



ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

THE OPENING OF
**RIVER
COURT
GARDENS**

31 MAY 2026

HEATHER HANCOCK

MASTER



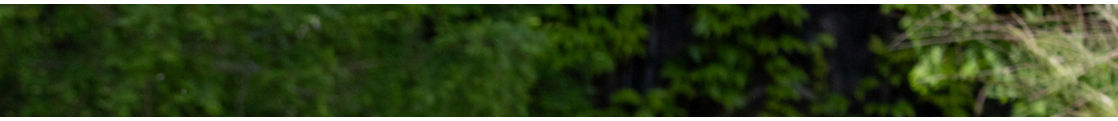
‘If you have a garden and a library, you have everything you need’

This line from Cicero’s letter to Marcus Terentius Varro in 46 BCE first sparked the idea to commission the River Court garden in St John’s College. Gardens in the ancient world were more than decorative; they provided intellectually stimulating social venues designed to encourage philosophical discourse and political influence.

Two thousand years on, the changes we are making to the College landscape embody the belief that gardens are essential to the complete intellectual environment. We appreciate them for leisure and pleasure but, more than this, time spent in a well-considered garden helps to incubate deep learning and original ideas.

From the ancient philosophers to modern-day psychologists, educators and scientists, there is all the evidence we need for the restorative power of gardens.

Our forebears knew this well. From the earliest days of the College, productive gardens and ornamental pleasure grounds marked its boundaries, and we enjoy the beautiful Scholars’ and Fellows’ Gardens to this day. Still, walking through the grounds to reach those spaces demands a deliberate decision.



This stunning new garden inserted into River Court and Lower River Court makes it effortless to reap the benefits, mind and soul.

From the moment the garden opened, I've seen countless students break into a smile as they emerge from the shady cloisters. The garden has been full of people seizing the chance to study outside, relaxing on the lawns with a book, gathering with friends, and engaging with this garden's superbly considered design.

The garden is already full of other forms of life too, designed as it is to provide habitat and food for birdlife, pollinators, moths, and small mammals, and its future-proof planting includes many new climate-resilient species to St John's, from the aged Tamarix trees and thorny citrus *Poncirus trifoliata* to the intoxicatingly scented *Hamamelis 'Aphrodite'*.

It takes rare talent to imagine a landscape capable of reconciling the stand-off between two of the College's architectural masterpieces, the gothic romance of New Court and the contextual modernism of post-war Cripps. We turned to Arne Maynard, renowned worldwide for his enchanting and enhancing gardens anchored in architectural rigour and scholarship.

Arne's River Court garden makes a sublime addition to the fabric of the College, an intelligent and beautiful space to be a catalyst for serendipitous encounters and enlightening discussion, for the deepening of bonds that reflect collegiate culture at its best.

We cannot thank Arne enough for his embrace of our ambition, the truly superb landscape he has designed, and the generosity with which he shared insights and ideas with our superb in-house gardening team along the way.

Both I and the whole College are incredibly grateful to our generous and enlightened benefactors Richard and Gosia Trubshaw for making this transformation possible.

DAVID AUSTRIAN

HEAD GARDENER



The garden that changes with the academic year

River Court gardens have been designed by Arne Maynard to offer distinctive moments at each point of the academic year. My role, and that of the gardens team, is now to care for and guide this landscape as it matures.

The Boston Ivy has long been a focal point of the Michaelmas term at St John's, as its glossy green leaves turn fiery shades of red and orange, before falling. The new plantings, including the Persian ironwood, *Parrotia persica*, and the closely related witchhazel, *Hamamelis 'Aphrodite'*, will add even more colour to this autumn spectacle. What's more, the falling leaves on the Katsura trees, *Cercidiphyllum japonicum*, will give off a pleasant aroma that's like burnt sugar or candyfloss.

When students return for the Lent term, the fragrance of Christmas box, *Sarcococca confusa*, and Wintersweet, *Chimonanthus praecox*, will fill the air, echoing the scent familiar to everyone beside the Bridge of Sighs at this time of the year. The witchhazels will add spicily scented orange flowers, and a mixture of early flowering bulbous *Iris reticulata* and *Narcissi* will add further texture and colour.

Easter term will see plumes of light pink flowers from the Tamarisk trees, *Tamarix tetrandra*, native to the Eastern Mediterranean and well suited to Cambridge's dry conditions. Further colour will come from the deep pink flowers of the Judas trees, *Cercis chinensis* 'Avondale', with the Japanese bitter orange, *Poncirus trifoliata*, producing white, sweetly scented, flowers.

Throughout the gravel garden, drought-tolerant salvias, grasses and herbs provide long seasons of interest and support pollinators. The light blue scented flowers of *Iris* 'Jane Philips' will catch the eye, and the Pasque flowers, *Pulsatilla vulgaris*, are a particular favourite of mine, and a quiet nod to the local wild flora south of Cambridge.

