

# Peter Stafford

The most famous story about The Lost Gardens of Heligan revolves around the gardeners' thunderboxes. You may know it: gardeners – using the same pencils they used to write plant labels – wrote their names on the wall of their loos. When one went away to fight in the First World War a cross was put next to his name. When they were officially missing or dead a second cross was added. All this was discovered during the garden's restoration, when a fluid used to uncover the names on faded plant labels was applied to the faint markings on the toilet wall. It is managing director Peter Stafford's favourite story about the garden: "I love the name, for a start.

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Thunderboxes! But also that they are right next to the south-facing Italian garden, where the family would sit and sun themselves. The whole area is an expression of the extraordinary hierarchy of the time, but reveals the gardeners' own lives and intimacies.”

Peter has no horticultural background, but he has always had a strong association with the land, which has included nurturing his own 25-acre freshwater wetland site in Devon. He has a deep love of British wildlife, and his office is arrayed with pygmy shrew skeletons, stuffed foxes and mouse skulls: "I hope you're not squeamish," he says, handing me a pickled baby mole in a jar. "I have always been drawn to champion the underdog. Nobody knows moles, certainly nobody loves them. They are hidden away underground, and we curse them and trap them, but they are fascinating." As a 17-year-old amateur in 1967 he even succeeded

It's 21 years since the gardens at Heligan opened to the public, and to mark the anniversary we meet the gardens' wildlife-loving managing director

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in taking the first (and only) photographs of a live female mole underground with her young.

Peter had a varied career before Heligan. Having dropped out of medical school, he became a lorry driver, starting his own haulage business. One of his customers started a factory in Cornwall and he moved there as trainee salesman, eventually becoming marketing director. A freelance consultancy for

the Department of Trade and Industry followed, advising businesses facing challenges. Clients included Heligan, whose owner Tim Smit – impressed with a report from Peter – asked him to stay on and implement it.

Heligan now gets vast numbers of visitors – a quarter of a million a year. It is a level of success that puzzles Peter slightly, although he has a theory: "It sounds odd, but I don't think we are perceived as a garden. We are more about history, atmosphere, ambience, even life and death." Part of Peter's role is as overseer of the garden, keeping this ambience intact. Heligan has no head gardener, quite deliberately. "The role of the head gardener is to stamp his own vision on a garden, and this garden has its own, very strong personality. It isn't appropriate for someone to come in and make it their own."

It gives Peter the freedom to take less obviously horticultural decisions, such as with the management of the spectacular, ancient rhododendrons

surrounding the large open area of lawn known as Flora's Green, which have been infected with *Phytophthora ramorum*, sudden oak death. "Someone with a horticultural background might feel that the thing to do was cut them down, clear the bed, build a garden for the future, but it would completely take away the essence of the place." Instead he wants to leave them to die gracefully. "They have become a celebration of the fact that life goes through phases: youth, the beauty of maturity, and decline. Leaving them lets us appreciate that process." He leads me through the massive green facade of the rhododendrons into their dark, sculptural insides, where he has placed simple wooden benches. "It's just a way of showing people they are welcome to sit here a while and appreciate this. We don't advertise that they are here. If people are receptive, they find them."

It is 21 years this year since the Lost Gardens of Heligan was 'found' by Tim Smit, and Peter has been managing director for 17 of those years, brought in as straight man to Tim's charismatic, ideas man. His lot has always been the practical side – the catering, car parks, accounting and loos, a task he has carried out admirably: all runs smoothly. But it is his sensitive stewardship of the romance of Heligan, and the careful uncovering of its hidden histories and inhabitants, that has helped secure the garden's place in our collective imaginations. □

• A series of events celebrating Heligan's 21st anniversary continues until Christmas – see [www.heligan.com](http://www.heligan.com) for details or call 01726 845100.

NEXT MONTH Chris & Toby Marchant.

