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COMMENT

There is more to the National Trust than great houses

Protecting historic homes and collections is vital, but so is promoting the outdoors. Our founder understood this perfectly

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20 May 2024 • 8:00am



The epitaph on Sir Christopher Wren’s tomb in St Paul’s Cathedral famously reads, “If you seek his monument, look around.” You could say the same of Octavia Hill (1838-1912), who campaigned for much of her life to save green spaces for the health and leisure

of all – swathes of London, Kent and the Lake District, to name a few, would look very different today were it not for her.

Among her many and varied achievements, she co-founded the National Trust, then called the National Trust for Places of Historic Interest or Natural Beauty, in 1895. We're proud to be celebrating her legacy with a Show Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in London this week.

I feel sure that if Octavia walked along the show's Main Avenue, she would recognise the ideals that lie behind our urban community wildlife garden. Designed by Ann-Marie Powell as a series of 'outdoor sitting rooms' – an idea Octavia advocated for – it celebrates the power of being connected with nature, and each other.

The plants give us joy, but they also invite wildlife, including pollinators, to make their homes alongside ours. A soundscape, wheelchair-accessible paths, and tactile hand-carved oak benches mean everyone can feel part of the space. As Octavia once said, "We all want quiet. We all want beauty ... we all need space."

The Octavia Hill Garden honours the past, but it also reflects our present, and looks to the future. Octavia's ideas weren't just relevant in the rapid industrialisation and deprivation of Victorian London, they are timeless. Today, one in three people in Britain don't have access to nearby nature-rich spaces. It's a shocking fact. This scarcity has deep implications for our health and for the nature crisis that we face.

We know that access to green space brings with it a raft of human benefits: better educational outcomes, improved wellbeing, greater resilience and recovery. These aren't 'nice-to-haves', they are profoundly important to us as individuals and as a society.

A recent study funded by the National Institute for Health and Care found that the more we are exposed to green space, the less we are likely to struggle with common mental health disorders. The benefits that green space brings – more social contact, less stress, better air quality, to name a few – bring real improvements to people's lives. Octavia grasped this instinctively; increasingly, the science agrees.

I hope that this garden can be read not just as a beautiful piece of garden design – though it absolutely is that – but also as a statement of intent. Through it we are reasserting that access to green space shouldn't be a luxury; it was, and still is, crucial to us all.

Many people associate the Trust with great houses and collections and we cherish these without question. But ensuring everyone can enjoy "the sight of sky and of things growing" has been in the charity's DNA from its first moments.

We're continuing to make good on Octavia's vision in places you might not expect. In the

heart of Manchester, we've worked with partners to transform the disused Castlefield Viaduct into a park in the sky, where people can pause and recharge. Stoneford Community Garden in east London gives locals – many without a garden of their own – a nature-rich space on their doorstep.

And we're busy creating 'green corridors', knitting together woodlands, towpaths and parks so that people in inner-city neighbourhoods can access large areas of green space.

I hope that once the gates have closed on the world's most famous flower show for another year, more people will recognise the name 'Octavia Hill'. But, more than anything, I hope we as a nation embrace her legacy more firmly than ever. She gave us green respite in our cities, open countryside to refresh us and footpaths to access it. Let's pass that gift on to future generations, by allowing Octavia's vision to spill out of the Chelsea Flower Show and into communities, verges, hedgerows and the smallest pocket-sized parks.

Octavia began the National Trust in 1895 – nearly 130 years later, there's still work to be done.

Hilary McGrady is Director-General of the National Trust. The Octavia Hill Garden by Blue Diamond with the National Trust is on Main Avenue at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, 21-25 May

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