamic of the space.
- Replacement of the artificial grass path with locally-sourced, sawn Yorkstone paving (supplied by Allgreen) – in line with National Trust policy, more fitting for Cliveden's character and fully accessible to all visitors.
- Removal of ageing box hedging, replaced with *Taxus x media* 'Hilli' yew, chosen for its manageable height and long-term sustainability.
- The addition of new topiary forms, carefully designed to complement existing heritage structures and provide visual anchors for the surrounding planting.
- A focus on planting that evolves gracefully through the seasons, from spring vitality to winter silhouettes, rose hips and seed heads, creating year-round interest that encourages repeat visits.