

# PlantNetwork Podcast 47.

*Transcript of the PlantNetwork podcast with Rupert Wilson, Principal Data Manager for the RHS, and Don Murray, Freelance Consultant, interviewed by Mercy Morris, PlantNetwork Manager.*

[00:00:00]

**Mercy Morris:** welcome to the PlantNetwork podcast. Today, I'm chatting to two of our long-standing trustees who are retiring at the end of March, 2024.

First up you'll hear **Rupert Wilson** Principal Data Manager at the Royal Horticultural Society, and then joining us partway through the podcast is **Don Murray**, who's currently a freelance consultant, but has worked previously for the Eden project and Mount Stuart gardens.

If you've ever considered becoming a trustee for PlantNetwork, then this is the episode that you want to listen to. You'll find out about the high points and the low points. And just what it would contribute to your career. And you'll also find out about Rupert and Don's favorite moments.

[00:00:46] [Have you actually been a trustee since 2011, Rupert? That seems like a lot of time you've given.](#)

**Rupert Wilson:** It does seem like quite a long time and I must admit my mind was a bit hazy, but I did go back through my calendar and things. I think it was around May 2011, Matthew Jebb, who was the Chair at the time, called me up and then said, would I like to join the board? I think he also caveated, he asked me how my monetary skills were, because I think he was looking for a treasurer. Anybody that knows me, realizes that I

wouldn't be best placed as a treasurer. So yes I was welcomed onto the board.

Going back through the list of events, I did actually attend when I was then at the University of Reading in the School of Plant Sciences. I attended the meeting in '96 at Oxford Botanic Gardens, which also the events calendar tells me was the very first PlantNetwork AGM or PlantNet as it was in those days. And then a year later, I was up at Edinburgh with the Plant Records Group there, as an attendee, and that's where I met people like Rob Cubie and David Knott and Becky Govier, and I think possibly Andy Sier as well, who were running the Plant Records Group at that time.

In 2001 I went to Cambridge and at that point, unknown to anybody else at the event, I'd been offered the job at the RHS, but I was still working for the University of Reading. So I was scoping out the other delegates.

By 2002 I was already helping with some of the arrangements at RHS Rosemoor when we had a Plant Records Group meeting. So, I have a long, long history of involvement with PlantNetwork and it's been wonderful.

It's the locations that you can get to, that we've hosted meetings at. I mean, I think two of my all time favorites, one was a Plant Records Group meeting in the Isle of Bute, so Mount Stuart, that's where Don was working at the time, and he invited the Plant Records Group meeting there. And that was fantastic because I mean, anywhere that you have to travel over water to get to is an adventure. And we managed to get all the RHS plant records officers there and we stayed in a B& B and we had a good time.

It's traditional for Plant Records Groups to have an evening meal the night before where you chew the fat and whatever and, and have a good meal. And we were sat down for dinner and there were a number of guests that weren't there. And we got messages from them and they'd missed the ferry. So they were

stuck on the mainland and we were on the Isle. So Mount Stuart was a wonderful venue and a good meeting.

And then the other one was while, Matthew Jebb was Chair of the board and, and Matthew obviously was at Glasnevin in Dublin. So, he used to host meetings there and we used to have meetings in his office, which is in the garden, but he also then hosted us for dinner at his house. So yeah, so we had this wonderful, wonderful meal in his house and went for a stroll around the garden. So that was very nice.

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:03:39] So what skills do you think you've used most as a trustee?

[00:03:44] **Rupert Wilson:** I've learned an awful lot because I mean I was very, very new back in 2011.

I mean, although I've been in the RHS job a little while, I was still new to sort of networking outside and things other than the Plant Records Group. So, I think it was learning to listen, considering everything, keeping an open mind. And being able to put your point across where you perhaps had something to add, or maybe something you didn't, didn't agree.

And I think it's that institutional memory I can remember where we have discussions around the board and I'm the only one that would remember that we encountered that situation about five years previously or whatever.

Although, I mean, obviously now we've got, we've got better minutes and they're all easily accessible, but yes, that institutional memory. Also it's those connections you build as well. It's the network of people that you build up over time that you can, you know, if you're thinking, if we're thinking about a meeting or, or somebody that we need to, to do something for us, we can, oh yes, we know so and so, or yeah, or have you tried, have you thought of, of, of that person at that garden?

## **Mercy Morris:**

[00:04:42] So you've been with the RHS for the whole of your time on the board. What do you think's been the benefit to the RHS?

