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Travel Scholarship

Lost Gardens of Heligan and
Tresco Abbey – Considering
Horticulture for Wellbeing in a
Changing Climate



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Contents

Table of Figures	2
Acknowledgements	3
About the Author	4
Objectives for the Travel	5
Activities and Main Points of Learning.....	6
The Lost Gardens of Heligan:.....	6
Tresco Abbey Gardens:	6
Personal Highlights	8
Tips and Recommendations	9
Summary of Costs	10
Impact on Future Career.....	11
Photographs	12

Table of Figures

Figure 1 - A Coastal View of Tresco Island	3
Figure 2 - Vicky in the garden.....	4
Figure 3 - View of the Jungle, Lost Gardens of Heligan	12
Figure 4 - Learning Seed Pod, Lost Gardens of Heligan.....	13
Figure 5 - Learning Seed Pod, Lost Gardens of Heligan.....	14
Figure 6 - Phoenix canariensis, Tresco Abbey Garden	15
Figure 7 - Aloe flowering at Tresco Abbey Garden	16
Figure 8 - Protea flowering at Tresco Abbey Garden	17
Figure 9 - Propagating at Tresco Abbey Garden.....	18
Figure 10 - A Beach on Tresco.....	19

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Merlin Trust for this unforgettable opportunity to travel to The Lost Gardens of Heligan and Tresco Abbey Gardens, to meet some amazing horticulturalists, to see fabulous plants I've either never seen before or only seen growing under glass and to learn an incredible amount about the gardens and the plants growing in them. It has been incredible and never to be forgotten.



Figure 1 - A Coastal View of Tresco Island

I would also like to thank Royal Botanic Gardens Kew for supporting this placement, and the RHS and the Bentham Moxon Trust for providing additional bursary support.

About the Author

I am relatively new to horticulture as a career, having worked in the industry for just 2 years. However, I have long held a love of horticulture through managing my own garden, holding an allotment for a number of years and volunteering at West Green House in Hampshire.

After a long and established HR career, I had attended one employee relations meeting too many and decided something had to change and instead, I had to follow my passion for working in gardens and with plants. It was a big decision though and came with some nerves, so I decided to test the water by dipping my toe into volunteering at a garden close to my home, West Green House, and purposely began there one cold and frosty morning in late January, figuring that if I enjoyed the work in the cold, dark months, there was a good change I would enjoy it all year round. Well, it's safe to say I absolutely loved it and remained there as a volunteer for 2 years.

I decided to build on my self-learned knowledge by enrolling on the Level 2 City and Guilds Diploma in Practical Horticulture at Merrist Wood College. Further building my confidence, knowledge and experience in Horticulture enabled me to take on paid gardening work with Age UK, Surrey. Working with older people in their gardens to maintain them in the way they wanted, bringing gardens back to life and learning from and about the people I was working with was an absolute joy!

Attaining the Level 2 Diploma and gaining practical employed industry experience enabled me to apply for the Kew Specialist Certificate in Ornamental Horticulture and to launch my full-time horticultural career. It was a nerve-wracking decision, but I was encouraged by my college tutor to apply, and am still pinching myself that I'm here, with this opportunity.

Looking to the future, I would very much like to work in a large garden close to home and I know that what I learn at Kew, and the experience gained on my travel scholarship placement, will go a long way to supporting this.



Figure 2 - Vicky in the garden

Objectives for the Travel

I decided to travel to The Lost Gardens of Heligan and to Tresco because I was aware they are able to grow a range of sub tropical plants that we are only able to grow under glass in London, and because I had never visited either garden and was very interested in spending time in gardens new to me. I was also aware that The Lost Gardens of Heligan had recently opened a new learning centre, and I am interested in social and therapeutic horticulture as a potential future career path.

My objectives in visiting these two gardens were as follows:

The Lost Gardens of Heligan:

- To visit a garden I have never visited before to see their structure and planting.
- To enhance my horticultural experience and knowledge.
- To meet a wider range of horticulture professionals.
- To speak with them about their new Learning Seedpod facility which aims to provide education, training and horticulture based wellbeing activities for local communities.

Tresco Abbey Gardens:

- To work with the team learning about their sub-tropical planting schemes and their environment.
- To consider the effects of climate change and the impact and influence this type of planting could have in the future in London and surrounding areas.
- To visit a garden I have never visited before.
- To meet a wider range of horticulture professionals.
- To improve my horticultural knowledge and experience. My aim was to do this through speaking with and working alongside the current horticulture professionals based at these gardens, and by doing any additional research that arose from these discussions.

The trip was a great success and I learned a great deal at both the Lost Gardens of Heligan and at Tresco Abbey Gardens which has enhanced my knowledge and experience for my future horticultural career.

Activities and Main Points of Learning

The Lost Gardens of Heligan:

During my time at the Lost Gardens of Heligan, I was fortunate to meet Henry Welch; Head of the Jungle Area, and Dan Ryan; Head of Nature Futures. They each gave a tour and explained their work and future plans.

In the Jungle area, Henry explained how the valley setting, alongside the soil structure (generally quite poor and free draining) support plants including *Dicksonia antarctica*, *Musa*, *Gunnera* and Palms such as *Phoenix canariensis*, which would otherwise not survive in the colder, wetter surrounding areas. The structure and form of these plants gives the area a Jurassic or jungle feel. In the valley, there is a microclimate that is around 5 degrees warmer than the surrounding, more exposed areas.

