

Olden Community Garden

our History



Olden Community Garden owes its existence to the vision and efforts of one woman, Patricia Tawn, known as Pat.

In the early 1980s, Pat lived at 22 Whistler Street, London N5. She became aware that Islington Council was looking to raise money from a two-acre derelict plot of land opposite her house, behind a brick wall.

The land, originally owned by British Rail then the Greater London Council, devolved to Islington Council in 1973. There were rumours of it being rented to a masonry cutting company or a garage, etc. Pat wanted it to become a garden and she raised a petition supported by her neighbours. Islington Green Space Department was sympathetic because the Borough of Islington has the least green space of any London borough. Eventually Islington Council agreed to the plan for a garden.

It took about two years to clear the land which had been used for fly tipping. The CVS, Community Service Volunteers, agreed to take on the site. At that time anyone claiming unemployment benefit for more than six months was sent on skills training courses, eg horticulture, bricklaying. They built the patio, a clubhouse, paths, the greenhouse and a large raised brick pond which was later removed because it leaked.

Pat called the garden 'The Olden Garden' because at that time many older people lived in Whistler Street and would meet to socialise in the garden. With the help of a few older neighbours, Pat set about making the site into a garden. They dug flower beds and planted trees, shrubs and flowers, etc.

The mosaic created by the late Derek Whitehead and mounted on the garden door over 20 years ago is being repaired.

The site

Now a two-acre oasis of greenery, Olden Community Garden emerged from a railway embankment that dates back to Victorian times, when the railway line opened in the 1870s. It is bounded by Drayton Park bridge to the north, Ronalds Road bridge to the south, and the railway track to the west, for freight trains from Finsbury Park via the 'Canonbury curve' under Highbury Fields, previously a route for freight going to Canary Wharf. On the east, a long 10-foot high brick wall stands alongside Whistler Street. Whistler Street was built in 1866-70 for the railway workers and their families who were mostly from Ireland. The flat area next to Whistler Street is now a flower garden with a lawn, herbaceous border and mature trees.

We have two special trees. The olive tree on the patio was donated by the Pause Team, Islington children's social services, in memory of one of their mothers. The Team visit it regularly. Morag's mulberry tree was planted near the sheltered seat on the top terrace. Morag's family donated £3,000 when Morag, a young mother, recovered from a severe illness and claimed that visits to the garden helped her.

The Whistler Street door with a touchpad lock leads to a patio with a large summer house funded by Arsenal Football Club, a wheelchair accessible toilet funded by the Lottery, and a tool shed. The patio has been enlarged to improve wheelchair access. In 2022, Jamie's hut was built at the end of the lawn. Also on the top flat area is the potting and composting area, next to the gate used for deliveries of bark chippings, etc.

A new small wildlife pond, funded by Local Giving's Magic Little Grants, is dedicated to Carrick James who died in 2018. He was our treasurer for many years. He influenced the development of major local community initiatives and was very knowledgeable about birds and pond life.

The steep railway embankment includes an orchard with apple, pear, plum, damson, cherry and apricot trees. One of the apple trees is very old. It is believed to date back to the second world war when the area was used for vegetable growing.

The terraced vegetable beds above the greenhouse were recently reconstructed by volunteers using reclaimed railway sleepers funded with a National Garden Scheme Community Garden Grant. The Earthlings volunteer group now grows a wide range of vegetables.

The wildflower meadow was refurbished recently with a grant from Our Space Award and a new path winds down the slope. The new raised butterfly garden nearby was created with materials excavated from the meadow.

There is a large woodland area, mainly ash and sycamore, with a circular path through it and a large clearing in the centre, with a table and seating useful for young people's Woodcraft Folk sessions, etc.

All this is maintained and developed by our volunteers of all ages and abilities. We contract with part-time professional gardeners (see list of names at the end) who lead the volunteers and advise our Trustees. Volunteer gardening sessions and open days are held every Tuesday during February-November and on the third Saturday in the month. To pay our gardeners' fees, we fundraise, encouraging donations from our members, and we apply for grants, for example to Islington Council's Community Chest.

