

The Merlin Trust, set up by the late Valerie Finnis, helps young horticulturists to visit wild places and gardens alike. Every year the AGS shares, with the Merlin Trust, the cost of funding up to six young people on expeditions around the world. **Katie Price** looks at the history of the Trust and meets some of the 'Merlins'

Cultivating the 'Merlins' – our next generation

'Two hours had passed since I began the hike down the river. I knew I was getting closer to my awaited reward because I came across a hybrid... Ten minutes later I was proved right, upon the mesmerising sight of a golden, spiralling inflorescence that was confirmed to be the legendary *Heliconia xanthovillosa*. The thrill, awe and excitement I felt in that precise moment are totally indescribable!'

This short passage captures perfectly the experience of seeing plants in the wild. It comes from a report by Michael Benedito, a Kew diploma student from Madeira, who had travelled to Panama in Central America in 2012. His field trip was funded by the Merlin Trust. In his report he thanks the charity 'for giving me this unique life opportunity to travel for the very first time to a tropical country.'

So what is the Merlin Trust and who is behind it? Make a quick visit to its

website, www.merlin-trust.org.uk, and you will encounter many familiar and distinguished names from the world of horticulture. It's fair to say that the Merlin Trust is pretty well connected. But that's not surprising, given that the charity's founder was the renowned plantswoman and photographer Valerie Finnis VMH.

Valerie died in 2006 but remains well known among AGS members. She bequeathed her library to the Society and one of her stone troughs was auctioned at last November's conference. In 1942 she joined Waterperry Horticultural School for Women and, over the next 28 years, developed her expertise in growing and propagating alpine plants and sharing her immense knowledge with swathes of young women.

Her career spanned what garden writer Ursula Buchan, a close friend, calls 'the golden age of gardening', when enthusiasm for plants and horticulture

CHARLIE HOPKINSON



Valerie Finnis, founder of the Merlin Trust, which she named after her husband's only son, who was killed during the Second World War

cut across wealth and class, and craftsmen gardeners swapped treasures with lords of the realm. Thanks to her extrovert character and her intense curiosity about people, Valerie was one of

the driving forces behind that post-war blooming of British and Irish gardening.

Chris Brickell, a former RHS Director-General and a long-time AGS member, knew Valerie as a frequent visitor to RHS

Garden Wisley in his early days there. He says: 'Valerie met her husband, Sir David Scott, when he went to Waterperry for advice on growing alpines – he was a very keen gardener himself.'

'Following his death in 1986, Valerie talked to me, Brian Mathew and other gardening friends to identify some way of helping young people who were interested in a horticultural career. In particular she wanted to help them to broaden their knowledge outside formal horticultural courses and to see and enjoy plants in their natural environments, meaning they could learn about the conditions plants might need in cultivation.'

So Valerie established the Merlin Trust in memory of Sir David and his only son, Merlin, a gifted naturalist, who was killed in the Second World War. The Trust, with Chris Brickell as its first chairman, began to fund travel projects for horticulturists under the age of 30.

Bulb expert Brian Mathew, who was another longstanding Trustee, says the remit was broad from the start. 'Valerie favoured the projects that followed the path of plantsmanship, being a good plantswoman herself, but it was seldom that an applicant was turned down.'

'Overall, I think she was most excited by those who chose to travel to see plants in the wild in far-flung places or to visit famous gardens and botanical gardens around the world.'

Her enthusiasm for the exploits of her 'Merlins' was obvious. In the first edition of the Merlin Trust newsletter, she wrote: 'Dear Merlins – Can you imagine

the pleasure and satisfaction with which I open my post each morning? Not only is there a growing number of applicants for grants... but also your postcards from all over the world. And then there are the reports, each unique and fascinating.'

Copies of the reports, written by the Merlins as a condition of their funding, are held at the RHS Lindley Library and the Royal Geographical Society Library. More recent reports can be accessed on the Trust's website, a growing resource for travellers and gardeners alike.

