

INNER HAVEN

By the Head Gardener



Magnolia x soulangeana with the turrets of Paper Buildings



Coal Tit



Garden cat Patsy, like many working from home

There is a grounding and reassurance that comes from the Garden, especially in tumultuous times. Nothing symbolises this more than our three veteran London plane trees (*Platanus x hispanica*) on the main lawn that have stood proud since the 1770s, watching as history unfolds before them.

The Garden's role as a haven within the City has been especially palpable throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Like many communities across the world, the community of residents at the Inn also came together, with offers to help with shopping for those isolating and the sound of clapping for the NHS heard over an otherwise very quiet Inn. The Garden really came into its own for our residents during this time, with even those who could only enjoy the Garden from their windows mentioning the reassurance and joy of seeing the stripes on the lawn after a mow.

The sense of sanctuary was heightened with the absence of noise pollution giving way to the sound of birdsong. Many of the residents noticed this and commented to me on the increase in bird numbers across the Garden during this time. Research carried out by scientists from Aberystwyth University found that great tits (*Parus Major*) in cities have adapted to sing at a higher pitch than their countryside cousins to get above the urban noise. We have a healthy population of these in the Garden, and it did make me wonder if they sounded so loud during lockdown because they still thought they needed to project their voices to get above the noise of the Embankment that was no longer present.

It is difficult to know whether the numbers were up or we just had more time to appreciate them. Or perhaps they were just being bolder, taking advantage of there being fewer people in the Garden. I have a soft spot for smaller birds and, alongside the great tits, I enjoyed what seemed to be larger numbers of coal tits, blue tits, robins, blackbirds and wrens.

Up until this year, the wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) had been my personal favourite. I love their unassuming, small, brown, rounded figures on their matchstick legs with such a loud voice for something so little. I find them very cute and it always brightens my day to have one nearby in the Garden. Though after this spring there may be a new favourite vying for my affections.

This was the first year I have spotted the tiny goldcrest in the Garden. Goldcrests (*Regulus regulus*) are Britain's smallest bird, with a similar but smaller shape to a wren and a flash of golden yellow on their crowns. According to Jude from the Treasury team (a keen birdwatcher) they weigh as little as a 20-pence piece. Some are winter migrants, travelling here from northern Europe every winter, but there is also a large population that stay and breed into the summer. They enjoy conifers and mixed woodlands. I have not spotted one since the spring, so I am not sure whether we have a breeding pair in the Garden now, which according to Jude we sometimes do. Either way I will be keeping my eye out for them from now on – they really are enchanting.

For those questioning if there is a conflict of interest with me having our beautiful Garden cat, Patsy, alongside a love for birds, fortunately to date Patsy has never harmed a bird (just the occasional mouse), though like me she does like to observe them. Unfortunately, my attempts to photograph the birds over this time have generally failed and so the photos included here are those of others.

It does fill me with pride to think of the Garden as not just a haven for people but also for wildlife. I am keen to find the balance to garden in a manner that is in keeping with the Garden's long history and grandeur, alongside creating much-needed urban habitat and food for birds, bees, butterflies and countless invertebrates. Thanks to the work of progressive gardeners past and present, gardens are not seen as a place for nature to be tamed but rather to work with plants to



Gold Crest © Cliff Watkinson, flickr.com



Narcissus 'Hawera' flowering early spring in the meadow



Wren © Milo Bostock, flickr.com



Insta Live weekly videos proved popular during lockdown

create a layered, habitat-rich and importantly beautiful oasis for wildlife, plants and people to enjoy together. It would be difficult here not to mention William Robinson who, in the 1890s, was asked for his thoughts on the Inner Temple Garden and his seminal book *The Wild Garden*, which called for a move away from the sterile planting favoured in the Victorian era.

Our work to develop the spring bulb meadow at the top of the Garden is part of this long movement in gardening and will be developed over the coming years. For example, balancing sharp edges and large areas of fine lawn with more 'natural' and carefully managed biodiverse areas. The team and I have also been working to reduce our use of pesticides and herbicides, looking to alternatives such as a flame gun for weeds and different plant selections for those that get hit by pests such as capsid bugs. We are making progress and through our observations the wildlife benefits are being felt alongside the beauty of the Garden. We do not currently have our own beehives, though there are hives very local to the Inn which use our Garden for nectar. I was delighted to hear from a local beekeeper that, during lockdown, our Garden continued to sustain our local beehives with rich nectar due to our abundance of flowers through the period.

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Bumblebee enjoying *Echinium candicans*



Wisteria and tree peonies in the Wisteria Garden



Great Tit

It is a shame that we experienced one of our best springs when, unfortunately, the public or those usually at the Inn were not around to experience the beauty of the Garden over this time. Thankfully, Master Robertson made the wise suggestion of doing Instagram Live videos, which developed into the weekly snapshots from the Garden each Wednesday afternoon at 4pm. These windows into the Garden meant we could share its beauty and diversity to those no longer able to experience it in person. It would have been easy to focus solely on gardening tasks, with only a skeleton team caring for the Garden and keeping it in check, and to forget its main purpose, which is to be shared and enjoyed even if from a distance. Thankfully we managed to do both – just!

It is hard to know what the long-term impact of COVID-19 will be on society and on people's everyday lives and wellbeing. My thought is that one of the possible benefits will be a continuing desire for people to be connected to simpler pleasures. As always, gardens will continue to be much-needed havens for both people and wildlife. My hope is that they will be more highly valued and protected as our wonderful Garden is. I am fortunate that the Inn values our Garden so greatly and to have a team of highly skilled and dedicated gardeners. We look forward to continuing to develop the Garden even further into a beautiful haven, its borders brimming with nectar-rich flowers, birds playing through the trees and people coming to enjoy a quiet moment or to socialise, distanced or not, depending on the situation.

Sean Harkin
Head Gardner



Above: Resident enjoying a moment in the Garden to read. Background: Poppies (*Papaver rhoeas* and *Papaver somniferum*) take over after the spring bulbs in the new meadow area at the top of the Garden