

THE MERLIN TRUST: A FUND FOR YOUNG HORTICULTURISTS

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ABSTRACT

In 1990, the renowned plantswoman Valerie Finnis VMH founded the Merlin Trust, a charity that awards travel grants to young horticulturists. Ten years after her death in 2006, the Merlin Trust remains true to her vision, and the ever-growing band of 'Merlins' enrich the horticultural world with the knowledge and skills they have gained on their travels. Many of these horticulturists have gone on to work in botanic and physic gardens and this paper gives some examples of these.

INTRODUCTION

Aspect, soil, climate, associated flora and fauna are all factors that give horticulturists an insight into the role a plant plays in a complex ecosystem and the conditions it needs in which to thrive. And while botanic gardens have rich library and herbarium resources that might yield this information, there is nothing so enlightening as seeing a plant in the wild.

The Merlin Trust is a small charity that helps early-career horticulturists to do just that. Each year, up to 20 'Merlins' undertake expeditions supported by travel grants from the Trust. In 2015–2016 the Trust has made awards to young horticulturists to support travel to habitats and gardens in, among others, Australia, Burma, California, France, Japan, Madagascar, Sweden and western Scotland. As a condition of this support the horticulturists write detailed reports, copies of which are held at the Royal Geographical Society and the RHS Lindley Library, swelling a rich public resource. More recent reports are digitised and can be accessed on the Merlin Trust website (Merlin Trust, 2008). The Trustees judge the reports for two coveted prizes that are awarded annually, the Christopher Brickell prize for best report and the Valerie Finnis prize for best photographs. These two famous names give an idea of the origins of the Merlin Trust, and explain why it is so deeply embedded in UK horticulture.

FOUNDING THE TRUST

Valerie Finnis VMH (Fig. 1) was a renowned plantswoman and photographer who founded the charity in 1990. VMH is the Victoria Medal of Honour awarded by the Royal Horticultural Society Council to outstanding British horticulturists. Only 63 horticulturists can hold the medal at any one time. Valerie trained at Waterperry Horticultural School for Women, which she joined during the Second World War. She remained there

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Fig. 1 Valerie Finnis. Photograph reproduced with kind permission of the RHS Lindley Library.

as a teacher for 28 years, developing her expertise in growing and propagating alpine plants, in particular the Kabschia and Engleri subsections of *Saxifraga*. Her extrovert character and her intense curiosity about people enabled Valerie to play a leading role in post-war horticulture, a period which her friend Ursula Buchan describes as ‘the golden age of gardening’. Valerie met her husband, Sir David Scott, a very keen gardener himself, when he went to Waterperry for advice on growing alpiners. Following his death in 1986, Valerie sought to identify a way of helping young people interested in a horticultural career, in particular to help them broaden their knowledge outside formal horticultural courses. After much consultation of her extensive contacts, she established the Merlin Trust in memory of Sir David’s only son Merlin, himself a gifted naturalist, who was killed in the Second World War.

Former Director General of the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Christopher Brickell CBE VMH says: “I was asked by Valerie to Chair the Merlin Trust, which I did for ten years. Valerie, of course, came to the meetings and took a personal interest in all the ‘Merlins’ who were given awards. While sometimes Valerie appeared to be rather vague and unaware of what was happening around her she was, in fact, very shrewd. Through the Merlin Trust she achieved, perhaps subconsciously at first, the development of a network which is a very important link between generations of horticulturists who sometimes join each other to go on plant-studying expeditions and other projects which would, I am sure, have pleased her greatly.”

