

The influence of social and material  
agents on garden visiting in England.

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## **The influence of social and material agents on garden visiting in England.**

### **ABSTRACT**

Visiting a garden that is open to the public is a popular leisure activity of many people in England and yet there is a dearth of research literature on the practice of visiting gardens. Two studies have identified why people visit, but by concentrating on motivation and hence human agency, they have disregarded the actions of social and material agents on the decision-making process. This paper reports the findings of a study into visiting pay-to-visit gardens in the South of England. A self-completion questionnaire was delivered to a cluster sample of residents in Southern England in 2002 to ascertain their preferences for visiting attractions in general and visiting gardens specifically. Interviews were then carried out with volunteers from the survey and with visitors to horticultural attractions to obtain a greater understanding of this phenomenon. Few visitors to gardens are there on their own and so either both or all of the individuals in a group were interviewed together. The results demonstrate the influence of both material and social agents. This paper reports on just one material agent – the weather, and one type of social agent – charitable organisations involved in garden visiting. In particular the influence of two major charities, the National Trust and the National Gardens Scheme are revealed.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gardens, as both private and public spaces, are a major resource for leisure in the UK. In a report by BBC Worldwide (1998), 34 million people had access to a garden and a conservative estimate suggested that 16 million people visited a garden open to the public in 1999 (Evans 2001). There have been two studies of garden visitors, their characteristics and

motivation, carried out in the UK, Gallagher (1983) and Connell (2004) who each conducted visitor surveys at gardens.

Together, these studies identified the two main factors that motivate visits. First, the setting, provided by gardens, draws the visitor; that is the peace and tranquillity, the naturalness and the freedom they offer. Secondly, horticultural aspects attract visitors, particularly the aesthetic value of the garden and the associations visitors can form with their own domestic gardens. Additionally, but less importantly, the studies identified motives that could be generic to any attraction, for example, social bonding and the opportunity to go out for a day.

By considering motivation, each of these studies focused on human agency and almost disregarded the actions of social and material agents. Pickering (1995) emphasises the importance of the effects of the physical environment by using the term ‘material agency’, that is ‘agency that comes at us from outside the human realm and that cannot be reduced to anything within that realm’ (Pickering, 1995, p.6). As a result of the climate, gardens are unique amongst attraction types as the imagescape (Wanhill, 2003) of the attraction itself changes dramatically from season to season and over time. This paper, however, considers the affects of the weather on the visitors, rather than the gardens. Social agency arises from individual people, but there are also collective forms, such as by institutions and organisations. These are more than simply aggregates of individual social agents - Wilson (2005) describes them as in some intuitive sense as ‘higher-level’ entities than individual persons.

This paper reports the findings of a project that seeks to understand visiting pay-to-visit gardens in the South of England. It describes three phases, one quantitative and two qualitative that form part of the doctoral thesis of the author. The project uses a mixed methodology, where each phase of the research complements the others. It aims to move beyond a conceptualisation based on human agency, such as motivation and constraint, to incorporate social and material agency.

