

THE LOST GARDENS OF HELIGAN

By Tim Smit

Heligan was the family home of the Cornish Tremayne family for over 400 years. The original 1,000 acre estate was completely self-sufficient and included a flour-mill, saw-mill, brewery, quarry and, not least, productive orchards and gardens. The gardens reached their zenith in the Victorian era and were the recipients of many contemporary plant hunters' specimens. At its height there were 57 acres of planted gardens, around 100 acres of ornamental woodlands and 300 acres of rides.

"It was the silence that struck you at first.....This dank, dark place had its own strange beauty"

The carnage of the first world- war caused profound changes to the social structure of England as huge numbers of young men in domestic service went to their deaths. Of the 22 gardeners working at Heligan at the outbreak of war only 6 survived. There simply was not enough labour available to work the estate and the general labour shortage enabled many people to obtain better jobs, certainly easier work than on an estate. Consequently, the gardens fell into ruin and nature set about its perennial task.

"The hedge had grown massive and now stretched at least 30 yards deep.....Poking through this sea of thorns were some amazing plants."

The chance discovery of the derelict gardens by Tim Smit and his friend lead to, after an immense amount of work and numerous obstacles, a most remarkable garden restoration. Heligan, which is home to a number of historic plantings over 150 years old, is generally regarded as the best restoration of its kind anywhere and was the subject of a four part BBC documentary program. A major goal of the project was to re-introduce the organically based kitchen garden practices of the day.

"Only on turning the rusty handle door did we realize the danger..... A small pair of rusty scissors..... Who did they belong to? What had happened here?"

The book presents fascinating, easily read and well-illustrated accounts of the history of the house and gardens followed by the herculean restoration of the garden.

Tim Smit went on to develop the acclaimed Eden Project in an abandoned china clay pit not far away from Heligan.

“THE KITCHEN GARDENS AT HELIGAN”

Lost Gardening Principles Rediscovered

By Tom Petherick and Melanie Eclare

Reviewed by Chloe Broomhead

The Kitchen Gardens at Heligan is a good book for fireside gardening.

The 2 acres of kitchen gardens are described as they are today, growing food for the many visitors to the garden instead of the occupants of the "Big House". The original glasshouses and cold frames have been rebuilt and much of the garden is surrounded by gorgeous old brick walls. Who wouldn't love a walled veggie garden?

As the subtitle notes only seeds, trees, machinery and techniques used in 1911 are employed by the team of full time staff and volunteers who tend the gardens now. These "lost gardening principles" include: rigorous daily observation, physical barriers and carefully timed plantings. Interesting old methods of training vines and peaches are also practised.

The book is full of beautiful photographs of the immaculate vegetable crops and many of the over 200 varieties grown are described in detail. Also included are copies of many original sketches, plans and plant engravings as well as a number of recipes (although I'm not sure about many of these). There is a fascinating description of the art of growing pineapples in a Pine House using horse manure. Who knew decomposing horse manure was the Edwardian version of a heating cable.

As the vegetable gardener in the family I enjoyed this companion book. Give it a try on a cold winter afternoon with a cup of tea.

Reviewed by David Broomhead