

THE ENGLISH GARDEN TRADITIONS OF LIGURIA



UNESCO World Heritage Site classification on the horizon for the Hanbury Gardens

By SUSANNE ALTWEGER-MINET

The historic settlement of the Riviera by the English during the 19th century is still very much present in the charming gardens along its coast. Two gardens in particular are closely connected with the English merchant family of Hanbury, who were also passionate gardeners: La Mortola near Ventimiglia, better known under the name Giardini Botanici Hanbury, and the Villa della Pergola in Alassio.

The most famous example of the English gardening traditions of Liguria are the Hanbury Gardens, which are on the waiting list for UNESCO World Heritage Site classification. The palazzo itself was the former home of the Marchesi Drengo and offers a breathtaking, panoramic view of the hillside estate, its forest of plants and the Mediterranean. The park is a bucolic treasure trove for lovers of botany and garden design, and it is all in thanks to the young Thomas Hanbury who acquired the steep, coastal plot in 1867.

Hanbury had two goals: to create a beautiful park and

garden, and to establish a harmony of native and exotic plants through acclimatisation and botanical experiments. Today, the University of Genoa has catalogued some 6,000 different plant life species in the gardens.

It was important to Thomas to protect the elevated landscape of the place and as he transformed the estate into botanical gardens, the avid gardener retained the originality of the sharply inclining slope. Pergolas are connected by serpentine paths, winding stairs and hidden ramps, which all meet in the centre. Thomas also took great care to preserve fragments of the ancient Roman Via Giulia Augusta, which run through the domain.

Solid and reliable footwear is a must and for those wanting to follow the signposts down towards the sea, good health is also recommended. But however much the trek may leave you feeling breathless, it will be nothing compared to the beauty of the views. One is well compensated by a voyage through a paradisiacal world of plants, sculptures, amphorae and wells.

When picking a time of year to visit, spring and autumn are ideal. Parking is difficult during the summer with limited spaces on the nearby squares and streets. There is a small café on-site, but there is room for improvement and it is shabbily furnished when compared to lovely décor of the gardens outside.

Few are aware that the Villa della Pergola in Alassio also belonged to the Hanbury family from 1922. The house and terrace were built back in 1880 by another British family (the Scottish McMurdos), but the Hanburys brought their signature green thumb to its gardens. Today, the park is characterised by a romantic pergola encircled with roses and bougainvillea; pine, olive, almond, Lebanon cedar and eucalyptus trees; gigantic bird of paradise flowers and cacti. The artistry of the park has, in the past, attracted masters of film. Hitchcock shot scenes for his directorial debut - *The Pleasure Garden* - here in 1925 and Oscar-winning Guy Green followed in 1957 with *The Snorkel* starring Peter van Eyck. Outside of their family properties, the Hanburys extended their influence to a number of other great gardens in Liguria such as the Villa Boccanegra and the Giardino Moreno, of which just a portion has survived under the popular name of the Monet gardens.

The charming Boccanegra, whose roots date back to the middle of the 16th century, can be found almost directly across the bay from the Hanbury Botanical Gardens. At the beginning of the 20th century, the estate was bought by vivacious English heiress Ellen Willmott - a lover of roses and keen botanist - after she visited La Mortola. During restorations to the garden in 1983, plants from all over the world were transported to the Villa Boccanegra and continue to thrive today on terraces of varied elevations. Over time, the palazzo has become enveloped by climbing plants and vines.

Sadly not all of the Moreno Gardens of Bordighera exist today, but on Via Domenico Tumiati, a small section lives on. In 1884, painter Claude Monet described the gardens as 'incredibly beautiful' and 'pure magic'. He must have been thoroughly taken; the gardens inspired three individual paintings. ▀