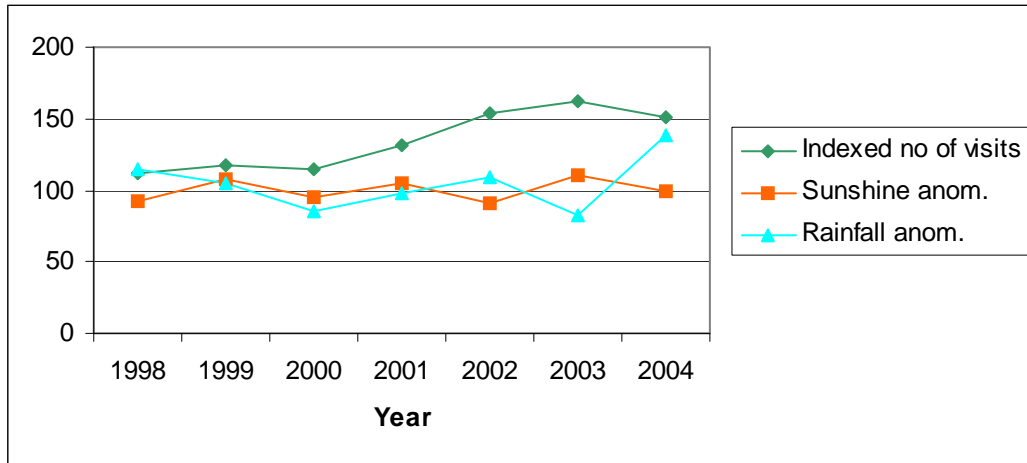
## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In her review of the literature Connell (2004) discusses several factors that influence garden visiting, including a rising trend of environmentalism and the impact of gardens ‘as a form of cultural tourism in postmodern society’ (Connell, 2004, p. 232). However, she did not investigate them empirically in her study and other empirical evidence in support or refutation of her suggestions is difficult to locate. Gallagher (1983) recognised that the reasoning behind a trip ‘is a complex process which takes account of the total experience, the decision to go, the journey there, the image and reality of the place and the homeward trip’ (Gallagher, 1983, p. 35). Nevertheless her research concentrated on the part a prior interest in the garden plays. Therefore, the relevance of social and material agents has not been considered. This study begins by reviewing one material agent – the weather and one type of collective social agent - charitable organisations. In particular, the influence of two of the major charities central to garden visiting, namely the National Trust and the National Gardens Scheme, is discussed here.

### The Weather

Over the past quarter of a century there has been a long-term trend of increasing numbers of visitors to gardens (VisitBritain, 2005a), but there is also variation from year to year. There has been just one key factor, that the increases and decreases that have occurred across the gardens sector, have consistently been attributed to and that is whether the weather has been predominantly sunny or raining. The south coast of England is the sunniest part of Great Britain and there is also an appreciable summer minimum and winter maximum amount of rainfall, with totals in July just half those in January (The Meteorological Office, 2006a). Figure 1 shows the Met. Office’s assessment of the weather experienced in the summer in England and how it compares to the difference from the 1961 to 1990 average (The

Meteorological Office, 2006b). The number of garden visits is the indexed numbers of visits in England in the year (based on the survey carried out by VisitBritain [2005a]).



**Figure 1 A comparison of sunshine, rainfall and the number of garden visits per annum**

*Source:* Derived from the Meteorological Office, 2006b and VisitBritain, 2005a

The figure demonstrates that (with the exception of 2002<sup>1</sup>) as the number of hours of sunshine increases (and to a certain extent as the amount of rainfall decreases), the number of garden visits increase. For example, 2003 had a long hot summer and was the second driest year since 1766 and had the highest level of garden visiting ever recorded (Mintel, 2004 and VisitBritain, 2005a). In contrast, England experienced its wettest summer since 1912 in 2004 and there was a 6% decrease in visitor numbers. That year, 79% of garden operators mentioned the weather as the most important negative factor on visitor numbers (VisitBritain, 2005a).

### Charitable Organisations

The two key organisations involved in garden visiting are the National Trust and the National Gardens Scheme (NGS). The National Trust is the principle owner of gardens in the UK looking after 200 gardens and 67 landscape parks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is 'the greatest collection of gardens ever held by one body' (Thomas, 1987, p 11). Entrance is open to both members of the Charitable Trust and to non-members. Details of all its properties are listed in an annual handbook sent to members who have free admission to the properties.

The NGS is also a charitable trust, but unlike the National Trust, it does not own any gardens. Founded in 1927, it co-ordinates the opening to the public of over 3,000 gardens in order to raise money for charity. It does this through recruiting owners of gardens, particularly private domestic gardens, and helping them to open their garden to the public for a few days each year. The principal assistance it offers an owner is through the marketing of the gardens, by distinctive yellow signs in the vicinity of the garden, over the period of opening and guide books, known as the 'yellow' book. This actually has two forms annually, a full edition of all the gardens in England and Wales and booklets for each County.

