



Trebah Gardens Tea House, Cornwall

Trebah Garden is a magnificent old, wild and magical Cornish garden; the product of 100 years of inspired and dedicated creation. A dramatically beautiful 26 acre garden, it is listed among the 80 finest in the world.

In its first 100 years, Trebah was cared for by owners who loved the garden, could afford to maintain it, and planted for their great great grandchildren. The Estate was split in 1939, and for the next forty years Trebah changed hands on average every six years. Inevitably the maintenance of the garden suffered, but those forty years of maturation provided the natural wild framework within which a truly magical garden could be created.

In 1981, Trebah was bought by Tony and Eira Hibbert who began an exhausting and ambitious restoration programme. In 1987 they opened the garden to the public and in 1990 formed Trebah Garden Trust.

In recent years it became clear that to further secure the future of the garden two main challenges needed to be addressed; to identify a conservation philosophy which conserved the heritage value of the garden while allowing it horticultural vitality; and to increase visitor numbers through the winter months whilst meeting the expectations and demands of visitors to the garden.

The proposals to meet these challenges fell into two main categories; improvement of the existing visitor facilities and the continuing restoration of the garden including the reconstruction of Alice's Seat, a derelict arbour.

Case Study | Trebah Gardens

A brief was developed for the new Visitors Centre focusing on specific functional requirements, but also setting aesthetic design criteria:

The new building should be striking and individual in design but not dominant.

Trebah has never had large or imposing garden buildings, nor have the gardens the scale to accommodate them, but this was an opportunity to add to the quality of the garden.

Economic and efficient to run, yet ornamental and fun.

The new Visitors Centre would be the engine house of the viability of the gardens, but should also be a true 'garden' building.

Quality yet low cost.

The Heritage Lottery Fund seeks design and materials of quality and yet the Trebah Garden Trust require facilities at low cost. Clever use of timber was likely to be critical.

Capacious yet intimate.

The building would have to work aesthetically and economically for a range of visitor numbers.

Unusually the site of the building is an integral part of the planted garden rather than an ancillary site near the car park as is frequently the case in such sites. The new building is therefore intended to contribute positively to the experience of visiting Trebah by matching, as closely as possible, the character of this special sub-tropical garden. The building has to meet a wide range of functions; a tea house that will be intimate on a 'wet February afternoon' yet deal with holiday peeks, a shop that reflects the quality of the garden and a function room that can host art exhibitions, lectures of different size and type and performances of various types.

The structure comprises Douglas Fir post and beams built off masonry rear walls under copper roofs with glass and timber front walls. Inspiration for the structure was taken from the giant Gunnera leaves, which are such a significant feature of the lower garden; massive ribbed leaves with raking stems sprouting from the base of the plant.

The relatively large building completely fills the available site and is designed to follow the contours whilst allowing easy access across the substantially different levels between approach and garden. From virtually all viewpoints it is all but invisible as it integrates so well with the historic landscape.

At Trebah Caroe and Partners have created an award winning building that is intended to make a subtle, perhaps subliminal, impression on visitors to this special place. We have not set out to create a landmark, 'statement' building as this would tend to overwhelm the garden. The overwhelmingly positive responses from visitors suggest that we have succeeded in our objectives.

In complete contrast to the carefully conceived and detailed new building we were responsible for the reconstruction of Alice's Seat as a simultaneous project. This charming thatch and cob structure is known to have existed on the site in 1878 but it takes its name from Alice Hext who bought Trebah in 1906 with her husband Charles and who lived there until her death in 1939.

The seat was partly collapsed in 1947 and by the 1990s no trace was left except for patches of pebble paving and slumped cob. Initial investigation of the slumped cob revealed the line of the rear wall and post holes. From this limited information we developed an initial design in a rustic style and worked closely with local craftsmen, without being unduly prescriptive, to create a charming folly that seems to match the spirit of the original structure.

Awards

RIBA

Town and Country Design Award 2003 (Tea House)

Civic Trust

Commendation 2003 (Tea House)

Civic Trust

Award 2003 (Alice's Seat)