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978-1-108-06545-0 - Kew Gardens: Or, a Popular Guide to the Royal Botanic Gardens of Kew

William Jackson Hooker

Excerpt

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KEW GARDENS.

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BRIEF HISTORIC NOTICE.

It is generally known that considerable changes in the Royal Botanic Grounds of Kew were contemplated about the year 1840, when, from being a private garden belonging to the Royal Family, and maintained by funds from the Board of Green Cloth, it was liberally relinquished by her present Majesty, Queen Victoria, and placed under the control of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods and Forests, with the view of rendering it available for the general good. The public, having since been freely admitted to the Gardens under a few needful regulations, must have observed the many alterations and improvements effected under the sanction of the above-mentioned Commission, and cannot fail to desire some information respecting them. It is with a view to satisfy such laudable curiosity, and to increase the interest with which the Gardens are visited, that this GUIDE is now compiled.

We shall not here enter into the full and early history of the Royal Gardens of Kew: a few statements are, however, necessary, and we have selected them from the best authorities.

About the middle of the seventeenth century, the spot that now forms the Royal Gardens of Kew, together with a residence called *Kew House*, belonged to R. Bennett, Esq., whose daughter and heiress married Lord Capel. There is a handsome white marble monument to this lady in Kew Church. Kew House and Grounds then passed into the hands of Mr. Molyneux, who was secretary to King George II. (when Prince of Wales), and who married Lady Elizabeth Capel. He was well known as a man of literature and an astronomer. With an instrument of Mr. Molyneux's own con-

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struction, and in those very grounds, Dr. Bradley made the valuable discoveries relating to the fixed stars, to commemorate which an inscription was placed by the late King William IV. on the pedestal of a sun-dial, which stands on the identical spot which had been occupied by Dr. Bradley's telescope, upon the lawn, opposite to the present palace.

The Prince of Wales, who was son to George II., and father to George III., admiring the situation of *Kew House*, took a long lease of it from the Capel family about the year 1730, and began to form the pleasure-grounds, then containing about 270 acres. They were completed by his widow, Augusta, Princess Dowager of Wales, who delighted in superintending the improvements, then conducted upon a most extensive scale. At this time Sir W. Chambers was employed in decorating the Gardens at Kew with temples, &c., an account of which he published in a large folio work with many plates, (dedicated to the Princess Dowager of Wales,) under the title of "Plans, Elevations, Sections, and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew, in Surrey, the Seat of H. R. H. the Princess Dowager of Wales."

The Exotic Department of this Garden was commenced by the same Princess, and much favoured by the Earl of Bute, about the middle of the eighteenth century. Many of the finest foreign trees were contributed by Archibald Duke of Argyle (styled by Horace Walpole the Tree-monger), who sent them from his once richly-stored garden at Whitton, near Hounslow.

We find that in the year 1759, Mr. W. Aiton, a pupil of the celebrated Philip Miller, of the Chelsea Physic-Garden, was placed in charge of the Botanical Gardens at Kew, — a gentleman no less distinguished by his private virtues than his knowledge of plants, and great skill in cultivating them. His professional abilities quickly procured him the notice of the late Sir Joseph Banks, and a friendship commenced which subsisted between them for life.

About the year 1789 His Majesty George III. purchased Kew House, which was soon afterwards pulled down, and its furniture removed to an older mansion, since known by the name of *Kew Palace*, and once the property of Sir Hugh Portman, who is mentioned as "the rich gentleman who was knighted by Queen Elizabeth at Kew." This small but picturesque red brick dwelling, which appears to be of the date of King James, or Charles I., was purchased in 1781 for Queen Charlotte (who died there); and it was long the favourite suburban residence of the Royal Family. Her Majesty evinced much interest in the increase of the collection of plants; and justly does the late Sir James E. Smith, President of the Linnæan Society, bear testimony to the Queen's love of botany,

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when he says "that the genus *Strelitzia* (so called by Mr. Aiton) stands on the sure basis of botanical knowledge and zeal, few persons having cherished the study of nature more ardently, or cultivated it so deeply, as Her Majesty." Under such auspices, and aided by the enlightened patronage of Sir Joseph Banks, it was only to be expected that the Gardens of Kew should become celebrated all over the world. So early as 1760, the great or old Stove (No. 8. of the Plan), 114 feet long, was built by Sir William Chambers.

