



# Shropshire Open Gardens Shropshire Historic Churches Trust

RAISING MONEY FOR CHURCHES IN NEED SINCE 1993

DEC 2017

## What is Open Gardens?

Open Gardens is a well-established and very successful open gardens scheme that sees 25 events in Shropshire between May and mid-September. Most of the events are on Sunday afternoons, with a handful on Saturdays.

Raising on average £20,000 to £25,000 per year, the scheme is an important income stream for the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust, equalling Ride+Stride for Churches.

## Volunteers are all

The events happen because of coordination by a trust volunteer, with a little help from his friends. Roland Bream, SHCT Trustee, has been coordinating and marketing the programme of weekend events for eleven years. Deanery representatives distribute leaflets. The event then relies on local volunteers organizing and opening their gardens and PCCs opening up their churches.

## Good marketing is essential

Every year Roland produces 22,000 attractive colour leaflets, currently sponsored by Savills Estate Agents. The leaflet is also funded by advertisements for local nurseries and plant fairs. Each leaflet costs 7 pence to produce.

Clearly positioning the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust as the organiser, it lists the events by date giving a brief sales pitch for each. It offers important information, such as the local church name, where to park, ticket price, accessibility, whether you can bring your dog and whether tea will be available. It features great photography. It now advertises Ride+Stride for Churches using the national logo.

Leaflets are distributed by the deanery representatives to tourist information centres, garden centres, caravan parks, local shops and cafes. PCCs are contacted by post. Only five leaflets are provided to each church. Roland explains that "Very few of the people who come are churchgoers." This is an opportunity for people who a trust may not usually encounter to give and discover your trust.

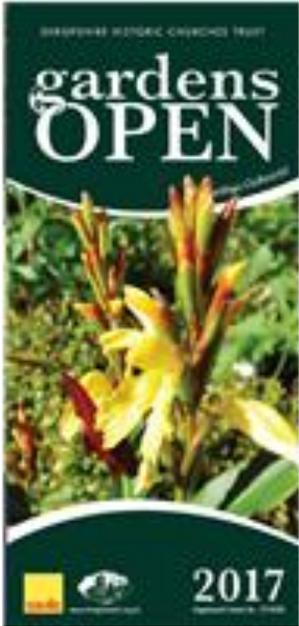
## Variables

Roland states that the weather plays a large role in determining the number of people who come and income. 2016 was a very wet year and takings over all were below average. Roland says, however, "Good weather is helpful, but one trail did very well despite terrible weather in 2016 which might have been because of team spirit." The type of event also plays a role, e.g., single garden or trail. Location also makes a difference.

## Who comes?

The number of visitors can vary from 50 or less to over 500. This year Much Wenlock's event set a new record at 650. Many of the visitors each year are new. It is important that the trust is represented at each event.

## The main attraction



Open Gardens features trails, the chance to visit a number of gardens in one village, as well as single gardens. Entry usually costs between £3 to £5, which makes for an affordable day out.

The local church is open. There is a link with the Trust's grant giving. Roland told us, "Every garden in one hamlet opened in 2016 because of a grant to a church". People can specify times and dates that suit them.

People sell refreshments and some hold plant sales. The profits are split 50/50 between the Trust and the church. Roland thinks that people could charge more for refreshments.

Roland likes four to five new places to open each year to keep the list fresh. Sometimes people volunteer their gardens, but usually they have been approached. 50 to 60 people are approached each year. 50% of the venues are new each year.

### The competition

In Shropshire, Yellow Book, which is 50% bigger, is the main competition for Open Gardens. Roland believes that Open Gardens tries harder as the second biggest and that competition is healthy.

### The potential for other counties

At the Churches Trusts Forum Fundraising Working Group meeting, trust representatives from other areas were impressed with Shropshire's success and were enthusiastic about the concept. The amount of work involved in setting up and running a scheme and the challenge of competing with other popular open garden events were noted. Roland felt that the work could be worth it and that there was potential in rural areas. It was observed that the different audiences attracted by a scheme like Open Gardens might be a vehicle for recruiting new volunteers and donors. It was noted by all that succession and attracting new volunteers was a growing issue for the majority of trusts.

Roland gave encouragement, stressing that competition with other existing events should not be a barrier if you differentiate your event. He says "There may well still be grounds for other trusts to explore this idea, but they would have to bear in mind that they would have to compete and that it takes time to build up loyalty and momentum." One off events, rather than a series, may be an option for some.

Roland finds organising the events very rewarding, but acknowledges that there is a lot to do. He recommends calling on your own network of friends and contacts to help. He found this invaluable when he started.

*The Churches Trusts Forum would like to thank Roland Bream for sharing his experience and knowledge about Shropshire's Open Gardens with other counties. We thank Shropshire Historic Churches Trust for their help. This case study has been prepared by the National Churches Trust.*

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**THE OPEN GARDENS YEAR** - Organising Open Gardens is a year round job. This works in Shropshire because of Roland's dedication to the event and his strong local contacts. He is concerned about succession. It may be valuable and better suit new volunteers to be part of a small working group and to divide tasks.

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- January to February - designing leaflets, updating the SHCT website, printing and distributing leaflets to Deanery representatives at a meeting
- March to April – circulation, marketing
- May to September – the events take place and it is important to visit yourself or to ensure that a colleague is representing the trust, ongoing marketing, managing finances, sending out next year's forms.
- October to December – managing income, liaising with garden owners, creating next year's list