



## **Tree Listening: A Ceramic Installation**

**Garry Barker**

Tree listening is a ceramic installation that is designed to provide an entry point for conversations with museum visitors.

Based on the idea that art can become a focal point for conversations, this body of work (19 ceramic pieces, located at various points within a garden) was designed with the York city art gallery garden in mind. The ears were made from local clay sources, including the same terracotta clay source that was used for the bricks that line the edges of the museum's garden.

The work furthers the artist Garry Barker's concern to use conversations with people to both instigate new work and to provide starting points for new audiences to engage with art as a way to extend their appreciation of the world and how issues such as politics, global warming and emigration impact on everyday experiences.

This installation was installed twice, the second time in spring 2017 because of the popularity with which it was received the year before. A planned walk was added to the piece in 2017 and the artist led a walking tour that was scripted in response to conversations with the museum head gardener.

### Exhibition

**Garry Barker: Tree Listening: A Ceramic Installation**, York Art Gallery, York.  
March 5 - May 27 2016 and March 11 - May 26 2017.



**Tree Listening: A Ceramic Installation**

**Garry Barker**

**Exhibition Information and Publicity**

## Garry Barker: Tree Listening: an installation of ceramics

York Art Gallery

March 5<sup>th</sup> – May 27<sup>th</sup> 2016

March 11<sup>th</sup> – May 26<sup>th</sup> 2017

This installation was reinstalled in 2017 and was further developed by the addition of an artist's walk.

York Museum Gardens

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### Opening times

7:30am – 6:00pm\*



Instagram

\*See [Visitor Information](#) for changes.

### Tree Listening

**Tree Listening** is an installation in the York Museum Gardens by artist [Garry Barker](#). Nineteen giant ceramic ears are located among the trees and plants, waiting to be discovered. They invite us to slow down, enjoy the great outdoors, and to listen to our surroundings.

Find out more about the installation and read a Q&A with Garry on the [Centre of Ceramic Art website here](#).



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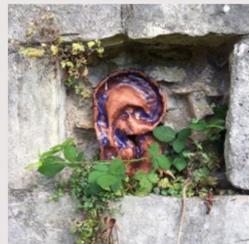
## TREE LISTENING

Previous Installation, 2017

Hieronymus Bosch's The Garden of Earthly Delights features giant ears that are big enough to climb into. The garden plants elephant's ears and lamb's ears can be purchased from most good quality garden centres and elephant's ear fertilizer is freely available, promising to promote large leaves and strong stems. Ears are no strangers to the garden.

Gardens are important to us, both as a source of beauty and food and as a reminder of how our lives are intricately bonded with nature. Sometimes living in a city it's hard to remember that inches beneath the pavement lies the raw earth of nature, we can become so obsessed with our everyday lives that we forget to listen to what nature is telling us.

These oversized ceramic ears by artist [Garry Barker](#) celebrate the fact that York Art Gallery is now asking us to Rethink Ceramic Art but they are also in the garden to encourage us to slow down and listen to nature. But perhaps Nature is also listening to us; these large ears listening for clues as to why rivers and seas are so polluted, listening to find out why noisy humans have created global warming.



Some ears are easy to find, others are hiding in the foliage. When you find them try and think what they could be part of, are they like the Jelly Ear fungus, growing directly out of the earth, or are they cast offs from the BFG?

Find out more in this Q&A with Garry...

### Why did you want to work with the gallery and why in particular are the gardens so important?

I've been visiting York Art Gallery on and off for 40 over years and always found hidden gems in the collection. The recent facelift and celebration of its fantastic ceramics collection has however really invigorated the gallery and has highlighted how ceramics as a medium has often been undervalued and little appreciated as an art-form.

The fact that the gallery has also opened out the garden area and has overseen the careful planting of both aromatic and 'sculptural' plants, also highlights the vital importance nature has to the development of our aesthetic sensibilities. Some of the most significant artistic developments were initiated by artists simply going back to look and listen to nature.

