

Sensory Gardening @ Nevill Hall

Nevill Hall Nature Spaces

Jan 2026



Overview

As part of the Millennium Branching Out project a Sensory Garden was created around the remains of an Old Fish Pond. It included a wheelchair friendly path from the main road and a circular route around the pond itself.

A raised wheelchair accessible bed was planted with twenty sensory and medicinal herbs and plants.

After twenty-five years the pond and surrounding area has become overgrown and in need of restoration.

In particular the path has been damaged by tree roots and the wooden bridge added as part of the original project is in need of further repair. .



Sensory Gardening: The Concept

Sensory gardening is a concept of creating spaces that stimulate our senses to provide relaxation in our busy world... to increase our nature connection... to provide distraction from the arduous schedules of demanding work... to enhance our feelings of wellbeing... and to complement our joyful experiences.

The setting of Nevill Hall Hospital achieves this in part just from the views of the wonderful landscape, but within the gardens there are spaces where more specific design and planting have been done to create an intimate sensory surround... and more can be created.



A dedicated Sensory Garden was first constructed in the hospital gardens for the Millennium Project and it is now much in need of restoration. But the opportunity of using the concept of therapeutic and sensory gardens can be incorporated in the re-design and planting throughout the site.

History



When the 'Brooks', later to become 'Nevill Hall', was built in 1869, the south western border of the estate was bordered by fishponds, said to date from mediaeval times. The building of the District General Hospital on the site in '60s saw the upper pond, filled in to become road and part of the car park but the lower part remained.



It is a place where from the south west corner one has magnificent views to the Bloreng and Sugar Loaf, but at those early times of the hospital was at times extremely boggy.

The last head gardener of Nevill Hall hospital was John Hefferman. He was dedicated to maintain the highest standards and make the gardens more accessible. An inspiration to improve this particular space was after seeing an older man taking a walk round with his wife in a wheelchair. He was trying to get there but because of the terrain having to keep to the road.

John then became one of the leaders of Millennium Garden Project of 2000 for which the existing Sensory garden became one of the most successful elements.



Perfect access was created in a design to which various disabled users contributed - red paths for the partially sighted, seating benches for wheelchairs, raised beds, and more. The pond was bordered by suitable plants with an emphasis on scented plants.

At quiet times it was an ideal place for relaxation and contemplation by staff, patients and visitors, coping with stresses and joys. However, on sunny summer days use by staff at lunch time

sometimes reached standing room only.

It was though a difficult garden to maintain, requiring intensive care that even from the beginning was hard to provide. Coping with rabbits was a particular problem. The bridge created over the stream had to be reconstructed in 2014, and is now in need of further repair. Tree roots have disrupted the level surface of the paths.

There was once access into the Red Barn field but that has now been overgrown with brambles which are also now overshadowing the garden area.

Sadly over the years the disrepair is significant. It now needs a lot of loving restoration, and most essentially regular maintenance established. This is something that cannot be provided within existing contract budgets, and NHNS wishes to help.

Alongside this Sensory Garden is an exercise area, created in 2006. This remains, and indeed the equipment is still usable, but likewise needs restorative attention.



Opportunities and Potential

The existing Sensory Garden is an area, a close walk from the hospital, which is ideal for immediate relaxation and meditation. Lessons must be learnt from previous design to fit more with nature, but the potential is fantastic. It does require regular gardening and therefore an ideal site for volunteer activities.

Access must be improved again by levelling the paths and also refreshing the surface red colour, indeed replacing from black asphalt laid in recent site works. New access could come from the Meadow (Red Barn field) through gates on the southern border with more opportunity to walk on easily to enjoy the wider site. (See Meadow @Nevill Hall). The exercise area, with servicing is still there to be used.



An additional new proposal from NHNS is that the concept of Sensory Gardening is applied elsewhere in the gardens. A space in the southern part of the site could be used to create a new medicinal garden planted with herbs and other plants that were used in previous centuries. An appropriate addition to a hospital site. Information on the plants could be provided.

In time, with volunteer support, consideration could be given to restoring some of the planting that used to happen in other areas around the site.

There is potential in Local Places for Nature (LPfN) to create a 'Therapeutic Garden on a Healthcare site'; one of the key outcomes desired by the LPfN funding. This is an opportunity to create a new feature on the site that fits well within the existing site. Ideas for this can be considered and developed during forthcoming stakeholder engagement.

Other ideas and suggestion for more sensory gardening across the 'Phase 1' parts of the site will also be considered.

Future Plans

- 1) **Appraisal and redesign** –A holistic approach is required to consider 'sensory gardening' across the site, linking and integrating all areas. This will heed the lessons from the past.
- 2) **Path repairs and design** – Specific requirements for the original Sensory Garden include resurfacing, both to re-level consequent on tree root disruption, and restoring the original colour of red. Path restoration throughout all the gardens is also required but consideration should be to harmonising design. Funding for this needs to be sought.
- 3) **Replanting** – as required in a new design with suitable plants, ideally scented, but with consideration of the rabbits! This is a task NHNS volunteers would love to do. And within agreed plans, the local community and NHNS could assist with providing plants.
- 4) **New access** - The original access toward the neighbouring Red Barn field, and beyond should be reopened as is proposed in Meadow @ Nevill Hall.
- 5) **Tree, shrub and bramble management** - overgrown shrubs and low hanging tree branched require attention. Brambles proliferating in the neighbouring Red Barn field need removal (see Meadow @ Nevill Hall).
- 6) **Exercise equipment** - As a minimum, this area needs tidying, neighbouring rhododendrons and other plants need cutting back and the equipment needs 'servicing' or replacing – though all items still work !
- 7) **Signage** this is an exercise that needs to be coordinated across the site with a standard giving directions and information about the gardens.

Evolution

An important principle in maintenance is to recognise change, imposed on us by nature but will certainly come from evolving use by all people and services. Nevill Hall Nature Spaces sets out to be an organisation wanting to be informed by members and users, specifically to recognise the growing understanding of the role of nature in our own health, and our responsibilities in the changing natural world... and to support the gardens accordingly.

Views of the existing Sensory Garden December 2025

(to follow)

