



## **Greenhill Gardens: Final Evaluation Report for The National Lottery Heritage Fund 2025** **Restoring Dignity, Heritage and Community in the Heart of Swansea**

**Submitted by:** Matthew's House, Swansea **Date:** December 2025

### **1. Introduction**

In 2017, the team behind Matthew's House began to dream about what lay around the building, a forgotten, overgrown Victorian graveyard surrounding and behind the old St Matthew's Church building in the heart of Swansea a Building now known for unconditional hospitality and hope for the most vulnerable in our city. The site had been unused, locked off from the public, and slowly falling into disrepair for many years. Though many residents walked past daily, few knew the stories buried beneath. And unless the project was open and running the grounds were locked for safety and security reasons

From this seed of curiosity and compassion with a growing sense of making the outside of our project as beautiful, purposeful and peaceful as the inside of our building, in 2020 Greenhill Gardens was born. A vision to uncover the site's heritage, transform the space into an accessible green haven, and reconnect the local community with its past, its environment, and with each other.

Thanks to the vital support of the National Lottery Heritage Fund and an extraordinary group of volunteers, designers, contractors, and storytellers, that vision has now been realised. This report provides a full, reflective evaluation of the Greenhill Gardens journey from start to finish, celebrating its successes, learning from its challenges, and documenting the powerful social, emotional, and environmental impact the project has had.

[More on the Greenhill Gardens journey including photos and the moments can be found on our “Journey page” on the Greenhill gardens website by clicking here!](#)

Here's our interactive Site walkthrough of some of the works completed before we started the project works.



## 2. Project Aims

The Greenhill Gardens project was developed to meet five core aims:

1. **Restore dignity** to a disused burial ground by honouring those buried on-site.
2. **Preserve and share local heritage**, making stories and records accessible to future generations.
3. **Reclaim green space** for the public in a densely urban part of Swansea.
4. **Foster community connection** through volunteering, events, and co-creation.
5. **Offer a peaceful environment** that promotes reflection, wellbeing, and connection to nature.

The project was also designed to align with wider heritage and environmental goals, including biodiversity improvement, placemaking, volunteering, and youth education. It also sought to model a new way of heritage engagement, one rooted in hospitality, community ownership, and creative storytelling.

### 3. Pre-Project Challenges and Context

Before works began and we took over the building in 2016 ([The Hill Church Swansea](#)), the site was hidden behind locked gates. Vegetation had taken over, headstones were scattered and unsafe, and several serious safety concerns. Initial clearance revealed disintegrated pathways and lots of delaminated headstones and grave art. Community memory of the site had faded.



Early engagement showed a strong desire from locals to see the space revitalised, particularly the project supporting the vulnerable and those facing homelessness but also the gardens and site heritage.... This also came with a wariness about disturbing graves, safety and their condition. We committed early on to handle everything with dignity, care, and transparency. That approach shaped every step we took and from early stages we invested in site photos, walkthroughs, scans and topographic surveys in readiness for the dream season.

We faced challenges sourcing historic records, reconciling conflicting burial data, and gaining planning approval due to the sensitive nature of the site. However, strong relationships with Swansea Council, CADW, planning officers, and Historic Environment consultants helped us develop ideas that were both respectful and visionary.

### 4. Delivery Timeline and Key Milestones

#### Phase 1: Consultation and Planning (2020–2022)

- Community consultation with local families, churches, and historians to start relationships and support
- Historic grave records reviewed, including oral histories, site works including our walkthrough, building models and viewing early maps.
- Meetings with Swansea Council archives, CADW, CIW Church in Wales, professional partners and the Planning Department.
- Project Planning, dream work and initial works and designs created.
- **Project awarded funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund.**

## Phase 2: Site maintenance and Stabilisation (2021–Apr 2024)

- Overgrowth removed, hazardous weeds and plants removed.
- Dangerous gravestones stabilised or laid flat.
- Continued, laborious maintenance completed by volunteers including safety railings and barriers around site.
- Site made safe and secured in advance of major landscaping.