Gallagher (1983) established that 41% of the respondents to her survey were members of the National Trust, but this may reflect that the gardens in her sample were all historical and that the National Trust owned three of them. She found that 9% of the respondents were members of local horticultural societies, 4% were members of the RHS and 1%, the Garden History Society. She also showed that the reasons for visiting gardens differed slightly in importance between all visitors and those who were National Trust members. For each reason a slightly larger number of members thought it was an important reason. The greatest variation was in relation to 'garden visiting is a hobby', but whether respondents took up membership, because

they liked visiting gardens, rather than perhaps visiting gardens because they were members, is difficult to say.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The search of the literature had demonstrated that secondary data on visitors to gardens was limited and based on visitor surveys. It was therefore felt that a quantitative survey of *residents* would provide more appropriate *initial* data on motivational, social and environmental issues than a qualitative method and would include people who although motivated, may be constrained in some way from visiting. Following the completion of a pilot study, a cluster survey of residents, based on postcodes in the BH postcode area, in East Dorset and West Hampshire, was carried out in November/December 2002. The sample size was 932 households, from which the adult who would next celebrate their birthday was asked to complete the questionnaire. A total of 345 were completely or partially completed, giving a response rate of 37%. All questionnaires were collated, including those that were only partially completed. The survey instrument included open and closed questions; data was entered into SPSS and analysis was carried out using chi-square to a 95% confidence level. However, in some cases a statistically significant difference between variables could not be demonstrated as more than 20% of cells had a count of fewer than 5.

The second and third phases of the project, from which this paper primarily draws, uses qualitative data obtained from interviews. The first group of interviewees were nine volunteers from the residents' survey, just described. The second phase used a sample selected purposively (based on convenience) from the visitors to six horticultural attractions, namely three pay-to-visit gardens; the public Pleasure Gardens in Bournemouth; a garden centre and a small professional, horticultural show. In order to gain a better understanding of the dynamics of decision-making within a pair or group of visitors, the interviews were carried out, in both phases, within the decision-making group if possible. There was no formal interview schedule for either phase. Instead the residents were simply engaged in

conversation about their domestic gardens and visiting gardens and other horticultural attractions.

The short interviews with the visitors in the attractions used the grand tour question approach (Spradley, 1979). In this method only the one broadest possible question is asked. In this case it was, 'What made you come here today?' Further questions were then asked, in an informal way, to encourage them to expand on their initial response. The author undertook all the interviews; each was recorded, transcribed and then imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package. An analytic programme developed by Strauss (1987) was adopted. In this technique the transcribed data is coded and each piece is compared so that similarities and differences are distinguished.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### Weather

The literature review demonstrated that the weather has a major influence on visitor numbers in the gardens sector. The residents' survey in this study asked respondents which of 10 factors most influenced how they spent their leisure time. Almost two-thirds cited the weather and a quarter said it was the most important factor (in each case this was the highest response). The weather affects everyone, so not surprisingly, there were no statistically significant differences between different groups of visitors (e.g. by gender, age, occupational group) or by the number of times they visit gardens in a year.

The qualitative data shows that the weather has different impacts. The research by Connell (2004) shows that the setting of a garden is an important motivator for visiting a garden and as outdoor attractions, the weather can be particularly important:

*VI19: I think it's just nice to come at this time of the year when the weather is good really. You can just wander round without getting soaked.*



But the weather can also prompt a trip out:

RI03: *...we're a bit off the cuff, we look at the weather and suddenly think we'll do something*

It can also determine which type of attraction to visit:

D: *What made you choose the garden rather than the beach today?*

VI08: *...Just, uh, the weather not being so nice, so you know, we thought we'd do a detour on the gardens. We thought we'd have a look.*

It is interesting that it is not always the weather as a material agent that has the effect; it can be through the social agency of a weather *forecast*. These can help people anticipate whether a visit will be enjoyable and the best time to go:

D: *... what made you think of coming today?*

VI15: *'Cause the weather (laughter). I don't think the forecast's very good, so we've come.*

VI64: *Yes, yes so we'll be going to Exbury on Wednesday or Thursday.*

D: *You say Wednesday or Thursday...*

VI64: *Yeah.*

D: *The forecast isn't very good for Wednesday.*

VI64: *Isn't it? Oh, we won't be going Wednesday then!*

This showed that the weather does not only afford a visit, it can constrain too. Several interviewees told of how previous visits to a garden had been aborted, specifically by bad weather:

*D: And did she give you a choice of where to come?*

*VI12: Not really, no. She just, well we were coming here once before and we got to the gates and it poured with thunderstorm so we went off...so she said we'll definitely go today, as it's a nice day.*

This type of reaction to inclement weather is supported by the results of the residents' survey. Over three-quarters of respondents said that if they were told it was going to rain all day, just as they were leaving home, they would not continue with a visit to a garden. Over half would cancel the visit, if the same circumstances occurred, as they arrived at the entrance to the garden. Whatever the weather does to us, its agency is very different to that of charitable organisations. The weather is without intent, whereas the actions of employees and volunteers are determined by organisational objectives.

