

‘Whispers of better things come to us’: a Victorian pioneer at Chelsea

The Octavia Hill garden, designed by Ann-Marie Powell, honours the campaigner for green spaces for the urban poor

Jane Owen

Beyond the genteel hubbub of garden lovers at this year’s Chelsea Flower Show is an ethereal soundscape representing two powerful women born 130 years apart. The first is Octavia Hill, who co-founded the National Trust in 1895, and the second is show star Ann-Marie Powell, who designed the show’s bosky Octavia Hill garden and commissioned sound artist Justin Wiggan to interpret the garden’s electrical impulses into audio.

Wiggan’s work reflects a complex tapestry of 166 plant species including bold yellow, purple, brown and green from Dutch iris; lime yellow from long-flowering *Euphorbia ceratocarpa*; clear-blue *Baptisia* (wild indigo); shimmering grass *Bouteloua* and clouds of old man’s beard woven into place by Location Landscapes.

Overhead, trees and a hexagonal steel canopy help frame the lush 22 x 10-metre design intended for a brownfield site, a struggle to imagine in the Chelsea Flower Show ground’s verdant, leafy acres. Mature plane trees make a backdrop for the show garden’s trees, including pink-flowered *Lagerstroemia indica* or Cape Myrtle from China; *Celtis sinensis* from Asia; and *Maackia amurensis*, whose tactile bark fixes nitrogen from the atmosphere through a symbiotic relationship with bacteria from the *Bradyrhizobium* genus.

The hard landscaping, by The Landscaping Consultants, is worthily low carbon: no concrete; the brick, timber and stone are recycled from National Trust properties, and thatch walls are in place to encourage wildlife.



A portrait of Hill by Reginald Grenville Eve (1921) © Alamy



Ann-Marie Powell, garden designer: 'Why isn't Hill as well known as Florence Nightingale? I'd never heard of her but when I started reading about her I fell in love with her a bit' © Rachel Warne

Any wildlife that sets up home there, such as a nightingale taking a break from Berkeley Square, will be in for a shock in late May when the show closes and the garden moves 180 miles north to Blue Diamond's Show Gardens in Nantwich, Cheshire. It was the group's brainwave to have a joint Chelsea garden with the National Trust and they picked up a sizeable portion of the garden's rumoured £500,000 price tag.

Powell designed the garden so that visitors of most abilities can get up close and personal to the canopy via a sloping path, a splash-along “walking stream”, and two ingenious walking-stick-and-wheelchair-friendly grills over the stream.

The sound of the splashing stream melds with Wiggan’s plant-based soundscape, which he made using electrodes to convert “... the energy from key seeds, plants and trees into sounds using a device that converts changes in electrical impulses which control synthesisers”.

Then comes a soundscape poem, “Whispers of better things come to us”, from Octavia Hill’s 1877 speech campaigning for better living conditions and clean air, read in one version by the garden’s stakeholders and “sung” in another by a nightingale.

Hill’s passion for conserving and restoring green space is the garden’s theme as well as one of the Trust’s founding principles, and the garden’s female ethos is reflected in the Trust’s workforce, as Andy Jasper, the Trust’s director of Gardens and Parklands explains:



Illustration of Powell's Chelsea garden

“We’re about 60 per cent female horticulturalists, and we’re very, very proud of that. And we’ve got our apprentices working on the garden. We have put some money and a lot of thinking time into this.”

Powell too has put in thinking time: “People love a bit of colour. So many parks are boring now — councils just don’t have the funds so we’ve used bold browns, yellows, maroons and greens, and plenty of non-natives as well as natives because as our climate changes some of the non-natives will be better able to survive here, and they will nurture their own community of insects.”

Because of her working-class background, Powell feels strongly about the garden’s theme of green access for underprivileged people. Her grandfather’s allotment in Leeds was an important escape for her while she was growing up.

Hill came from a middle-class family who fell on hard times, and her instinct for social reform began early. Aged 14, she taught Ragged School children, taking them to Hampstead Heath over weekends. Appalled by working-class living conditions, particularly in factories and mills, she raised money with the help of the artist John Ruskin and others to build parks and housing for the urban underprivileged.

As Powell says: “Why isn’t she as well known as Florence Nightingale? I’d never heard of her but when I started reading about her I fell in love with her a bit. She came up with the idea of ‘intimate space’ for families to sit together — all the things around green space that we’re talking about now.”

While organisations from the National Trust to the Open Spaces Society continue to work and campaign in support of public gardens, green public space continues to be gnawed away. As part of the 2021 Environment Act, developers now have to ensure a minimum 10 per cent Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) — which could, for instance, mean adding trees to a site. That sounds great until you read the small print: developers can apply to plant on an alternative site. Or they can apply to buy their way out of the BNG commitment.

Meanwhile, biodiversity continues to suffer, as vividly demonstrated by Bug Life’s citizen science “splatometer” measuring the number of insect splats on windscreens, and by the Natural History Museum’s international, peer-reviewed biodiversity tracking and analysis. Both indicate that Hill’s message about protecting green space is as urgent today as it was more than a century ago on this increasingly overcrowded island.



Dutch iris, one of the plants that inspired the colours in the Octavia Hill garden © Jonathan Buckley/GAP Photos

What would Hill have made of Chelsea's extravagant gesture for green-ness? Across the Thames and east from the show under the shadow of the Shard and a short walk from the old FT office at Southwark Bridge, Hill made the Red Cross garden on the site of a derelict paper factory, with play areas, a pool, bandstand, benches and even some houses. The park could be the mother of Chelsea's Octavia Hill's garden, serving an underprivileged community on a brownfield site. I used the park for fresh-air FT meetings. Well, office workers are pretty downtrodden (not that this applies to the FT's, obvs).

Hill made another small development at Freshwater Place, in London's swanky Marylebone, where Ruskin bought Hill two sets of cottages in the 1860s on condition that she would get 5 per cent annual return. Back then, Marylebone was an undesirable area, as a contemporary report in *The Times* outlines: "The houses faced a bit of desolate ground occupied by dilapidated cowsheds and manure heaps. The needful repairs and cleaning were carried out, the waste land was turned into a playground where Mr Ruskin had some trees planted."

No mention of Hill's contribution, of course, in this male-dominated Victorian society. It must have taken guts to persevere. A contemporary account of Hill by the Bishop of London, Frederick Temple, gives a snapshot of her courage and determination. He encountered her at a meeting of the ecclesiastical commissioners and wrote, "She spoke for half an hour . . . I never had such a beating in all my life."
