

Institut Européen des Jardins & Paysages

Inventory of Gardens and Designed Landscapes of England

Inventory of Great Britain

TRESCO

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Name:	TRESCO
District:	Isles of Scilly (Unitary Authority)
Parish:	Tresco
label.localisation:	Latitude: 49.946752 Longitude: -6.3314457 National Grid Reference: SV 89373 14171 Map: Download a full scale map (PDF)
label.overview:	Heritage Category: Park and Garden Grade: I List Entry Number: 1000427 Date first listed: 11-Jun-1987

Details

Gardens extensively planted with exotic species which were begun in the early C19 and developed in the mid and late C19, together with a lake and woodland walks.

HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT

In 1834 Augustus Smith (b 1804), the son of a Hertfordshire banker, James Smith, acquired a lease of ninety-nine years from the Duchy of Cornwall for the Isles of Scilly. The new Lord Proprietor was required by the Crown to spend £5000 within six years on various improvements including the construction of a new pier at St Mary's and the completion of the parish church; inspired by Jeremy Bentham, Smith worked for the social and economic improvement of the islands.

Residing initially on St Mary's, Smith began building a new house on the neighbouring island of Tresco in 1835. The house was built to the east of the ruins of the medieval priory of St Nicholas, a cell of the Benedictine abbey of Tavistock, which in turn occupied the site of a C6 burial ground. Smith's new house was extended in 1843, and again in 1852-3; state rooms were constructed in 1861-3 (CL 1980). The new house was complemented by terraced gardens, initially constructed within windbreak walls and subsequently expanded within areas sheltered by trees planted by Smith after 1834. Plants for the garden were obtained from nurseries including James Veitch of Chelsea, private gardens such as Abbotsbury and Melbury, Dorset (qqv), and foreign countries visited by Scillonian seamen. In 1850 Smith initiated contacts with Sir William Hooker (1785-1865) at Kew (qv) which led to plants being sent to Tresco; this arrangement continued under Sir Joseph Hooker (1817-1911). Augustus Smith died in Plymouth in 1872, and was succeeded in the lease by his nephew, Thomas Algernon Dorrien-Smith. The appearance of the house and gardens under Augustus Smith is recorded in watercolour views by Lady Sophia Towers and Mrs Frances Le Marchant, together with a series of mid C19 photographs (private collection).

T A Dorrien-Smith was instrumental in establishing flower-growing for the London market in the late C19 to alleviate a downturn in the islands' economy, while on Tresco he expanded his uncle's shelter belts and continued the development of the exotic planting in the gardens. Dorrien-Smith died in 1918 when he was succeeded by his son, Major Arthur Dorrien-Smith, who had collected plants in the early years of the C20 in South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand while on military service. In 1920 Tresco was described as 'an imperial asset of great importance' (Kew Bulletin) in relation to its plant collection and the work undertaken on acclimatisation. During the Second World War three of the Major's four sons were killed, and he was succeeded in 1955 by his surviving son, Lt Commander T M Dorrien-Smith. The development of the gardens, including

the introduction of further plant material from South Africa and the Antipodes, continued under the Commander, and his son, Robert A Dorrien-Smith, who took over the running of Tresco in the early 1970s. The gardens and shelter belts have undergone extensive restoration following severe storm damage in 1929, 1987, and 1990. Today (2000) the site remains in private ownership.

DESCRIPTION

LOCATION, AREA, BOUNDARIES, LANDFORM, SETTING Tresco Abbey is situated on the island of Tresco towards the centre of the Scillonian archipelago. The site lies c 400m south of the hamlet of New Grimsby and c 1.25km south of the port of Old Grimsby. The c 30ha site comprises some 6ha of gardens, c 24ha of ornamental plantations through which a series of walks passes, an ornamental lake, and a cricket ground. The site is bounded to the west by a minor road, Appletree Road, and to the north by Great Pool; elsewhere the site adjoins open heathland. The site occupies a ridge of high ground which drops north to Great Pool, west towards the coast adjacent to Appletree Road, south to Appletree Banks, and south-east to Abbey Pool. There are extensive views south across the island towards the picturesque Great Rock and the neighbouring island of St Mary's, west towards the neighbouring island of Bryher, and north across Great Pool towards high ground near Old Grimsby.

