FRIENDS OF THE HKBRAS TRIP TO CORNWALL

KIRSTY NORMAN

In April 2002, 25 members of the Friends of the RAS Hong Kong Branch took part in the group's first Monday-Friday organised tour, thanks to the excellent teamwork and organisation of Anita Wilson, Rosemary Lee and Penny Byrne.

The group visited six gardens in eastern Cornwall, in order to look specifically at oriental planting, and the connections between Cornwall and the early plant hunters. Given the county's place in the history of early oriental plant introductions, there are many gardens to choose from, but in this choice we were fortunate to have the help of the remarkable Maggie Campbell-Culver, author of the recently published and well received The Origin of Plants and previously in charge of the gardens at Mount Edgecumbe, and also her husband Michael Culver. Both had become close friends of Penny Byrne and her husband Tim Heald while neighbours in Fowey. Maggie's love of her subject, and her instinctive ability to strike a balance between educating us and allowing us to roam made her a very popular guide and companion.

The group met in Fowey on the Monday, visited two gardens a day for three days, and dispersed on the Friday. The trip also included that essential of a Friends outing, good Chinese food, in the form of two fine dinners organised by Penny. Gardens visited were Trewethen, Pine Lodge, Tregrehan, Heligan, Caerhays, and also the Eden Project, though Eden is perhaps more of a phenomenon than a garden.

The great Cornish gardens we now know were, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, the testing grounds for what was to become a veritable torrent of newly discovered plant material, much of it being brought or sent back from China, Japan, Korea and the Himalayas. The way was paved by men like Major General Thomas Hardwicke, (1755-1835) of the Bengal Artillery, who brought the first Himalayan rhododendron to Britain in the early 19th century. Discoveries were made by missionaries such as Père Armand David and Père Jean Delavay in the late 19th century, but it was in the early 20th century when professional explorer-collectors such as Ernest Wilson, George Forrest, Frank Kingdom Ward, and Reginald Farrer began systematic
collecting that the flow greatly increased. These discoveries coincided with a period of great wealth in Britain, so that many owners of gardens could and did aspire to these exotics. Remove rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, peonies and magnolias alone from our great gardens and we would hardly recognise them, but almost all of these are relatively recent, and oriental, introductions.

Cornwall was chosen as a suitable home for many of these early exotics largely because of its mild and damp climate. Many of the plants were thought to be more tender than they have proved to be (camellias were initially grown almost exclusively in greenhouses, but the Japonicas are actually hardy), and as a result some have grown spectacularly better than they do in the wild, even out of hothouses. One has only to visit Heligan to see this: individual rhododendrons left in happy and unpruned seclusion for 70 years have grown to the size of small houses, with a diameter of up to 70 feet, and at Trewithen, Pieris formosa have reached 25 feet in height. At Caerhays, Rhododendron keysii (from Bhutan, 1851) produces its tiny red and yellow bell-like flowers for eight months of the year. When seed arrived from the collectors, its recipients often had no idea of the size of the eventual shrub or tree, so that planned planting was difficult and the original gardeners would be amazed to see the results now. It is hard to avoid statistics in these Cornish gardens: Tregrehan alone for instance has 15 trees which are regarded as the biggest and best specimens in the country (including the Handkerchief Tree from China, Davidia involucrata).

Much of Cornwall’s spring tourism is the direct result of these largely Chinese, Himalayan and Japanese plant introductions, and many of the great gardens actually close in the summer, as their glory lies in their spring flowering magnolias, azaleas and rhododendrons.

We were guided first around Trewithen’s gardens by Maggie herself. This garden, created largely in its present form between 1904 and 1960 by its owner George Johnstone, around an 18th century house, was set on its new path with the delivery of 100 rhododendron hybrids in 1905. It now houses a marvellous collection of magnolias, rhododendrons and camellias, amongst many others. Some of the planting around the Great Glade is from seed brought back by Kingdom Ward himself. We searched out the Magnolia wilsonii (introduced to Britain in 1920 after discovery by Ernest Wilson in 1906) with its
unusual downward-hanging flowers with nine pure white petals, and rich red stamens, and also found a large specimen of the quite rare Michaelia doltsopa, also with rich white, scented flowers. A Metasequoia glyptostrobioides gave us one of many chances to benefit from Maggie’s knowledge, and showed again how recent so much of our knowledge is. The tree was spotted in 1941 by a forester in Sichuan who, being unable to identify it sent leaves to Beijing. By extraordinary coincidence, a Japanese palaeobotanist was working on three-million-year-old fossils of the same tree, thought to be long extinct, and in 1946 the connection was made between the two. Like the Gingko biloba, therefore, this is a fossil survival - and whereas it is struggling to survive in its remote Sichuan valley, thanks to gardens like this it is actually thriving in Britain, and is now widely available. This was a theme we came across in several gardens: British horticulture feeding plants back to their original countries.