The editor of *Sibbaldia*, David Rae, helped Valerie with the legal requirements of establishing a trust at the very start and was a Trustee for twenty-four years and chairman for two. Plantsman and botanist Brian Mathew MBE, VMH, who was also a long-serving trustee, takes up the story: “Valerie Finnis’s vision for the Merlin Trust was to help young people who had already chosen horticulture as their career to broaden their horizons – giving them the chance to travel to far-flung places. Valerie favoured the projects that followed the path of plantsmanship, being a good plantswoman herself, but it was seldom that an applicant was turned down on the basis of ‘that’s not us’. Few applicants made plant photography their primary aim but those that did received particular favour – again, reflecting the fact that she was a very good photographer. Overall, I think she was most excited by those who chose to travel to see plants in the wild or to visit famous gardens and botanical gardens around the world. Maybe this was a reflection of the fact that she did not go ‘plant hunting’ herself, although she did go on lecture tours abroad.

“From the beginning she saw it as being much more personal than just another grant-giving body and set out to get to know her Merlins, as she called them, through letters and phone calls. Valerie regarded the Merlins as her ever-growing family, kept in touch with them and liked to know how their careers developed, when they got married, and so on. Her memory of past Merlins was remarkable; she remembered clearly who each of them was and where they had visited.”

Since Valerie Finnis died in 2006, that very personal aspect of being a Merlin has become less pronounced, although successive Secretaries to the Trust – Fiona Crumley, Joanne Everson, Chloe Wells and now Sarah Carlton – have always mentored applicants to support the process and help with planning their journeys.

So how does the Merlin Trust work? Applications for grants from the UK and Ireland are invited throughout the year, and funding is available to foreign nationals studying in the UK. Applicants should be aged between 18 and 35 or in the first five years of their horticultural career. They are asked to submit their travel plan, which may include either visiting gardens in the UK or abroad or studying plants in their natural habitats anywhere in the world. The Trustees consider any projects, whether long-term or short-term.

WHO BENEFITS?

In the 26 years since the Trust was founded, it has supported more than 630 Merlins to travel around the world. And wherever one looks in UK horticulture – from iconic public gardens to conservation organisations to specialist nurseries and beyond – there is likely to be a Merlin close by.

The journal *Sibbaldia* itself is a case in point. Its sub-editor is a Merlin. Kate Hughes, Horticultural Project Officer at RBGE, became a Merlin in 1997 when she travelled to Chile to collect plants from the temperate rainforests there. “I had recently graduated from the HND in Horticulture with Plantsmanship at RBGE and the Scottish Agricultural

College and completed a project on Chilean species which are popularly grown in Britain. The Merlin Trust funding enabled me to join a plant-collecting trip and learn not just about the plants and plant collecting but also about the importance of the work of botanic gardens in conservation. Eighteen years later I still call on my experiences there and am currently looking at the possibility of working again with counterparts who I met back then, whose careers have developed similarly, and with whom I can collaborate.”

Other Merlins at RBGE include horticulturist Louise Galloway, who undertook projects in Scotland and Borneo, and John Mitchell, who has worked for 32 years at RBGE, 21 of those as Alpine Supervisor. As Merlin number 76, John travelled to China on the famous 1994 Alpine Garden Society (AGS) Expedition. “It had a massive impact on me,” he says. “I was travelling with the ‘cream of the crop’ – Ron McBeath, Christopher Grey-Wilson, Elizabeth Strangman – and it was such an eye opener. I was privileged and honoured.” He has returned to China numerous times and travelled widely, taking part in expeditions to Iran, Altai, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan, Tibet and Alaska. He is in no doubt about the value of these experiences. “Seeing plants in the wild gives you a better idea of how to grow them. It reminds you why you wanted to work with plants in the first place and gets you enthusiastic all over again, and once you get the bug it’s hard to stop. It’s really important for us to build expertise in the younger generations coming through, getting a wide range of people used to plant exploration and study.”

