

Being there

When the Friends offered former apprentice **Ellis Gant** the opportunity of work experience on Tresco, Isles of Scilly, he seized it with both spades

Tresco Abbey Gardens is a sub-tropical plant paradise nestled around the ruins of a Benedictine abbey on the island of Tresco, some 30 miles south-west of mainland Britain. The gardens were originally started in 1834 when philanthropist Augustus John Smith took up the leasehold of the Isles of Scilly and chose Tresco as the place to build his home. Through Augustus and the work of four successive generations, the gardens have survived through several upheavals to be the unique collection they are today.



View of the avenue of palms from the middle terrace

Through the Friends of VBG I was lucky enough to spend two weeks in July 2021 working in the Abbey Gardens, which make up some 17 acres. I was camping on the main island of St. Mary's and catching the 8am ferry across to Tresco island each day, which took a maximum of 10 minutes. This certainly has to be one of the best commutes to work!



Pebble garden

The gardens are set across several levels, with a series of interconnecting pathways that surround the abbey ruins. The location on a south-facing hillside, protected by shelter belts of Monterey pine and Monterey cypress trees, shields the gardens from harsh winter gales while the gulfstream-washed shores mean the garden is generally frost free. As a result the gardens are adorned with an eclectic mix of tender plants from across the world. The top terraced area has an array of South African and Australian plants that thrive in the hot and dry conditions in

free draining soil. Many different species from the Proteaceae family grow along this terrace including Banksias, Leucadendron, Leucospermums and Protea. These plants are well established too and with the heatwave weather experienced during my time here and the sea view back across to the other islands, it felt like I was in another continent!

Although the King Protea, *Protea cynaroides*, had largely finished flowering by the time of my visit, the fading heads were still something quite spectacular to see. Towards the western end of the terrace are colourful plantings filled with the likes of Cape Heathers

and Callistemon. The fire heath, *Erica cerinthoides*, also took my eye shining in the hot sun. There is no question as to why it is called the fire heath with its striking red flowers but the name also boils down to this plant's ability to reshoot from its rootstock after a fire, a quality which actually keeps the plant in good health.



St Mary's, from the top terrace

The middle terrace features several different displays, such as the pebble garden, which was the first landscaped part of the garden, in a union jack design. Also growing through this terrace are several different types of palm tree that give the garden its iconic look. Phoenix *canariensis* growing over 10m tall are arranged in avenues in association with *Araucaria heterophylla* and *Butia capitata*, to name a few.



Striking: The Fire Heath

Below the middle terrace runs the long walk that spans the width of the garden. This area at the bottom of the hillside has deep soil which has allowed for mature trees such as the Pohutukawa, *Metrosideros excelsa*, to grow large, creating areas of shade. As a result the added moisture retention has allowed for the likes of *Dicksonia* and *Cyathea medullaris* to thrive, with the added benefit of no winter protection needed! The

newer area, the Mediterranean garden developed in the 1990s, features a further mix of plantings with a fountain that has a sculpture of an Agave. Steps leading up from around clipped olives and succulents take the visitor to an ornate shell house and further plantings of *Aeoniums* and *Protea*. The vegetable and cut flower gardens are also situated next to this section of the garden so you really can have it all at Tresco!

My time was spent mixed between working with the tender collections and the vegetable and cut flower garden. A lot of work was put into tidying the gardens ready for a royal visit by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge: this enabled me to work in several parts of the gardens which led onto discussions about different plants and the regions they originate from. The head gardener, Andrew Lawson, took me around the garden, telling me about the different plant selections, many in which he has helped to source seed or cuttings through trips abroad. The dedication of the garden team and the Dorrien-Smith family can certainly be seen in the presentation of these gardens, carefully curated to create a sense of tropicality that I hope to get back to in the not too distant future.



Shell House, Mediterranean garden