ENTRANCES AND APPROACHES The late C20 visitors' entrance is situated c 30m south-west of Tresco Abbey and is approached by a concrete drive which follows the southern boundary of the site from the late C20 helicopter landing site on the cricket ground c 200m south-west of the house. The entrance, ticket office, and associated facilities are converted from C19 single-storey stone buildings which stand immediately west of the mid C19 south entrance to the Abbey. This entrance comprises rugged rockwork supporting a painted timber gate. Beyond the south entrance the drive leads north for c 30m through mixed shrubbery before sweeping west and north-east through the West Rockery, an area of artificially arranged rockwork above pools and a cascade, to reach the inner courtyard of the Abbey. In the late C19 and early C20 visitors entered the gardens through a gate attached to the building known as 'Valhalla'. This approximately L-shaped structure comprises a two-storey gabled cottage to the west with a single-storey range to the east. The garden facades of these structures have loggias supported by rustic stone piers; the loggias contain a collection of ships' figureheads which was founded by Augustus Smith in the mid C19, while the walls are decorated with sea shells. Valhalla was constructed by Augustus Smith in 1871 to serve as an entrance for the visitors who had first started to visit the gardens in appreciable numbers c 1860 (Nelhams 2000); it was extended in 1960 by Commander T M Dorrien-Smith (CL 1980).

The principal C19 approach to Tresco Abbey was from New Grimsby to the north-west. From the hamlet a drive, known as Abbey Road, passes along the north-west shore of Great Pool, before turning south-east to continue parallel to the southern shore of the lake for c 750m. To the south the concrete drive is bounded by Abbey Wood, a mixed plantation with mature trees and conifers underplanted with evergreen shrubbery, while to the north the drive is adjoined by an area of meadows planted with specimen trees and several paddocks; the drive is partly lined by mature Monterey cypresses. The drive approaches the Abbey through a picturesque gothic granite gatehouse (listed grade II) which is set in a granite wall (listed grade II). The wall extends south-east to the Abbey buildings and serves as the revetment to the raised entrance courtyard. The gatehouse and courtyard were constructed by Augustus Smith in 1843. A further drive extends parallel to the north facade of the Abbey and then continues c 430m east, where it is known as Penzance Road, to reach the coast at Pentle Bay. A mid C19 inscribed slate panel set into the wall enclosing the gardens south-east of the Abbey and adjacent to the drive provided rules and directions for mid C19 visitors to the gardens.

PRINCIPAL BUILDING Tresco Abbey (listed grade II) stands on a spur of high ground to the north of Abbey Pool and south of Great Pool. The house comprises two and three storeys and is constructed in coursed granite with ashlar dressings. The buildings has an irregular plan which reflects its evolution over some thirty years from 1835. To the north is the entrance courtyard entered through the gatehouse of 1843 (listed grade II) and enclosed to the south by the west wing, also built in 1843. An archway leads through this wing to the central courtyard which is enclosed to the south by the south-west wing. This wing contains the state rooms built in 1861-2 and is terminated to the south-west by a single-storey conservatory overlooking the West Rockery (under restoration, 2000). To the east of the courtyard lies the main range of the house with a four-storey square tower to the north-east which was built in 1890 to the north of the gabled, two-storey house built in 1835-9 which remains

the core of the house. Tresco Abbey was built by Augustus Smith (d 1872) and his nephew, Thomas Algernon Dorrien-Smith, who appear to have acted as their own architects. The appearance of the house in the mid and late C19 is recorded in a series of watercolour views by Mrs Frances Le Marchant (private collection), and a set of photographs commissioned by Augustus Smith in the 1860s (private collection).

GARDENS AND PLEASURE GROUNDS The gardens are situated principally to the west of the Abbey. A series of three mid C19 terraces extends below the south facade of the house, connecting the West Rockery and the East Rockery on the east- and south-west-facing slopes below the house. The south-facing slope below the Abbey is laid out in informal terraces which incorporate a C20 swimming pool and pavilion.