[00:04:50] **Rupert Wilson:** So when I was first approached back in 2011 my senior managers were very supportive actually. They realized that they wanted to progress me, to develop me and one way of doing that was to go out and meet people and work with people. So, you know, not just not to stay within the confines of the RHS. I was actively encouraged to join the board and go to the meetings and a lot of trustees do this, they try to go to as many meetings as they can to support the events and to meet people, encourage people. But that also meant that I was able to go and tell people about the work of the RHS. So spreading the word about what we're doing .

And certainly within the Plant Records Group meeting the people were also very keen to know who was using what system and who might be moving and what was new. So they were also very keen to find out what the RHS was doing because it seemed to be that if the RHS went in that direction, other people might be interested in it.

Obviously it also meant that I could then feed back what the National Trust, English Heritage, what other organizations are doing, make sure that we were all on the same lines.

And I think it was also putting people in contact as well. So my own team and others would be able to yeah, it's the networking thing again.

**Mercy Morris:** It's so important, isn't it? I don't think that people realize when they say they can't afford to send people to training events or to meetings, I don't think they realize quite how much they're cutting themselves off and putting themselves in a silo.

**Rupert Wilson:** The meetings are far more than the calendar events, you know, the, the, the agenda of the day. It's the conversations you have over lunch. It's the conversations you have when you're at the beginning of the day over coffee. And the people you meet and the contacts that you make that you follow up on as well afterwards.

**Mercy Morris:**

[00:06:29] **Don.** I've got you down as being a trustee for PlantNetwork since 2014. Is that right, do you think?

[00:06:36] **Don Murray:** I believe so. That's what I've got. in my head, but I've been involved with PlantNetwork a lot longer. So at some point, Alistair Griffiths was a trustee at the Eden Project and somewhere along the line, he passed the baton across to me. And I think it's around about 2014, but it might be earlier.

**Mercy Morris:**

[00:06:55] So we've heard about Rupert's favourite memories. What's your favourite memory? Can you think of one?

[00:07:00] **Don Murray:** Oh my goodness. For me, it's around actually developing that network, you know, and there's been so many moments where we've had to make big decisions and all that kind of transformation from plant collection management into generating income. I mean, that's been such a big thing over the last 10 years, that change has been big.

Two of my fondest memories, let's call them fondest memories. When we had the Contemporary Issues for Gardens and Plant Collections; this is going back in 2010 at the Eden Project. I mean, in that very title of that meeting, you know, it was a big change, a big transition. And the other one is the plant records group meeting at Mount Stuart Trust.

I think between the Eden Project and Mount Stuart, it was, it was the buzz, you know, it was a real sense of activity and just everyone was just, just, you know, really on, on top of their game, you know, it was just brilliant.

[00:07:58] **Rupert Wilson:** Certainly we had a plant records meeting at Eden and it was great because at that time you had the youth hostel pods, so quite a number of staff, the attendees stayed in the pods. Again, you were on site as well, so again, it was all great.

[00:08:16] **Don Murray:** But it really felt, it really felt as if we were on the edge of, of big changes because at that time, things like Nagoya were coming in and it was big changes and it was just that sense of purpose. It was, it was a real buzz in that room. And of course we had some great, obviously people like David Rae and, and some other kind of big hitters were all there. They're all now, you know, executive directors or whatever, chief execs, you know, but real sense of the actual decision makers were in the room at that time and people were really listening to one another and change was happening.

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:08:50] **Which skills do you think you've used most as a trustee since you've joined?**

[00:08:54] **Don Murray:** Well, it's various skills, isn't it, that come into play? You start thinking about what ones are the most used, but at least that's what I think, but what colleagues probably think is completely different.

But I think, I think around that, that, that sort of strategic thinking and that we've had to engage at a really high level being a trustee. So you've got planning, considering long term goals, the direction of PlantNetwork and all along, you know, in the front of your mind, I've been thinking like that (although) it doesn't always come out that way.

And the other one is around governance. So I think one of the skills is around that governance knowledge has really increased, I mean, over the last 10 years. So that, that kind of governance is back, but that sort of strong understanding of the principles, the kind of legal, ethical responsibilities and also all these kinds of

organizational, like almost like bylaws, if you want to put it that way. So that governance side, I think I've really brushed up on. And of course, risk management. You know, all along as a trustee, you know, we've been really kind of assessing and managing the risks, whether that's growth or we've had to prune back.

We're now in a phase of growth and in many ways, the risk management is higher because we know we've got two employees we're having to think, you know, about their livelihoods and that's really important.

