

European Garden Award 2014
Laudation for "The Lost Gardens of Heligan"
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The sleeping beauty

„Lost for many years under mountains of bramble, ivy, rampant laurel and fallen timber, anyone who was moved by „The Secret Garden“ will love Heligan, the most secret garden of them all“ –

That's written on the Heligan website and describes the scene of the largest garden restoration project in Europe in recent times.

What has been unearthed?

The Garden of Heligan, beautifully situated at the head of a valley overlooking the harbour of Mevagissey in Cornwall, is first mentioned in text in the twelfth century, and is owned by the Tremayne family has been for more than 400 years.

As a part of an estate with a number of farms, quarries woods, brickworks, mills, brewery and productive orchards and kitchen gardens, Heligan was the centre of the community, flourishing at the end of the 19th century. The owners brought plants from across the Empire and despite the mild climate conditions in Cornwall, they grow surprisingly well.

You may imagine:

Superb pleasure grounds, a number of walled gardens, a huge, productive vegetable garden, a jungle, a native Cornish woodland, situated in the midst of the Cornish rolling hills, the Garden of Heligan seemed to be a scene right from Jane Austen's famous novels „Sense and Sensibility“ or „Pride and Prejudice“ – dreaming of a walk inside the walled garden accompanied by Mr. Darcy...

It was after the Great War, when the last male heir died, that the manor house was rented to friends of the family.

The Gardens fell into decline and more than seventy years later a long period of sleep began.

During the Second World War the area was used by the Americans to rehearse the Normandy landings.

Later on the manor house was sold, and after decades of neglect, the devastating hurricane of 1990 should have consigned the Lost Gardens of Heligan to a footnote in history.

But then, by pure accident, John Willis from the Tremayne family met Tim Smit, the famous Dutch self-made man, music producer, gardener and archaeologist, John Nelson and Robert Poole and went to see the gardens – and Tim Smit was entreated by the „sleeping beauty“.

He said, „my first visit was on Friday 16th 1990. For all three of us it became a case of „the rest of your life starts here“.

In 1991 a report about Heligan was shown on TV, initialized by Tim Smit, the result was, everybody who watched it wanted to visit the Garden immediately.

But there was no garden to show –
and what do you think about the reaction of the people?

In shortest time there was a large number of volunteers and a group of garden specialists, ready to start to restore Heligan.

Eight years later Heligan is one of the most visited gardens in England with more than 300.000 visitors per year, in 1999 Heligan was awarded „Garden of the year“.

Since initial restoration Heligan has developed:

The Pleasure Ground, more than 200 years old and reopened in 1997 is a walled garden in New-Zealand and Italian style, zoned by hedges and murals. You can find fountains, pavilions, ponds and a crystal grotto and „Flora’s Green“ is surrounded by rhododendrons belonging to one of the world’s largest collections.

The Productive Garden contains more than 300 different varieties of apples and vegetables. Lemon- and peach trees and grape vines are growing close to glass-houses, which have also been restored.

The Jungle was developed about 150 years ago in a large, deep valley. The paths lead through large areas of bamboos, agaves, palms, rhododendrons and tree ferns.

The Lost Valley and Ancient Woodlands, connected to the Jungle, are built as a landscape park; alleys of oak trees and beeches evidence the former use and form part in the forest today.

With more than 70 veteran camellias and 350 ancient rhododendrons, Heligan was awarded National Collection Holder status by Plant Heritage for its historic and unique collection.

Two green overgrown sculptures by Susan Hill, situated at the entrance of the garden are called The Mud Maid and The Giants Head – Cornish mythology at its best.

The historical background, the different character of the gardens, the aspects of biodiversity and sustainability and culture and wildness add to an atmosphere which is unrivalled in its class.

The gardens were never really lost, the people of Heligan entered into a project which should be considered best practise all over the world; how to reinvigorate and protect heritage and create a renowned garden for the future.

There is so much to discover, to learn, when you visit Heligan. Sustainability, wildlife interaction, protecting historical landscape features and preserving traditional techniques found together with modern education and innovative technologies.

The Jury of the EGHN Garden Award was deeply impressed by the story of „The Lost Gardens of Heligan“ and the great achievement of the people.

For me, it's a great pleasure to welcome the director of the Lost Gardens of Heligan, Mr. George Elworthy and to bestow this Award – Congratulations.