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**What was your inspiration behind the ceramic ears?**

Most of my work begins in drawing. As well as wondering the streets with a sketchbook, I also make drawings to visualize concerns I have about the world around me. One series of drawings began with people putting their ear to nature. People would be drawn with their ear to a tree or to the ground, as if trying to hear nature's whispers. I began these drawings after reading about how the average family produces almost two tons of waste a year and how we seem to be constantly told that economies should grow and yet we all now know that the world's resources are being stretched to their limit.

Eventually the drawings evolved so that it was nature itself that had the ears, as if it was listening to us, just as we were trying to listen to it.



Image taken from the Bury Times article on Tree Listening

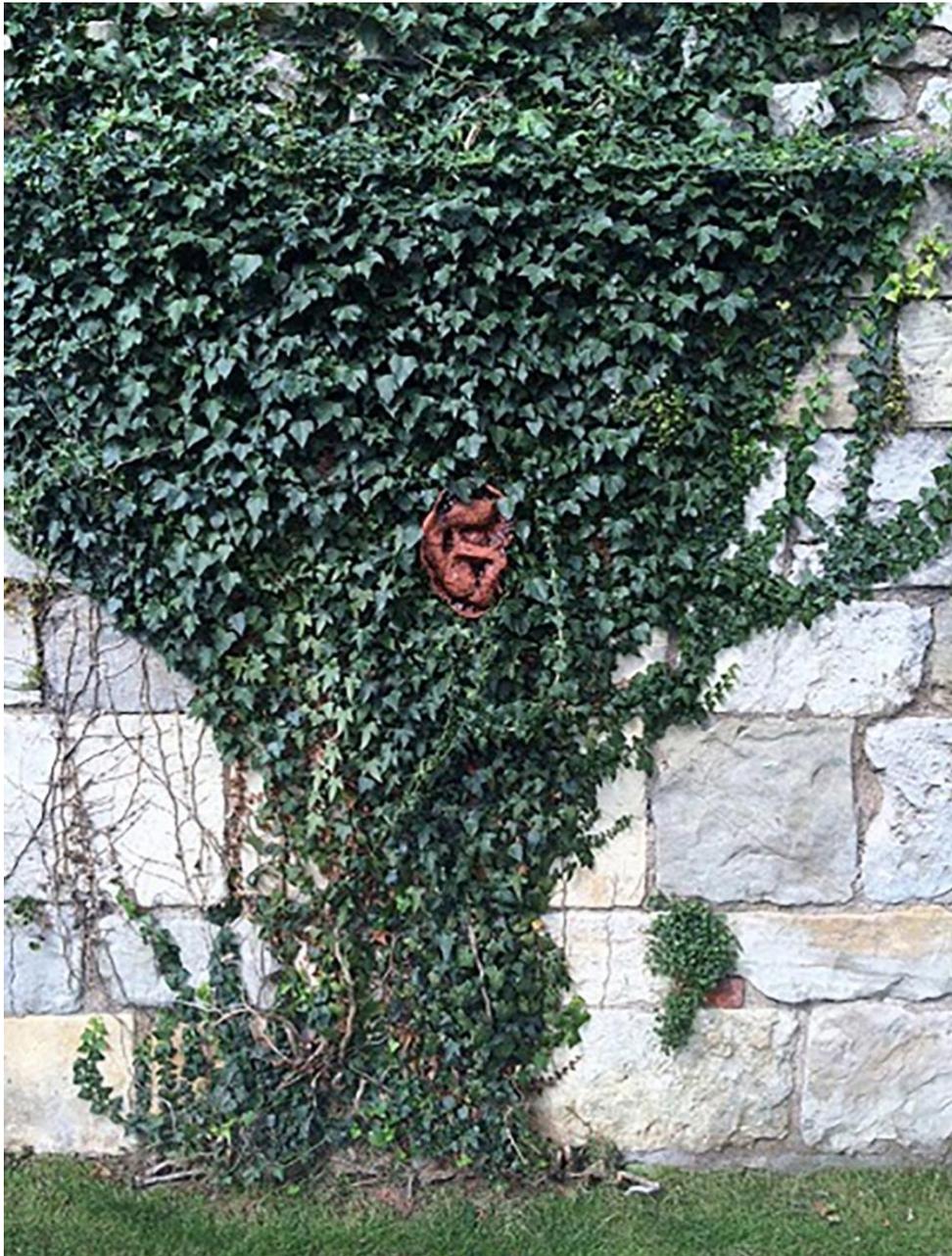
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## Tree Listening: A Ceramic Installation