Through The BIG Alliance in Islington, groups of corporate volunteers come from time to time to work on major projects.

Enhancing biodiversity throughout Olden Community Garden continues to be a priority aim, with current projects in the woodland and a 'forest garden' being part funded by grants. We use harvested water from the Highbury Roundhouse, we compost all the green waste and we create wildlife habitats from woody debris.

Olden Community Garden is designated by Islington Council as a Grade 1 Site of Importance to Nature Conservation.

History

Pat Tawn moved to Kent in 2008, leaving the garden - now well established - in the care of a committee. Anna Sullivan was our chair and I was the membership secretary. In those days members were given keys to access the garden via the Whistler Street door.

Members could join if they lived or worked in Islington. Children had to be accompanied by an adult because of the railway line at the bottom of the garden which separated us from the allotments in Arvon Road.

One of our challenges was when the Victorian brick wall, separating the garden from Whistler Street, fell down - luckily inwards into the garden. It was a sunny Sunday afternoon and without any warning the wall collapsed. This was in 2009. Because Whistler Street is in a conservation area, Islington Council agreed to rebuild the wall with the same red Victorian bricks, most of which could be salvaged. It was two years before the Council rebuilt the wall using a skilled 70-year-old bricklayer who laid every brick of the 10-foot tall, 80-foot long wall. The work cost over £200,000.

Not long after the brick wall was rebuilt, Islington Council closed our woodland area to the public for health and safety reasons. The adjacent Victorian 'bottleworks' building, Highbury Roundhouse, had been declared unsafe. The building had previously housed a factory making glass bottles for the Stephens Ink factory in St Thomas's Road and, subsequently, under the leadership of the late Bay Hodgson, it had been refurbished for use as a community centre. Our woodland remained closed for over two years until the building was demolished in 2013. During that time the woodland reverted to saplings and brambles before our volunteers could start clearing the paths and the woodland table area. The newly rebuilt Highbury Roundhouse opened in 2023.

Terry Stacy became our chair in 2012 and in 2014 we obtained charitable status as a Charitable Incorporated Organisation. Under an agreement with Islington Council which owns the land and is responsible for the trees, the volunteer-run charity – Olden Community Garden – now maintains the garden, with the object to promote a community garden for the benefit of people living or working in the London Borough of Islington.

As well as members visiting the garden to relax and enjoy family picnics, etc, community groups were given access. The local college brought adults with learning difficulties who were being taught horticultural skills by the lovely teacher Nigel.

Our partnerships developed and increased over the years. Access is now available, often free of charge, to many community groups, including some at the neighbouring Highbury Roundhouse and staff at ILDP (Islington Learning Development Partnership). Other regular users include Drayton Park Primary School, nursery schools, and Forest School groups.

Over the years our membership numbers have also increased. Some 300 members join or renew each year. As most memberships are for a couple or a family, we estimate that access is available to about 1,000 local people. Our annual survey of members invites suggestions for improvements or changes in Olden Community Garden.

Members and local community groups, eg Arvon Road Allotments Group, Birth Companions, Islington Gardeners, may book the garden for parties, events or meetings. A Diwali party is held every year. We are also open to the public for major events, including London Open Gardens, National Garden Scheme Open Day, and London Open House Festival.

Every summer since 2013, except during Covid, we have held a Music Festival, organised with much help from our wonderful gardener/musician Andrew Smith. A short film was made of the 2016 Music Festival, with Anna Sullivan, Carrick James and Terry Stacy all featuring in it.

Olden Community Garden, together with the three other major community gardens in Islington, Culpeper in N1, King Henry's Walk in N1 and Sunnyside in N19, are precious oases of green in inner London.

Jill McKeown

with help from Evelyn Thomas

20 May 2026

Our chairs:

Pat Tawn 1986-2008

Anna Sullivan 2008-2012

Terry Stacy 2012-2024

Charles Waddell 2024-

Our paid gardeners:

Simon

Andy

Laura Arison and Andrew Smith

Maria Papiou and Caroline Haines

Ruby Nichols and Caroline Haines