



Natan Bruneel and friends visit some gardens in the South West of England.

When you feel like crying when you have to go back to work after a vacation, that means your holidays have been rather good, I guess. This was the case after our two-week garden tour to South-West England last September. Our travelling party consisted of three 40-year-old Belgian friends – all historic garden lovers, although each one from a different point of view. It is just fun to share the same interest. For us, I think, the combination of outdoor activity with accommodation and civilisation make a garden visit the perfect thing to do when on holidays. Although we did not intend to rush, we visited about 20 gardens in the counties of Devon, Cornwall, Dorset, Somerset and Kent, and I made a small selection for Flying Visits.

Kingston Lacy (National Trust, Dorset)

I do support all initiatives to get the youth in touch with heritage but, after an earlier ‘Easter Egg Hunt’ experience with over-excited children and (grand)parents, we thought we were pretty safe planning our trip to South-West England in September (no Halloween, Christmas or Easter hysteria). However, I must say I was flabbergasted and surprised that on a rainy Monday morning in September we were far from the only ones visiting this historic house and gardens. I am sure in Belgium that would not be the case. Nevertheless, I must admit that we did not meet many people of our own age (or younger).

Above: Trebah Garden, Valley View.



Above: The Victorian Kitchen Garden at Kingston Lacey.
Below: A view of the River Tamar from Antony House.



As Kingston Lacy was our first National Trust site, we needed to go through the ceremony of renewing our National Trust membership. This is still a manual ‘paper’ process and one that takes some time (room for process improvement here). After that, we were ready to admire an impressive border of unicolour dahlias beneath the south terrace of the house that was built in the 1660s for Sir Ralph Banks. Of course, these were not the last dahlias we would admire during our trip. Otherwise, not too many flowers here but a huge lawn and a straight gravel path equally ornamented with sculptures and urns facing one of the three obelisks we would discover on the estate.

Behind the lawn and a ha-ha, a kind of Japanese garden leads to the Victorian Kitchen Garden. I liked the kitchen garden and the restoration process that is going on there. The first phase of the restoration is bringing the herbaceous flower border back to life.

I especially liked the well-preserved greenhouses behind the flower garden. Another Victorian touch we found was the Fernery. I did not know this type of garden survived. Further, I can recommend the new Woodland Trail which is very nicely done with a comfortable surface to walk on and with many funny nature games for children. On the 3 miles (5km) trail there were no queuing elderly people. Here we were alone...

Antony House (NT, Cornwall)

I really enjoyed Antony House and the adjacent Antony Woodland Garden. The 18th-century house is wonderfully situated in a landscape which Humphry Repton was consulted on. The north terrace of the house, facing an enormous lawn with magnificent views over the River Lynher, especially shows Repton’s influence. Besides the vistas, the stars of the garden are some very special individual trees. The huge Black Walnut (*Juglans nigra*) is an eye-catcher and the old Cork Oak (*Quercus suber*) is just spectacular. West of the house, immense yew hedges enclose garden chambers with mixed borders and a knot garden.

The entrance ticket to Antony House also gives entrance to the Antony Woodland Garden, which is owned by the Carew Pole Garden Trust. (The Carew Pole family owned the property before it was given to the NT and still lives there.) It is worth making the effort to explore this woodland garden, which must be beautiful in spring with camellias and rhododendrons – though hydrangeas were a respectable stand-in as autumn splendour. Interesting trees, sculptures and views of Antony House and the river stick in the mind.

Lanhydrock (NT, Cornwall)

Expectations were high for Lanhydrock, a late Victorian country house. The house as such was wonderful with a fully maintained kitchen and servants’ quarters. I liked the idea of playing with fragrances here and there in the house to evoke the past by smells. The gardens equally met expectations with a degree of maintenance and detail I have never seen before. The conscious fan-shaped raked earth under the famous tailored yew trees in the courtyard garden seemed exemplary to me. The Victorian parterres in the formal garden were neat and lovely, but I felt more touched by the High Garden where a round herbaceous garden was of a dazzling beauty. Even in late summer, the borders were beautiful with ginger lilies, sedums, asters, rudbeckias, dahlias, heleniums, Japanese anemones, etc. Like many people I always take pictures of the plant lists and the border schemes, you know, ‘to do the same in my garden, next year’... yeah right.

Lanhydrock was a first class site. Oh yes, it was here that we had that discussion about automatically charging a general donation when paying for a Victoria Sponge cake in the café. It is a matter of principle (or maybe a cultural one?), but we rather think that charging a donation (even as small as 50p) without asking is a kind of theft. It also spoils the pleasure of consciously donating something. The cake was nice, as always, and the poor girl at the cash desk, once she had recovered from our (over?)reaction, came to our table with apologies and a 50p coin – which we generously donated to the National Trust of course. (We had the same situation at Hestercombe later on our trip, but there, however, the ticket lady was not to be mollified.)

Saltram House (NT, Devon)

Do you recognise the stately feeling when driving up the driveway of an old estate? Making the ‘grand entry’ through the landscaped park, the path slowly revealing the estate’s secrets. I was in this expectant mood when approaching Saltram House. I was shocked, therefore, when suddenly a very busy motorway was passing underneath my romanticised stately driveway. Back to reality.

