Introduction

I first heard about the Merlin Trust in early 2012. I was entering my second year of my two year apprenticeship at the National Trust for Scotland’s Inverewe garden. The head gardener at Inverewe Kevin Ball passed on an e-mail he had received inviting applications for places on a joint Merlin Trust and Alpine Garden Society tour of the Taurus Mountains in Turkey. I thought that this would be a fantastic opportunity but it unfortunately clashed with my best friend’s wedding so was unable to go without making myself very unpopular. I did however make me aware of the Merlin Trust and saw on their website that they were open to applications for funding for horticulture tours all year. With the encouragement of Kevin I decided that I would come up with a proposal for a tour. At first I was thinking of all the exotic places around the world I could visit. I thought about Chile or New Zealand to see many plants that grow at Inverewe growing in their natural habitat or the islands of Socotra with its bizarre and unique flora of which I am very interested. I then thought of something less exotic but to my mind just as exciting, to visit some gardens in the south of England. I have been lucky enough to visit a number of gardens in Scotland during my time at collage and during my apprenticeship at Inverewe. I had however never visited any of the famous gardens of the south. I felt that visiting gardens would probably be more beneficial to me as a gardener than seeing plants in their natural habitats, however fascinating that would be (and however much I would enjoy the adventure of going overseas). I had never been able to justify the cost or time it would take to make a trip to these gardens in the south of England so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to do just that. I then had to decide which gardens to visit which was a really difficult decision as there are some many gardens to visit in this part of the world. I had different reasons for visiting each one of the nine gardens I eventually picked but I felt that I came up with an exciting and balanced itinerary and I was absolutely thrilled when my application was accepted and I could begin to plan the journey in more detail. I decided to do the whole trip on public transport which in itself was a bit of an adventure at times.
The sleeper to London is a very civilised affair. Board in Inverness at 8 o’clock at night and arrive in London 8 o’clock in the morning refreshed after a sound night’s sleep. There was however a slight oversight in my planning. My first port of call was not in London itself, I had decided to save Kew for the way back, but was Nymans in West Sussex. This involved getting a underground from Euston to London Bridge to change onto the Brighton train which called near Nymans garden. This is where my oversight became clear as anyone who has attempted to travel on the London underground at 8 in the morning will have already noticed, it was packed. I sat down naively thinking that the trains would quieten down soon but as I watched train after train pass with faces pressed up against the glass I realised that this was hopeful thinking. I eventually lucked up the courage and joined the queue of frustrated commuters. The previous morning I had had my usual uneventful 5 minute cycle from my house to Inverewe garden so the contrast between this and trying to board a underground train on one of the busiest transport systems in the world, at the busiest time of day was very stark to me. I made myself unpopular by trying to do so with a bag which took up as much room as I did. Trying to ignore the glares I eventually managed to squeeze myself and bag onto the train and became one of the faces pressed up against the glass.

The train from London bridge was much more relaxing. This time I was going against the commuter flow and the Brighton train was much quieter and I could begin to get excited about the day ahead. Nymans is a garden I have been aware of ever since I was first introduced to *Eucryphia x nymanensis* ‘Nymansay’ at college. I have developed an appreciation of *Eucryphias* working with the extensive collection at Inverewe. Although I knew they would be in flower with their beautiful white cup shaped blooms I was still very keen to visit the garden where this exceptional cultivar developed from. It is obviously known for more than just *Eucryphias* and I knew there would be plenty to see at this time of year.
The garden at Nymans has been developed since the late 19th century by three generations of the same family. The Menssel family designed and developed the garden here until it was passed to the National Trust in 1952. The garden is built in a series of garden rooms with extensive woodland beyond. As I paid for my entry the assistant behind the counter commented on what bad weather they had been having this summer and how the garden was suffering in areas, particularly the Roses which has no love for endless rain. I responded, with a certain amount of glee, that where I had come from we were having the opposite problem and that it was too dry for a lot of the plants we grow. It isn’t often you get an opportunity to be smug about the weather when you live in the North West Highlands of Scotland and I intended to make the most of it.