In 1761 the noble Orangery (No. 2. of the Plan) was erected also by Sir William Chambers. It measures 145 feet in length, its width is 30 feet, and its height 25 feet. In the same year was added the very elegant Temple of the Sun, as it is called, of the Corinthian order (C. of the Plan); and some young trees were planted near, which are now grown to be among the most beautiful in the Gardens, particularly an *Oriental Plane* and a *Turkey Oak*. Such had been the increase of plants, that, in the year 1788, a greenhouse was built for Cape plants (since demolished), 110 feet long; and another for the vegetable productions of New Holland, nearly the same size (No. 10. of the Plan), was added in 1792. (This latter has been much enlarged and improved under the name of the "Australian House.")

A catalogue of the plants in the Exotic Garden of Kew was published by Dr. Hill in 1768, and a second edition the following year.

A far more elaborate and important work appeared in 3 vols. 8vo., accompanied by some admirable plates, the *Hortus Kewensis* of William Aiton, in 1789, giving an account of the several foreign plants which had been introduced into the English gardens at different times, amounting to 5,600 in number; and so much was it esteemed that the whole impression was sold off within two years. Mr. Aiton did not long survive this publication, for he died in 1793, in the sixty-third year of his age, and lies buried in the churchyard at Kew, near the graves of his distinguished friends, Zoffany, Meyer, and Gainsborough. He was succeeded by his son, W. Townsend Aiton, Esq., who was no less esteemed by King George III. than his father had been, and who, besides conducting the botanical department, and taking charge of the extensive pleasure-grounds, was also employed in the improvement of the other Royal gardens, in all which he displayed great skill and judgment, and an intimate acquaintance with his profession.

The voyage of Captain Cook and Sir Joseph Banks round the world; those of Captain Flinders and Mr. Robert Brown (*Botanicorum Princeps*), and of Mr. Allan Cunningham, to Australia; the expeditions of Bowie and Masson respectively to Brazil and the Cape of Good Hope—all these enriched the Gardens of Kew with the vegetable

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productions of the southern hemisphere, to an extent unparalleled before or since: besides which, other collectors were employed abroad during a long period of years in various countries; and the produce of their researches was deposited at Kew. On various occasions, especially during the life of King George III., other houses, stoves and pits were erected, as occasion required; but it must be confessed that, on the demise of that revered monarch and of Sir Joseph Banks, whom His Majesty so much delighted to honour, and who died shortly after the King, the establishment languished and suffered from want of Royal and scientific encouragement. During the reigns of George IV. and William IV., with the exception of a few plants being transmitted by occasionally employed collectors, and one hothouse being erected by the last-mentioned sovereign (and it is but right to add that this conservatory is eminently handsome and ornamental), the Botanic Gardens retrograded rather than flourished; and matters must have been much worse, but for the truly parental affection cherished towards it by Mr. Aiton, and the able exertions of his foreman (now the curator), Mr. John Smith. Throughout the country an opinion existed, which soon began to be loudly expressed, that either the Gardens should be entirely abolished or placed upon a very different footing, and rendered available, as a great popular yet scientific establishment, for the advantage of the public.

Government was, happily, ready to respond to this latter feeling; and in 1838, the Lords of Her Majesty's Treasury appointed a committee to inquire into the management, condition, &c. of the Royal Botanic Gardens. The result was, that in May, 1840, a return was made to the House of Commons, in the shape of a report by Dr. Lindley, who, at the desire of the committee, had surveyed the Gardens, in conjunction with two well-known practical gardeners.