### The National Trust

The National Trust's core purpose is 'to look after special places for ever, for everyone' (National Trust, 2006, p. 8.). As an interviewee said about Kingston Lacy in Dorset:

*VI86a: ...the old boy died and they had to give it over to the National Trust, because you know they couldn't pay the debt. I think it's marvellous that they keep them up, don't they, else our heritage would have gone, woul'n'it?*

A man (VI13) and his wife (VI13a), however, recognised that the Trust has a dual role not only to conserve but also to enable access to the public, including its members:

D: *What aspect of the Trust...*

VI113: *Well because the National Trust both preserves, you know, the coastline, the countryside and so, on, um, and it's very pleasant to go round the gardens.*

VI113a: *It's expensive, if you have to go visit a place without...*

VI113: *...being a member.*

The research by Gallagher (1983) suggested that National Trust members appear to visit gardens more than non-members. The survey of residents sought to identify whether this is because they visit gardens more often than non-members and are therefore 'counted' in a survey more often or whether the sort of people who visit gardens have a greater propensity to join the National Trust. 18.5% of respondents were members, and there were no statistically significant differences between gender, age, employment status, occupational grouping or type of gardener.

**Table 1. Analysis of visits by members and non-members of the National Trust (per cent of respondents).**

(%)		Members	Non-members	<i>p</i> -value
Have ever visited a garden		95.3	80.1	<b>0.003</b>
No of visits to a garden in 2002	0	11.7	25.0	<b>0.000</b>
	1-2	26.7	47.2	
	≥3	61.7	27.8	
Like to revisit a garden		95.0	80.8	<b>0.024</b>

When asked if they had ever visited a garden, 95.3% of members had, in comparison to 80.1% of non-members (using Fisher's exact test,  $p = 0.003$ ). Table 1 provides an analysis of visits by membership. This shows that almost two thirds of members made three or more visits to a garden in 2002, compared to a quarter of non-members (using Chi<sup>2</sup> test,  $p = 0.000$ ). Taken together, this suggests that members not only have a greater propensity to visit, but are also more frequent visitors to gardens.

Moreover there was a statistical difference ( $p = 0.024$ ), between members and non-members who *like* to revisit a garden. Interestingly it can be seen that the proportion of members who have ever visited a garden and those members who like to revisit is virtually identical. Similarly the proportions are the same for non-members. This suggests that membership does not contribute to a difference in preference for repeat visiting. Therefore the greater number of visits must be attributable to members visiting more gardens or some other aspect of membership, such as free entry to National Trust properties. One visitor verified this:

VI41: *Yes, I do, um, I suppose really I [sigh] I go to the gardens because I am a member.*

D: *... because you get the free entry?*

VI41: *Yes, I do.*

So what else does membership offer? Members are sent a free handbook each year and 90% of members who responded to the survey said that it had inspired them to visit a garden. In an interview with a resident, who is a member, it was explained:

D: *So when you're in Cornwall do you get your National Trust book out to see what's in the area?*

RI09: *Yes, sometimes, if we go anywhere. ...I mean, we keep the book in the car...and um coming back from Cornwall, I think it was once, I looked a couple up and we just*

*quickly went there um, and that was on the way, just outside Exeter, um so we did that really just on the spur of the moment.*

### The National Gardens Scheme

The NGS is not as widely known by the public, as the National Trust, so it was not used as a variable in the residents' survey. Therefore the data presented here is qualitative, but it offers insights that could not be gained from quantitative data collection. In this first extract, a lady visiting a NGS garden explains how the actions of the charity influence her (note also the *interaction* with the weather):