Garry Barker

Installation image





**Tree Listening: A Ceramic Installation**

**Garry Barker**

**An artist's walk and talk: Easter 2017**

York City Art Gallery

Garry Barker: Tree listening: An artist's walk and talk: Easter 2017

Animal, vegetable or mineral?

What are these ears listening to? To the people that pass by? To the garden? To the signs of nature and history that surround us?

We have always tended to separate out what we call animals, vegetables or minerals. But what if we shouldn't? What if we have spent too much time always measuring the world against ourselves? That's the basic premise for the ears. Perhaps we should be listening much more carefully to what goes on and if we did perhaps we would treat the world in a very different way. There is a wonderful stairway construction in an early Renaissance drawing, it's designed by Raymond Lull who was famous amongst many other things, for coming up with what we now think of as classification systems.

Human beings sit on the sixth step, God of course is on top, supported by his angels just beneath, and 'Coelum' or heaven them come the humans and below them what he called, 'Brutum' brutes, beasts or animals. Below the animals are the plants and below the plants, 'flamma' or flame, fire looks as if it is alive, so it was above 'Lapis' or stones, minerals and other things that were considered not alive. The bottom step, 'Scala Intelle' could be translated as the ladder of understanding, and this type of understanding has been at the forefront of Western ideas since that time.

However it wasn't always like this, there used to be something we now call 'Animism', the belief that all material things have what is sometimes called sentience, a word that means that just like you or me, everything else has its own way of being, of even perhaps 'thinking'. There was a belief that some sort of spirit exists not only in humans, but also in other animals, plants, rocks, mountains, rivers, thunder, wind, and even shadows.

So how could we even begin to think about the world like that? Why is it important to go back in time and look at what other people thought?

750 Millions of years ago, we can find in the fossil record microscopic origins of biomineralization, which is the ability of organic, living creatures to convert minerals into hard, physical structures, like bones, shells, teeth and hair.

The simple single-celled organisms that dominated life's first few billion years were rapidly becoming more complex, building a store of innovations that sustained some through the so-called Snowball Earth period, when Earth's climate turned so cold that the equator resembled Antarctica.

Bones evolved as a defense against predators. That's the best guess for why, 200 million years later, skeletons evolved independently in at least two dozen separate animal clades. The same basic dynamics should apply to single-celled organisms, too. Indeed, there's evidence for fierce predation in the single-celled world, with fossils of 1.2 billion-year-old protists containing photosynthetic structures almost certainly

acquired by gobbling algae. In this light, biomineralization would seem to be a defense mechanism, a way of sticking in a predator's craw or deflecting a stinger. Of course, predators eventually developed their own biomineralization strategies, as did other algae. Eventually it became ubiquitous in the marine world, to the point where what we now call limestone is simply a composite of microscopic fossil seashells. It's also the primary ingredient in concrete. Their shells have become our own.

Snails of course have shells, and they are full of calcium, in spring birds need calcium to help make their egg shells, so they eat broken snail shells, therefore if you keep hens, make sure there are plenty of snails about.

We have often reduced soil to dirt, if you go back before inorganic fertilizer, look at rain forests and there is not a lot of minerals, lots of growth. Natural eco systems are really good.