Fiona Crumley, a current trustee and the first official secretary after Valerie retired, says that she had a very good instinct for a person. Indeed, in the selection of the 600-plus young horticulturists who have received funding, the trustees have shown unerring judgement. Merlins have gone on to become botanists, plant-hunters, gardeners, specialist growers and writers.

Kew's coffee specialist, botanist Aaron Davis, travelled to Turkey as Merlin No 3; Ursula Key-Davis, director of pelargonium and fern specialists Fibrex Nurseries, went to America; Lynne Dibley, of Dibleys Nurseries, whose *Streptocarpus* 'Harlequin Blue' was named RHS Plant of the Decade 2003-2012, went to South Africa; as did Rae Spencer-Jones, horticultural journalist and author, and Lucy Hart, head gardener at Fulham Palace. Garden designer Martin Walsh travelled to China and Kyrgyzstan; and Seamus O'Brien, curator of Kilmacurragh Botanic Gardens, near Wicklow, went to China and Nepal.



Tim Lever of Aberconwy Nursery, whose Merlin funding inspired him to make further trips to see plants in the wild – here he is in Arunachal Pradesh

To mark the turn of the millennium, the Trust began to offer fully funded places on Alpine Garden Society tours. The two charities share the costs of participation of between four and six young horticulturists each year.

Aberconwy Nursery's Tim Lever, now a stalwart of the AGS Chelsea exhibit team, joined the AGS trip to Yunnan in 2006, led by Harry Jans and John Mitchell. 'It was an excellent opportunity to travel in the wild in knowledgeable company and reinforced

my interest in alpine plants,' says Tim. His words epitomise one of the Trust's great strengths, that of bringing together different generations of plants people, with huge benefits for both sides.

Nicola Starkey, a Kew Diploma student who travelled to Himachal Pradesh in 2011 with tour leaders David and Margaret Thorne, wrote in her report: 'This was my first time in the mountains and my first experience of botanising. As one of the youngest members I was inspired by the knowledge, ability and determination of everyone. I hope that

in 30 to 40 years time I am scrambling up mountain sides, hopping over boulders, trudging through snow and wading through rivers; you've redefined what retirement means to me.'

Bulb specialists Bob and Rannveig Wallis have been joined by Merlins on a number of tours to Turkey and say that they contribute greatly to the dynamics of a group. Bob notes that they have further advantages, often reaching places that others cannot get to. 'We were in the Palandöken Range near Erzurum,' recalls Bob.

'One Merlin was a regular rugby player and was extremely fit, so we gave him a walkie-talkie and pointed to a little col in a ridge high above us, where there was a large patch of snow. Off he went at jogging pace! Eventually, when he was a tiny dot, his voice came on the radio to tell us that he had found *Fritillaria albryana* in the snowmelt water.'

Another beneficiary of the collaboration between the AGS and the Merlin Trust is Joanne Everson, manager of Kew's rock garden and woodland garden and a frequent lecturer to AGS groups. In her first year at Kew, she applied – and was shocked to be selected – to join the AGS trip to Bhutan.

She says: 'We'd been trekking for ten days and we got up to this meadow which was full of *Cypripedium himalaicum*. Sitting there, looking way down onto the camp, I literally had to pinch myself. I had never botanised, had only been in a plane once before and here I was at 3,000m on a mountain in the middle of Bhutan during the monsoon. How on

Inspired to pursue a career with plants

Nigel Hopes, the Alpine Area Supervisor at Birmingham Botanical Gardens, benefited from a fully funded place on the 2012 AGS tour to South Africa. Nigel manages the rock garden, alpine yard, winter border, trials garden and a number of plant collections: *Cyclamen*, *Primula auricula*, South African bulbs and *Streptocarpus*. He also organises exhibits such as the spring bulb display, autumn bulb display, a show auriculas theatre and a display of cacti on the terrace during summer.