On entering the garden I passed a huge *Davidia involucrata* which still had a few white handkerchief like bracts hanging onto the magnificent tree. The garden seemed quiet and peaceful with the mornings commuter rush a distant memory, although the dark clouds which were gathering were of some concern. As I walked on I got a view down the summer border which ran down both sides of the path with large swathes of colourful herbaceous plants brightened up the gloom of the day. As I walked down the path the inevitable rain started. At the end of the herbaceous border I began to see evidence that the garden had been suffering with the weather as the half-hardy bedding plants looked as if they were unhappy about the deluge of rain they had been having all year. Although small and sulking there were some attractive *Salvias* in the display, I was particularly interested in the blue flowering *Salvia patens* which is one which I had not grown before.

I entered the Rose garden and although it was still very colourful, as the assistant had warned the blooms had suffered some damage from the persistent rain. I was drawn to some of the darker coloured flowers such as *Rosa ‘Roseraie de l’Hay’* with wine-purple flowers and *Rosa ‘Charles de Mills’* with magenta pink flowers, which really stood out amongst the mainly pastel shaded flowers. As the rain grew stronger I sheltered in an avenue of beautiful mature Lime trees and allowed the worst to pass. Then I wandered through the soden Bamboo grove with the some of the bright stems of the bamboo such as the bright yellow *Phyllostachys vivax ‘Aureocaulis’* was burning brightly. The colourful summer borders were planted in three defined levels with the small *Zinias*, *Gazanias* and *Antirrhinums* providing the most eye catching colour. The areas around the summer border were full of mature trees and shrubs. The large specimens of *Magnolias* and array of *Eucryphias* suggest spectacular shows in spring and
autumn respectively. There were blooms however and the various *Cornus kousas* and a late flowering *Magnolia hypoleuca* were providing a mid-summer treat.

Beyond this area is the ruin of the old house which was severely damaged by a fire in 1947. Part of the house has since been rebuilt but most remains as a slightly eerie gothic style shell. The borders and courtyard areas around the house were my favourite area of the garden. The borders around the ruined southern side of the house had a fantastic tropical foliage plants such as *Musa basjoo*, *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, *Schefflera* and *Aeonium* 'Zwartkop' as well as flowering *Hedichium*, *Zantedeschia* and *Geranium palmatum*. On the wall of the ruin was growing an ancient *Wisteria* with its gnarled stem which added the mysteries appearance of the building. I took shelter in the grand rooms of the rebuilt portion of the house as another down pour deluged the garden. When I plucked up the courage I exited the house into a lovely Mediterranean felling courtyard planted with flowering Lavender and various species of *Achillea*. Around the corner there was another ancient *Wisteria* and some large terracotta pots of *Agapanthus*.

Away from the house there was a long pergola walk with more *Wisterias* planted which was be beautiful when in flower earlier in the year, and quite a job to prune. On my way out I decided to walk over the lawn to the recently planted Pinetum area. The original Pinetum was a major feature of Nymans however the sever storm of 1987 which ravaged this area of England took care of most of the mature Pines. After a couple of minutes of walking around the grass areas of the Pinetum my unsuitable footwear was cruelly exposed as my shoes reached saturation point and decided to make my way for a cup of coffee and attempt to dry off.

I then travelled down to Brighton where I was to spend the night with relatives. I hadn’t been to Brighton since before my teenage years and it was strange having such a flying visit. I saw many places that I had fond memories of as a child and it reminded that I must return for a longer visit soon.
I caught an early train along the south coast as far as Chichester. For there I caught a local bus heading to West Dean. The bus passed the magnificent Chichester cathedral on the way out of town and I remembered I had been here as a child on a day trip from Brighton. My destination was West Dean college and more specifically West Dean college garden.

I had included West Dean on my itinerary as I had heard about the impressive productive walled garden. The garden has been largely restored in the 1990s after suffering huge damage in the storms of 1987 and 1990. On entering the garden I decided to save the walled garden and first wandered around the very impressive grounds of the college. The main feature in these grounds was a grand 300 foot pergola which was covered in colourful climbing Roses, Clematis, Ivy and honeysuckle which were filling the air with a wonderful smell. The paving inside the pagoda was very rustic and the planting created a very lush feeling with the deep green foliage of Hostas and ferns. This pergola then opened up to a small pond where water lilies were waiting to bloom.