8,000 years ago we only grew crops once a year, and let residue material go back into the soil. Fertility gradually decreases and we destroy the ability of the land to grow. WW2 invented TNT is a great fertilizer, but it kills the life in the soil.

How do you put life back into the soil? You compost.

Compost is oxygen concentrated, aerobic, so that the bacteria stay alive, if it gets too hot turn the pile.

Gardens are great places to think about the world.

Under each ear woodlice can be found. They are crustaceans, creatures that have developed hard carapaces to protect themselves. This can open out as a story of how the first sea creatures began to cope with extra levels of limestone in the water and the way they secreted this as a new thing called shell. Then how later because essentially we have sea water inside us, fish type creatures began secreting this shell like substance inside themselves, forming what we now know as bone.

As we muse on sediments and rocks and water, we move from glacial flour to clay deposits and their differences. But what is clay?

Clay is the common name for a number of fine-grained, earthy materials that become plastic when wet. Chemically, clays are hydrous aluminium silicates, usually containing minor amounts of impurities such as potassium, sodium, calcium, magnesium, or iron.

Where does clay come from? Clay is a soft, loose, earthy material containing particles with a grain size of less than 4 micrometres ( $\mu\text{m}$ ). It forms as a result of the weathering and erosion of rocks containing the mineral group feldspar (known as the 'mother of clay') over vast spans of time.

Clay minerals form in the presence of water and have been important to life, and many theories of abiogenesis involve them. They are important constituents of soils, and have been useful to humans since ancient times in agriculture and manufacturing.

When we think of the geology of this part of Yorkshire, people might have seen the William Smith circular map of Yorkshire set into the museum gardens, and if not we will walk here before the end of this tour, and you will be able to see where the terracotta clay that the ears were made from originally was dug from .

Beneath the drift deposits of the Vale of York lie Triassic sandstone and mudstone, and lower Jurassic mudstone but these are completely masked by the surface deposits. These deposits include glacial till, sand and gravel and both terminal and recessional moraines left by receding ice sheets at the end of the last ice age. The Escrick moraine extends across the vale from west to east and the York moraine, 8 miles further north, forms a similar curving ridge from York eastwards to Sand Hutton. To the north of these ridges are deposits of clay, sand and gravel left by a glacial lake. There are also areas of river alluvium consisting of clay, silt and sand deposited by the main rivers and streams.

The fluctuating advance and retreat of Devensian ice sheets has resulted in the deposition of a complicated sequence of glacial deposits. The melting and retreat of the ice sheet led to the deposition of till, sand and gravel, silt, sand and most importantly different types of clay.

Silts and clays were washed into the glacial lakes and formed laminated deposits. The post glacial and late glacial deposits are almost all water laid and concentrated mainly in valleys

Clays and silts form the bulk of the glacial lake deposits and comprise of dark grey brown, grey and brown laminated clay, in layers 1mm to 4mm thick, with laminae and more rarely, very thin beds of silt and fine-grained sand. The clays are silty, almost gravel free, and plastic when wet. They pass, by interlamination, into fine-grained sands and may be overlain by thin sand or superficial till with, in places a thin peat at the surface.

River terrace deposits were formed by postglacial drainage. As the Devensian glaciation drew to a close, the ice melted from the Vale of York and surrounding areas, the glacial lake drained and the rivers established their present drainage pattern.

Clay minerals have a sheet-like structure and are composed of mainly tetrahedrally arranged silicate and octahedrally arranged aluminate groups.

Kaolinite is the principal mineral in kaolin clays. It is a 1:1 clay mineral – the basic unit is composed of a 2-dimensional layer of silicate groups tightly bonded to a 2D layer of aluminate groups.

Throughout the mineral, there is a tetrahedraloctahedral layered structure with tight packing between the layers. This tight packing – like the pages of a closed book – results in kaolinite not shrinking when dry or swelling when wet.