What was your route into gardening?

When I was around 13 years old, a family friend was taking *Fuchsia*

earth did I get here?' She describes it as 'a very personal opportunity – quite amazing'. Joanne is now the secretary of the Merlin Trust, fielding all the applications (and often mentoring the applicants) for the 20 to 30 trips that are funded each year.

The Merlin Trust now funds

DAWIE HUMAN



Nigel Hopes with *Brunsvigia radulosa* on the AGS field trip to South Africa 2012

cuttings and I was interested that he could produce plants for free. He gave me a pot of cuttings to take home, they rooted and I was completely hooked. From school I did my work experience

at Ashwood Nurseries, which gave me a hunger to learn even more. I went on to work part-time at Ashwood

Continued overleaf

horticulturists under the age of 35 or in the first five years of their career, playing a vital role in their development. Valerie Finnis is often quoted as saying: 'For me it used to be plants before people,' but she said she came to see that 'it's really only people that matter'.

Some AGS members might not

entirely concur, but the Merlin Trust succeeds in bringing the two together in a combination that is as powerful as it is enduring.

➔ If you would like to support the Merlin Trust please contact Joanne Everson: j.everson@kew.org



Nigel Hopes tending a *Cyclamen* display at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Nurseries and completed a First Diploma in horticulture and National Diploma at Rodbaston College. I joined Birmingham Botanical Gardens as a student.

What was it that inspired your interest in plants and gardening?

At Ashwood Nurseries I would come across new plants on what seemed like a daily basis. The more I learned from the staff there, the more I wanted to know. I became addicted to plants and I spent my wages buying plants to grow in my Dad's garden.

What stage were you at when you applied for Merlin Trust funding?

When I applied for the trip to South Africa I was just about to take over the collection of South African bulbs at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.

What did you hope to get out of the trip?

I wanted to learn as much as I could about cultivating some of the beautiful bulbs from the Eastern Cape. I hoped it would give me a fighting chance of being able to grow them successfully

VIC ASPLAND



Becky Middleton working on the Palm House parterre at RBG Kew

back in the UK. I also hoped to come across lots of new plants.

What did you get out of the trip?

The places we visited and the incredible plants made it the trip of a lifetime. We were blessed for a number of reasons, the main one being our guides Cameron McMaster and Dawie Human, who shared with us their extensive knowledge of South Africa's wild flowers. Nothing compares to seeing a plant in the wild. One of my highlights was seeing *Brunsvigia radulosa*

growing in grassland: it looked just like a firework exploding out of the ground. You can learn so much by seeing where a plant grows in the wild. This gives you the knowledge to replicate these conditions in cultivation. I now also have a wish list of seed and bulbs that I want to experiment with to enhance the plant collection at Birmingham. Above all, I want to explore and see even more plants in their natural environments.

What are your goals?

My main aim is to continue working

DOUG BROWN



Beccy Middleton studied sub-tropical plants at the Tresco Abbey Gardens

hard here in Birmingham, to improve and develop the areas of the garden that I'm responsible for and to nurture the plant collections that I look after. Not long ago we renovated the cascade in the rock garden. One of my goals is to travel to the Himalayas to improve my understanding of plants from this region and to get some inspiration to develop the rock garden further.

Beccy Middleton, who trained at Kew, is the Walled Gardener at Inverewe (National Trust for Scotland) in Wester Ross. In 2011 the Merlin Trust funded

two weeks of work experience for Beccy at the Tresco Abbey Gardens, Isles of Scilly. Beccy won the Trust's Christopher Brickell Prize for the best report that year.

What was your route into gardening?

I graduated from the University of Sheffield with a degree in music and philosophy, but quickly realised that I really wanted to work outdoors with plants. I took voluntary gardening roles and self-employed work before striking lucky with a training position at the Cambridge University Botanic Garden.