D: *How did you know about the garden?*

VI95: *Yellow book.*

D: *So do you buy a copy?*

VI95: *They're free.*

D: *...And so do you sort of look out for that, to get the booklet?*

VI95: *Yes, every year, I get the booklet.*

D: *And then how ... do you use your booklet, once you've got it? Do you go by date, or by garden or a bit of both?*

VI95: *By date, um, uh, it suits us better to come mid-week than week-ends, so I look through and see which are open, at the beginning of the year I do this...I highlight the ones I want... and I put a green 'g' on the calendar that means look in the book, because in the past, we've missed some. We've said oh there's this garden to see, oh, it was last week. So, I put a green 'g' on the calendar which means look in the book and then I've highlighted them. Um, so it's a question of dates, so that if it's a nice*

*sunny day and we want to go to a garden we immediately know that there is one that we're interested in.*

Other people react differently to the NGS marketing devices. In the next extract a man (VI91) and his wife, (VI91a) at the same garden, describe their experiences:

*VI91: We were actually making a 'phone call from a public box, when I saw the sign on the roadside. I didn't really take it all in except that it was open each day and that it was in this direction and that was all I took in at that moment.*

*VI91a: I think the thing about the road signs as opposed to getting a leaflet with it all in, is it, it sort of feels, I know it's not, but it is planned, but it feels that you're happening upon it... Whereas if you go and get a book and say we're going to do this and this, I think what I mean is, it adds to the overall experience of when you're walking around the garden, like happening upon a little grotto or something and to actually happen upon the whole garden, in the first place, by seeing the sign and saying oh let's go down there, I think for me adds to the enjoyment and the pleasure of it as opposed to sort of maybe getting a book.*

Equally interesting, is how the collective agency of the organisation has created a view of their gardens that amounts to a 'brand'. In the last two extracts that are quoted here, two couples discuss their perception of the gardens opening under the auspices of each of the organisations discussed in this study:

D: *Do you think that gardens that are open for the NGS are different to National Trust gardens?*

VI92: *Oh, yes.*

VI92a: *Oh, yes, entirely different.*

VI92: *Because it's really, when you realise that one or two people have done it, it's a lot of effort...*

VI92a: *It's a family affair.*

VI92: *With the National Trust, they have got lots of gardeners haven't they?*

VI92a: *Yes.*

VI92: *And they're a little bit more intimate aren't they...*

VI92a: *Yes.*

VI92: *... and smaller which we like, yes....*

VI92a: *Well I mean, as soon as we got out the car the gentleman said welcome to our garden, which you wouldn't get from the National Trust.*

VI97: *They're far less, much more informal than National Trust gardens or, I mean so many of the National Trust places are very formal aren't they?*

VI97a: *I think most of the thing with the NGS gardens is they're private, they're private houses...*

VI97: *You can relate to them more.*

VI97a: ...So it's your, it's the owner's garden, it's the owner's stamp on it, whereas a National Trust garden, is much more, well it's...

VI97: What they feel it ought to be.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research of Gallagher (1983) and Connell (2004) identified the motivation for visiting gardens, but failed to consider the actions of social and material agents on visiting. This study has discussed just one material agent, the weather and one type of collective social agency, namely the charitable organisations, the National Trust and the National Garden Scheme. By quantitative data obtained from a survey of residents and through the words of interviewees, the importance of these agents has been established. It has shown that the agents *prompt* visits, either through the intentional actions of marketing or as in the case of the weather, by being inclement. They enable opportunities to visit – either as the National Trust does, directly through its' ownership of properties or as the National Garden Scheme, indirectly by its influence on owners. Although these organisations are made up of individual people who each have social agency, their collective agency also acts on people and the final extracts demonstrated both the individual social agency of the owners of the NGS gardens and the collective agency of the employees and volunteers of the National Trust.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2002 the VisitBritain survey on which the figures are based, had a response rate of just 107 gardens, two-thirds of the level of responses in the previous year (VisitBritain 2005a) and so when the Eden Project received over 1.8 million visitors, in that year, it distorted the data. Therefore it is suggested that it is the manner of collecting the data that partially explains the anomaly in the relationship between weather and visitor numbers for 2002. Other factors that must also be considered are the ending of restrictions due to foot and mouth disease (in 2001) and the provision of an extra Public Holiday for the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations (Mintel, 2004a).