Long-lost wonders

After being left to wrack and ruin for almost eight decades, the exotic gardens of Cornwall's Heligan estate were rediscovered and restored to their former glory. Thirty years since they opened to the public, **CLARE HARGREAVES** shares the gardens' remarkable story

It was not your usual toilet graffiti. Instead of amorous scribblings or obscenities, the writing in heavy pencil on the white-washed walls beside the lavatory was a stark one-liner: "Don't come here to sleep or to slumber." Below it were the signatures of those who had sat in the tiny cubicle, and a date: August 1914.

This graffiti was written in the gardeners' Thunderbox Room on Cornwall's Heligan estate, at the outbreak of the First World War. As Heligan's 13 gardeners signed those walls before marching off to war, little did they know that many would end their days on the battlefields of France and Belgium. Only four returned. With the disappearance of its workforce, Heligan's prized gardens, like so many across Britain, were "lost" too, sinking into a slumber that would last nearly 80 years.

They were awakened in the early 1990s by archaeologist and musician Tim Smit, who had moved from London to a farmhouse near Heligan. By coincidence he had met John Willis, a descendant of the Tremayne family who had owned the estate for more than 400 years but sold off the house in the 1970s. Willis invited Smit to accompany him in exploring what was left of his inheritance, and the two were joined by local builder John Nelson. Cutting through brambles and laurels as thick as their arms, the explorers uncovered Heligan's horticultural treasures, many brought back from far corners of the world by Victorian plant hunters. They ranged from tree ferns and palms, to rhododendrons grown from seeds collected by botanist Joseph Hooker on his Himalayan expedition of 1848–51.

But it was the names etched on the walls of the Thunderbox Room that set the tone for Heligan's subsequent restoration. Rather than telling the story of the gentry who had lived in the house, Smit resolved to celebrate the lives and skills of the ordinary men and women who had toiled in its grounds.

Gradually, Smit and his colleagues coaxed new life back into the productive gardens that once supported a community of more than 20. No original cropping plans remained, so pre-1910 varieties of fruit and vegetables were planted to make the gardens as authentic as possible. Beds were dug by hand and fertilised with manure from Heligan's livestock, just as they had always been. Today around 500 heritage varieties of fruits, vegetables and flowers flourish, preserved for the future.

Further south, the Melon Yard's red-brick walls are adorned with espaliered pears and fan-trained plums and greengages, and the flower garden's glasshouses produce grapes and lemons once more. The vinery is believed to be the only surviving example of a glass-house designed by Joseph Paxton (the creator of Crystal Palace) in the 1800s.

Heligan's most famous fruit, though, is the pineapple, grown from the 18th century onwards in a "pit" heated by regular supplies of fresh horse manure. Having got the pit working again, Heligan now produces around a dozen pineapples a year, some used in rum liqueurs served at Lost Suppers cooked by the gardens' resident chef, Nat Tallents.

In 2013, the Imperial War Museum registered Heligan's Thunderbox Room as a Living Memorial, and if you visit on Remembrance Sunday, you can join staff in commemorating the men who scrawled their names on those walls. Heligan is not just about priceless plants, but people too, just as it's always been.

Clare Hargreaves is a freelance writer and trained horticulturist

VISIT For more information on visiting Heligan, go to **heligan.com**

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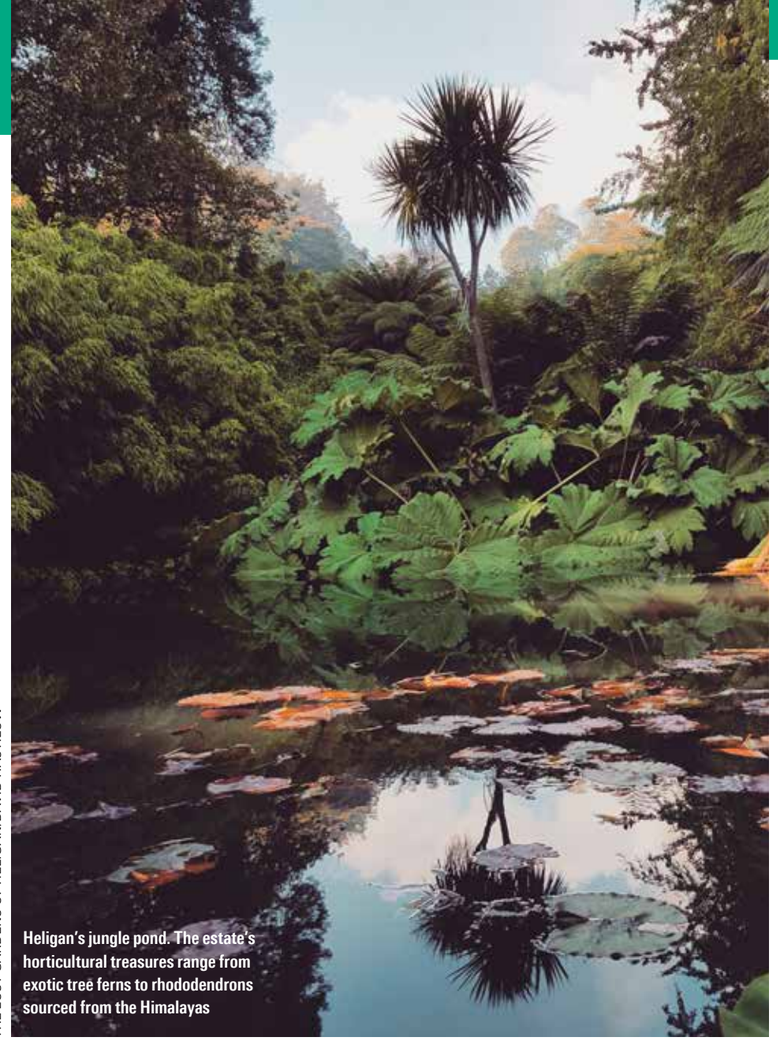

THE LOST GARDENS OF HELIGAN/DAVID HASTILOW

Heligan's jungle pond. The estate's horticultural treasures range from exotic tree ferns to rhododendrons sourced from the Himalayas

ABOVE: Heligan's team of gardeners have used pre-1910 produce varieties for authenticity and to preserve them for posterity. RIGHT: The estate's ruined flower garden (top) and Melon House (bottom) before their restoration in the 1990s

Charles Dyer (left) and Frederick Paynter (below) were two of Heligan's workers who fought in the First World War. Dyer never returned

The Italian Garden, pictured in the early 20th century (right) and restored to its former glory after years of painstaking work by Tim Smit and his team (above)

Manure from the estate animals is used to fertilise produce beds