And the other one is around teamwork and that sort of, that sort of collaboration. So it's definitely as a trustee, you know, working within a board. More difficult, by the way, while it's been more online, so I've really found that quite challenging since the pandemic. That sort of teamwork and collaboration has been really hard for everyone, I think, to really adjust,

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:10:44] During your time on the board, you've spent time with Garden Organic, The Newt, Mount Stuart and the Eden Project, as well as being a freelance consultant as you are now. How's your involvement with PlantNetwork enriched your professional life, do you think?

[00:10:59] **Don Murray:** Since the pandemic, there's been a lot of change. So I was 14 years at the Eden Project and quite happy. And then I was like five years at Mount Stuart. And then since the pandemic, life has just got mad. But as a trustee you know, I think it's more of around that enrichment when it comes to leadership skills, decision making abilities, networking opportunities, and of course that personal fulfillment, all of which has really enriched my professional life.

I mean, if you look at one aspect, like, like, for example, the leadership experience, serving as a trustee provides really valuable leadership experience. Now, I've often played a crucial role in guiding the direction of PlantNetwork, making decisions

on behalf of fellow trustees and ensuring that the organization's long term sustainability.

So I think I think from that comes a real deep sense of enrichment when it comes to my actual professional life. And there's probably other examples, you know, just, just understanding governance, you know, really understanding what governance means. It's really enriched me in that way. So serving as a trustee, it's given me that unique perspective of PlantNetwork's governance. Understanding how the board functions how to make decisions and oversee PlantNetwork's operations that can be beneficial for individuals in various professional roles. So obviously the work that we do as a charity, we do it for others. You know, that's the thing we're serving, we're serving others and that's where the governance side really kind of kicks in. And that's been so enriching and, you know, learned heaps.

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:12:51] Brilliant. So, both of you, what do you think are the best and worst aspects of the role?

[00:12:58] **Rupert Wilson:** I think certainly when I first started, the day job allowed more time, there seemed to be more time, more flexibility to focus on the role of trustee. I think probably Don might say similarly, that post pandemic, the world seems to have changed a bit, it's gone a little bit bonkers. There's an awful lot more calls on your time. So you have to be very, very, motivated to make sure you're putting, putting the time aside to read the minutes to check the emails and then to respond as well and to perform your duties as a trustee.

But the best bit and still remains that it always will be is the contacts that you make and the people you meet and the things that you learn from them as well. And I think Don has alluded to that in that you can learn from other trustees how they behave and the decisions they make.



Sort of mentoring almost, but without calling it mentoring. It's that contact and working with people as a team with this goal of being a great organization, a great networking organization for living collections.

[00:13:58] **Don Murray:** Yeah, you're so right. Again, it's just like you, Rupert, it's that, that massive change post pandemic. And it's not just with PlantNetwork, it's, you know, it's with other charities that I'm on the board of. I think we've all come through this journey in a very bizarre way, but the best aspects for me is similar to Rupert but definitely contributing to PlantNetwork's cause.

You know, that's been such a pleasure and a joy. We are so passionate about it. And that sense of making that, that positive impact has been highly rewarding. It's been absolutely magic. Also the leadership opportunities. Again, you know, serving as a trustee, it's been so valuable.

Networking opportunities, as Rupert said. And also learning and development. You know, the role of a PlantNetwork trustee involves that continuous learning for staying informed about sector trends or legal changes or best practice. So that learning has been constant, but you have to put the time and effort into it.

You know, you have to actually go and find the information and definitely that, that personal fulfillment, you know, just being part of PlantNetwork success, you know, and actually being able to say, yeah, I helped with that. I took a little bit and I just, I just helped with that little bit. Well, we nudged it that way and, you know, and it just worked.

The worst aspects. Yeah. As Rupert said, it's the time, the time commitment. And I think I've really sensed that as I became self employed it wasn't that when I was working for different organizations, I was very liberal with my time. I was obviously very conscious of it. But as you become self employed, for anyone out there thinking, who's self employed and is thinking about becoming a trustee, you do have that challenge. If you've

got a new client or you've got a meeting with, yeah, PlantNetwork, what one do you go for? You know, that can be really challenging.

The other one is around the legal responsibilities, I found worst. Not worst. That's not the right word. It made me twitchy. It made me realize I had to be the top of my game. Because you can't blag being a trustee, you know, you really can't. Well, you can for a little bit, I guess, but then you get caught out. So the kind of legal responsibilities was always in the front of my mind.