## The walk

As we walk through the garden, each ear or pair of ears is set down in conjunction with the plant life, as well as the stories of mineral and animal life, there are of course plant stories and as we walk around the gardens we can pick out some of these stories, many of them are of immigration, many plants coming from all parts of the world, to weave this in too. E.g. Cornelian cherry from Syria.

1. Buff clay ear hanging from the cherry tree. This is an interesting tree, as cherry trees tend not to grow this old, it's about 80 years old and as you can see has shaped itself in relation to the wall it stands in the shadow of. Both humans seeking to protect the wall and its own natural propensity to search out light, have shaped this tree's asymmetry, the ear hanging, hidden within its 'dark face'. This tree has been working very hard to survive and if we listen to it very carefully during a long dry spell we can hear the gurgling of its pipes. The best trees for tree listening are eucalyptus, they can sound like bad plumbing in the dry season. The louder they sound the more work they are having to do. Air gaps form in their capillary tubes when food is short, so a noisy tree is sort of crying for help, water me! The cherry tree has observed 80 years of the garden's history, planted just before the war, it has seen the arrival of Canadian air force etc.
2. This part of the garden is interesting because these old walls are the only old walls in York covered in ivy. There is a constant struggle between English Heritage and nature conservationists as to whether or not to let ivy grow over these old walls. It has been unfairly blamed for causing damage to buildings, but rather than damaging walls, the plant positively protects them. Ivy's web of dark green leaves acts as a 'thermal shield', insulating brickwork from the extremes of temperature and moisture that often cause cracks. It can also protect against pollution damage. Yes it does invade cracks and holes, but acid rain and frost are kept at bay and it is a great nectar source in early winter. Ivy leaved toadflax grows next to the ivy, a Mediterranean plant, it was brought initially to London with imported marble slabs in 1640. In Italy it is called 'the plant of the madonna', not to be confused with toadflax which is yellow and grows upright. Can be eaten as a salad, a bit like cress, but more acrid. Note the efflorescence or mineral salts coming out of the ear. Water works through the clay and the minerals dissolved in it dry on the outer surface.  
The white stuff is composed of calcium, magnesium, sulphate, nitrate, phosphate and ammonium salts. Both the wall and the ear are porous and have similar processes going on when it rains. The ceramic is in effect 'blooming'.

3. This ear shares a small niche with a dandelion and a snail. Dandelion roots were often roasted and mixed with chicory as a way of making coffee go further. Some people actually prefer it to coffee. Lion's teeth or 'wet the bed'. All parts of the dandelion are edible and have medicinal and culinary uses. It has long been used as a liver tonic and diuretic. The snail shell is a good source of calcium for birds.
4. Sedge can be woven into mats or to make seat coverings. Sedges have edges; rushes are round; grasses are hollow right up from the ground. Egyptian papyrus was made from a type of sedge, which all tend to grow in wet marshy land or on the edge of rivers, the Nile being a particularly wet and swampy place. An enormous contribution to nutrient cycling and habitat formation in these ecosystems. Rhizomatic root structure and rhizomatic learning is a variety of pedagogical practices informed by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
5. Yellow clay ears, similar in colour to some of the bricks used to make the planter. Echinacea, herbal cold remedy, used by North American Indians. Yellow coneflower, the only Echinacea that is yellow, all the others are purple. From Arkansas. Next to Christmas Box, a Mediterranean plant, which has white flowers at Xmas time, wonderful for late flying insects.
6. Terracotta ear next to terracotta bricks from Tudor wall of King's Manor.
7. Next to fungus on wood, story of jelly ears. Edible Auriculariales fungus, also Jews ears. Tree old hornbeam. On the wall more ivy leaved toadflax.
8. Rhubarb, someone mistook these ears for dogs vomit. Best description I've ever had of my work. Yorkshire rhubarb was harvested by candlelight to make sure it kept its soft delicate texture. It grows so fast you can hear it creaking when you are in the rhubarb sheds. *Troilus luridus*, Bronze Shield bug found here. Rhubarb is a good source of calcium. Soil microbes need calcium too, so they eat calcium compounds, converting them into a form plants can use. Plants need calcium for cell wall development and growth. Soil can have tons of nutrients in it (nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, calcium, etc.) but be completely sterile, meaning it has no microbes in it. Microbes can digest some nutrients that plants' roots can't, but excrete a form of that nutrient that roots can absorb. Soil is sand, silt and clay, but what makes it soil is the organic matter.
9. Bay laurel, in terracotta pot. Link to museum and Roman terracotta including large similar sized containers as well as roof tiles with faces. Oil of bay laurel is reputed to alleviate arthritis and rheumatism. Also good for high blood pressure. *Laurus nobilis*. Bay leaf in cooking from the Mediterranean. A wreath of bay laurels was given as the prize at the Pythian Games because the games were in honor of Apollo, and the laurel was one of his symbols.
10. Debatable land. Holly and chestnut trees. *Ilex aquifolium*. The mistle thrush is known for vigorously guarding the berries of holly in winter, to prevent other birds from eating them. The tree was seen as a fertility symbol and a charm against witches, goblins and the devil. It was thought to be unlucky to cut down a holly tree. Horse chestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum* fruit is most likely