## Phase 3: Construction and Restoration (May–Oct 2025)

- Project started once planning permission and direction given by Swansea council, CinW and archaeologists (reporting commenced)
- Site clearance under archaeology support and guidance. Minimal findings of bones and ashes reburied by archaeologists that we're not relating to headstones spaces and locations.
- Structural engineers addressed large underground voids and unsafe areas. Site levelling and bases laid throughout including structure bases.
- New paths, seating areas, dog huts, lighting, and planting beds installed.
- Habitat walls constructed using donated materials.
- QR posts installed for interactive trails.
- Design and signage erected.

## Phase 4: Interpretation and Digital Heritage (Jan 2024–July 2025)

- Heritage trails researched and written (Main Trail, Deeper Trail, Tarran's Trail).
- Burial register database digitised.
- Professional recordings produced with voice actors and local storytellers.
- Trail videos and website developed.

## Phase 5: Launch and Evaluation (Aug 2024–Dec 2025)

- Official launch on Saturday 20th September 2025 (300+ attendees).
- Drone film, choir, street food, family trails, speeches and press.
- Evaluation surveys, PhD-led impact study, and volunteer feedback.

Official Launch Day Full Video made by volunteer below.



## 5. Achievements

### A. Heritage Access and Engagement

- Over 4,200 individuals confirmed buried on-site, updated from 2,500 through careful research by volunteers teams and support Swansea archives. This was a large piece of work that took more than six years to complete and much of the work completed in final 18 months.
- Stories like that of Jane Padley brought to life.  
<https://www.matthewshouse.org.uk/greenhillgardens/trail6/deep-dive-difficult-moments/>
- Downloadable burial database now live and helping families reconnect with lost relatives. One family is planning a reunion of 50+ people at Matthew's House in 2026 thanks to this work.
- Endorsements received from historians including Gerald Gabb and Andrew Dulley. See them on an article here - <https://matthewshouse.org.uk/voices-of-support-greenhill-gardens-heritage-trail-earns-esteemed-endorsements-from-swanseas-leading-historians-gerald-gabb-andrew-dulley-and-rob-sheffield-author-of-pieces-of-us/>
- Website (<https://matthewshouse.org.uk/greenhillgardens>) features interactive maps, stories, photos, and downloadable trails.

### B. Community Use and Enjoyment

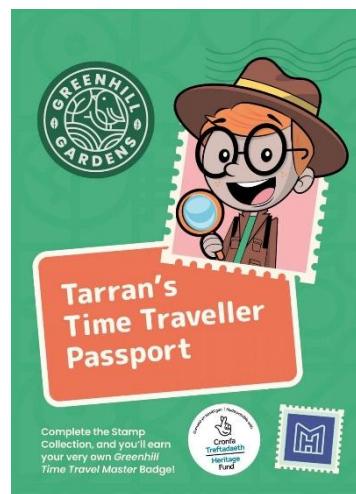
- Space is used daily by guests of Matthew's House as a peaceful outdoor extension.
- Dog huts used multiple times per day.
- New benches and paths support mobility-impaired visitors.
- Friends of Matthew's House event held in the Gardens, live music and pizza.
- Strangers now enjoy the space quietly, evidence of successful placemaking.
- Serving vulnerable people through our pizza oven and community space on December 23<sup>rd</sup> for up to 150 vulnerable people. Before a big Christmas day where our Christmassy Grotto will be in the outside buddy hut with festive blow ups and lights for all to enjoy!

### C. Volunteering and Involvement

- 41 volunteers supported the launch event with hundreds through the construction and setup
- Weekly gardening and maintenance tasks have been supported by guests.
- Volunteers helped research, write, record and test the trails.
- Steel remembrance panels include all those buried on site installed on 18 panels across the site.
- Corporate friends donated materials, time and support (e.g. Wickes, BVL Gas, Brunnell Engraving).

### D. Educational Impact

- Hosted visits from Scouts, Beavers, and families.
- “Tarran’s Trail” created for children aged 6–8, guided by a fictional time traveller.
- Dylan, a local young actor recorded the voiceover trail to support engagement and experience.
- Over 30 children from Sketty Scouts completed the trail and received “Time Travel Master” badges. On two occasions.
- One child remarked, “I went back in time tonight!”
- Scout leaders described it as “a safe, captivating, and unforgettable way to bring local history alive.”



