



## **Award Report for The Professional Gardeners' Trust**

**by Sharon Horder**

### **on attending 'Exploring Garden History with the RHS Lindley Library'**

I am currently in my first year as a Trainee on the 3-year Professional Gardeners Guild Traineeship, and am based at Godinton House and Gardens in Kent. I am in my mid-thirties and came to horticulture as a career changer about 4 years ago. Previously I had been living and working in London for almost a decade in the field of International Development. However, I was keen to pursue a childhood interest in historic and botanical gardens further and so I started the RHS Level 2 Certificate in the Principles of Horticulture alongside my full-time job. Taking the course made me realise that horticulture was a field that I wanted to be in full-time, and led to my career change. I left my London career to complete my RHS Diploma and then spent a year volunteering in several different gardens to gain practical horticultural experience. After this, I was successful in getting a place on the PGG Traineeship which enables me to spend three years receiving full-time on-the-job training at three world-class gardens.

As a PGG Trainee, I am required to gain skills in a number of competencies, some of which I will gain through my practical day-to-day work in the garden, and some of which I will gain through formal training courses. The PGG Traineeship Job Description and Training Information lists 6 competencies which it recommends we undertake through formal training courses (college or books). One of these is Garden History.

Having had a long interest in historic gardens, yet never having had any formal teaching about garden history, I applied to the PGT for funding that would enable me to undertake a short course called 'Exploring Garden History' run by the RHS Lindley Library. The PGT generously awarded me £210 from the Kenwyn Pearson Award which covered the entire cost of the course (£150) and a sizeable contribution towards my weekly travel costs from Kent to London to attend the course (£20 per week).

The course was a 6-week part-time course that took place one afternoon a week over 6 consecutive Friday afternoons from March 3<sup>rd</sup> to April 7<sup>th</sup> 2017. My employers at Godinton kindly enabled me to take time off during this period which I made up by working overtime at weekends.

The course was held at the RHS Lindley Library near Victoria in London. The course was designed to provide a thorough grounding in the main themes of British garden history over a period of 500 years. The themes of the 6 weeks were as follows:

Week 1 – Introduction and Overview

Week 2 – From Medieval Gardens to the Tradescents

Week 3 – Restoration and the Baroque

Week 4 – The English Landscape Movement

Week 5 – Victorian Gardens

Week 6 – The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and Contemporary Gardens

The course leader was Dr David Marsh, who proved to be a passionate and engaging garden history tutor, and we also received additional guidance each week from expert RHS Library staff. There were 12 participants in total on the course. Each week was structured in 2 parts – firstly a lecture by David on the theme of the week, accompanied by a slide show of relevant pictures and photos. After a break, we were then shown at first-hand relevant original material from the library's collections. We were able to view and study rare books, manuscripts, garden plans and artwork that brought to life the theme of the week. In both parts, the teaching we received was excellent, and the RHS Library staff really were experts in their field, delivering a wealth of fascinating information. We weren't required to do any homework but a reading list was provided and David Marsh has a great website with plenty of articles giving more information about a great variety of garden history, so there was plenty of guidance on how to pursue each week's learning further.

Some of the most memorable content for me included learning about plant hunting expeditions and the history of Kew Gardens, as well as seeing original 'Red Books' by Humphry Repton and drawings by Gertrude Jekyll.

Overall, I thought that the course was very well run. It was a nice informal learning environment, and both staff and fellow participants were very supportive and friendly. The course structure and length also suited me well – if it had been more than 6 weeks long, or more than one afternoon a week, I would have found it difficult to manage alongside full-time work. Personally, I would have appreciated more handouts to accompany the lectures. However, I took my own notes and the reading list provides plenty of ideas for information to pursue further in my own time.

In terms of my own personal learning and the contribution the course has made to my career, I think that it has provided me with a very important grounding in British garden history. I believe that it's key for me to have an appreciation of garden history given that I'm currently working in and hope to continue to work in historically significant gardens. The course taught me a vast amount, and nearly everything that was taught was new content to me. I am now more familiar with key names in the UK's horticultural history – from Canterbury Cathedral as a monastic garden, to Joseph Hooker, to John Claudius Loudon and many more. The knowledge I have gained will allow me to get more from each place I work in, and hopefully to be sensitive to the unique historical context of each future garden that I work in. It will also give me more appreciation and enjoyment of some of the finest gardens

that I hope to visit over the many years of my horticultural career to come. In addition, the course introduced me to the RHS Lindley Library, a great resource for a budding horticulturalist that I'll definitely continue to use, and to the Gardens Trust, another interesting organisation that I will continue to follow.

I would definitely recommend this course to other PGG trainees and other horticultural students who haven't previously had any teaching in garden history and who are within traveling distance of central London. For PGG trainees in particular, I think it's really important that we develop an appreciation of the history of the gardens we are placed in and that this informs our work in them. In addition, if we go on to work in historical gardens, this appreciation should inform the decisions we make throughout our careers as staff in them – to some degree we will be the guardians of the historical legacy of each garden we work in, and have a duty to preserve this and pass it on to others.

If time and funding doesn't allow PGG trainees to easily attend a course in Garden History, one suggestion could be to have a session on this at the annual PGG seminar. David Marsh and his colleagues at the Garden Trust deliver short training sessions to various groups around the country, and David has said he would be happy to deliver a session to trainees at one of the seminars.

I would like to extend many thanks to the PGT for giving me the opportunity to do this course by providing funding, and to Godinton staff for allowing me time out of my usual working week to be able to attend. Thanks also to the course tutors David Marsh, and the RHS Library staff, Elizabeth Koper and Brent Ellison.



Above photograph: The course tutors with me and some examples from the Lindley Library Collection.