

Jurassic jewel revealed in the heart of London

Joanna Fortnam meets the man behind a stunning new fernery in South Kensington's Royal College of Art

South Kensington, London's museum district, is full of impressive buildings hiding surprises – the Victoria & Albert Museum encloses the John Madejski Garden; the Natural History Museum is famous for its dinosaur bones. And now the Royal College of Art has allowed a slice of primitive rainforest to take root in its courtyard.

Only recently unveiled, what was a barren internal space has been revamped by landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. It is the largest fernery in central London, a green jewel at the heart of the college and completely invisible from the street.

The original space was created almost by accident. The Darwin Building, opened in 1962, nearly but not quite encircled two tall and ancient London plane trees. The trees were marooned on a hump of balding lawn, their roots hacked away on one side. When a later wing was built it closed the circle and left the planes poking their heads just above the roof line. The space beneath was shady and aquarium-like in summer but, certainly at the lower levels, a bit hole-in-the-ground in winter.

The new fernery contains 25-30 different types of fern and is viewable from all levels within the building. The crow's nest position on the fourth floor is shared by the Senior Common Room on one side and the Student Union bar on the other. Both have open-air terraces where generations of Great British Artists can overlook the fernery.

In summer this should be quite a wondrous spot – the play of sunshine on the frondy umbrellas of giant tree ferns stretching up to meet the branches of the planes, with a glimpse of the Royal Albert Hall hovering like a Victorian mothership to the east.

When I meet Longstaffe-Gowan in the slough between Christmas and New Year, the college is quiet. The ferns have just been planted,

Top five ferneries to visit

● **Ascoq Hall**, Isle Of Bute, Scotland (ascoqhallfernery.co.uk). Enchanting sunken and glazed fernery, housing a collection of subtropical ferns.

● **Southport Botanic Gardens**, Merseyside (visitsouthport.com). Splendid 19th-century public fernery. Tufa-walls, grottoes, mirrors reflect ferny vistas.

● **Belfast Botanic Gardens**, Northern Ireland (belfastcity.gov.uk/parksandopen-spaces). The 1889 Tropical Ravine House is a lush, rocky gully.

● **Dewstow Gardens**, Monmouthshire, south Wales (dewstow.com). Built by pre-eminent fernery constructors James Pulham & Son: a wonderland of pools, tunnels, tufa grottoes.

● **Benmore Botanic Garden**, Argyll, Scotland (rbge.org.uk/the-gardens/benmore). Derelict for more than a century, restored in 2008-9. Grotto and diverse range of ferns.

● Chosen by Sarah Whittingham, author of *Fern Fever: The Story of Pteridomania* (Frances Lincoln, pub. Feb 2, £35). Pre-order from Telegraph Books at £31.50 + £1.25 p&P. Call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk.



so it's all still a bit raw around the edges. But even without the buzz of trendy art students, it is clear the fernery is a design masterstroke: a green, relatively low-maintenance shared space in the kind of concrete and glass box so many hard-up institutions are stuck with.

What was an odd remnant of the outdoors has been transformed into a chamber of Jurassic greenery. Tall ferns, short ones, curious double-pronged ones and elegant leaning specimens form an naturalistic colony that could be a survivor of the last Ice Age. Ground-cover ferns mingle with the autumnal leaf litter of the planes. From inside the building the view is of a giant terrarium, lacking only a small dinosaur.

Longstaffe-Gowan, garden historian and landscape architect, pops up in all sorts of interesting places. His current project is a redesign of the gardens of Kensington Palace (opening late March) and, as Gardens Advisor at Hampton Court Palace, he has done restoration work there. He has also been known to hit the headlines with a talent for discovering historic artefacts in unlikely places.

Boundlessly energetic, he wears his scholarly background lightly and brought a deft sense of scale



Best frond: Todd Longstaffe-Gowan in the 'statuesque' fernery he created at the Royal College of Art

and economy to the RCA courtyard. "I realised we couldn't touch the trees, so whatever we did here had to be shade-tolerant.