After wandering around more of the grounds and looking at the very grand ivy clad college building I decided it was time to check out the main event. I entered the first area of the walled garden which...
was in fact the orchard. The orchard is divided up into four beds with two opposite long paths running the full length of the walled garden with colourful herbaceous borders along these paths. These borders were dominated by the bright colours of *Hemerocallis*, *Salvias* and small frames with *Clematis* growing in mounds. Behind these borders various neat standard apple and pear trees were growing and beginning to fruit.

I then entered the next walled garden which seemed to be a warren of small display houses. Built between 1890 and 1900 these glasshouse were derelict for many years until being refurbished in the early 1990s along with the rest of the garden. I spent a great deal of time exploring these beautiful sunken Victorian glasshouses. I was particularly interested in the Chili house. As a self-confessed ‘chili addict’ I was transfixed by the delicious possibilities these hundreds of Chili varieties provided. I began to plan my visit back for one of West Deans annual Chili festivals. The warren of glasshouses kept throwing up surprises and when I thought I had seen them all I kept discovering a new one tucked away such as the Orchid and fern house.

Two larger glasshouse stood on the back wall but before looking in these I had a look through into the next section of walled garden where they grew the vegetables. This area was beautifully kept laid out in a four crop rotation. I was particularly impressed with the Brassicas which were very neatly netted with tight black netting to keep of the pigeons and cabbage white butterflies. Finally I entered the large glasshouses. One contained old grape vine on one side and a magnificent old fig tree on the other. The fig tree had been cut back a number of times and had the most amazing fat gnarled stem. The other glasshouse had a huge wall trained peach which was covered in fruit on one side and the other had tomatoes and basil growing in very close proximity. Being a warm day this glasshouse had the most delicious smell of Mediterranean ingredient at their best- time for lunch.

After lunch I caught the bus back to Chichester and managed to get a train very quickly. I was heading back towards London and to the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames where I would be spending the next two nights.
In the morning I caught the bus for the short trip from Kingston over to Hampton Court. Stepping off the bus I caught my first glimpse of the spectacular façade of the palace. Andrew, a college at Inverewe, worked at Hampton Court for a number of years and had kindly arranged for me to receive a tour of the garden.

At the main gate I met Nick, a gardener at the palace who had worked here for over 30 years. As Nick showed me around the garden the thing that struck me was the huge scale on which everything at the garden is set. Very different from the previous two gardens I had visited. We first looked at the glasshouse area which has ten large individual glasshouses which produce the plants for all the royal palace areas in London so is a huge operation. The bedding plants had all been planted out so most of the houses were empty, however there was some interesting tender plants in one of the houses which are used in various parts of the garden. We then looked at the east front area which is on a mind blowing scale. The herbaceous border runs along the side of the palace as far as the eye can see. The lawn in front of the palace is dotted with clipped yew trees and circular beds planted with various colourful bedding schemes.

We then saw the privy garden. This area has been restored for original plans to how it would have looked in 1702 when it was originally laid out for William III. I found this area rather spectacular, particularly when viewed back towards the palace. I had a preconception about this style of gardening being rather cold and austere but did not find this in the privy garden. I feel it was perhaps softened slightly by some of the planting; particularly eye catching was the flowering lavender. The privy garden was completely empty, a very unique situation Nick assured me for a property that receives over half a million visitors a year. This was due to the Hampton Court flower show being on
and this indeed is where I was heading after my tour of the garden. I was struck by the high level of maintenance in here as well as in the east front area where the beds were very clean and weed free and grass areas neatly mowed and edged. This was particularly impressive when considered the scale the garden is set and the amount of ground the gardeners have to cover. We then passed a number of smaller sunken gardens all decked out with colourful bedding plant heading towards the great vine.

Planted in 1769 the *Vitis vinifera* ‘Shiva Grossa’ is recorded as being the largest grape vine in the world and is a truly magnificent sight. It completely fills the substantial glasshouse and was absolutely laden with fruit. Outside the glasshouse a large area of seemingly bare soil is where the roots of the great vine extend out to and this area has well-rotted garden manure added every few years. Nick finished his tour in the courtyard inside the palace which gave me the opportunity to have a ‘quick’ wander around the palace, although the sheer size of the palace made a ‘quick’ wander impossible. Walking around the palace put the garden more in context for me and the views of the privy garden from the William III apartments gave extra perspective of that area.