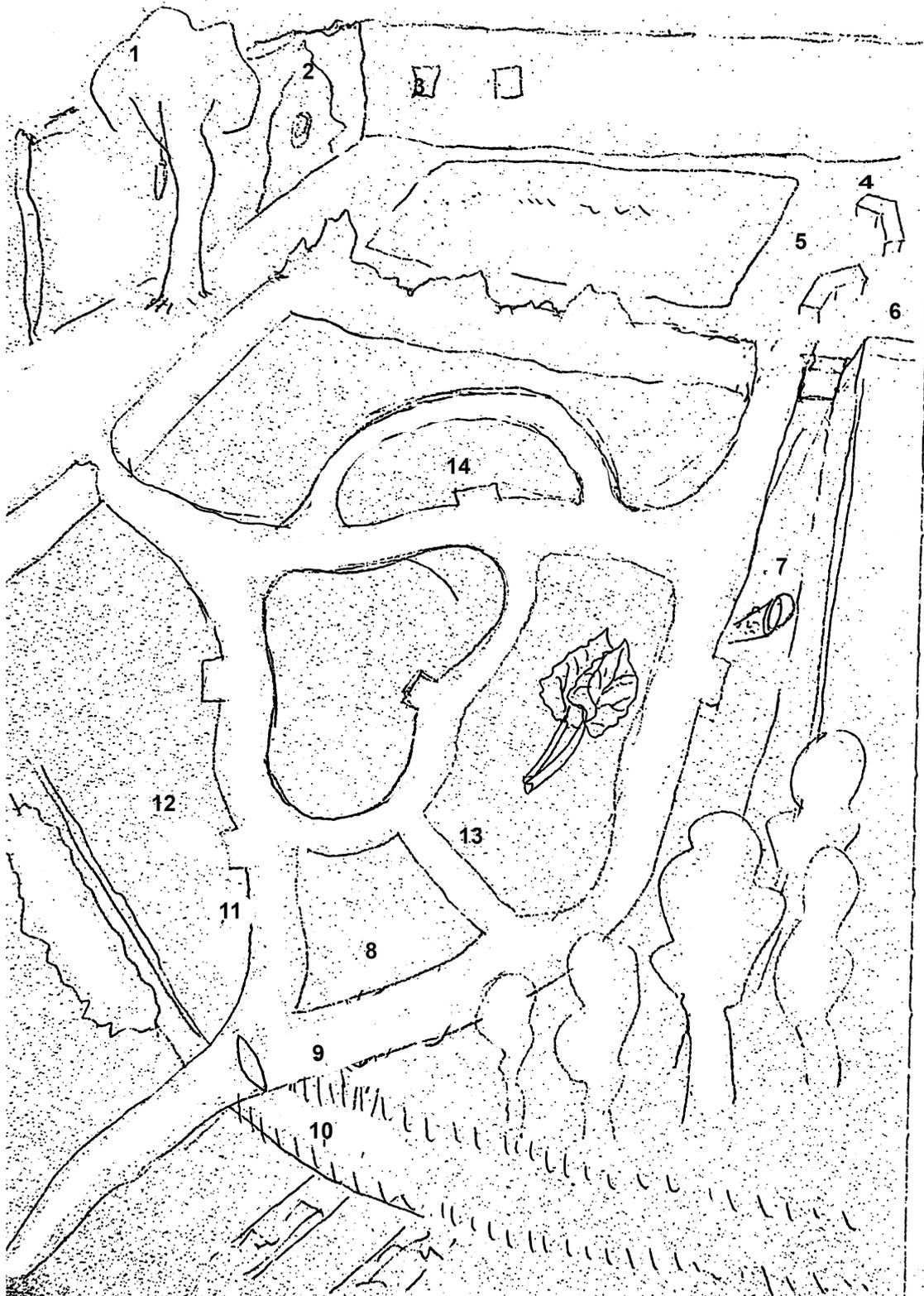
to be toxic to horses. From South East Europe/ the Balkens. A famous specimen of the horse-chestnut was the Anne Frank Tree in the centre of Amsterdam, which she mentioned in her diary and which survived until August 2010. But mainly about conkers.

