BANKSIDE OPEN SPACES TRUST | RED CROSS GARDEN

RED CROSS GARDEN — ANNIVERSARY — 2026



CELEBRATING 140 YEARS LEGACY &
20 YEARS OF RENEWAL



Cover image:

Octavia Hill

Born: December 3, 1838 (Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, England)

Died: August 13, 1912 (Marylebone, London, England)

CONTENTS

RED CROSS GARDEN
ABOUT THE GARDEN
THE GARDEN LAYOUT
THE HALL
THE COTTAGES
THE MOSAICS
BANKSIDE OPEN SPACES TRUST
KEY ORGANISATIONS
NATIONAL TRUST
METROPOLITAN PUBLIC GARDENS ASSOCIATION
FANNY WILKINSON
CALBAS LTD
ROYAL COLLEGE OF OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS
OCTAVIA HOUSING
LAND USE CONSULTANTS
CHRIS BLANDFORD ASSOCIATES
THE STEERING GROUP
RED CROSS & WHITE CROSS COTTAGES
VOLUNTEERS
BOST'S ACHIEVEMENTS
AWARDS
GET INVOLVED

RED CROSS GARDEN

We celebrate 140 years since Octavia Hill's lease signing on 15 March 1886 with a grand opening on Saturday 2 June 1888, attended by the local community, Octavia Hill herself and the Archbishop of Canterbury.

In a letter to her fellow workers in 1887, Octavia spoke of the Red Cross Garden as being laid out with walks that:

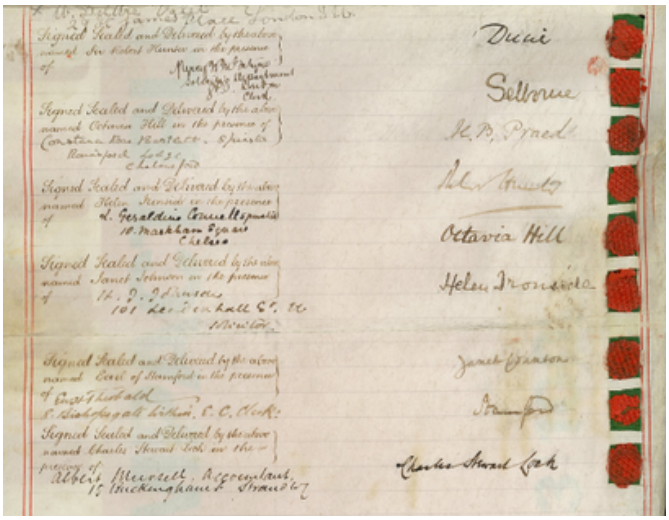
"Wind about between small lawns and flower beds set with flowering trees and shrubs.

Two plane trees are planted on the larger spaces of gravel, which are to have circular seats around them, and where we hope working women will sit and rest and do needlework, and tired men will sit and smoke on summer evenings.

A small pond has been made in the garden, and a jet of water forms a fountain on it.

The narrowest part of the pond will be crossed by a little bridge."

On Thursday 1 June 2006 Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) officially re-opened Red Cross Garden.


Octavia Hill

Octavia's signature on lease

Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal was in attendance and carried out the opening ceremony in 2006 with local residents, businesses, those involved with the restoration, and students from two local schools coming together to celebrate.

Artist, Suzie Balazs unveiled a mosaic with students from those schools.

Speaking at the Royal re-opening of the garden, former BOST Director Helen Firminger stated:

'The Red Cross Garden was set up by a visionary lady, as a beautiful haven with flowers and fountains to bring together oppressed urban people who did not have the means to escape to the country'.

ABOUT THE GARDEN



AN OASIS (RED CROSS GARDENS, SOUTHWARK).

The Garden stands as a pivotal aspect of what is regarded as one of Octavia Hill's most remarkable environmental and social initiatives. Together, three key elements significantly enhanced the lives of residents in the impoverished and bleak area of Southwark during that time.

Octavia Hill was committed to infusing light and air into the dreariness of the industrial slums of 19th-century Southwark.

She recognised that the 500 families residing in the new tenement buildings across the street lacked spaces to play and relax.

To address this, she successfully convinced Church Commissioners to lease her a site that had once been a dilapidated paper factory and hop warehouse.

Red Cross Garden was designed in 1887 and inaugurated by the Archbishop of Canterbury in June 1888.

The layout featured a bandstand for music and poetry, vibrant mosaics adding art and beauty for the working class, and flowers, trees, and a pond introducing nature and color. It hosted the Southwark Flower Show, with fetes, celebrations, bands, and maypole dancing.

THE GARDEN LAYOUT

Much of the garden's early design was lost after World War II, replaced by a simpler layout that buried the pond and removed the winding paths and flower beds.