The Learning SeedPod had opened just a few days before my visit, and Dan explained that he will develop educational/access programmes that add to what is currently locally available. This includes sustainable farming and planting, access for school groups and local charities, wellbeing, crafts and spirituality. We discussed the potential pros and cons of operating as a for profit business versus a charity. Each status having its own challenges and opportunities in terms of funding, messaging and purpose. Dan also explained that Heligan's close proximity to the Eden Project, as well as other smaller gardens means they need to ensure they are offering a range of opportunities unique and diverse from their neighbours. Whilst they are committed to growing the facility, he feels it is important this is alongside their local gardens, rather than in competition with them and that they remain true to their B Corp values.

Tresco Abbey Gardens:

At Tresco Abbey Gardens, I worked alongside the garden team for 10 days. I arrived shortly after Storm Goretti, which had seen the destruction of over 400 trees in the shelter belt and, to some extent, within the gardens. I learned from this that the position of the shelter belt, to block prevailing winds, and the maturity of the trees protected the gardens from any more significant damage. Although the garden did sustain some damage, it was minimal compared to the severity of the storm. Clearing up and replanting was underway throughout my visit, and the garden had to remain closed to the public for safety reasons.

During my time at the Abbey garden, I learned that, in a similar way to Heligan, the soil on Tresco is very sandy and free draining. This, together with the warmer temperatures, where they rarely see frosts, and where a constant summer breeze means the temperatures equally don't climb too high in summer, mean that sub-tropical plants survive over winter. I learned that even with global warming, it is not likely that the full range of plants happy to grow on Tresco would be equally happy in London. Although there may be fewer future frosts in London, the likelihood of wetter weather, coupled with areas of clay-based soil are likely to mean that such plants would suffer root rot and not survive.

Personal Highlights

Visiting both gardens and meeting the gardening teams was a real privilege and an experience I will always remember.

At the Lost Gardens of Heligan, I particularly enjoyed hearing about how the Learning Seed Pod will extend the opportunities for local communities to access nature in a variety of ways. Seeing how the facilities are structured was very interesting and an inspiration for thinking about how horticulture and nature can be made accessible to a wider range of people.

At Tresco, I particularly enjoyed seeing and learning about many different types of plant that I had only seen previously under glass. Seeing them in their more natural environment helped cement my knowledge and understanding of their habit and form. I also very much enjoyed working in the propagation area at Tresco, learning about the conditions the plants needed to thrive, together with potting up plants for resale in the shop.

I was very interested to learn about and see how Tresco Island uses food waste to create plant fertilizer! I also learned, via the weekly plant ident, to identify several plants including *Protea*, *Leucadendron*, *Melaleuca*, *Stone Pine*, *Westringia*, *Correa*, *Echium*, *Geranium maderense*, *Araucaria heterophylla* and *Phoenix canariensis*, which was an amazing opportunity.

Tresco Island itself was a highlight for me - to be able to travel round the island and meet local people is an experience I will treasure.

Tips and Recommendations

If you are interested in sub-tropical plants and their environments for growth, I would recommend this trip wholeheartedly.

I found it an excellent opportunity to see plants that are largely grown under glass at Kew without having to travel too far from home. I found this to be beneficial from environmental, financial and logistical points of view.

I have found the teams I met and worked with to be unfailingly kind, accommodating and generous with sharing their knowledge and experience, and I would highly recommend the opportunity to meet them. If it was possible, I would recommend extending the trip to include some of the many other interesting gardens in the Cornwall area. It would also be beneficial, if possible, to plan to visit the gardens at different times of the year to experience seasonal changes.

The changeable weather conditions on the Isles of Scilly can make travelling to and from the island a challenge. As the gardens offers accommodation to volunteers out of season (accommodation in high season is very expensive and hard to come by!), this is even more pertinent to consider. The boat service from the mainland to the isles doesn't operate in winter, so options to travel are limited to plane or helicopter. I found I was unable to travel home from St Mary's back to Cornwall on the day I had planned due to the weather conditions. It is not uncommon for people to be delayed by a number of days if the weather is bad, so I would recommend leaving time and budget for this at either end of the trip as you may need to book last minute accommodation and make alternative travel arrangements.

Thank you so much for enabling this learning and development opportunity! It is one I will always treasure.

Summary of Costs

Travel	
Air Fare Lands End to St Mary's	£390
Ferry Fare St Mary's to Tresco	£15
Mileage: - 600 miles @ 45p per mile	£270
Subsistence	
Accommodation: 3 nights	£ 460
Food and Sundries	£329
Other Costs Car Parking at the airport	£136
TOTAL ESTIMATED COSTS	£1,600

Impact on Future Career

I envisage this project will benefit my future career in horticulture in the following ways:

- Meeting a growing network of contacts in the industry
- Having knowledge of a wider range of plants since visiting the gardens and understanding which plants to select for these particular environments
- Seeing different garden design styles to take forward into my future career
- Further experience in propagation techniques
- Cementing my interest in horticulture for wellbeing as a potential future career path

I have included some further photographs below which I hope you will enjoy.

Photographs



Figure 3 - View of the Jungle, Lost Gardens of Heligan



Figure 4 - Learning Seed Pod, Lost Gardens of Heligan



Figure 5 - Learning Seed Pod, Lost Gardens of Heligan



Figure 6 - *Phoenix canariensis*, Tresco Abbey Garden



Figure 7 - Aloe flowering at Tresco Abbey Garden



Figure 8 - Protea flowering at Tresco Abbey Garden



Figure 9 - Propagating at Tresco Abbey Garden



Figure 10 - A Beach on Tresco