Although the park is a peaceful place, the noise of the busy road was always present. Still I was charmed by the place, as were my friends. Strolling in the garden, looking at the same borders and follies again and again, we stayed till closing time. Of course, there was the house in Adam style



Above: Lanhydrock’s Courtyard Garden.
Below: The Chapel at Saltram House.



and the rooms with impressive early Chinese wallpaper, but the parkland’s big orangery, temples, Gothic summerhouse and tree-lined avenues were just as beautiful. We found our favourite spot behind the chapel. There is a lovely pond with nice planting and borders. Moreover, if you imagine that noisy roads sound like whispering waves, all is perfect.

Glendurgan Garden (NT, Cornwall) and Trebah Garden (Trebah Garden Trust, Cornwall)

We had a discussion about the level of maintenance of private gardens versus the ones owned by big organisations like the National Trust. After visiting the privately owned 'The Garden House' and finding it a bit sloppy, one of my friends concluded that an army of volunteers, such as the National Trust can access, is needed to keep a garden at the highest standards. Of course, this is too simplistic and my dear friend proved he might be wrong as he found Glendurgan (NT) a let-down in comparison to the adjacent privately owned Trebah Garden. Anyway, descending these valley gardens, both made by the Fox brothers, is an experience you should combine and I do not feel like choosing between them.

Glendurgan is a 19th-century woodland garden laid out in a ravine. I had gained my first impression of how a Cornish ravine garden would look when visiting Cotehele earlier, but this one was on a much bigger scale. I was above all charmed by the maze of cherry laurel, planted in 1833. Until then I had considered cherry laurel (*Prunus laurocerasus*) to be a plant of bad taste used during my childhood as an easy solution hedge. However, in several woodlands in the UK I saw it being used as under-planting and in Glendurgan the cherry laurel proves, when excellently trimmed, very suitable for a maze. Of course, I got lost and never reached the central hut.

Walking down Glendurgan Garden you arrive in the fishing village of Duran, and halfway up again you can take a footpath to Helford Passage (to have a drink in the pub). Doing this you also pass beneath Trebah Garden. To find the entrance, though, you need to go up again. For step-counter fanatics, all this is very good for your statistics.

Trebah Garden is a feast of exotic planting and the ravine setting is extraordinary. I must come back in springtime to see the camellias and rhododendrons, but the tree ferns, gunneras, hydrangeas, bamboos and all the other plants dazzled me. As elsewhere in Cornwall, the surprisingly mild climate affects the planting more than I could have imagined before. The follies, ponds and bridges were fun, but I did not understand why an amphitheatre had been squeezed in five years ago. I suppose it fits in some business plan, so I get it. But I don't get why a semi-soft rubber-like material was used to renew the paths in that part of the garden. It reminded me of the texture of the running track in an athletics ground. For me, this was the only 'bémol' or flat note in a fantastic experience.



Above: A view of the valley at Trebah Garden.
Below: The maze at Glendurgan Garden.

Opposite page:

Top: The King's Garden at Godolphin.
Below: Fern trees at Glendurgan Garden.



Godolphin (NT, Cornwall)

Godolphin was one of our discoveries. In comparison with the other estates of the National Trust this was rather a small one. The number of visitors and volunteers was also small. We fantasised that this must have been how it felt in the early days of the NT.

The Godolphin family established their mining estate in a land rich in tin and copper. The early mine workings are still present in the surrounding woods with warnings to walkers about old mine shafts.

No manicured gardens here, but rough and simple square gardens with old box hedges and native planting. Apparently, in a distant future the Pond Terrace will be restored, bringing water back to the garden. As the site had been neglected for a long time, priority must be given to restoring the buildings. The most important garden at Godolphin is the King's Garden near the house. It is a walled garden that might have looked like a Tudor garden when it was established, but later it was transformed into a vegetable garden. The choice has been made not to recreate a kind of mock Tudor garden, but to make a simple garden with nice mixed borders. This was a soothing place to be.

I would like to write more about all the other gardens I have not mentioned (Stourhead, Trengwainton, Trelassick, Iford Manor, Forde Abbey, Hever Castle and the surprising The Newt), but maybe I must end with a little tribute to my plant catch of this trip, the *Erigeron karvinskianus* (Mexican Fleabane).

Earlier this year I read *Life in the Garden* by Penelope Lively. In this book, she described so warmly her beloved signature plant *Erigeron karvinskianus* that I was intrigued to learn more about it. People in England will maybe laugh at me, but I did not recognise the plant when looking it up and I could not remember having seen it in Belgium or in any nursery. However, from day one of our trip I saw this daisy-like plant everywhere, creeping between paving stones and showering down drystone walls. I had the perfect spot in mind to introduce the self-sowing *Erigeron* in my own garden and therefore bought three young plants in Great Dixter nursery the day before crossing the Channel back home.

You can imagine my surprise when, one week later, I saw that in a crack of my sister's pavement my so-called great discovery was already growing, waiting until my father would pass by to pluck out the bloody weed... 🌿



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