

Garden People

Christopher Woodward Director, Garden Museum

Photograph: Neil Hepworth



The day that I spoke to Christopher Woodward he had just come back from a 'warm-up' at a pizza bar because the heating in the Garden Museum was not working – it was the first day back after the New Year holiday. – but he assured me it would soon be put right for visitors!

Trained as an art historian at Cambridge, Christopher Woodward worked for the Bath Preservation Trust before becoming Director of the Building of Bath Museum. He then went to London to work at the Sir John Soane's museum as a curator, returning to Bath to become Director of the Holbourne Museum. I asked what had turned him from art and architecture to gardens. "I was a gardener as a child, and bought plants with my pocket money, but my sister's rabbit ate them all – so I was discouraged. I came to gardens through eighteenth century poetry and paintings, then, when I was researching my book *In Ruins* I saw the contest between the ruins and nature – how the vegetation curled over crisp edges of the buildings or a sculpture, how lichen created as new beauty out of seats and statues. There are quite a lot of gardeners happy to see stone disappearing under plants. So then I became interested in the forms of gardens".

We talked about the restoration of historic gardens "Sometime a restored garden can be overdone – there is an artificiality about some of them. But it does mean that we can visit them and see something of what they were like"

When Christopher Woodward arrived at the Museum in Lambeth in 2006. it was called the Museum of Garden History, in danger of closure, with a collection of garden implements, and revolved around the Gertrude Jekyll tradition, the tradition of designers such as Rosemary Verey. it is now called the Garden Museum. This, says Christopher Woodward, is to allow a wider range of activities, such as recording gardeners before they disappear. "Where can you go to see a garden by Christopher Woodward Tunnard? The gardens of Cedric Morris or Valerie Finnis? I would like to do exhibitions on the last two, but there is so little information and perhaps visitors wouldn't come" (The next exhibition, about Christopher Lloyd and his garden at Great Dixter, should be a sure fire hit.) The Garden Museum aims to try to correct this and become a repository of information and films. "For example there is no collection of information at the RHS about Beth Chatto or the work of John Brooke – both highly influential people in horticulture and design. We should rectify this". Currently the Museum is working on a film about the Priona Garden in the Netherlands, and the work of Henk Gerritson. The garden was one

of the first ecologically-based gardens and influenced the Dutch 'cult' designs and people like Piet Oudolf. "Henk died two years ago, and there is a danger that his garden might be lost – at least we will have a record of it".

Christopher Woodward is keen to record the work of designers such as Dan Pearson, whose work shows a connection between the past and the present. The gardeners Patrick and Sylvie Quibel who have created *Le Jardin Plume* a garden which reflects influences from Vaux le Vicomte, the Mosque at Cordoba . abstracting the essence of those gardens. "They use plant material to form the garden, to create the architecture, and show how designers use the past"



Museum Garden

Gavin Kingdom

We discussed the purpose of a museum. "Why should people come here – what for? Why should someone get on a train from Basingstoke to visit a museum rather than living garden? We offer events as well as exhibitions where people can take part in discussion rather than just sit and listen I want to encourage debate and the asking of questions – the conversation between the expert and the people who make gardens. We want to show for example, the most significant garden of this year as well as of the past – a Museum is different from a magazine in that it is, like a garden, a place which people can enter to discover"

The new Museum design, by Dow Jones, has a mezzanine gallery for the permanent collection overlooking the space for exhibitions and events. With Christopher Woodward leading a team including Mary Guyatt, who came from the Victoria and Albert Museum and Anne Jennings a garden historian of note, the Garden Museum looks to become such a place of discovery and, the enthusiasm of its Director will join with the enthusiasm of its gardening, designing and writing visitors.



Garden Museum – Interior

The Plant Fair 2009



Books:

Christopher Woodward: *In Ruins*, Random House

With Linda Rutenberg *The English Garden at Night* available April 2010

Website Garden Museum www.museumgardenhistory.org

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