



Cornwall's sleeping beauty

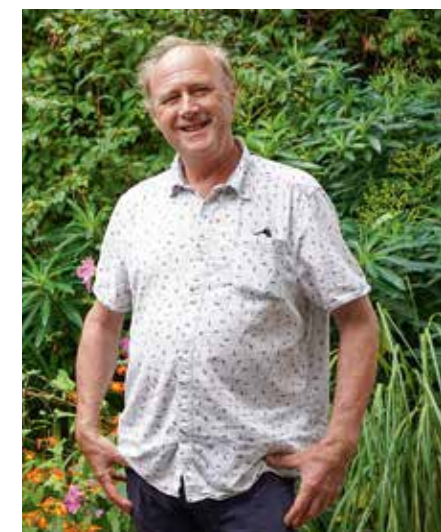
It's 30 years since Heligan's famous lost gardens were opened to the public for the first time

Words CLARE HARGREAVES

The story of the rediscovery of the Lost Gardens of Heligan just over 30 years ago has all the ingredients and romance of a modern-day *Sleeping Beauty*: a brave prince battles through impenetrable thorns to awaken a beautiful princess who has fallen asleep for nearly 80 years. He rouses her with a kiss and they live happily ever after.

The princess – Heligan – was once one of Cornwall's finest estates, whose exotic gardens had been "lost" in 1914 when the estate's workforce marched off to war – many never returning. The prince was Dutch-born archaeologist and musician Sir Tim Smit who would later found the Eden Project. But it was an unlikely set of events that led to Tim's role in reawakening Heligan's famous gardens, packed with magnificent finds from the furthest corners of the globe and, in its heyday, renowned as a feat of Victorian plantsmanship and engineering.

In 1987, Tim had moved with his family to a farmhouse near Mevagissey, where the locals were full of tales of treasures buried in the tropical valley connecting it with Heligan. He was intrigued. At the same time, he had inherited some pigs and hatched the idea of a rare-breeds farm. While searching for a location he met John Willis, a member of the Tremayne family who, for the previous 400 years, had owned Heligan. The house had been sold in the 1970s, but John had inherited the land (with his sister), and was keen to see what damage Cornwall's Great Storm the previous month, January 1990, had done. Did Tim fancy exploring it with him? So began a quest that would change Tim's life and wrest these



Lost and found: (left) Sir Tim Smit, who later went on to co-found the Eden Project. Above: the Mud Maid sculpture by Pete and Sue Hill, commissioned in 1997

mysterious gardens back from obscurity. Today, Tim's memories of spotting ferns and palms erupting from the brambles remain as vivid as ever. Pushing through a creaking door, they spotted the finial of a glasshouse gable-end. "It was at a crazy angle, like a sinking ship," recalls Tim. Looking up, Tim saw a vine leaf among the weeds and, hanging on the wall, a pair of rusting scissors he presumed were for cutting grapes. Later experts would identify the vinery as probably the only surviving example of a glasshouse designed by Joseph Paxton in the mid-1800s.

But it was another find that would steer Heligan's subsequent restoration. Poking around with local builder John Nelson, Tim realised he'd walked into a thunderbox room, or lavatory. Spotting graffiti on the wall, the two prepared themselves for some light-hearted toilet humour as they deciphered the scribbles. Instead, they read: "Don't come here to sleep or slumber." And below, the signatures of the men who had sat in that tiny dark corner, and the date August 1914. The kitchen gardeners, it seemed, had solemnly signed their names before abandoning their secure little world at Heligan for the bloody battlefields of France and Flanders.

Only four of those 13 gardeners returned. Tim realised this restoration would be different from those of other

stately homes and gardens, which focused on their aristocratic owners. "Putting Heligan in aspic for posterity wasn't what we wanted," he says. "Instead, we'd tell the story of those who worked here and re-discover their horticultural knowledge and skills."

One day in May 1991, Herbie Knott, a photographer and friend from Tim's musician days, popped by while on a job. "Herbie had his camera with him, but had run out of film," recalls Tim's former wife, Candy. "I drove to St Austell to buy a few rolls of colour film. Herbie shot those, but then ran out of film again so asked me to get more. On the second visit, I could only find black and white."

A slot about the restoration on BBC2's *Gardeners' World* that autumn put the project on the national map and finally,

on a rain-drenched Good Friday in 1992, Heligan was officially opened to the public, despite still being a building site with no café or properly working loos. "There was great excitement when our first visitor arrived," recalls Tim. "We were so pleased to see him we let him in for free!"

Work continued. Overgrowth was tamed to reveal rare camellias and rhododendrons, some grown from seeds brought back by Joseph Hooker's Himalayan expedition of 1849-51. Mrs Tremayne's Flower Garden – declared by *The Gardeners' Chronicle* in 1896 to be "the finest herbaceous border in England" – was restored to its former splendour and renamed the Sundial Garden. Heligan's estate lands were restocked with rare-breed cattle and sheep, reared regeneratively to combat soil degradation and climate change.

The restoration of the productive gardens provided the greatest challenge. The manpower, skills and glass that had been deployed were huge, and no cropping plans had survived. Fortunately, as Tim and his crew dug, they unearthed some of the original zinc plant labels, which provided clues as to the kinds of fruits grown on its red brick walls. Vegetable planting, though, had to restart from scratch, based on research uncovering heritage varieties that would have been grown before 1910.

In its heyday Heligan's garden and estate would have fed a household of around 30. Today, with more than 350,000 annual visitors, it can only supply a tiny proportion of what's used in the on-site restaurant. Now, though, Heligan has employed chef Nat Tallents, who runs regular Lost Suppers showcasing its produce, from pasture-raised Red Ruby beef to just-picked broad beans.

Even if you can't get to a Lost Supper, pass through the kitchen gardens at the right time and head gardener Nicola Bradley might offer you a sun-warmed 'Royal Sovereign' strawberry, an 1892 variety that was served at the Queen's coronation banquet. "You won't find it in the shops as it has a short shelf life," says Nicola. "But for flavour, it's incredible."

But Heligan's most iconic fruit is the pineapple, which, from the early 18th century, was grown in pits heated by readily available fresh horse manure. On re-discovering the gardens, Tim and his team were keen to see if they could get the sole remaining pit working again. Using suckers from South Africa, Heligan eventually produced 20 pineapples a year. But the required quantities of fresh manure are hard to find and carbon-heavy to transport, so other heating



Gardener's office
The Head Gardener's office and (below) before it was restored. Heligan employed 13 full-time kitchen gardeners who provided food for around 30 people, as well as exquisite heritage variety strawberries, and exotic pineapples. Only four of the gardeners returned from the war

Citrus house
The ruined citrus house (above) led on to the huge vinery (top left, now restored), which was one of the first buildings to be found by Tim Smit and John Willis. Experts would later identify it as a possibly the only surviving example of a glasshouse designed by Joseph Paxton in the 1800s

methods are now being sought. "We want methods that don't use fossil fuels," says Nicola. Her dilemma underscores the challenges facing Heligan as it looks ahead to the next 30 years. "We have to work out how to remain true to who we are, while also moving with the times."

The First World War, when Heligan was "lost", also marked a nationwide loss of biodiversity and connection to the natural world as farming and gardening became industrialised. Now, many of Heligan's regenerative methods are being discovered once again. "Our priorities are healthy soils and biodiversity," says Alasdair Moore, head of gardens and estate. These, along with age-old gardening skills, are vital, he says, if Heligan's reawakened sleeping beauty is to live happily ever after. ■ heligan.com



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