The space became quiet and little used. Later, Southwark Council leased the garden to BOST, supported by generous funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Council. Land Use Consultants prepared the first strategy, while Chris Blandford Associates refined it and managed the restoration.

Calabasas Ltd completed the landscaping and building in 2005.

Guided by archaeological and historic research, the restoration brings back the spirit of the original design while creating a garden that fits modern community life.

Recycled materials honour Octavia Hill's approach, and the pond now offers a place for wildlife as well as beauty. Delicate planting was reintroduced, and local children planted two thousand yellow crocuses in tribute to Octavia's work.

BOST now maintains the garden with the help of a committed group of volunteers.









THE HALL





Elizabeth Casson



Walter Crane. 'The Heroic Deed of Alice Ayres.' c.1890

Designed by Elijah Hoole, Red Cross Hall was established to serve as a reading room, library, and a venue for working men's clubs, women's groups, concerts, plays, poetry readings, and gymnastics.

This was also the birthplace of the Cadets movement. Elizabeth Casson, the founder of the first college of Occupational Therapy, served as the Hall's secretary from 1908 to 1913.

It played a crucial role in community, with Octavia Hill describing it as a kind of "Parish parlour."

The walls were once adorned with murals by Walter Crane, illustrating scenes of working-class heroism.

Today, it is privately owned and referred to as Bishop's Hall.

THE COTTAGES



Lithograph by Elijah Hoole architect of Red Cross Hall and Cottages

Octavia Hill's Red Cross Cottages were established to provide small, high-quality homes, each uniquely designed to showcase character.

These cottages offered a welcoming alternative to the cramped and impersonal tenements that previously occupied the site where the Cathedral School now stands.

They are currently owned and managed by Octavia Housing, a housing association that evolved from the Horace Street Trust founded in 1889.

Many residents have proudly called these cottages their home for over six decades.



THE MOSAICS

Two mosaic roundels originally decorated the garden wall.

One was "The Sower" donated by Julia Minet in 1896 and made by Powell and Sons. It was on a wall in the north-west corner overlooking the Red Cross Garden, but it has since been relocated to the rear of the current Octavia House building.

The second mosaic roundel was "The Good Shepherd" presented by a Mrs. Lynch and Miss Gregg. It was made by Salviati; however, it is now thought to be lost.



COMMEMORATIVE MOSAIC



The new mosaic, unveiled in 2006 by Princess Anne, the new mosaic is the creation of artist Suzie Balazs. It draws inspiration from drawings by children from St Joseph's Roman Catholic Primary school and the Cathedral School of St Saviour and St Mary Overie, who explored Victorian tales and visited the garden prior to its restoration.

Their designs reflect the garden's 19th-century transformation from gloom to beauty.

The mosaic's inscription, "The Wilderness Shall Blossom as the Rose," references an original ceramic inscription, while "A New Life for Red Cross Garden 2005" commemorates the major restoration.

BANKSIDE OPEN SPACES TRUST

Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) brings people together to create inspiring urban green places, helping make neighbourhoods greener, healthier and more beautiful.

Founded by local residents in 2000, BOST has spent more than 25 years protecting and enhancing parks, gardens and shared spaces across SE1.

Working closely with communities, Southwark Council, local businesses and dedicated volunteers, BOST ensures each green space reflects the needs and character of its neighbourhood.

Their work includes managing and improving much-loved gardens, running regular gardening groups, supporting park steering groups, and creating outdoor activities that enhance wellbeing.









KEY ORGANISATIONS

BOST are ever grateful for all the organisations and individuals listed in the following pages that helped make Red Cross Garden possible, and who continue to safeguard open spaces to this day.

National Trust

The National Trust was founded in 1895 by Octavia Hill, Robert Hunter and Hardwicke Rawnsley, inspired by the belief that nature, beauty and history should be accessible to all, regardless of background or means.

Today, it is one of the largest conservation charities in Europe, with over 5.3 million members, around 9,500 staff and thousands of dedicated volunteers who support its work in communities across the country.

The Trust cares for more than 250,000 hectares of land, over 890 miles of coastline, and more than 500 historic houses, gardens and nature reserves across the UK, preserving these special places for future generations to enjoy.

Its enduring purpose is captured in its motto: “For everyone, for ever”.

