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Lambeth's Garden Museum gets a glorious makeover and expansion for summer

The redesign of Lambeth's Garden Museum makes it feel much more central to London, says David Sexton

DAVID SEXTON | Wednesday 17 May 2017 16:35 |

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Growing interest: building continues at the Garden Museum, home to the grave of Captain William Bligh *Matt Writtle*

Never mind the Garden Bridge. The new Garden Museum is actually happening: a gloriously successful makeover and expansion, in the deconsecrated church of St-Mary-at-Lambeth, right next to Lambeth Palace. With Dan Pearson planting, too.

Perhaps not every last detail will be finished by Monday, the day it is scheduled to reopen after 18 months of works. But just how much of an improvement it is on what was there before is already apparent. Those who knew the Museum of Garden History (as it used to be called) before are going to be delighted.

The museum's energetic, clever and mischievous director, Christopher Woodward, has masterminded this project and brought it towards completion for a comparatively moderate sum too – around £7 million, of which £3.5 million came from the Heritage Lottery Fund.

He himself raised more than £100,000 through epic sponsored swims, including one across the straits of Gibraltar and another down the Thames from Oxford to London. He trains every day and is so appallingly fit that, for his next project, a swim in the icy waters

As we went around the building site in safety boots and helmets last month his excitement about what was emerging there was infectious. The redesign is by the same south London-based architects, Dow Jones, who devised the first installation of the museum within the church back in 2008, already a remarkable achievement. Internally, they are building on what they did then so successfully.



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The Museum of Garden History, the first of its kind in the world, was initially created in 1977 by John and Rosemary Nicholson, who had traced the tomb of two great 17th-century gardeners and plant collectors, John Tradescant the elder and younger, to the churchyard. The church, an ancient foundation but largely rebuilt in 1851 – save for the 14th-century tower – had been deconsecrated in 1972, stripped of its furnishings and scheduled for demolition before this new use was found for it.

The Garden Museum is an independent charity, not government-funded, and its early years were modest. One visitor remembered it as “a cheerless place where classes of garden history students would huddle in a tomb-cold library, and the occasional visitor would wander vaguely among the haphazard/serendipitous collection of ancient hoes and seed catalogues”.

But it has always had enthused supporters who have helped raise funds. And in 2006 Woodward was appointed director.


Woodward came from the world of fine art, having been a curator of Sir John Soane’s Museum and director of the Holburne Museum in Bath – and has written *In Ruins*, a fascinating book in praise of picturesque decay.


He cheerfully professes more or less complete ignorance of plants – unless he’s exaggerating? – having only a balcony in Hackney as a garden himself. Perhaps that’s all to the good, though: his ability always to see gardens in a much wider cultural context has transformed the ambition of the museum. Ideas and forms matter more to him than euphorbias and epimediums.


Two years after he arrived a new two-storey internal structure within the church, known as the Belvedere, was built to accommodate both temporary exhibitions and a permanent display.


This new interior could neither have foundations nor touch the church walls but, using a light modern material, cross-laminated timber, in large panels shaped off-site, the architects found a visually arresting solution to these constraints within the tight budget.




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Closer look: inside the Garden Museum (Matt Writtle)

The pale wood plays off beautifully against the creamy stone and the boxiness against the Gothic vaulting. The gallery space has been tripled, allowing 1,200 objects from the permanent collection to be displayed, rather than just 180 as before.

There are touching mementoes and curiosities here. Some are impressive artefacts: a wonderful 17th-century terracotta watering can, for example, or a glass "cucumber straightener" invented by George Stephenson. Others earn their place through significant associations with great gardeners: William Robinson's cloak, Gertrude Jekyll's desk.

As we walk around, Woodward exclaims that in its early days the museum was offered Philip Larkin's lawnmower "and, infuriatingly, a person long gone wrote back and said it wasn't relevant! And he wrote that beautiful poem about running over a hedgehog. [The Mower – "we should be careful/Of each other, we should be kind/While there is still time"]. It's now part of the archive in Hull – but it belongs here," says Woodward.

Some of the exhibits, however, are peculiarly evocative precisely because they are humdrum: a very early Flymo, old seed packets, clogs from Kew, where they were worn until the Seventies. The museum has always been a place that brings your own childhood memories of gardens flooding back as well as recovering some of the history of an activity that naturally is so little recorded, so swallowed up by time.

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A special display has been added: a gallery designed by Alec Cobbe known as The Ark, which displays 20 precious Tradescant items on loan from the Ashmolean in Oxford, a cabinet of curiosities conceived in homage to Tradescants' own museum, one of the wonders of 17th-century London.

It was while levelling the floor of the chancel for this that the workmen discovered a previously unknown vault beneath, which turned out to contain 30 lead coffins, including those of five Archbishops of Canterbury, among them that of Richard Bancroft, who oversaw the production of the King James Bible. This is a remarkable discovery that enhances all the more the building's richly layered history.

who lifts the lid up to let me glimpse the coffins, shows me remarkable close-ups of them on his phone, one bearing a gleaming red-and-gold mitre. A glass viewing hatch is being installed to allow a glimpse at least to all.

Inside, the church itself is much more visible than before, when some of the necessary clutter of ticket booths and cloakrooms felt obstructive. "It's much calmer now," says Woodward.

And outside, somehow, in quite a tight space in the churchyard, three strikingly beautiful new pavilions have been slotted in, low-built and open in feel, creating a Japanese-style courtyard around a Dan Pearson garden of definitely Zen tendencies. The walls are beautifully clad in bronze folded to look like tree-bark, echoing the plane trees behind them.

Two of these pavilions are for school and study groups. The third will be the new café, with a bar that will get the evening sun and an outdoor terrace.

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Stunning details: an interior view (Matt Writtle)

Already, even unfinished, it looks fabulously enticing. "I think it's a lovely space, just a place to come and be, in London," says Woodward. "it's very much a clinging-on space in the city, next to a big roundabout – and there are relatively few places where you get this feeling, I think."

We clamber up to the top of the medieval tower, which Woodward plans to open to visitors. There's an amazing vista over Lambeth Palace and the river, one even the Garden Bridge might not have been able to match.

From here, the Garden Museum suddenly feels central to London in every sense. After years of work bringing the project to this point, Woodward is confident: "My nervousness will be just how to preserve this nice calm feeling if it gets very busy," he confides.

The Garden Museum, Lambeth Palace Road, SE1 (020 7401 8865, gardenmuseum.org.uk), is scheduled to reopen on May 22

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