Strangers, or persons not well acquainted with the vicinity of Kew, often entertain very incorrect notions of this establishment; nor can such be wondered at, seeing for how long a time it was the private garden of the Royal Family, and taking also into account its extensive and highly-varied nature. It may be interesting, especially as exhibiting most forcibly the change that has since taken place, to describe in few words the extent and condition of the grounds at the time of this investigation, namely, in 1840. They then consisted of—

1. *The Grounds immediately about the existing Palace of Kew*, which were of small circuit, lying near the river, and consisting mainly of those of the great edifice or Palace*, begun by Mr. Wyatt in the reign of His Majesty King George III., and soon afterwards pulled down, and the grounds of the present Palace. The boundary

* The site of this Palace is now, with the sanction of Her Majesty, used as a nursery for the supply of the London Parks.

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is the river on the north side, the Pleasure-Grounds on the south and west, and the Botanic Garden on the east.

2. *The Botanic Garden proper*, which contained at the time in question 11 acres, or thereabouts, of very irregular outline; bounded on the north partly by the gardens of those residences, mainly Crown property, which stand on the south side of Kew Green, in part by the Green itself, from which it was separated by a handsome railing, and in part by the gardens of His late Majesty the King of Hanover; westward, by the grounds of the Palace above-mentioned; eastward, by what were then the Royal Kitchen and Forcing-Gardens (now a part of the Botanic Garden); and south by the Pleasure-Ground.

3. *The Royal Kitchen and Forcing-Gardens*, situated between the Botanic Garden and the Richmond road, comprising about fourteen acres. (This portion has been, as just observed, added to the Botanic Garden.)

4. *The Pleasure-Ground or Arboretum*, comprising 270 acres of wood, shrubbery and lawn, lying to the south of the Botanic Garden, and bounded by the Richmond road on one side, and the river on the other. For some years this extensive and beautiful area had been thrown open only twice a week during the summer (now daily during that season, and the public are admitted at three different entrances).

5. South of this, and stretching between the Richmond road and the Thames, almost into the lower part of Richmond, lies *Richmond Old Park*, or the *Old Royal Deer-Park*, as it is sometimes called; a noble extent of pasture, comprising about 400 acres, interspersed with many fine trees; distinguished by the *Observatory* erected by George III., and now liberally granted to the use of the British Association, where that scientific body has carried on an interesting series of experiments on terrestrial magnetism.

The report of Dr. Lindley, mentioned above, has reference only to the second of these divisions, namely, the *Royal Botanic Gardens*, which are stated to "include many fine exotic trees and shrubs, a small collection of herbaceous plants, and numerous specimens of grasses." Ten different stoves and greenhouses then existed; most of which have been either condemned and pulled down as unworthy of the Gardens, or so greatly altered as to be no longer recognizable under Dr. Lindley's description.

It resulted from this investigation, that the whole of the Gardens, Pleasure-Grounds and Park was transferred to the department of the Commissioners of Her Majesty's Woods and Forests. Mr. Aiton, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of his holding office, retired from the charge of the Botanic Gardens; and the present Director received instructions from the Board to enter upon his important

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duties in the spring of the year 1841, and to prepare, as speedily as possible, a Report of those alterations which were deemed essential for rendering the Gardens useful to the public at home and to our colonies abroad. Many useful suggestions on these heads were offered by Dr. Lindley in the before-mentioned document, especially the following: — “A national garden ought to be the centre, round which all minor establishments of the same nature should be arranged: they should be all under the control of the chief of that garden, acting in concert with him, and through him with one another, reporting constantly their proceedings, explaining their wants, receiving their supplies, and aiding the mother-country in every thing that is useful in the vegetable kingdom. Medicine, commerce, agriculture, horticulture, and many valuable branches of manufacture, would derive much benefit from the adoption of such a system. From a garden of this kind, government would be able to obtain authentic and official information on points connected with the founding of new colonies: it would afford the plants there required, without its being necessary, as now, to apply to the officers of private establishments for advice and assistance.”

Changes of a highly important character could not fail in suggesting themselves to the Director, on his becoming intimately acquainted with the minutæ of the establishment, many of which it were tedious to narrate in this place.

One of the first was to open the Botanic Gardens for the admittance of the public daily. Not only the Grounds but the Plant-houses and Museum are open to visitors; the number of whom, it is needless to say, is very considerable*; yet, what is peculiarly gratifying, and contrary to the anticipation of many persons, this privilege has been rarely abused. In the few cases of an opposite line of conduct, the consequent detection (which must be expected where trustworthy men are necessarily dispersed through the Gardens at their various occupations) has proved its own punishment.