Just making sure that as an organization, we're able to fulfill the obligations. Because the consequences were really quite serious. And when I was seeing that post pandemic, we're seeing a lot of charities fail. I think it's like three to 5 percent of charities have disappeared.

Very rarely, there's been a conflict of interest. I think it's happened once. But I didn't spot it until after the meeting. And also, again, being self employed, the kind of voluntary nature of a trustee. You know, it's that time you can put in and sometimes when I was employed, you know, justifying X amount of time spent on PlantNetwork when I could be generating income. It did come up very rarely but I was always able to bat it away and look at the wider aspects of the benefit that being a trustee on PlantNetwork brings to the organization that I was working for.

[00:17:15] **Rupert Wilson:** Just, just as a chip in there. The trustee board there is, there is not a few individuals, there's quite a number of individuals and there's a good spread of knowledge, skills and experience. So you might be the person that's really hot on governance, but there'll be somebody else who's really hot on finances. And the way you work as a team, you sort of support each other and you can have open discussions about things. And whilst that risk is slightly terrifying but you're generally not acting alone. You are putting forward your views and then there's a consensus, isn't there?

**Mercy Morris:**

[00:17:47] Obviously we're hoping to recruit some people to take over from both of you, possibly not for quite such extremely long terms. What advice would you give to somebody listening to this who'd be interested in applying to be a trustee of PlantNetwork?

[00:18:04] **Rupert Wilson:** I would say that, getting involved with PlantNetwork first, get to know PlantNetwork, attend the meetings, you know make yourself known. Once you sort of put your head above the parapet, you probably find that one of the trustees comes and comes and sort of taps you on the shoulder.

But I would definitely say do it. It's great for personal development, for learning new skills. Talk to your line manager, get their support. I mean, you know, most of us now have some form of, (personal development plan or) CPD. It's just a great way of ticking those boxes and saying that you're doing something. And it's also looking outside of your organization and there's a lot to learn from other similar organizations. I would say, do it, but maybe start off by actively participating in meetings.

[00:18:50] **Don Murray:** I think that's so important, Rupert. I think you've hit the nail on the head. I think it's also about reflecting, you know, thinking about the best and the worst aspects. Now, just, just with that in mind, if you are considering about being a trustee, you know, it's important to weigh these factors up and consider, you know, if the role of the trustee lines with your personal and professional circumstances.

I think one of the biggest challenges for any trustee and the right thing, the smart thing is to know when to bow out and certainly for myself, you know, my, my personal and professional circumstances since post pandemic, it's just went nuts.

There's a lot of aligning with other chartered organizations and organizations at PlantNetwork. And we need this new raft of trustees desperately need people to come in from aligned sectors. You know, that would be really interesting because we're seeing this influx of the environment, nature, horticulture,

you know, as a science and art has always been involved in nature and the environment, but it's becoming more and more important because there's a lot of other sectors who just aren't listening to that horticultural sector and we could be contributing so much more.

So yeah, so I'd say go for it. Join today.

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:20:15] [What are you going to be doing with all this spare time that you've got now?](#)

[00:20:19] **Rupert Wilson:** A few years ago, before the pandemic actually, I took the quite extreme step of reducing my hours. So I only now work 30 hours a week, so four days. And I wanted to spend more time doing other projects that I like. I'm doing things like renewables. In Reading we have the Reading Hydro Scheme. So we've as a community created a hydroelectric scheme on the river Thames at Caversham. I've become involved in that and these things sort of build, you know, one thing leads to another.

[00:20:46] **Don Murray:** Yeah, life is never boring. So the moment that I made the decision to step down, I then became a co-opted director of the Bute Community Land Trust. So I'm now on the Bute Community Forest. They've got an amazing rainforest on the north side of the island. And also I'm becoming more busy with the RSPB Scotland advisory Committee.. And it's interesting. So I've kind of migrating into that nature and environment side and it's really neat. So the RSPB wanted me on the committee because they wanted for horticultural landscape professional insight and with the Bute community forest, they wanted me because of the woodlands and trees and that sort of ecological management.

So yeah, horticulturalists. We're really pretty cool.

### **Mercy Morris:**

[00:21:39] You are, you're very well rounded individuals, I must say. Really good projects to get involved in. Well, a very brief thank you for contributing your time to this and it's been really interesting reminiscing with you and talking about this and thank you so much for the, the years of service that you've given.

PlantNetwork will be much poorer without you but hopefully we'll get some, some lively, entertaining people to replace you.