



FRONDS REUNITED

When the landscape architect Todd Longstaffe-Gowan first set eyes on this Regency hothouse in Bedfordshire he instantly recognised it as the work of the great designer George Tod. No matter that it had lost much of its fenestration and all but one of its ferns, nor that the adjacent grotto's ceiling was no more. He simply had to buy the property to which it belonged. What followed was a pane-staking labour of love, with everything from the correct glass to the exotic foliage and fake stalactites all duly restored.

Text: Ruth Guilding. Photography: Beth Evans





The gardener extraordinaire Todd Longstaffe-Gowan designs wonders: a giant succulent pincushion in the shape of a coronet for Lord Rothschild; a rose-girdled ruin-mound and fowl house for an RHS flower show; a tree-fern rainforest in his own London backyard. Six years ago, he and his partner, Tim Knox, and their pair of miniature dachshunds, Missile and Worm, decamped to Bedfordshire. The lure was a perfectly preserved Georgian town house standing in six shaggy acres with – the jewel in this crown – a Regency glasshouse and grotto, the *coup de foudre* that convinced them to up sticks and move here.

When Todd unlatches a yellow-glazed Gothick door there is a sudden splashing, of water falling from a height, spluttering down a glissade of stalactites to a green pool where goldfish float. From a cushion of maidenhair fern a gilded road delivers another rainbow arc of water from its open throat. Filmy fern fronds quiver in the moist air. It's a pretty little house,

he says, isn't it? This mossy grotto chamber and the glasshouse it adjoins are intact and in full use again because of his great skill and imagination. Its previous owner, between 1919 and 1964, was the classical architect Professor Sir Albert Richardson, who crammed the house here with all things Georgian, right down to the sedan chair parked behind the front door. But the professor was not so much of a gardener, although he hung a chandelier in the glasshouse and trained up vines, which would eventually grow through its roof and begin to pull it down. After his death everything was mothballed in a Miss Havisham-esque slumber, then offered to the National Trust, which declined the gift. House and garden remained like this until Richardson's paintings and furniture were dispersed in a Christie's sale in 2013.

Two years later Prof Sir Albert's grandson invited Todd and Tim for lunch and a final look around. Since Todd is a garden historian of note and founding editor of *The London Gardener* he was immediately

enchanted to discover the 17th-century bones of a much older garden, a virtual *hortus conclusus* within high red-brick walls, its lime avenue, stag-headed oaks, bowling green and little banqueting pavilion all extant. He knew at once that this was exceptional, and especially the glasshouse, which was almost certainly built by the celebrated Regency designer George Tod, who published books of his hothouse designs in 1807 and 1823. Tod had built similar glasshouses nearby for the Earl of Upper Ossory at Amphil Park and the Duke of Bedford at Woburn Abbey, but only this one survives, erected in c1820 for John Morris, a socially ambitious brewer who wore the purple of commerce. With 41 public houses to his name, Morris was as rich as Croesus, building his greenhouse on a little eminence overlooking the site of his brewery that's now a teeming Waitrose car park and the beating heart of modern Amphil. About 1830 the exceptionally fashionable and pretty fernery grotto was added at one end, Morris's afterthought,

built within the shell of what had probably begun as a potting shed.

Some time after Prof Sir Albert's death, his son-in-law would haul sheets of corrugated plastic across the glasshouse's broken roof, thus saving it from total destruction. As a result, when Todd found it the massive amphitheatre-shaped pot stand below was mostly intact, with yards of treillage on the back wall and about a third of the original very thin Regency glass. Even so, it was necessary to almost dismantle the entire structure in order to put it back together, rebuilding the parapet and window sashes. The cave-like grotto chamber was another matter. The ceiling had collapsed completely and all the stalactites decorating its tufa-like

rock formations had fallen into the fishpool below. They were exactly remodelled, and after decades of dryness water came back, the old lead irrigation pipes replaced by a copper system of Todd's invention. Only a single fern survived from all the verdure that once flourished in this space. He replanted a great variety, which fill the chamber now with green mounds and cushions of quivering fronds.

'I really don't want to spoil my plants,' he says. 'So we don't heat the glasshouse now. I grow plants that are happy in this cool, frost-free environment, in small pots I can move around – I've made use of lots of hand-thrown ones we found in the potting shed.' When Morris lived here this was probably a hothouse for cultivating



Previous pages, left: the glasshouse is a rare surviving example of George Tod's work. Right: dozens of replacement panes were handmade in Poland. These pages, opposite: Todd Longstaffe-Gowan is growing plumbago and jasmine up the treillage. The floor panements and plant stand are all original. Right: the grotto is glimpsed through a Gothick door

peaches. For ease of maintenance and for their exoticism, he grows succulents, cacti and scented geraniums – 'true' geraniums – instead. 'I have fond memories of visiting Chrissie Gibbs in Oxfordshire. He used to send you home with a big bouquet of fragrant geraniums picked from his greenhouse. I've always been very fond of strange succulents and agaves too, and I like the lax, sprawling, pendant cacti like these ones.' Another bulbous specimen is growing from a fragment of lava from Mount Etna. Friends donate cuttings and Todd collects seed on his travels. The granddaddy of all is the 'Henry Moore' cactus grown from a caterpillar-sized nodule liberated by Tim from a specimen in the sculptor's studio in Perry Green. Of

an unidentified genus known only as the 'worm cactus', it continues to sire dozens of offspring in a breeding programme that benefits many of their friends.

Todd and Tim say they bought their house and garden quite unexpectedly in a fit of recklessness. 'We weren't intending to, but it was such a rare ensemble – the gardens and their motley collection of forlorn buildings. The rarest of all is this glasshouse and its grotto-fernery. It's been a peculiarly satisfying experience coaxing it back to life' © Todd Longstaffe-Gowan's latest book, *English Garden Eccentrics: Three Hundred Years of Extraordinary Groves, Burrowings, Mountains and Menageries*, is published by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (rrp £30)



Left: the stalactites overhanging the grotto – most of which are original – are formed of rolled lead encased in vitreous cement. After finding them in fragments at the bottom of the pool, the owner recast and hand-moulded them back into existence. Opposite: an arc of water jets from the mouth of a frog nestled in the fronds

