

# EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2016

## Laudation: Hestercombe Gardens



Whenever people leave Hestercombe Gardens in Somerset the reaction is always the same: „This is great“ –

And in fact, the combination of gardens from three epochs, the Gregorian landscape garden, the Victorian terrace garden and the formal garden from the period of King Edward VII –

Hestercombe is just a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total ‚work of art‘.

It was over 10 years ago when I visited Hestercombe gardens the first time, it was in the early days of the EGHN and, of course, one of the first trips to European gardens had to be to an English garden.

At this time, Hestercombe Gardens were already in a good condition, I remember standing in the Victorian garden, deeply impressed by the scenery and the atmosphere which conveys the sense of being a part of the 19th century, stepping back in time.

Looking to the Great Plat and down to the Taunton Valley took my breath away:

A sunken parterre, a wonderful level space within the garden, is in the style of the Tudor's and the Italian Renaissance, with lawn and borders, fenced by paths and stone lines.

A pergola runs the whole length of the south side to mark the end of the terrace and to provide a link to the wider landscape scenery – English garden art at its very best.

But let's have a look behind the curtain, let's have a look to history and what Hestercombe Gardens mean for visitors and likewise for experts, and why the jury choose to award Hestercombe Gardens:

Hestercombe, located close to Cheddon Fitzpaine, County of Somerset, has a rich and diverse history, first mentioned in an Anglo-Saxon charter of 682 and was continuously owned by one family for nearly 500 years.

The landscaping as we know it today was created in the midst of the 18th century by Coplestone Warre Bampfylde, a soldier and artist as well.

He was creating a splendid landscape garden with numerous temples, a waterfall and shrub borders.

In 1873 the 1st Viscount Portmann undertook considerable remodelling of the house including the creation of the Victorian Terrace.

Edwin Lutyens was commissioned to create a new formal garden with a planting scheme designed by Gertrude Jekyll. Their Formal Garden, designed between 1904 and 1909 is arguably the finest example of their collaboration.

But a short time later the gardens were neglected and became overgrown.

Hestercombe House was used by the British and American Armies during the 2nd World War, before becoming the head quarter of the Somerset Fire Brigade.

In the 1970s the Terrace gardens and the Formal Gardens were restored by Somerset County Council – one of the first major garden restoration projects of the UK.

But the landscape garden wasn't included, lots of the structures were completely lost, one lake had dried up and buildings like the small temple had fallen into disrepair.

Hestercombe House itself and the Formal Garden were sold to Somerset County Council in 1978.

Since October 2003 the gardens have been managed by the Hestercombe Gardens Trust.

Somerset County Council transferred the freehold of the house, Formal Garden and visitor centre to the Hestercombe Gardens Trust, under the Community Asset Transfer Scheme, thereby reuniting the house with its historic landscape for the first time in more than 60 years.

The house, which was opened to the public for the first time in May 2014, now houses a contemporary art gallery, the Column Room Restaurant and a second hand book shop.

A fantastic achievement, but the progress made from the late 1970s is characterised by the foresights, efforts and energy of one man: Philip White

It was him who discovered the sunken paradise of Hestercombe Gardens during a lunch time walk - and the book of these Gardens got new pages!

Please let me say something to this part of the story:

Last June I went to Cornwall to visit the Eden Project and the gorgeous Lost Gardens of Heligan, also a previous winner of the EGHN Garden Award.

There it was Tim Smit, who decided in the 1990s to revive the Gardens of Heligan when he found them totally destroyed – spending his lunch time by a walk!

Obviously, people in England are not only born with green fingers they also like to discover lost paradises during lunch time... So let me say: Spend more time into walking during lunch time....!

I share the glowing testament to the hard work of Philip White that is presented on Hestercombe Garden's website:

„The miraculous transformation of Hestercombe Gardens has taken place thanks to the dogged determination of one man, Philip White, he is the founder and chief executive of what has now become the Hestercombe Gardens Trust. Quietly spoken but with a strong vision, he recalls how the dramatic restoration project began:

,I was based at Hestercombe when I worked for the Somerset Wildlife Trust back in the early 1990s, having given up my previous life as a dairy farmer, and during my lunch hour I would walk through the overgrown valley behind the house. It had been planted up as a commercial forestry by the Crown Estate in the 1960s but had become sadly neglected.

Gradually I began to notice remnants of what was once an eighteenth century landscape garden, designed by a former owner of the house Coplestone Warre Bampfylde. You could just make out the edges of the silted up lakes, the broken brick lead that had once fed the now derelict waterfall and the tumbled down pillars of a lost temple.

I became consumed by the idea of restoring the landscape to its original glory; somehow I knew that I had been brought here for this express purpose, and that if I did not undertake this challenge, then no one else would“.

Funding and support was not immediately forthcoming from outside sources, so Philip White began his campaign alone. He begged and badgered to obtain some backing and in 1995 he funded, curated and invigilated an exhibition of Bampfylde's paintings at Christie's which generated a huge amount of interest in Bampfylde and his garden.

And – as also written on Hestercombe's website and obviously no longer a secret: Phillip White re-mortgaged his house – without telling his wife – to finance the restoration of Hestercombe Gardens.

Today visitors can enjoy the original circuit walk: the elegant structures are restored, the eighteenth century Arcadian landscape with its range of classical and rustic buildings including the Temple arbour, Mausoleum, Gothic Alcove and the spectacular Great Cascade. As I told you: a total work of art.

**Laudation by: Roswitha Arnold**