

# Creative landscape

In what was once an overgrown valley, **Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens** is now a site blooming with carefully curated flora and some of the country's most impressive contemporary artworks.

*Fiona McGowan* meets the man behind the vision.

At the head of a valley that rises up above a rushing stream, there is an unfettered view to the iconic castle-topped island of St Michael's Mount. It's a scene that begs to be captured – painted, drawn, photographed. The stands of woodland at either side of the valley provide a frame for a vista that rolls away down a grassy slope, gently slipping down to the sea. Facing south, sheltered from blustery north-westerly winds, sub-tropical flora thrives alongside indigenous trees – beeches and pines standing tall above bamboo, ferns and an array of rubbery-leaved plants that would seem at home in a rainforest. There is nothing formal about this garden, no straight lines or symmetrical borders, no order of colour or style. And yet every aspect has been considered, each sector containing a carefully selected group of plants, chosen to suit the site, and the symbiotic relationship with the trees, shrubs and flowers alongside it.

Tremenheere Sculpture Gardens opened in 2012, fifteen years after Neil Armstrong bought 11 acres of overgrown valley near Gulval in West Penwith. He and his wife had four children at the time, both working as full-time GPs in Mullion on the Lizard Peninsula. For a long time, the project was all his own: "My wife wasn't really into it. She said, 'Off you go, dear.'" He grins a little sheepishly as he describes the years of hard labour that he put into cultivating the garden. The idea of incorporating sculpture came slowly. Neil explains: "It felt, when I developed this garden, that there was no focus – no big house. So I wanted to create moments of interest to stop you. Otherwise you just wander around. So the artwork provides direction and focus on certain vistas."

With a mother who was a landscape gardener, Neil has gardening in his veins. He's also passionate about art: "I've always been interested in contemporary art. I became keen on this whole trinity of the landscape, the planting and the artwork, where the art worked in synergy with the garden, rather than the art being more dominant." One of the most impactful pieces of work in the garden today is one of the earliest works to have been commissioned – James Turrell's *Skyspace*. An oval structure, clad in rough-hewn granite stone, it perches



PHOTO: JESSICA SILVER

Chelsea Garden



PHOTO: KARL DAVIES

Perspex wind sculptures by Michael Chaikin



PHOTO: KARL DAVIES

Tremenheere Woods

at the top of the valley. Inside is a smooth, white room whose walls tilt inwards up to a large oval opening. It's the sort of space that makes you whisper. A smooth white bench circles the wall, and there is nothing to look at but the sky – a shifting image above you.

Turrell, says Neil, was hugely influential in the direction of the sculpture garden. He initially built a temporary structure on the land in 1999, to interact with the solar eclipse, and the two men began to collaborate on a vision for the garden. Turrell resolved to make two works for Tremenhede – “I guess that was a big step-change,” says Neil. “James Turrell is, according to one London critic, not only the most important artist living at the moment, he's the most important artist of this century.” In his diffident way, Neil is clearly proud to have Turrell's work: “There are five works by him in the UK, and two are here in Cornwall.” “In your garden,” I add. Neil nods and looks down. The second Turrell work is a hidden gem – even regular visitors to the garden might not have encountered the sculpture, it's so tucked-away. And it's only open to visitors at certain times: usually on Saturday mornings, says Neil, cagily. He calls it ‘the Tank’, and it's his favourite sculpture of all...

Among the ever-evolving plantings is a similarly evolving collection of sculptures. “The artwork here gets mixed press,” admits Neil. “It's not mainstream stuff.” He chooses each piece personally, usually working in collaboration with the artist for some time before incorporating it. Some are on loan to the garden, and some have been specifically commissioned. They are a varied collection that Neil says are all carefully chosen to be site-specific: a group of huge, blackened, rounded stumps that are reminiscent of shrouded giants hunkering in the woods; the elegant, fluid forms of ceramic vessels by eminent local sculptor Tony Lattimer; a gigantic black head of a minotaur that looms through the trees; and a weighty, rounded granite piece by Royal Academician Peter Randall-Page, to name just a few. A boardwalk leads the visitor uphill, alongside a river that is a wild torrent after rain, and a babbling stream in drier times (rare though they are in Cornwall). At the top, the boardwalk loops around some tree-shaded ponds; wooden benches invite a pause – literally and metaphorically, a place to take a breath. “Pauses are important,” says Neil, “whether to stop and admire the exotic shrubs, the great, ancient trees and the views, or to take in the sculptures.”

The perennially popular restaurant and shop at Tremenhede, located inside a big curve of wood and granite building, are both separate businesses – albeit so much a part of the ethos of the gardens that they seem entirely intrinsic. The only element of the gardens that was not privately financed was the restaurant building: an EU-funded project that was so bureaucratic that Neil has avoided seeking external funding ever since. It means that his vision for Tremenhede has had to grow slowly, apace



Neil Armstrong



Black Mound by David Nash RA



The Upper Gallery



Slip of the Lip by Peter Randall-Page RA

with the growth of the business. “But that's all right,” he says, smiling. “It's a garden. It grows at its own pace.”

Since 2012, Neil and his wife have gradually bought land from their neighbours, doubling the original acreage. The most recent development has been a handsome oak-framed art gallery, which opened in January 2017. “Building the gallery was always part of the long-term plan,” says Neil. “The idea was to grow Tremenhede as an arts destination. It's still evolving,” he adds with quiet enthusiasm. “There are several projects which are in various stages of being worked on.” The table in front of him is scattered with drawings: he's planning a new artwork that is all his own design – a watchtower that integrates with the natural environment, perhaps involving copper... He might be collaborating with an American artist, he mumbles... More definite are plans to build an artists' studio, to enable up to eight resident artists to have an indoor space to work when the weather proves too inclement to create in the gardens themselves. He's also planning to build a tiny cabin to serve as a one-person workshop.

Throughout the 20 years since Tremenhede's first inception, this tall, softly spoken Irishman has managed to combine bringing up four children, becoming practice manager in his GP surgery, creating a 22-acre public garden, and developing the beginnings of an ‘art destination’. Over the years, he's travelled all over the world to learn about plants, from Mexico to Vietnam and from the Himalayas to South Africa. He absorbs art from all aspects of culture: “We spend our holidays looking at galleries and churches, strangely. I'm not religious at all, but it's the ambience and the atmosphere.” He is passionately involved in the local art scene, and collaborates with world-renowned artists. Neil leans back in his seat next to the rosy woodburner in the corner of the restaurant. “It's a nice foil to have this place,” he says, “it's something I like to do. It's great fun and satisfies a creative need, working in the arts.”

tremenhede.co.uk



One of the views from Tremenhede