Metropolitan Public Gardens Association

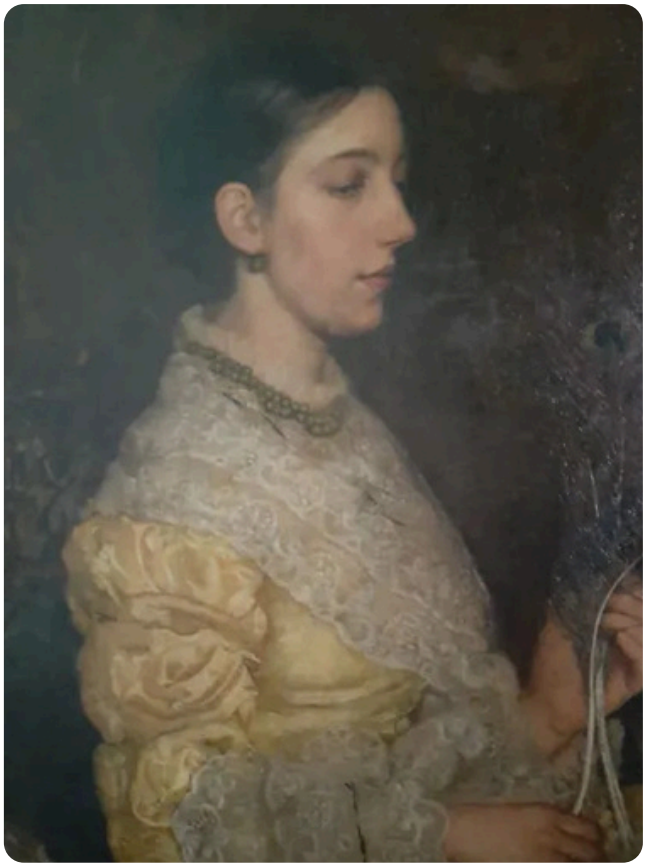
The MPGA founded by Lord Meath in 1882 has long been recognised as one of the leading Charities in its field, and has helped to set up several organisations including the National Trust and the National Playing Fields Association.

It also campaigned for school playgrounds to be made available for public use out of school hours.

The MPGA continues to support gardens and green sites under threat of development in the Capital.

It was originally involved in restoring Red Cross Garden during World War I, to assist the trustees, providing skilled labour (on an agency basis which the MPGA used to do in its earlier years), and acting as a channel for the donation of all of the required plant material by a distinguished MPGA member.

FANNY WILKINSON



Fanny Wilkinson was Britain's first female professional landscape gardener, together with her assistant Emmeline Sieveking they laid out Red Cross Garden.

Emmeline was the daughter of a physician and her father had worked for none other than Queen Victoria.

Working for the MPGA over the next 20 years Fanny created more than 75 public gardens throughout London. These ranged from large parks to small churchyards, where she often supervised sizeable groups of previously unemployed men.

CALABAS LTD (CALABASAS)

Calabasas is a highly respected landscape contracting firm known for delivering exceptional work on historic and high-profile gardens and parks.

For 16 years, the Reigate-based company specialised in high-quality restoration projects across London and the South East, working with both private clients and local authorities.

Their work at Red Cross Garden was a standout example of their craftsmanship.

They balance traditional and contemporary construction techniques to overcome a complex brief and create a finished landscape that everyone involved could be proud of.

They responded to a complex historic brief, resulting in a durable and accessible public garden.

The Royal College of Occupational Therapists is the professional body for occupational therapists in the UK.

Its members include practising occupational therapists, students and support workers. For more than 90 years, the organisation has championed the profession and the people behind it, and today represents more than 36,000 members.

The College supports its members to learn, research, teach and practise, continually developing their knowledge and skills. It also works with healthcare commissioners, policymakers and wider partners to position occupational therapy within health and social care.

The organisation is based at Phoenix House on Borough High Street in Southwark, close to the historic Red Cross Hall and Red Cross Garden associated with the social reform work of Octavia Hill. This local connection also relates to Elizabeth Casson (1881–1954), a pioneer of occupational therapy in Britain.

The Princess Royal has served as Patron of the College since 1986.



The Octavia Hill Society was established in 1992 to promote awareness of Octavia Hill, her family and her colleagues, and the relevance of their ideas today in both national and international contexts.

At the heart of its work is the Octavia Hill Birthplace House, which serves as a museum and learning centre.

The Society collects, preserves and interprets material connected to her life and work, creating a focal point for visitors and researchers.

It also supports research, lectures and partnerships that explore her legacy and its links to places associated with her work.

The Society recognises individuals and organisations reflecting her values, advocates for the preservation of related buildings, and runs the Clock Bookshop, established in 2019, selling donated second hand books to support the Birthplace House.

Octavia Housing & Care originated as the Horace Street Trust in 1889, as marked on the plaque below The Sower mosaic in Red Cross Garden. Octavia Housing (Octavia) provides homes, support and care for people in Central and West London.

Octavia has stayed true to its social purpose for more than 150 years as they continue the pioneering work of their founder, Octavia Hill.

They believe in supporting the diverse neighbourhoods we serve so that people can live well, be independent, make connections and thrive.

Octavia have more than 5,000 homes and deliver equality through homes, support and opportunity, supporting vibrant communities and better lives for all. Stewards of a proud legacy dating back to 1865.