The Hampton Court Flower show was the first large scale flower show I have attended and I wasn’t really sure what to expect. I had been told that is quieter and easier to get around than Chelsea but having seen the crowds at Chelsea on the TV I thought that that would probably not be difficult. It was however busy, very busy. And wet. I found it difficult to enjoy most of the show gardens and the stands in the floral marquee as crowds of people jostled to look at everything and I found it difficult to get close enough to take in most of the show gardens. One that I particularly liked and caught a quiet moment was ‘Light at the end of the tunnel’ by Mathew Childs. He was injured in the London terrorist attacks in July 2005 and the garden is a representation of his recovery. As you enter the tunnel is dark and enclosed but as you look ahead the tunnel structure becomes more open with shafts of light penetrating and some ferns growing alongside the path. It becomes more and more open until you are back out in the open with bright, flowing planting scheme. I found it very effective a quite an affecting experience.

I also very much enjoyed the Plant conservation tent. It set out plants from different regions of the world that are endangered, some that you would not expect such as Lavender and Thyme which are threatened in their native Mediterranean region. It also explains how horticulture plays a vital role in
the conservation of endangered species and I found this very inspiring. I generally found the scale of
the show and the volume of people quite overwhelming. It is probably sensible to give yourself a
couple of days to view all the different exhibits and going early (or late) to avoid the worst of the
crowds would be my strategy if I went back.

I walked back from Hampton Court to Kingston upon Thymes as it was the rain had stopped and it
was beginning to brighten up. I had a walk along the Thymes and had dinner in a restaurant that
over looked the river and got an early night. A day of traveling and a big garden waited the next day.
I made another early start and caught 515 bus from Kingston bus station heading towards Guildford. I told the driver I was heading to Wisely garden and he said he would give a shout when we got there. After about an hour of traveling the bus pulled into a layby on the busy A3 and much to my surprise the driver said this was my stop. This was not really what I was expecting but he explained to me that I had to go on the overpass and it would take me to the garden. So over the bridge I went and as the traffic noise faded behind me I came down the road into the car park for Wisely.

The garden here was started here in 1874 by business man and RHS member George Ferguson Wilson. The garden was gifted to the RHS in 1902 following the death of Wilson and it has developed steadily into the RHS flagship garden. Wisely is a huge, diverse garden which covers a huge range of gardening styles outside and a number of different glasshouses. It is slightly overwhelming but incredibly inspirational place. I began by wandering through the pleasant seven acres area with its impressive specimen trees and serene ponds towards the new icon of Wisely, the Bicentenary Glasshouse.

The view of this excellently designed Glasshouse, which appears to float on the huge lake in front of the building, is almost as impressive as the huge range of plants inside. The lush foliage of the Bananas, Tree Ferns and various Palms greet you on you entrance into the glasshouse. A particularly eye catching plant was the *Ravenala madagascariensis* which is commonly known as the ‘travellers palm’. As common names often are, this is a misleading common name as it is not in the family Arecaceae so is not a true palm, but is in fact in the Bird-of-paradise family Strelitziaceae. There are two theories as to why it is known as the travellers palm, one being that water collects at the bottom which could be used as drinking water by people on a journey and the other being that its distinctive
straight fan shaped foliage runs in a east to west line so could provide a rough compass. Another interesting feature of this plant is the blue seed it produces which is to attract Lemurs in its native Madagascar to eat the fruit and disperse the seed. In the dry temperate area I was particularly drawn to the bizarre form of the aptly named *Cereus peruvianus* ‘Monstrosus’. I was also very pleased to see some large specimens of one of my favourite succulents, *Agave attenuate*.

One of the most impressive aspects of Wisely, as you would expect from the RHS show case garden, is the level interpretation providing information and advice on a whole host of horticultural subjects. I was very interested in the area ‘the Root Zone’ which is located under the huge glasshouse. This interactive area, aimed at all ages, teaches people about the importance of the unseen and possibly undervalued role that roots play and the importance for people as well as plants. It was nice to see the RHS giving something that could be considered un-glamorous such a prominent role at Wisely.