BECCY MIDDLETON

The walled garden at Inverewe, managed by Beccy Middleton

What was it that inspired your interest in plants and gardening?

Both my parents are keen gardeners and encouraged me when I was small. My great-grandfather was a market gardener in Wakefield and it's nice to think that one of the family has come back round to growing fruit and veg again!

What stage were you at when you applied for Merlin Trust funding?

Working in Tresco Abbey Gardens had been on the radar for several years, but I finally managed to go in October 2011, while I was doing the

Kew Diploma in Horticulture. It was a great time to go because I saw many of the plants I was to go on to encounter under glass at Kew.

What did you hope to get out of the trip?

I wanted to see temperate and sub-tropical plants growing outdoors and learn about how to look after them and propagate them. I also wanted to see how the garden had been established in such an exposed coastal location. Though the temperatures on the Scillies are usually mild, they have some stiff gales and sea spray to contend with.

What did you get out of the trip?

My plant knowledge has definitely expanded. Interestingly, many of the plants I saw on Tresco are also growing here at Inverewe, even though it's 540 miles further north. Having said that, I don't think we'd get away with king proteas up here! The Abbey Gardens team were great and took time to explain the collections, maintenance and history of the garden. I also explored Tresco and some of the other islands, seeing the famous bulb fields and some of the fascinating native and introduced flora.

What are your goals?

I'm hooked on the west coast now, so I'd like to think I'll be gardening out here for the foreseeable future. A long-term ambition is to travel to Chile to see the temperate plants. We have so many beautiful Chilean plants in our gardens that I'd love to see them in their natural habitat.

Luke Barnes, a second-year undergraduate studying molecular biology at Cardiff University, travelled to Southern Laos with the Writhlington School expedition in 2011, supporting the Paksong Orchid Project.

What path did you take to get to this point?

On A-level results day I found myself in the clearing system and called Cardiff University. I was accepted for the course in molecular biology, an impulse decision that was possibly one of the best I've made in my academic career.

What was it that inspired your interest in plants and gardening?

My inspiration in gardening comes almost exclusively from Simon Pugh-Jones, a science teacher at Writhlington School in Somerset, who ran the school's renowned orchid project. At the time the project was quite small, but we were undertaking the micro-propagation of orchids. Being able to see this and how easily it could be applied to conservation was my main inspiration when I was about 12.

What stage were you at when you applied for Merlin Trust funding?

The Laos orchid project aims to protect orchids on the Bolaven Plateau by developing a sustainable trade in laboratory-raised local species to reduce the collecting of wild plants. We had established links with coffee farmers and our contact had come over to the UK for training in our labs and in the labs at Kew, with Dr Lauren Gardiner. We had bought the laboratory equipment and the Merlin Trust funding enabled me to travel back to Laos to help to commission the laboratory there.

What did you hope to get out of the trip?

I didn't quite know what to expect from the trip. I did hope that we would get the lab up and running by the end of the week and that we would improve the outlook for conservation.

What did you get out of the trip?

I thoroughly enjoyed the trip and have definitely got the bug for south-east



Luke Barnes and fellow Writhlington pupil Caroline Albrow in the laboratory in Laos, developing the agar medium on which to grow orchid seedlings

Asia. I gained experience in orchid identification and troubleshooting different problems that arise when attempting micro-propagation, such as when your lab gets attacked by moths as soon as it becomes dark! On a deeper level, I got a real taste for conservation and the very real effects that it can have. By the end of the week we were rescuing plants from a forest that was to be burned and planting them in a new reserve. It showed me quite clearly that, if you work with the right people, anything is possible.

What are your goals?

My travels turned my plans of what to do with my life upside down. Before Laos I was all set to go into academia and become a university professor with a research lab, a large salary and five or six PhDs! Now I've realised (and keep realising) that there is so much more to do out there. My favourite idea at the moment is to teach. I am only where I am today thanks to one particularly inspirational teacher. Part of me wants to be that teacher for someone else.