## E. Environmental Improvements

- Biodiverse planting: over £20,000 of in-kind plants, bulbs and trees from Wade Landscapes.
- Habitat walls built using sustainable techniques and materials.
- Festoon lighting enhances safety without polluting.
- Bulb planting day on 4th December 2025 with volunteers was brilliant!.
- Feedback from guests: “There’s more breathing room,” “It feels calm,” “It’s beautiful.”

If you haven't visited yet, here is our Drone footage of the space and inside the building to get a full flavour of what we have created inside and out!



## 6. Challenges Faced

- **Planning Complexity:** Due to the historic and sacred nature of the site, all design changes required careful negotiation. Getting CADW and planning team approval took longer than anticipated.
- **Engraving Errors and Material Change:** The first batch of steel plaques eroded too quickly in weather conditions. We had to upgrade to marine-grade steel (316) with black ink infill and reprint 18 panels. This was an unexpected cost, but necessary.
- **Burial Register Discrepancies:** Matching gravestone inscriptions with historic records was complex. Amanda, Thom and other long-term volunteers, spent three months resolving these, increasing our understanding from 2,500 to 4,200 names, matching grave inscriptions and locations to the details on registers to inform.
- **Flooding Worries:** Heavy rain threatened early works and the launch event. Remarkably, the site held up with no pooling at all even with floods in surrounding areas all over the city proving the quality of works and design, a testament to quality drainage.
- **Public Perception:** Some locals were nervous about changing a graveyard. Through transparency, reverence, and storytelling, concerns became support, welcomed visits to site through the process of the construction phase and the final stages gained us many more supporters due to the honouring works completed.

- **Volunteer Fatigue:** The scale of the launch event and ongoing works put pressure on a small team. Care was needed to protect wellbeing and celebrate often with some extra events, thanks regularly and sharing the load over time. We invested some contingency funds into the construction team completed some works (soil from piles outside of grounds to inside grounds) due to volunteer works being much more than originally anticipated even with welcoming company volunteer days across the months.

## 7. Independent Impact Study: PhD Report

**Tatiana Bodnar, a PhD student from Swansea University working with B-Corp regeneration company Urban Foundry, chose Greenhill Gardens as a central case study in her ESRC-funded research on “Urban Acupuncture.”**

Her mixed-method research involved surveys, ethnographic observations, and interviews with guests, volunteers, and staff. She concluded:

“This project is a textbook example of urban acupuncture, where small, strategic acts of urban kindness create ripples of hope and regeneration in the heart of a city.”

## Key findings:

- 100% of participants said Greenhill Gardens improved their wellbeing.
- 100% said it helped them connect to local heritage.
- 90.1% said it changed their perception of the city centre.
- Descriptions included: “uplifting,” “transformational,” “joyful.”



Figure 5: Most used words in survey open-response questions



Report is available in full as a supporting document.

## 8. Looking Ahead

Greenhill Gardens is no longer just a project. It is a living, breathing community space, host to stories, wildlife, hospitality and healing.

### Our goals going forward include:

- Ongoing school visits and trail bookings
- Continued planting and seasonal activities
- Partnership with heritage groups for guided talks
- Possible training projects using the space (e.g, horticulture, mens sheds, pizza making and hosting events)
- Digital expansion of the story archive and more print works as the heritage trails develops.



## 9. Thank You

To the National Lottery Heritage Fund, your belief in this project made all of this possible. Your investment has helped us reclaim forgotten heritage, offer beauty to a broken street, and share the legacy of thousands who can now rest with dignity - and whose stories continue to shape the living.

To every volunteer, donor, visitor and guest who made this project what it is: thank you. This garden is yours.



For further information or additional materials (e.g. photos, video links, press coverage, visitor quotes), please contact:

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[www.matthewshouse.org.uk/greenhillgardens](http://www.matthewshouse.org.uk/greenhillgardens)