Sally Petitt, Head of Horticulture at Cambridge University Botanic Garden (CUBG), agrees. “Such an experience, whether it be in the UK or the rainforests of South America, is invaluable early in a horticultural career in increasing understanding of plant cultivation. This is something which stays with you and encourages you to fully understand and consider how best to grow plants. The support of Merlin was invaluable to me and beneficial to my career in many ways.” Sally has two Merlin numbers, 251 and 339. Having started her horticultural career in 1988 as a trainee at CUBG, she progressed to a position looking after the then woodland and herbaceous section and thence into the alpine section. It was at this stage that she first travelled as a Merlin on a CUBG collecting expedition to Pakistan in 1998, looking at the flora, particularly the alpine flora, of the Plains of Deosai. Her second Merlin trip was an Alpine Garden Society expedition to China in 2000.

Sally says: “I was quite well informed before my trip to Pakistan – the expedition leader had shared his experiences of the flora and also the culture of the region and we were well equipped with suitable clothing, collecting equipment and so on. But I don’t think anything could have prepared me for the dramatic landscape, diverse flora, intensity of work and the mosquitoes. I wasn’t prepared to hear gunshots on the Pakistan-Kashmir border, which we were very close to at the time. There was a serious threat of nuclear war between the two countries and had we been mistaken for Americans we would probably have been vulnerable to attack. It was a real adventure, but a thrill and privilege to gain first-hand experience of the flora of this little-known region. This stood me in good stead for all my subsequent visits to see plants in the wild.” Sally’s first expedition set her on a path that was to see her honoured with the AGS Sir William & Lady Lawrence Award for significant work with alpinists for a person under 35.



Fig. 2 Sally Petitt on the CUBG collecting trip to Pakistan in 1998.

“Seeing alpiners in their native habitats and the conditions in which they grow – the geology, plant associations and so on – really enhanced my understanding of the plants I was growing in the alpine section and their cultivation requirements. I also learnt so much about plant identification, international legislation and protocol, and collecting procedures, as well as getting a better appreciation of the social and cultural aspects of the country. My report and articles for CUBG led to invitations to give talks, particularly to AGS groups, and I was then invited to join the AGS China expedition in 2000 and subsequently to co-lead AGS tours.”

Though no longer working directly with alpiners, Sally says her Merlin experiences are still relevant both professionally and personally. She is now one of the Merlin Trustees, assessing applications from young horticulturists and judging their reports for the annual prizes.

What is striking is how many people in horticulture both in the UK and abroad have been associated with the Trust early on in their careers. Troy Scott Smith, Head Gardener of Sissinghurst, one of the National Trust’s most famous gardens, became Merlin 374 when he travelled to Australia and New Zealand. Galanthophile and expert author Matthew Bishop visited Romania as Merlin 45. The editor-in-chief of the *RHS Plant Finder*, botanist Janet Cubey, who is also Manager of RHS Horticultural Data and Floral Judging, was an early Merlin, travelling to China and Vietnam.

The British public’s love affair with plants and gardens means that many Merlins, like Janet Cubey, are involved in public education and engagement, using their passion

for plants in their writing and broadcasting. Other examples include Lia Leendertz, garden writer for the *Guardian* newspaper and columnist for the RHS's *Garden* magazine, who travelled to Corsica as Merlin 253, and Bill Chudziak, gardener, broadcaster and nurseryman, who went to Nepal as Merlin 51.

Botanic gardens benefit enormously from the knowledge and skills Merlins bring with them. Andrew Gdaniec, Curator of Gibraltar Botanic Garden, was a Kew Diploma student when he travelled as a Merlin (Fig. 3). He first went to Canada to study cacti in the northern limits of species within Cactaceae and to investigate the potential introduction of hardy cacti to UK gardens. His second Merlin trip took him to the US, to develop contacts with professional horticulturists from North America and study cacti in habitat for his Kew Diploma dissertation.

Andrew says: "These expeditions were incredibly helpful in the development of my career. They enabled me to develop my experience and knowledge about succulents further, to write my dissertation and later publish a few articles. I started growing cacti at the age of four and have been able to continue my passion in a professional capacity. I still work with cacti and at the moment am developing succulent living collections in the Gibraltar Botanic Garden. I haven't stopped travelling to see them in the wild – in recent years I have visited Ecuador, northern Chile, Mexico, Morocco, South Africa, Indonesia and a few more."