Heligan is now one of the best known gardens in Britain, thanks to the televising of its restoration. Its 80 acres had almost disappeared into jungly luxuriance thanks to some 70 years of neglect, and were only “re-discovered” in 1990 thanks to a conversation in the pub at St. Ewe between its new owner John Willis, and one Tim Smit (now Director of the Eden Project). The gardens as we see them now are the design commissioned from Thomas Gray by Henry Hawkins Tremayne in 1780, and the last major planting was done before the First World War. Of the 22 gardeners then, all signed up; two thirds were killed, and none returned. The Tremayne family had six houses, and moved to Crone Manor, leaving Heligan tenanted but the gardens neglected, and the rest, as they say, is history.

We were taken around Heligan by Colin Howlett, whose familiarity with the project since its inception gave us a wonderful insight into its work. Many of the early plantings still visible are the results of Joseph Hooker’s 1848-1850 collecting in Sikkim, which were distributed by himself and by Kew almost immediately on his return: 23 of the rhododendrons at Heligan are Hooker plantings, as is the Crinodendron, and the Magnolia campbellii collected by him is now the largest of the magnolias at 60 feet in height. Thanks to the long neglect of the gardens, however, many of the rhododendrons have hybridised, with the result that Heligan now has the job of identifying and naming many new hybrids; this is also true of its camellias.
Although nothing to do with oriental planting, I think we all hugely enjoyed the Productive Gardens, from the story of the gardeners’ tools of 1914 still found hanging in ruined sheds, to seeing a working Pineapple House (heated to 120F with rotting manure, through honeycomb brickwork walls) and the last original Paxton vinehouse. Every detail was thought through by the 19th century gardeners, from the use of cobble drains taking water to a central cistern, to the “beavertail” glass panes in the greenhouses, which direct the water away from the wooden frames. Gardening was not just art and a spade: it was science and engineering too, and only 100 years later we are scrambling to rescue that knowledge.

At Pine Lodge we had the pleasure of being guided by co-owner Raymond Clemo. Pine Lodge is unusual in that it is a much more recently created garden. In the mid-1970s, the Clemos were persuaded to open their then much smaller garden for a day, to raise funds for a hospice. More than 2,000 people turned up, and the garden has been expanding and opening to the public ever since. The Clemos are still buying land, and adding to the garden, the most recent addition being a field now planted as an arboretum. Its recent creation has not changed the tradition of oriental connections: 20 years ago Clemo saw an advertisement placed in the RHS magazine by a young man who wanted to go plant collecting in the Himalayas, and sent him a cheque. Pine Lodge now houses many of Chris Chadwell’s introductions, and the relationship between Cornwall and the plant hunters continues. Students have now come to work at the gardens, including several from Japan, who have helped Clemo to create a replica of a traditional garden from Kyoto. Seeds were also contributed by colleagues at the Kyoto Botanical Gardens.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of Pine Lodge is its intimacy: it started small, and its most mature areas are the original densely planted mixed borders of shrubs, bulbs, and perennials, and its ponds and other water features, rather than its woodland gardens of huge rhododendrons, conifers, etc. Although the planting may be more exotic than most, its style is more familiar, and closer to something those of us with small gardens can aim for.

The Eden Project was a very different experience. Eden clearly has a manifesto, which is to educate, and our guide was a true evangelist.
The Mediterranean and Tropical biomes are not planted in order to try to recreate sections of those floras *in toto*, but more to provide examples for the message, which is an understanding of the importance of biodiversity. And unlike the other gardens where plants are grown to perform at their best, Eden grows them to perform “to type”; e.g. rhododendrons are grown on the rather scrubby soil they would have in the wild, which in Cornwall of all places provides a great contrast in results and was interesting to us in particular. However, as Tim Smit himself has admitted, conditions in the biomes are still not “real”: tropical trees are growing far faster and with smaller root systems, for lack of any wind or storms, for instance. And at the moment, insects are excluded, so that the staff must actually play God, and pollinate plants by hand.

If our guide was typical, the staff at Eden are genuinely convinced of the value of their work: he was hugely enthusiastic, (and rather frighteningly asked if he could read my notes, so that he could see which parts of his tour had come across best) and we were booked for the full tour, encompassing both biomes. Eden is the biggest event in Cornwall, and suffers a little from its success in that it is rather impersonal, but it is hugely impressive and very well organised. Maggie, who knows its creator Tim Smit, said that she felt that they were learning as they went along, and that having established an educational base they may move on now to more academic research in order to ensure the project’s long-term interest and value. Some research is already carried out, particularly into the plant diversity of the Oceanic islands, and Eden also propagates examples of rare plants, such as *Impatiens gordonii*, of which only 250 examples remain in the wild, in the Seychelles. A more unexpected aspect of Eden was the amount of modern sculpture installed about the site. In the Humid Tropics biome, a “shimenawa” has been hung above the rice exhibit area by two Japanese artists: a huge swag of rice straw signifying a sacred space in the Shinto religion.

