**The Big Back Garden Project**

The Big Back Garden (BBG) is an interdisciplinary and multi-partner project based on Baxter Park, Dundee. It grew from a school project which examined the Park’s history and impact on its visitors, developing into a project that worked with local residents and organisations to discover the significance of outdoor spaces. BBG explores what makes urban parks important places and their contribution to physical and mental well-being.

Why did we choose Baxter Park? Its importance lies in it being Dundee’s first ‘Peoples’ Park’, a big back garden for Dundonians since it first opened in 1863 and which still plays a significant role within the community. Recognising the detrimental impacts of rapid industrialisation in the town, linen manufacturer David Baxter paid for the land and its design by Sir Joseph Paxton. He then donated the Park to the town saying he wanted to provide a space ‘of easy access, affording the means of healthy recreation and exercise’

Led by the University of Dundee Archive Services, who hold the Baxter Park Trustees records, BBG began working with Morgan Academy’s S3 pupils in January 2020. Incorporating the BBG project in their curriculum, they used archival material to research the history of Baxter Park: its genesis, development and changing use. The Park’s story reflected not just the socio-economic story of Dundee, but also helped the pupils place it in a wider global context. They examined 19th century industrialisation and its impact on health and welfare, the development of leisure and recreation, plus political developments in the early 19th century, the impact of World War 2 and post-war societal changes. We also collaborated with our heritage partners across the city who contributed their own archival material and support.

Exploring the Park’s history not only offered the pupils a new perspective on a place they regularly use, but also prompted them to consider its past and current impact on people’s physical and mental health, research developed with project partners Dr Susan Mains (University of Dundee School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law) and Christine Kingsley (School of Art and Design) who specialise in exploring the impact of green and open spaces on health and wellbeing.

To offer the pupils’ research across the wider community, recorded narratives can be heard via QR code plaques on benches across the park and through the [BBG website](https://www.bigbackgarden.com/). Listening to the stories gives visitors the opportunity to enrich their own experience of Baxter Park, an aspect developed by BBG which has recorded the lived experiences of local residents and visitors.

BBG recorded memories of the Reminiscence Group at Boomerang Community Centre and joined with Dundee Voluntary Action (DVA) to run Chatterboxes, a drop-in oral history day in the Park’s Activity Centre. DVA provided youth volunteers who, along with the University’s Archive staff, recorded not just the memories of the Park visitors of all ages, but also their current perceptions and use. The collaboration brought a wider understanding of the role of the Park for different generations, from the six-year-old who loved climbing the trees to the family whose Gran remembers the annual summer holiday talent shows and whose grandchildren regularly play on the swings.

The importance of accessible public spaces has been increasingly highlighted as a key priority since the COVID-19 pandemic; this was mentioned in several of the Chatterbox interviews. The evidence from the recordings and their observations of users in the Park helped inform the research of Dr Susan Mains and Christine Kingsley. This led to a collaboration with artist and filmmaker Julie Cumming, creating a film about the Park and its impact on visitors. The film focuses on specific user experiences, introducing the Park and taking audiences on a virtual walk where they can pause and observe and listen to the landscape. Together with the film’s accompanying pamphlet and a quiz trail means that even remote visitors can be involved with the Park’s history and its benefits.

The collaborations of BBG and engagement with local communities have created resources which promote active use of Baxter Park. Encouraging a broader appreciation has proved successful; pupil evaluations expressed increased awareness of how history can relate to their own lives, while conversations with users consistently expressed pleasure in being in the Park and appreciation of its impact on their wellbeing.

The Big Back Garden has always aimed to reflect the ‘Peoples’ Park’ original ethos, to encourage communities to use it as a basis for their own initiatives. DVA staff use the project’s quiz trail with the local Young Carer’s group and Boomerang Community Centre hosts a permanent BBG display which incorporates interview clips. We anticipate that the BBG project will be the basis of further collaboration with organisations across the city and will continue to inspire groups and communities to discover, use and benefit from Dundee’s green spaces.