

Remembering the lost gardeners

Garden writer and columnist Lia Leendertz is haunted by those who toiled

Watercolour from the
RHS Lindley Library of
Hamamelis mollis 'Pallida'
and *H. 'Brevipetala'* by Graham
Stuart Thomas (1909–2003).

There are ghosts in every historic garden. I don't mean actual ghouls – I only believe in those at 2am – more that there is always a sense of the people who were once there. It is part of an older garden's appeal; we let our imagination make them even more fascinating places. It is the case with those gardens where we 'know' the previous owners in some sense: at East Lambrook Manor we picture Margery Fish bustling about busily; and at Sissinghurst Castle Garden Vita Sackville-West wafts moodily, wearing a fabulous hat – but equally at gardens where there is no celebrity involved. At Stourhead, for instance, I see

ladies parading around the lake or courting couples getting coyly soppy in the temples. At numerous large gardens it is the ghosts of the owning class that parade or cavort, or perhaps tinker – ladylike – with a border.

But at The Lost Gardens of Heligan in Cornwall, I see gardeners. I was lucky enough to visit there twice last summer and walked among the ghosts of those who grafted in the vegetable beds, or who woke at midnight

to spread the night soil. The stories of the gentrified owners are also told, but always in relation to those who physically worked the soil.

When you learn that the flower beds and apple arches lining the main walkway of

the vegetable garden were designed to hide working gardeners from the owners' gaze as they promenaded through the kitchen garden, it is the gardeners toiling away behind their flowery veil who you see – just as clearly as their silly, easily affronted employers. It is the perspective of the gardeners that is at the forefront, most poignantly in the graffitied names of gardeners lost in the First World War, written on the walls of the gardeners' toilets.

These ghosts – whether grand or humble – don't arise by chance. A garden presents its history with the use of interpretation: signs, guidebooks or websites. Heligan has actively sought

out this information and placed it to the fore; this elevating of workers struck me as unusual – which is a shame. You might argue that Heligan, with intensively managed potting sheds, glasshouses and productive gardens, lends itself to such interpretation, but every garden has a history beyond the lords and ladies who enjoyed it.

Generally we celebrate garden-makers who waved their hands and commanded a bank to be built, but not the poor souls who humped the earth or cut the bank's grass or – worse – lost their homes in order for the bank to be built. People worked hard in poor conditions to make these beautiful places. At some point land-grabs and enclosure had to occur for these grand sweeps of land to come under the ownership of one family.

The making of gardens such as Rousham, Stourhead and Chatsworth required evictions, and sometimes entire villages were relocated (twice in Chatsworth's case: once by 'Capability' Brown and once by Joseph Paxton). It is not pretty, but I like *The Independent's* Emma Townsend on the subject: 'In the past there was a completely iniquitous system of land ownership, which I regret, but the result has been the preservation of these amazing landscapes for us today'. We can still appreciate the beauty of a garden, despite disagreeing with the conditions under which it was created, or having empathy with those who maintained it.

The public response to Heligan certainly suggests that we rather like seeing the side of the 'little people'. The garden is hugely successful – one of the most-visited in Europe – despite or perhaps because of its complete lack of coyness about its workers. A garden's history is what it is and there is no need to draw a metaphorical floral and trained-apple curtain over any uncomfortable realities. The full, multi-faceted, complex story can only make a garden more fascinating. ●

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RHS / NEIL HEWORTH