Land Use Consultants is an award winning landscape, environmental and planning consultancy specialising in creative, evidence based place making projects. It works across disciplines to analyse, conserve and design historic landscapes with care and attention.

In Southwark projects, LUC provided landscape and heritage input to inform restoration principles and guide historic character. It supported planning for Red Cross Garden with Bankside Open Spaces Trust and partners, ensuring historic identity was respected while enabling public use.

Chris Blandford Associates is an award winning landscape, environmental and heritage consultancy specialising in creative, evidence based place making projects. It works across disciplines to restore and design historic landscapes with care and attention.

Following Heritage Lottery funding, CBA developed and delivered restoration proposals for Red Cross Garden in partnership with Bankside Open Spaces Trust, the Steering Committee and the local community, enhancing its historic character and public use.

THE STEERING GROUP

We owe our deepest gratitude to the wonderfully passionate, determined and endlessly supportive members of the Red Cross Garden Steering Group, whose dedication has guided this project from its earliest spark of an idea through to its delivery and long-term care.

For more than twenty years, this extraordinary group has continued to champion the garden with unwavering energy and heart.

Made up of Octavia's descendants, local residents, Southwark Council officers, staff from nearby businesses and voluntary organisations, the Steering Group has been a community tapestry bringing creativity and commitment to every step of the journey.

Their collective spirit has shaped the garden into the place it is today, and their ongoing stewardship remains an inspiration.

RED CROSS & WHITE CROSS COTTAGE RESIDENTS



Image: Red Cross Cottages
Paul, Joyce & Burt Coot
Residents since 1962
In fond memory of Joyce and Burt

The residents of Red Cross and White Cross Cottages play a truly special role in the life of Red Cross Garden.
As long standing neighbours, they hold a deep affection for this green sanctuary and help nurture its calm, welcoming character.

Their steady support for BOST, whether by keeping a caring eye on the space or championing its importance, has been invaluable.
Their involvement in everyday acts of care, from informal observation to welcoming visitors, strengthens the garden's sense of safety and belonging.

VOLUNTEERS

Bankside Open Spaces Trust is proud to celebrate the dedication and passion of the volunteers who help care for Red Cross Garden. Their commitment, generosity and hard work bring this historic green space to life, ensuring it remains a place of beauty, reflection and community for all who visit.





From tending plants and maintaining the garden's unique character, to welcoming visitors and supporting local activities, our volunteers play a vital role every day. Their efforts not only preserve the legacy of this special place but also create a warm, inclusive environment that reflects the spirit of the neighbourhood. We are deeply grateful for their time, enthusiasm and care—Red Cross Garden simply would not be the same without them.





BOST'S ACHIEVEMENTS

Over the past 20 years, BOST has played a central role in the care, development and day to day life of Red Cross Garden, securing a 25 year lease from Southwark Council. Through ongoing maintenance, community engagement and sensitive improvements, we help protect the Garden's historic character while keeping it a welcoming and accessible space for local people and visitors.

AWARDS

✦ GREEN FLAG ✦ LONDON IN BLOOM SILVER GILT, GOLD AND WINNER GILT ✦ SMALL PARK OF THE YEAR 2016 ✦ BRITAIN IN BLOOM ✦

ACTIVITIES

✦ REGULAR VOLUNTEER SESSIONS ✦

✦ GREEN FINGERS & NATURE EXPLORER CLUBS FOR CHILDREN ✦

✦ RE-PLANTED 1000 YELLOW CROCUS BULBS IN 2014 ✦

✦ MAY CELEBRATIONS ✦

✦ FLOWER & VEGETABLE SHOWS ✦

✦ EASTER EVENTS ✦

✦ WINTER WARMER EVENTS ✦

✦ MAKE MUSIC DAY EVENTS ✦

✦ LIONS PART PARADES ✦

✦ WEDDINGS ✦

GET INVOLVED

If you would like to support us, volunteer, share ideas or feedback, get in touch by emailing *info@bost.org.uk*

SIGN UP TO OUR NEWSLETTER

We send regular BOST newsletters to those of you who sign-up. You can easily unsubscribe and resubscribe at any time, Scan the QR code or visit this link:

BIT.LY/BOSTNEWS

DONATE TODAY

We are thankful for the kindness of donors. Donating today means that we can continue protecting this oasis in Central London and carry on with our work in the local communty. Scan the QR code or visit this link:

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FOLLOW US ON INSTAGRAM

You can also follow us on Instagram. We often share news, updates and activities that are happening across BOST. You can also tag the Garden with #RedCrossGarden. Scan the QR code or visit:

INSTAGRAM.COM/BOSTSE1



BANKSIDE OPEN SPACES TRUST

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