"I felt we needed something statuesque because the building is big and anything too small would just look rather feeble. What struck me about the tree ferns was that putting in irrigation wouldn't be difficult and, as they are surface-feeders, they are easy to look after.

"Also, I thought something almost mythical and primeval would be a great contrast. This building has all these bright interiors. You see all these trendy students walking around in their extraordinary clothes, and it seems

a very nice foil to have something so green – evergreen – that has a timelessness about it."

On every floor there is a different degree of richness to enjoy. Supermodels of the botanical world, the ferns look good from all angles, from the graphic patterns of their rough trunks to the explosions of green fronds.

It's still early days for a reaction from staff and students. "I suspect a lot of people think it's an ephemeral sort of garden – an installation," says Longstaffe-Gowan. During planting, when 15ft tree ferns were being lugged through the front door and shoved through a downstairs window and

into place, many suspected a remake of *Jurassic Park*.

"People would ask: 'What's going on, is it a film set?' I think they expected to see a pterodactyl flying past," says Longstaffe-Gowan. "But now we've had librarians coming out and saying 'thank goodness there's something to look at'. In spring it will frond up, and I reckon that next year the whole thing will just be magnificent."

● The Royal College of Art, Kensington Gore, London SW7. The next student exhibition is February 1-6 (020 7590 4444; www.rca.ac.uk).

● See tfg-landscape.co.uk for more on the work of Todd Longstaffe-Gowan.

FronDS for a shady place

Lyndon Osborn, a New Zealander with many years' experience importing tree ferns, worked closely with Todd Longstaffe-Gowan. He deliberately picked out unusual sizes and shapes of tree ferns for the RCA, with *Dicksonia antarctica* being the hardiest and most common type, and *Cyathea cooperi* probably the most unusual.

He says: "The canopy of the plane trees at the RCA creates an inversion layer [ie warm air is trapped] and the building bleeds heat through windows and doors. We've put in temperature gauges to detect these mini microclimates and this will help us work out the best places for different ferns as we go along."

Recent hard winters haven't been kind to tree ferns: "They've been hammered in the last two years," says Osborn. "I used to say they were hardy down to -10C (-14F), but I've changed my tune a little."

He now says that while tree ferns are hardy down to -10C (-14F) for short bursts, they cannot take prolonged cold, such as snow lying for four weeks, as happened in 2010.

One maintenance issue at the RCA is the blanketing fall of plane leaves in autumn. Although this looks quite attractive, the leaves must be shredded to speed up the composting process or the ground ferns would be smothered. Osborn plans to compost the leaves off-site, then recycle them as a mulch.

Here is his list of recommended ferns:

Tree ferns

● *Dicksonia antarctica*; *Dicksonia fibrosa*; *Dicksonia squarrosa*; *Cyathea medullaris*; *Cyathea australis*; *Cyathea cooperi*

Ground ferns

● *Asplenium scolopendrium*; *Blechnum spicant*; *Cyrtomium falcatum*; *Dryopteris filix-mas*; *Athyrium filix-femina*; *Matteuccia struthiopteris*; *Polypodium vulgare*; *Onoclea sensibilis*

Best buy

Dicksonia antarctica is the easiest tree fern to grow and the most widely available.

What size?

Tree ferns are very slow-growing so decide on the height you require and add one foot for planting. Remember, they have a large canopy once fronded.

Planting tips

Contrary to received wisdom, tree ferns actually prefer sunlight – but they are amazingly tolerant of shade. Frost protection is a must in hard winters. To protect the crown, pack it with conifer foliage or straw. In extreme conditions fleece is the answer.

Care

Humidity is the key to happy tree ferns. At the RCA an irrigation drip into each crown has been installed. Tree ferns are also heavy feeders so water the crown with a liquid feed such as Maxicrop or any seaweed-based product. Mulch around the trunk annually.

Contact

Find Lyndon Osborn at Columbia Road flower market, London E2, every Sunday from February. Visit www.treeferns.com or call 07946 303062 for more information.