Back outside I made my way up to the fruit area which is on a commercial scale and has every conceivable fruit tree and bush. They had a trail of Blackcurrant bushes under way and had on display every possible form. The research was the thing that I found most inspiring about Wisely. It is cutting edge and always changing. A lot of the research that affect how people garden all over the world takes place here and it must be a very dynamic place to work. I particularly liked the trial fields where a lot of the research into various aspects of cultivated plants takes place. One trail that was taking place when I was there was assessing *Delphiniums* for the Award of Garden Merit but various other trails were on-going as well.

As the rain got harder I headed into the woodland area on Battleston Hill to provide some shelter. I enjoyed the walk around the woodland with some interesting specimens. I was particularly impressed with the *Pinus montezumae* which added an exotic touch to the woodland.

Back over the bridge I waited alongside A3 waiting for the Guilford bus to continue my journey. At Guilford I changed onto a train up to Reading where I was catching the train heading down to
Cornwall. I arrived in St Austell quiet late and headed down to the bed and breakfast that I would be spending the next two nights.
In the morning I was quite tired due to the long journey the previous day but excited about the day ahead. I was visiting somewhere that I had wanted to visit for a long time ever since I saw a picture of the now famous biomes of the Eden project. The ambitious project to transform the dead landscape of a disused clay pit, into a global garden and a thing of beauty is incredibly inspiring. The awe inspiring first view of the domes is quite breath taking. It is incredible when you look at the old photos of the clay mine that the old dead pit has been transformed into something bursting with life. On my way down to the biomes I was struck by the quality of the planting and landscaping outside of what some would consider the main attraction. I was very impressed with the way that planting on the steep slopes down to the biomes were dealt with. The long, flowing swathes of planting running up and along these slopes was very effective.

On entering the biomes you are transported to distant places. On one side the vast tropical biomes takes you on a journey through steamy, humid jungle found in equatorial regions of Africa, Asia and South America. The smaller biome is dedicated to the warm temperate regions of the world particularly the Mediterranean, Southern Africa and California.
On entering the Tropical biome I was really hit by the heat and humidity of the place. I had really difficulty taking photos in this area as my camera lens kept steaming up. The thing that I particularly enjoyed about this area was the educational areas, such as the Malaysia hut which was set out like a small jungle allotment with Bananas, papayas and paddy field growing rice. It was not always aesthetically pleasing such as the area with the burnt tree trunks to represent forest clearance. It was quite shocking to come across this dark and barren area in an oasis of green, but it was making its point very well about the reality of much of the world’s tropical forest. I was also very impressed with the flightless birds that roamed about on the canopy floor which all added to the theatre of the place and also help to keep pests under control. I am sure that the view of the lookout at the top of the biome is spectacular but I was getting vertigo just looking at it so chickened out and headed to the Mediterranean biome.

My first thought when arriving was how lovely the climate in there was, the coolness and dryness was a relief after a extended period in tropical conditions. The theatre in here was also very impressive; it feels as if you enter into a courtyard in Italy with the paved street, white washed walls and terracotta pots of Pelargoniums. There was also the most fantastic smell of baking bread which all added to the feel. As I entered further into the biome I came across the source of the smell which was an area laid out like a Mediterranean café which had a fantastic herb and vegetable garden next to it which was filling the air with even more delicious smells. The planting in the biome was divided into sections with the Mediterranean area with ancient olive trees and cork trees as well as a small vineyard. Growing wine grapes is something that connects all the areas that this section is representing so it was fitting that the vineyard was at the heart. California was represented with drifts of poppies and lupines while Namaqualand daisies such as Arctotis, Gazanias and Osteospermons gave a taste of who colourful this region of South Africa can be after the spring rains.