One of my predecessors, Ralph Thoday, was famous for growing apples, winning prizes for them at the Royal Horticultural Society, so I'm pleased that the espaliered apples will once again give students the opportunity to enjoy the fruit of the gardens.

Waterlilies have been added to the reflecting pool in the Lower Court, and hundreds more spring bulbs will be planted to bring further colour and scent to the garden, ensuring the landscape brings interest to our community throughout the academic year.



Parrotia persica



Iris reticulata



Tamarix tetrandra



Poncirus trifoliata



1

Tamarix tetrandra

Dark arching branches and plumes of soft pink flowers soften the Western boundary

2

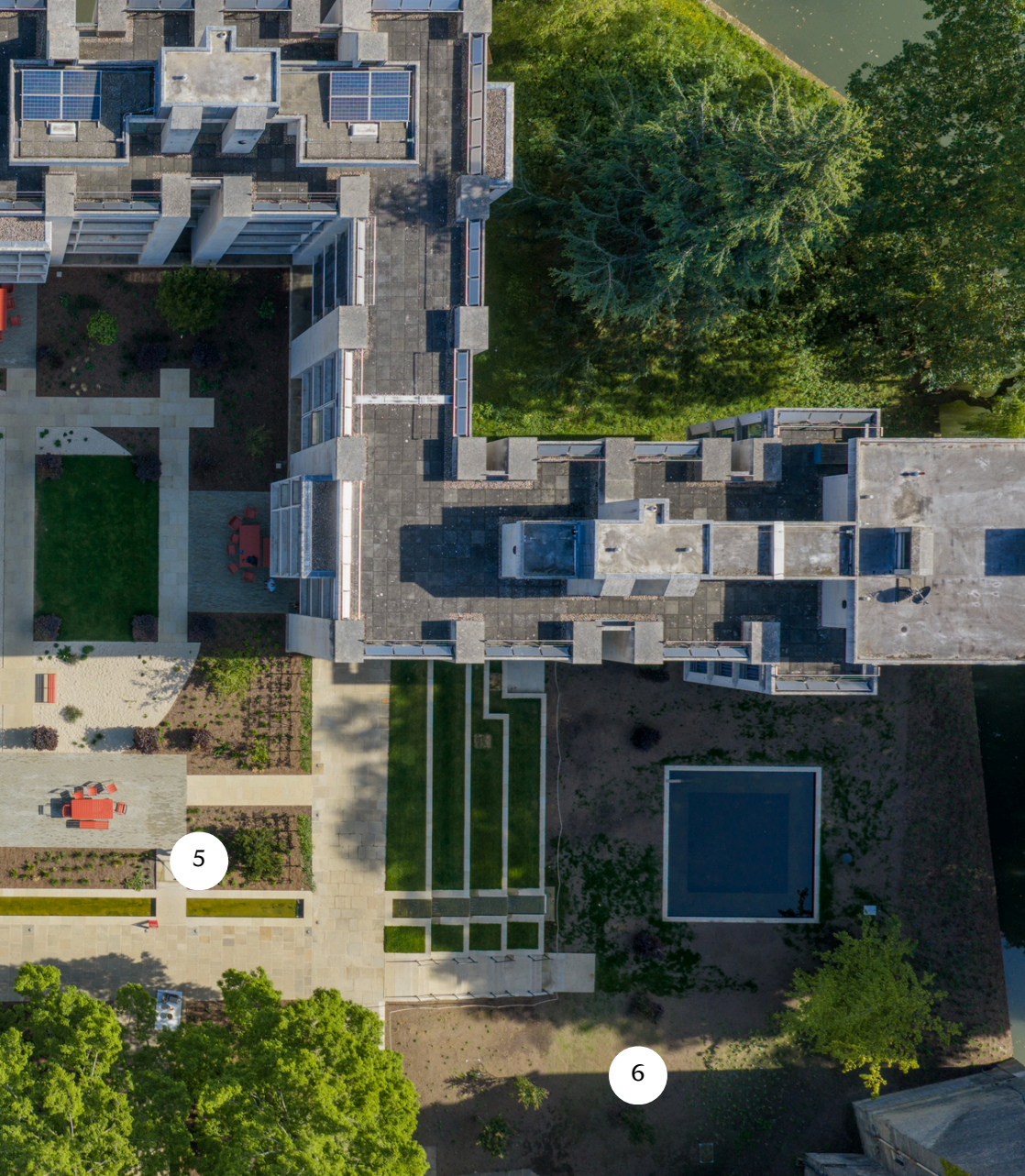
Sarcococca confusa

Christmas box under the metasequoia will fill the Court with scent in Lent Term

3

Iris 'Jane Phillips'