Merlins at other botanic gardens include Seamus O'Brien, Curator of Kilmacurragh Botanic Gardens (147 China; 364 Nepal and China), Brendan Sayers, author and orchid expert at the National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin (127 Mexico and Belize), Kate Pritchard, Glasshouses Curator at Oxford Botanic Gardens (287 Chile and Easter Island; 397 California and Arizona), Bill Baker, Assistant Head of Comparative Plant and Fungal Biology, RBG Kew (21 Nepal and 67 Cameroon), Aaron Davis, Senior Research Leader, Plant Resources, RBG Kew (3 Turkey) and Daniel Luscombe of Bedgebury Pinetum (430 Tasmania).

GARDEN VISITS

The Merlin Trust also supports young horticulturists who want to visit other gardens. Sally Petitt is clear that this is just as important for developing ways to inspire and educate that are central to the missions of botanic gardens today: "Visiting other gardens is valuable in many ways. It gives an opportunity to understand what can and can't grow in your own garden, provides inspiration to try new species, styles, techniques and cultivation methods. It can increase understanding of managerial issues, visitor management, education and so on. It also offers opportunities to network with other horticulturists and share experiences, both positive and negative. Both trips to see plants in their native habitats and visits to gardens provide opportunities to observe, absorb and better understand the requirements of cultivating plants."

One of Sally's six fellow Merlin Trustees is Jim Jermyn, Horticultural Consultant and Show Manager for Gardening Scotland and the Ayr Flower Show. Though the Merlin Trust



Fig. 3 Jim Jermyn and Dieter Schacht in the Schachen Garden. Photo: Sam Weller.

didn't exist at the time, Jim's career was transformed by a journey he made when he was a young apprentice at W.E.Th. Ingwersen's famous alpine nursery in Sussex: "One day the nursery foreman George Henley said: 'If you want to progress in the field of alpinism you need to get yourself over to the Munich Botanic Garden and serve your time on the Schachen Garden.' I asked how he proposed I did that. He told me to make an appointment with Mr Will (Ingwersen) and the rest would fall into place. Indeed it did – my father funded my train travel from Hertfordshire to Munich and gave me pocket money to get going. The experience I gained in Munich was to set me up in alpinism for the rest of my life."

THE FUTURE

The role of botanic gardens has changed and developed over the centuries since the Orto Botanico at the University of Padua was established in 1545. But throughout their history, whether as a scientific endeavour to catalogue the world's flora, a stock yard marshalling plant genetic resources for the economic benefit of its patrons, or a place to inspire wonder, one thing has not changed: the need to understand how plants grow. As the emphasis on conservation and habitat restoration becomes more pronounced, seeing plants in their natural environment is as valuable as ever. As Kate Hughes points out: "If you love plants already, and then you see them surviving in their context you immediately know them better and a picture is imprinted on your mind. When you travel and come into contact with all the other aspects of visiting unknown countries

such as the culture, colours, smells and sounds of a place that is not your own, these experiences attach themselves to the plants which you have seen and make up a life experience which links you to the plants in a way that studying them at home does not. This is useful, not only for an individual's personal and professional development, but also because we may feel that we want to conserve the environments and species to which we feel connected, and therefore be more inclined to use our professional energy to do this."

RBGE's John Mitchell says: "If anyone gets the chance to travel to see plants growing in the wild, I would say grab it with both hands. It doesn't have to be a long-haul trip. Start small, start with Europe, develop your skills. It will make such a difference to your whole approach. Merlin is absolutely amazing. Hats off to Valerie Finnis and hats off to the Merlin Trust."