The gardens west of the house are laid out in a series of three principal terrace walks which extend from east to west; these are connected by axial walks which descend the south-facing slope. The Top Terrace extends c 270m west from the house to a gate which leads west to a walk which continues a further 190m west of the garden to reach the late C19 Smith Monument (listed grade II). This rough granite obelisk c 5m high stands on the summit of Abbey Hill overlooking the sound between Tresco and Bryher. The monument was designed by Augustus Smith on his death-bed in 1872 and bears plaques commemorating Augustus Smith, T A Dorrien-Smith, and other members of their families. The Top Terrace comprises a gravel walk, to the north of which is a deep border planted with mixed exotic and succulent plants backed by mature trees, shrubs, and conifers. Some 50m west of the house a subsidiary walk leads north through an area known as Miss Innis' Garden, to reach a small gateway set in an artificially built-up screen of rockwork; this gateway leads from the garden to a network of walks which extend through Abbey Wood on the north-east-facing slope above Great Pool. The Top Terrace is linked to the lower terraces by the Neptune Steps c 80m west of the house. The four flights of steps lead to the Lighthouse Walk and are flanked by specimen palms and other ornamental shrubs, while the Walk is bordered by narrow beds planted with seasonal subjects and by tall ilex oak hedges. To the south the Lighthouse Walk is terminated by a raised bastion which supports a late C20 bronze sculpture of three of Robert Dorrien-Smith's children by David Wynne (guidebook); from this bastion there are views across the Green south to Great Rock. The late C20 sculpture replaces a late C17 cast-iron cresset or fire-basket (listed grade II) from St Agnes, Lighthouse, Cornwall; this was relocated in the late C20 to a site adjacent to the mid C19 bowling green east of Valhalla.

The Middle Terrace leads west from the Western Rockery below a series of rocky outcrops planted with specimen trees, shrubs, and succulent plants above the remains of the medieval Priory. Crossing the Neptune Steps, a broad gravel walk continues c 50m west through a formal garden with a simple summerhouse alcove to the north, and a circular, rock-edged pool and fountain to the south. The south-facing slope above the walk contains rocky outcrops planted with succulents with architectural foliage, while the remainder of the garden has planting with a Mediterranean character (*ibid*). To the south-west of this formal garden is an artificial mound, the Limpet Midden, composed of limpet shells deposited from at least Roman times (*ibid*); there are views east across the gardens from the summit of the mound. Adjacent to the Limpet Midden the Middle Terrace divides into several subsidiary paths, some leading north-west to the Top Terrace and another continuing west to reach a late C20 octagonal, open-fronted, pyramid-roofed summerhouse, the interior of which is ornamented with shell-work by Mrs Dorrien-Smith. This summerhouse stands on a gravel terrace at the head of the late C20 Mediterranean Garden which comprises four terraces retained by rustic granite walls and linked by axially arranged single and double flights of stone steps. The second terrace incorporates a centrally placed wall-fountain and semicircular pool, while the lowest terrace has an octagonal pool with a fountain in the form of a bronze Agave sculpted by Tom Leiper placed on the garden's central axis.

Some 130m south-west of the house the Long Walk extends c 250m from east to west across the full width of the garden, linking the walk below the ruins of the Priory, the Lighthouse Walk, and Mediterranean Garden. The Long Walk comprises a gravel terrace flanked by stone-edged beds planted with mature evergreen shrubs and specimen trees underplanted with ferns and herbaceous subjects. To the west the walk is now terminated by the 'Sacrificial Altar', a composite group of antique stone fragments which stands immediately east of a stone wall which blocks a western extension of the Long Walk through the kitchen garden to the west boundary of the garden. A further east/west walk extends parallel to the southern boundary of the garden, passing through areas planted with collections of bamboo and tree ferns. The areas between the east/west terraces and

north/south walks are planted with collections of plants originating in Australia and other countries; these have been developed in the C20 in areas planted in the C19 as orchards.