I was also very impressed with the allotment area with the recycled materials used such as edging made of car tyres and the plant labels made of old milk bottles. The areas are not always beautiful but they are always making you think.
I returned to St Austell to spend another night at the bed and breakfast before heading to another world renowned garden within around 10 miles of the Eden project.
The Lost Gardens of Heligan have a mythical quality. Ever since I first heard the name I was intrigued and when I heard more about the amazing renovation of this once grand garden. The name itself evokes powerful emotions and the story of the garden is just as fascinating. Between 1766 and 1914 the garden was developed by generations of the Tremayne family into a magnificent Cornish garden. However at the outbreak of the First World War the men working in the gardens went off to fight in Europe and never came back. The garden went into decline from this point and was almost completely forgot about until in 1990 what became the biggest garden restoration project in Europe started and carries on to this day.

As you enter the garden you pass an area known as Flora’s Green. Around the edges of this open grass area stand massive ancient *Rhododendron* species which must been planted in the early years of the gardens development and must be a magnificent sight in the spring flowering season. I then entered into the productive garden and my eye was drawn down the apple arch that runs the whole length of the walled garden with the productive beds on
either side of this. The productive gardens grow a dazzling range of crops which are used at the onsite restaurant at Heligan.

Through the walled garden you enter the Melon yard which contains a number of beautiful old stone out buildings and some impressive restored Victorian glasshouses as well as a pineapple pit which shows you the extraordinary lengths that Victorian gardeners went to produce exotic fruit which today are taken for granted. There is also a beautiful restored potting shed full of old pots, tools and jars of seed. Through this area was another walled garden in which stood very impressive terracotta pots containing mature citrus trees and also beds containing colourful annuals which are used as cut flowers.

It is not only fruit and vegetables produced at Heligan they also keep chickens, rear their own Dexter cattle and have a saw mill and woodturning area. This is all done in a sustainable way and exemplifies how estates like this would have to have been run in the past to be self-sufficient. I wandered through the massive mature woodland areas that skirt the edge of the garden where the crowds thin and it becomes very still and peaceful and I became very aware of the wild life.

My next port of call was the area known as the jungle which is a sub-tropical oasis planted on a step ravine. This area contains many plants you would expect to be growing in an area named ‘the jungle’. Towering tree ferns and Chusuan palms provide the focal points along with some huge clumps of bamboo. Under this amazing specimens of *Pseudopanax laetus* and *P. ferox* as well as huge clumps of *Gunnera* with this contrasting foliage adding to the jungle feel. Looking down into the jungle I also noticed huge specimen trees of *Ginko* and *Podocarpus*. It must have been an amazing experience to be hacking back brambles and exposing these magnificent old plants. It is remarkable to think that just over 20 years ago no of this was visible. It is an amazing story but also simply it is a beautiful garden.

I returned to St Austell and collected my bag from the bed and breakfast before heading to the train station to continue my journey. My next port of call was Falmouth which involved getting a train to Truro and changing for the short journey to Falmouth and the hotel where I would be spending the night. In the morning I caught the bus from Falmouth heading to another famous Cornish garden Trebah. The large bus spent around 20 mins winding its self through impossibly narrow lanes and round impossibly narrow corners with other road users having to perform some rather impressive reversing maneuvers to allow us passed. Eventually I was dropped at the entrance to the garden.
Before the restoration of Heligan there was Trebah. Another garden that was neglected and reclaimed by nature until a husband and wife team of Tony and Eira Hibbet bought the estate and spent three years restoring these wonderful gardens. As you enter the garden you fall down a wonderful lush ramp which is cloaked in foliage which hides the modern visitor centre and the main entrance to the garden. Inside the garden the path leads along a neat grass area on my left hand side and a shelf planted with some very impressive succulents, particularly some huge Aloes on the right.

As I walked further the views began to open up and there is a fantastic view down the valley on which the garden is planted, down to the sea below. The middle path down the valley follows along the side of a stream which forms in tranquil pools at various points down the valley before flowing onwards. Like the Jungle in Heligan towering tree ferns, Chusan palms and bamboos form the main structure of the garden. One of the Chusan palms at Trebah is the largest in Britain and it is a magnificent sight to see this palm towering over the garden. In the bamboo
maze the particularly impressive bamboos are *Phyllostachys nigra* ‘Bryana’ and *P. edulis*. In the middle of the garden is a path that passes through a huge patch of *Gennera*. At one point on this path in every direction I looked all I could see was spikey *Gunnera* stems and the massive leaves above my head. It felt like a prehistoric world.