Herbaceous perennial bringing softly scented blue flowers in early summer



5

6

4

Copper beech

The geometric shapes of the copper beech echo the architecture of Cripps Court

5

Taxus baccata Dovastoniana

This yew brings colour with yellow berries, in place of the usual red

6

Cercidiphyllum japonicum

Katsura trees will bring autumn colour and a burnt sugar scent

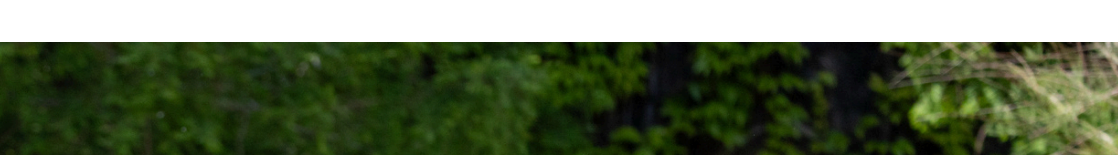
RIVER COURT REIMAGINED

A MODERN GARDEN IN A HISTORIC SETTING



St John's College has grown organically since its foundation in 1511. First, Second and Third Courts gradually occupied the area from the original Hospital to the River Cam. Across on the western riverbank, small pleasure grounds were made among the pastures, fish pools created, and formal avenues laid out. In the 1770s the Master, William Powell, proposed that Capability Brown be retained to improve the grounds, his naturalising efforts rewarded by the presentation by the College of a silver cup. In the 1820s, the College took the bold step of building on the Backs, creating the neo-Gothic marvel that is New Court. Over a century later, having acquired land north and north-west of New Court, the College was building again, this time the Modernist Cripps Building, its covered walkways and zigzag plan framing two new spaces, River Court and Merton Court.

When in the early 2020s the College decided to breathe new life into its grounds, River Court was the obvious location. Framed by the brick and Boston ivy-clad 'back' of New Court and the Modernist façade of Cripps, the space was occupied by a flat rectangle of grass awkwardly situated between these two remarkable pieces of architecture. It was not a space in which to dwell; the sea of windows made it hard not to feel exposed, and people hurried around the perimeter to get somewhere else.



Yet the space was full of potential. It is a busy part of the College, the covered walkways frame wonderful views, the four mature Metasequoia trees add dignity, and the earth bank down to Lower River Court and the Cam frames a view of the very beautiful old plane tree in the Master's Garden.

When describing his vision for the new landscape, Arne explained that a key part of his design process involves: "observing and recording the individual qualities that make that space unique and using these qualities to create a garden that feels appropriate to its landscape, with its own sense of place."

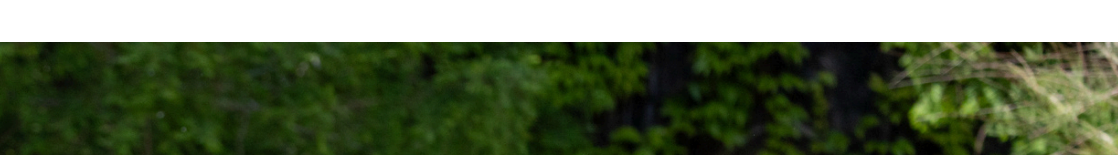
In this spirit, his response to the design challenge posed by River Court both reflects the historic geography of the College courts and captures the essence of collegiate life. Separating the space into a series of 'character areas', Maynard's design superimposes on an oval perennial meadow several blocks of lawn and stone paving to echo the historic courts' grass plats.

These immersive spaces, with shimmering contemporary and drought tolerant gravel planting create a tapestry of colour and are intended as places to meet, to work and read, and to wander through. Grasses, seedheads and bulbs take the planting through all four seasons and the changing demands of the academic year, with winter structure a particularly important consideration.

The planting of mature specimen trees and shrubs gives the garden instant impact and introduces new and unusual species to the College grounds. A rill along the main walkway nods to the historic fish pools infilled during the construction of New Court, and espaliered Evereste apple trees alongside the stone paths offer beautiful spring blossom, fruit from the bough in autumn, and structural interest throughout winter.

Maynard's signature use of topiary copper beech blocks anchors the bold linearity of Cripps to the garden, and the Metasequoia are underplanted for scent, with massed plantings of sweet box interspersed with witchhazel Aphrodite to bring a colourful note in the deep of winter.





New grass and stone terraces in Lower River Court create an amphitheatre for spectators of river life and to enjoy the London plane tree and passing clouds mirrored in the new reflecting pool. As the seasons pass, the turf will be studded with bulbs and early spring flowers.

The scheme reflects the College's continued commitment to biodiversity, creating a vibrant landscape that supports wildlife year-round. Nectar-rich planting attracts a range of pollinators, including many night-flying species, while the beech blocks provide sheltered nesting space for small birds. Seed heads will be left to offer food for birds and small mammals as the weather grows colder.

The intention in this design was that River Court would both read as though it has long been here, while standing testament to the College's willingness to re-imagine its historic setting for the benefit of today's academic community and those to come.



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