Some 50m south-west of the house and below the West Rockery a group of small terraced gardens planted with specimen palms and Mediterranean and South African plants is enclosed to the west, south, and south-east by granite rubble walls c 3.5m high (listed grade II), and to the east and north-east by high, formally clipped ilex oak hedges. The western boundary wall is extended north by a late C20 pergola comprising rustic stone supports linked by timber horizontal beams. To the north are the remains of the medieval Priory of St Nicholas comprising two gothic stone arches which lead to a walled garden enclosure containing several C17 and C18 graves and headstones (all listed grade II). The arches terminate a vista leading c 320m south-south-west which bisects the Palm Circle, an approximately elliptical area of lawns enclosed by shrubbery and planted with specimen Chusan palms and cordylines. To the south of the Palm Circle the axial walk is terminated by a Cyclopean group of rocks and a stone table. To the north-west of the remains of the medieval Priory is the Pebble Garden, a parterre with pebble-edged beds separated by gravel paths which are laid out in the form of a 'Union Jack' flag; this garden and its seasonal planting scheme in red, white, and blue formed part of Augustus Smith's mid C19 garden. To the south-east of the ruins of the Priory the Pump Garden incorporates a circular stone well and a cast-iron pump which are set among evergreen shrubs and specimen trees.

Augustus Smith built the walls enclosing the formal gardens south-west of the house c 1834 (CL 1980) and later began to plant shelter belts comprising particularly Monterey cypress and Monterey pines; these plantations were extended and enhanced in the late C19 and early C20 by T A Dorrien-Smith. The Palm Circle, originally known as the Hop Circle from Smith's planting scheme, also formed part of Smith's earliest garden, together with the Neptune Steps, Middle Terrace, Top Terrace, Long Walk, and Lighthouse Walk. The design of the garden with its axial vistas and terraces has been likened to Italian gardens including the Villa d'Este, Tivoli, which may have inspired Augustus Smith. Augustus Smith began to grow rare and exotic plants in the gardens, obtaining specimens from gardens including the Royal Botanical Gardens, Kew, Abbotsbury and Melbury, Dorset (qqv), and nurseries including Messrs Lee of Hammersmith, Thomas Nicholl of Redruth, and from 1853, James Veitch of Chelsea (ibid). By 1894 the gardens contained some 1500 specimens, while by the 1930s this had risen to 3500 distinct varieties (ibid). Throughout the C20 the gardens have been noted for their collection of sub-tropical, exotic, and acclimatised plants.

KITCHEN GARDEN The kitchen garden is situated to the west of the gardens c 300m west of the house. The garden is enclosed to the south, west, and north by stone walls which separate it from the surrounding shelter belts on Abbey Hill. The garden is laid out with an axial walk extending west to a gate set in the boundary wall. To the north and south of this walk are areas of lawn planted with standard fruit trees, together with vegetable and flower beds.

OTHER LAND A lawn extends south from an evergreen hedge which encloses the terraces south of the house to Abbey Pool, an informal natural lake c 100m south-east of the house. The ornamentally planted Paddy's Island lies in the lake c 160m south-east of the house, while the margins of the lake are planted with ornamental grasses and other subjects. A late C20 bronze sculpture of fishes, Shoal by Tom Leaper, stands in the lake adjacent to its north-west shore. In the mid C19 Augustus Smith developed the lawn and lake south-east of the house as the setting for a collection of exotic waterfowl (ibid). South-west of the lake a level grassy area known as the Green was developed in the late C19 as a cricket ground; since 1983 it has also served as a helicopter landing place. There are significant views south to Great Rock across the Green.

Abbey Wood, a mixed plantation on the north-east-facing slope above Great Pool is included in the site here registered. Developed from the 1830s, this plantation was designed to combine utility, as a shelter belt for the garden, with amenity, in the form of a series of woodland walks. To the west of the gardens further areas of mixed shelter belt divided by walks and rides extend along the ridge of Abbey Hill. The late C19 Smith Monument (listed grade II) stands on the crest of this ridge, affording views west to the neighbouring island of Bryher.

REFERENCES

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Illustrations S F Tower, Watercolour views of Tresco Abbey and gardens, mid;late C19 (private collection) [see CL 1980; King 1985] F Le Marchant, Watercolour views of Tresco Abbey and gardens, mid;late C19 (private collection) [see CL 1980; King 1985] Photographs of Tresco Abbey and gardens, mid C19 (private collection) [see Nelhams 2000]

Description written: January 2001 Register Inspector: JML Edited: October 2001

Legal

This garden or other land is registered under the Historic Buildings and Ancient Monuments Act 1953 within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens by Historic England for its special historic interest.