The Merlin Trust is in the process of creating a funded three-week placement to the Munich Botanic Garden to work in the Alpine Department and in Munich's famous satellite Schachen Garden at 2,000m in the Bavarian Alps. This will give successful applicants the opportunity to work with a wide range of alpinines in a more natural setting. If you would like to support the Merlin Trust or are interested in applying for a travel grant, visit the website at www.merlin-trust.org.uk

EXCERPTS FROM THE REPORTS: MERLIN'S EXPERIENCES

Louise Hay

Shortly before travelling to the Peloponnese in 2013 Louise Hay had accepted a job at the Eden Project as a horticulturist in the Mediterranean biome. Here she writes about a visit to the island of Monemvasia linked to the mainland by a short causeway: "The sheer cliffs of the island look uninhabitable, but somehow seeds still manage to germinate there. John [Richards, the tour leader] has a very interesting theory to explain how seed germination is possible in these extremely hostile conditions – spiders! They spin their webs between the cracks in the rock and wait for some unfortunate prey to become tangled among them, but prey is not the only thing that gets caught. Seed that drops from the nearby vegetation can easily get stuck in the web. When the spider wraps its prey and takes it back to its nest to devour it, it may inadvertently bring the seed with it. A spider's nest in the crack of a rock has just enough organic matter to germinate the seed and just enough room for the roots to anchor themselves. Many species have adapted to grow in this hostile environment. Among the ones we saw today was *Inula candida*, with its silvery rosettes of wavy margined leaves, *Ruta chalapensis* and *Scrophularia heterophylla*."



Fig. 4 Louise Hay is an Indoor Biome Skilled Horticulturist at the Eden Project. Photo: Louise Hay.

Ned Lomax

Ned Lomax, as a Gardener at the National Trust's Glendurgan Garden in Cornwall, travelled to the Northern Drakensburg Mountains in 2011. "Across the whole of the Royal Natal National Park it was evident that wild fires are commonplace, and it was interesting to note the different ways in which plants survived them. The majority of plants simply regenerated from seed contained within the soil. I observed that the large *Merwillia* bulbs which sat half-submerged in the ground, while charred by the flames, did not seem to have suffered at all. Other plants survived by growing in areas less susceptible to fire. I had already noticed that *Protea caffra* and *P. roupelliae*, the two dominant *Protea* species in the park, grew in different locations. I tended to encounter *P. roupelliae* at higher altitudes, which at first led me to think that it benefited from lower temperatures. However, after observing colonies of *P. caffra*, blackened by fire but reshooting strongly, and comparing them to scorched plants of *P. roupelliae*, in most cases dead, I noticed that the exposed higher-altitude locations in which *P. roupelliae* occurred were also by their nature less prone to wild fires. Having seen the conditions in which both *P. caffra* and *P. roupelliae* grow, I am very keen to attempt to cultivate them at Glendurgan. I am particularly heartened by the corky bark of *P. caffra* and its ability



Fig. 5 Ned Lomax in the Drakensburg Mountains. Photo: Ned Lomax.

to reshoot, suggesting that it may be capable of regeneration after an uncommonly harsh Cornish winter.” Ned is now Head Gardener at Lamorran Garden, a subtropical, Italianate-inspired garden at St Mawes in Cornwall.

Faye Steer

Faye Steer, Young Horticulturist of the Year 2010, went to Yunnan in 2011. She describes how the landscape changed as she reached higher elevations: “The trees were replaced by twisted rhododendrons, a few ice-pink flowers still hanging on, followed by rocky scree with scrappy plants dotted about. By now the mist was so thick all we could see was the steep scree slope rising above us, and the sheer drop to the other. One of our party called out that we should stop, and we all immediately saw why – shining out of the slate-grey rock was a single flash of turquoise blue. It was what we had been longing to see – the legendary blue poppy. This species was *Meconopsis horridula*, so named because every part of the plant is covered in spines.” Faye is now Glasshouse and Production Senior Supervisor at Chatsworth.



Fig. 6 Faye Steer and *Meconopsis horridula* in Yunnan. Photo: Faye Steer.

REFERENCE

MERLIN TRUST (2008). Available at www.merlin-trust.org.uk (accessed April 2016).