Tregrehan is run by Tom Hudson, himself a modern-day plant collector, though as a native New Zealander, his collecting comes not only from the Far East, but much of the southern hemisphere as well. At first glance it is a very traditional landscape of walled gardens and woodland walks, but one soon descends into a tree-shaded valley where the garden makes a radical departure into planting from the landmasses
which once made up Gondwanaland, with tree-ferns massing in the stream bed. It seems that the entire world is coming eventually to Cornwall.

Tom’s in-depth knowledge of the flora of western China in particular was illuminating for us. He explained that whereas much emphasis is put in the protection of rainforests internationally, in fact small “islands” of temperate conditions and vegetation within the tropics, where unique species exist, are also vulnerable: a single fire, for instance, could break the growth cycle for trees. Collection of seed is of great importance, but Chinese taxonomy is underfunded, (compared to botanical research for medical purposes) and collection for propagation abroad is illegal according to CITES. Another of his legacies to the future will be a naturalistically planted Far Eastern temperate woodland, with acers, viburnums, sorbus, gordonia, and the rare Taiwania.

Tom also delighted and surprised the group by being able to take us to see a specimen of the camellia named after HK Governor Alexander Grantham, and another of Camellia hongkongensis, plus a Hogplum (Coriospondius), which he said grows around reservoirs in Hong Kong. Full marks for being the only garden visited to have a direct Hong Kong connection, and to Tom for his thoughtfulness in pointing it out.

Among great gardens, that of Caerhays Castle is one of the greatest, particularly for oriental plants. The gardens are set spectacularly on a hillside cupped around the castle, with their back turned to the little beach and bay nearby and the sea winds, and are filled with some of the oldest specimens of rhododendrons, magnolias and camellias in England. The architect of the gardens was John Charles Williams, “one of the towering figures of the Edwardian age” (M.Campbell-Culver). By the time he died in 1939, he had the best collection of rhododendrons in the country, and he had been responsible for crossing for the first time the two most important types of camellia, C. japonica (from Japan) and C. saluenensis. The latter had been discovered by George Forrest in the early part of the 20th century in the Salween area of China, and Williams was an early recipient of seed. The resulting hybrids, C. x williamsii, are now some of the most highly regarded of all, being hardy, profusely flowering, and tidily shedding their dead blooms. (The original
and still important C. saluensis can be seen, against a building which has since rather ignobly become the ladies’ loo).

Caerhays also had, for me, the most unusual side-light on the business of importing oriental plants: in the Castle itself there is a collection of Chinese blue and white porcelain, bought at the behest of Veitch’s Nurseries (for whom Ernest Wilson collected plants in China between 1899 and 1905) in order to show its clients the plants painted in their Chinese settings!

We were guided around Caerhays by the Head Gardener, Jamie Parsons, whose tour was a hugely impressive mix of information about rare plants, and the science and practicality of running a large and important garden. His tour provided the most comprehensive range of oriental trees and shrubs of all the gardens we visited, thanks to the quality of the Caerhays collection, and to the amount of time he gave us despite the demands of his work.

Amongst other things, he is engaged in working on the historic records of the gardens, much helped by a garden diary stretching back over some 100 years, and in identifying the many hybrids found in the garden. He sends away slips of material from rare specimens to a specialist centre in Switzerland for grafting, in order to ensure their survival. He battles with lichen, which will swamp and kill azaleas, rabbits which can ringbark (and kill) a magnolia overnight; with replanting the 150 acres of woodland largely felled by storms and hurricanes in recent years, and with the ‘third biggest pest in gardens’ (after rabbits and deer); human beings stealing plant labels.

We also learned, sadly, that these gardens are finding it increasingly difficult to find people to come and work in them: a recent advertisement by Caerhays produced no candidates at all, despite offering accommodation. When one sees how much (often heavy) work has to be done by ever smaller teams of staff, it is understandable perhaps, but – as we learned - there can be few gardens which are more important to the future of oriental plants, in the West. We wish them well for the future. Perhaps there are RAS members looking for an energetic new career after leaving Hong Kong, helping to maintain this marvellous oriental heritage?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Peonies, The Imperial Flower*, Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall (Seven Dials, Cassell and Co, 2001. ISBN 1 84188 081 7)

*Magnolias*, J.M. Gardner


*Hong Kong Trees* (Urban Council Publications, 1988)
Members of the Friends of the HKBRAS on a visit to gardens in Cornwall with an Asian connection in April 2002.

Left to right:
Michael Culver
David Jordan (obscured)
Penny Byrne
Kirsty Norman
Magie Campbell-Culver
Edith Gilkes
Rosemary Lee
(back to camera) Roger Candler
Joan Rock