Coming into the real world again I began to notice the towering Oaks and Beech trees that grow up the sides of the valley. These areas looked very natural with soft pinks of *Gerannium* and Foxglove beneath. I passed the large pond at the bottom of the valley and there is a small path onto the gardens own beach. There is a small café on the beach and attractive views of the surrounding coast line. On re-entering the garden I took one of the paths that ran up the side of the valley where the large Oak and Beech trees were planted.

As I wandered these paths I began to realise there was much more of interest up here than I had first thought with some very interesting trees including *Podocarpus henkii*, *Sciadopities verticalata*, *Grevillea avellan*, *Laurelia sempervirens* and a group of Wollomi pine. On my way back into the visitor centre I noticed a bed that in my haste to get into the heart of the garden I had walked passed on the way in. It contained a beautiful flower *Abutilon x Hybridum* ‘Kentish Belle’.
I returned on the same intense bus journey to Falmouth and caught a train to the end of the line Penzance. Here I was staying for an evening before boarding a ship taking me to the idyllic Isles of Scilly and more specifically Tresco. I was hugely excited about this part of the trip as I have wanted to visit the Islands for a number of years and was thrilled to now have the opportunity. I decided to opt for the cheaper 3 hour boat option rather than the flash 20 minute helicopter ride. About half an hour in as we hit the rough sea and I began to turn green I rather regretted this decision. I was pleased to reach dry land again and stepping off the ferry with blue skies and turquoise water around it was hard to believe that this was still part of the British Isles. A further short ferry journey from St Marrys to Tresco before I arrived at my home for the night the New Inn, the only pub on the Island.

Tresco is probably the most iconic sub-tropical garden in the world. Here grows a remarkable range of plants, many which would not stand a chance of outside cultivation on the mainland. The garden was started here in 1834 by Augustan Smith who had moved to Tresco to take up the role of Lord Proprietor and leaseholder over all the Scilly Isles. He built his house and garden around an ancient priory which had fallen into disrepair in the 16th century. The ruins of the priory are included in the garden and form some of the most famous images of Tresco. He grow Monterey Cypress and Monterrey Pine as his shelter belt trees and began to experiment with a series of tender plants which thrived thanks to the hours of sunshine on the Islands as well as the relatively mild winter temperatures. Four generations of Augustan Smiths family have developed the garden into the horticultural treasure that stands today.
The first thing that struck me in the garden was the abundance of Norfolk Island Pines casually growing as if it were in the south Pacific. I had been told that these trees grow outside here but was not expecting to see such large specimens in such excellent condition.

Behind the lawn on which these magnificent trees stood I came into a lush, shaded path with contain many New Zealand and the Canary Islands. Amongst the Dicksonia and Cyathea grow some unusual palms such as the Rhopalostylis sapida and the dinky Phoenix roebelenii. Another New Zealand native Brachyglottis repanada, with its dramatic large serrated leaves added to the feel of this area. The plants were not the only exotic species in the garden. A colourful Golden Pheasant was hungrily scratching in the dirt adding to the exotic effect of the place.

I continued up the slope out of the shade and back into the warm sunshine and the plants began to change. Up the slope the soil is freer draining and in full sun. These conditions are perfect for plants from the succulents that thrive on this slope. Huge clumps of Aeoniums and Aloes grew naturally on the slopes as well as many Proteaceae members such as the Leucospermum cordifolium and of course the Protea themselves which grow like weeds on these slopes. Although just passing these were stills show stoppers.

Looking from the top terrace across the garden I could see Echiums popping up in every conceivable place. Again these plants were passed their best and the colour had faded from there towering flower spikes they were still a real presence. The same can be said for the massive Agave americana which was absolutely colossal in size. The old abbey arch clothed in succulents was a beautiful site with the majestic old stone work softened by Aeoniums clinging on to impossibly small holes.

