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## Horticulture on high: the implications of chartered status

**After a small celebration to mark a new era in horticulture, Andrew Gill, president-elect of the Chartered Institute of Horticulture, spoke to the Leisure Review about what such elevated status might mean for the organisation, its members and the wider horticultural sector.**

Earlier this summer the Institute of Horticulture added its name to the list of professional bodies within the sport, leisure and culture sector to have taken delivery of a royal charter. With the document safely in pride of place, the Chartered Institute of Horticulture marked its change of title and status with a garden party, hosted by the institute's patron, the Marchioness of Salisbury, at Hatfield House. The grandeur of the setting, with its formal gardens and extensive grounds, was appropriate for an institute dedicated to the service of the horticultural profession and perhaps for an occasion with just a touch of royalty. However, the institute was at pains to emphasise that event's most important function was to serve as an acknowledgement of the support of members and partner organisations as the institute worked towards achieving its charter.

The process of applying for chartered status is a lengthy, complex and costly experience but for the Institute of Horticulture it represented the fulfilment of an ambition held since the institute's founding in 1984. Speaking at the Hatfield House reception, the institute's president-elect, Andrew Gill, noted that the royal charter was an excellent way to mark the organisation's 30th anniversary. "There is a long way to go on our journey to raise the professional status of horticulture and a lot more hard work to be done," he said, "but today is a day of celebration and, in the words of Sir Winston Churchill, we may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing." Lady Salisbury noted the attendance of some 200 members and guests "from every corner of the British Isles" and suggested that such an expression of commitment augured well for the institute's ambitions.

Speaking to the Leisure Review after the Hatfield House event, Gill was able to reflect on what chartered status might mean for the organisation and how it might help the Chartered Institute of Horticulture achieve these ambitions.

"What it will do – and it won't do it overnight but we're confident that it will have this effect – is raise the status of horticulture as a profession" he said. "People will be under no illusions that it is a profession. Yes, it's a trade as well but you can study horticulture up to the highest academic levels. We think it will help to raise recognition and enhance status of horticulture as a profession that demands high levels of skill and CPD [continuing professional development]. The institute is the only professional body that represents the whole of the professional horticulture: from a gardener up to a professor of biochemistry, anyone who is involved in horticulture. We feel that the charter will strengthen the institute and the institute's voice. It will add a certain gravitas for our representations to government."

The institute has already seen an increase in expressions of interest in membership, a doubling when compared with last year, and it is beginning to receive a greater number of invitations for the institute to

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be part of discussions and gatherings relevant to its members' interests. A round-table discussion on the issues affecting the horticultural trades hosted by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs had been the most recent to arrive.

"We're hoping that we're going to be able to increase membership off the back of the aspiration of becoming a chartered horticulturalist," Gill said. "That will give us more resources, which would enable us to do more. We would really like to have a full-time – or even a part-time – chief executive. We don't have one at the moment; we don't have any paid staff."

While the new status will have implications for the organisation, Gill is sure that it will also make a difference to the institute's members. The first six chartered horticulturalists, one of whom is Gill himself, were announced at Hatfield House but Gill is confident that others will want to be able to put the designation 'CHort' after their name. A short-form application process will be in place for the next 18 months, allowing existing members and fellows to have their prior experience and qualifications acknowledged.

"Achieving individual chartered status involves displaying and demonstrating a certain level of professional achievement and standing," he explained, "and I have a vision that people will be able to answer the question 'What do you do?' at dinner parties with 'I'm a chartered horticulturalist.' In time we want to be a recognised centre of qualification and we would like to see 'chartered horticulturalist' on job specifications as an essential."

For all its apparent prestige, chartered status has not always proved a panacea for professional bodies but, according to Gill, the charter is a reflection of the institute's role within the horticulture sector. "It's one of our [sector's] strengths that we are such a broad church and we have so many disciplines in the industry but it's also a weakness in the sense that we have many representative bodies. The Chartered Institute of Horticulture has for a long time had the tag line 'Uniting a growing profession' so we see ourselves as one body that can speak for the whole of horticulture. It is increasingly important that you can not only make that claim for your sector but that you have the information to hand to respond to government consultations and make a cogent argument at that level to represent the industry. Government does want to talk to people they can have a dialogue with."

For all the arcane machinations and ceremonial rituals of the privy council, chartered status does impose some stringent requirements upon chartered bodies. The Institute of Horticulture anticipated its charter by examining and revising its internal structures and governance. In common with many charities, the institute depends upon the time and expertise given freely by its membership to fulfil its role as a professional body. In order to make the best use of an increasingly valuable resource, the institute consulted its membership on its structure and has streamlined a number of its processes, including reducing the number of trustees and making the internal decision-making process clearer than it might once have been. While the board only meets four times a year, the institute is now confident that the decisions are made properly, that they are made without undue delay and that they are representative of its members' views; and given the breadth of its membership, the institute is confident that they can be seen to be representative of the sector.

And given that chartered status represents acceptance into the world of the establishment, is there any fear that a professional body recognised in this way might feel constrained from being outspoken should it feel the need arise? Gill was adamant that this would not be the case.

"Quite the contrary really," he said. "We feel it gives us a greater

responsibility to our members to be giving the right message but it should be making our message stronger and more powerful. The only area where we have to be careful is that whatever we're saying is correct and representative, that it's not open to interpretation. That's where working with other partners helps. We're working with the Royal Horticultural Society, BALI, the Horticultural Trades Association, the Parks Alliance, lots of organisations that are signing up to what we might call a joint manifesto. We know that there are certain messages, such as getting more young people into horticulture; we know we have a skills crisis. Those things are universal. They're not going to change."

**The Chartered Institute of Horticulture can be found online at [www.horticulture.org.uk](http://www.horticulture.org.uk)**

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