11. Bee drinking. Because this ear has a deeper inside water collects and bees often drink here. Good place to look at woodlice. Look for woodlice under ears. Isopod crustacean with a rigid, segmented, long exoskeleton and fourteen jointed limbs. Despite being crustaceans like lobsters or crabs, woodlice are said to have an unpleasant taste similar to "strong urine". Woodlice breathe through 'lungs' in their hind legs.
12. Next to fennel. Cornelian cherry. From south western Asia including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon and Syria. Used in Iranian cooking. Not real cherries but dogwood cherries.
13. Lavender. Here we found a Rosemary beetle. Originates from southern Europe. Used as jewellery in Victorian times. *Rosa regosa*, great buds to draw. Natural domain is the salt-blasted sand dunes of Russia and Japan. Thick, tough leaves. Host of greenfly and ladybird lava. Harlequin ladybirds. Arrived in Britain in summer 2004, since then have been killing off local varieties. Introduced to control pests in greenhouses. Rose hips, used for herbal teas, jam, jelly, syrup, rose hip soup, beverages, pies, bread, wine, and marmalade. They can also be eaten raw, like a berry, if care is used to avoid the hairs inside the fruit.
14. Alliums/ornamental onions. Exploding fireworks. *Allium Albopilosum*. Strong onion or garlic scent. Oregano tastes better dried than fresh. Popularity in the U.S. began when soldiers returning from World War II brought back with them a taste for the "pizza herb". Turn around to see Dog's arse or open arse apple. A fruit that has to be left rot and then tastes much better, and was used in Tudor cooking.

#### General notes

They don't use pesticides in the garden, but do use herbicides, used to destroy unwanted vegetation. They use birds, toads, frogs, hedgehogs and foxes to keep down pests. Sparrow hawks, tawny owls, song thrushes breed, long tailed tits make nests out of moss, lichen and cobwebs. Garden created from a disused bowling green.

The compost is mostly leaf matter (beech in particular) and grass cuttings. You can watch worms dragging the beech leaves down into the soil. Use the beech compost at the bottom of pots. There is an enormous worm population.



Map of the garden, numbers indicating where ears are placed, and what stories are to be told as we walk the garden.