Around the old abbey walls stood some magnificent palms including Phoenix canariensis from the Canary Islands, Washingtonia filifera from California, Livistonia australis from Australia and the splendid Jubea specabilis.
from Chile. A final treat was provided by the massive bell shaped flowers of *Burgmansia sanguinea* which was at its showy flowering best. It was a magnificent experience to see all these ‘tender’ plants thriving outside in the British Isles and there were many other weird and wonderful plants which I could not identify.
The boats back to the mainland was much calmer and I stood on deck watching the Archipelago of the isles of Scilly disappear into the distance. Arriving back at Penzance I had a few hours to kill before I embarked on what I think is probably quite a unique journey in the UK, the ‘double sleeper’. The ‘double sleeper’ involves the Cornish Riviera sleeper train from Penzance to London before spending the day in London and then onto another overnight train, the Caledonian sleeper, from London to Inverness. The day in London allowed me to visit one last garden and probably the most renowned of them all the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. I had learnt my lesson from my rush hour experience my last time in London so I took advantage of the first class lounge facilities that are available to travellers on the Cornish Riviera and killed some time until the commuter crowds had thinned before braving the underground out to Kew.

The UNESCO World Heritage site of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is the most famous botanic garden in the world. Developed through the 1700s as pleasure gardens for Kew palace, the garden was adopted as a national botanic garden in 1840 and quickly developed and increased in size. The famous glasshouses were built to grow various types of tender plants that were being introduced to Europe from various tropical parts of the globe as well as huge outside collections being developed.

The Palm House at Kew is one of the most famous images in horticulture. The colossal historic glasshouse was built between 1844 and 1848 to house exotic palms which were being introduced to Britain in the early Victorian era. My highlights of the Palm House were the colossal Attalea butyracea which is the largest palm in the house, Encephalartos altensteinii a cycad which is at least 228 years old and considered the oldest pot plant in the world and a strange plant Pandanus vandermeeschii with its bizarre areal prop roots making the plant look like it could scuttle out the glasshouse at any moment. Unlike at the Eden project I was brave enough to scale the, admittedly much lower walkway around the top of the glasshouse and got the magnificent views over the tropical foliage.

Behind the Palm House I saw some majestic ancient trees such as the Stone Pine Pinus pinea which was planted in 1846, The Corsican Pine, Pinus nigra subsp. laricio and by far the largest Ginko biloba I have ever seen which was planted in 1762 and is the oldest specimen in the UK. Kew was the first place outside of Australia where the newly discovered Wollemi Pine was planted. Wollemi pines were thought to be extinct and were only known from fossil records until 1994 came across a cluster of trees in a gorge in the Blue Mountains near Sydney which he could not identify. He took a sample of the tree which were studied which turned out to be a ‘living fossil’ of Wollemia nobilis. These were planted at Kew in 1997 and had a cage built around them to protect them from theft as they were so rare. I think that now these have been planted successfully in various locations (including a large grove at Inverewe) that this cage is now perhaps unnecessary and the Kew Wollemi Pines should be freed from there imprisonment.

There were so many areas I enjoyed of the garden but other standouts were the giant pads of the Victoria amazonica in the Water Lilly house, the light and airy new Alpine House with its huge collection of beautiful small mountain dwellers, the Princess of Wales Conservatory with is divided into two main climatic zones with the dry tropics and wet tropics.
After Kew I had a few hours before my sleeper train to Inverness and I meet a friend who had recently moved to London which was a very nice way to finish the trip. It had been quite a long time to be on my own and while I had meet some really nice people along the way it was great to see a familiar face.
Conclusion

I found the trip incredibly inspiring. To see the plants and landscaping in so many brilliant gardens gave me so many ideas and thoughts that I will take with me on my career in Horticulture. I feel that all the gardens were different and I feel it would be unfair to compare them because of this. Many of the gardens I visited I did not have time to do justice to due to the vast size and range of their collections. All the gardens would need more than just a day to visit and I am aware I was just scratching the surface. It has given me the desire to not just revisit these gardens but to make more effort to get to others too. I believe that things can be learnt from every garden you visit and as well as being very enjoyable from a personal level it is also great for professional development. I also realised that Inverewe can stand up in terms of quality to some of the most famous gardens in the world. I would like to thank the Merlin Trust for giving me the opportunity to undertake this trip that I would have not been able to do without the funding. I would also like to thank Kevin Ball for his encouragement and support in the trip.