Next to the facility and consequent pleasure and instruction to the public, the enlargement of the ground was an important object. The limit of the Garden was not, indeed, exactly defined where it met the precincts of the residence of His Majesty the King of Hanover; but permission was soon obtained to include within the Botanic Garden

* It may not be uninteresting to our readers to state the gradual increase of visitors, since the Botanic Gardens were thus daily thrown open to the public. The amount of visitors

in 1841 was	-	-	-	9,174	in 1850 was	-	-	-	179,627
1842	”	-	-	11,400	1851	”	-	-	238,900
1843	”	-	-	13,492	1852	”	-	-	231,210
1844	”	-	-	15,114	1853	”	-	-	331,210
1845	”	-	-	28,139	1854	”	-	-	339,164
1846	”	-	-	46,573	1855	”	-	-	318,818
1847	”	-	-	64,282	1856	”	-	-	344,140
1848	”	-	-	91,708	1857	”	-	-	361,978
1849	”	-	-	37,865					

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all the ground immediately about the Conservatory and Orangery, which greatly enhanced the beauty of the view, and added between 3 and 4 acres. This augmentation to the limits, however, was, from its small extent, rather to be considered ornamental than useful. Application was made by the Chief Commissioner of Woods and Forests, to the Queen, for a grant of land from the contiguous Pleasure-Ground, which might afford the means of forming a *Pinetum* (or a collection of plants of the Pine-tribe) suited to such an establishment, and also of erecting a Palm-Stove, or tropical house, equally worthy of the place and the nation. Her Majesty was graciously pleased to assent to this request; and a portion of the Pleasure-Ground, comprising about 47 acres, and including a piece of water, was surveyed, and permitted to be enclosed within a light wire fence, which still gives to view the rest of the Pleasure-Ground, and adds to the beauty of the Botanic Gardens, which, thus augmented, contained 60 acres.

Again, in the winter of 1846-7, orders were received for abolishing the Royal Kitchen and Forcing Gardens of Kew, as such, and incorporating them with the Botanic Grounds, which has already been done, thus adding 15 more acres to the scientific portion of the grounds (75 acres in all).

But changes now come to be noticed that have been effected within the above-mentioned *Botanic Garden* grounds; for, in the same ratio that hardy plants required more space, so did the tender plants need increased accommodation; and plans were accordingly given in for those improvements, by which such a transformation is effected in the aspect of the place, that persons who have not visited Kew Gardens for a few years can scarcely recognise the localities. We shall describe, with all possible brevity, the present condition of the Royal Botanic Gardens, and at the same time indicate the objects most worth the attention of a stranger, both in the open ground and in the several plant-houses. There is a separate Guide-Book to the extensive and valuable contents of the two Museums of Economic Botany within the Gardens.

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ON approaching the Botanic Gardens by the new entrance at the head of Kew Green, the visitor cannot fail to be struck with the beauty of the richly ornamented gateway, erected in 1845-6, by the late Mr. Walker, of York, from a design of Decimus Burton, Esq. Passing through it, the main walk takes a westerly course, and, besides catching a distant view of Kew Palace, attention will be attracted on the left by the fine trees of the OLD ARBORETUM, a collection of hardy exotic trees and shrubs. On the lawn on the right-hand side of this walk, among other recently planted and recently introduced trees, is the graceful *Cryptomeria Japonica*, a plant of the Pine-kind, native of Northern China and Japan, with other young evergreen trees or shrubs, and a Palm of Northern China, *Chamærops excelsa*, which has been found to bear our climate for some years past with little or no protection; and on the other side of the walk, on the outskirts of the old Arboretum, will be seen good specimens of *Douglas's Pine* (*Abies Douglasii*), *Pinus Sabiana*, &c. The Plant-house, which here comes directly in view, is

No. 1. THE CONSERVATORY ;

A handsome stone building, of classical design, sometimes called the ARCHITECTURAL GREEN-HOUSE. This fine structure was removed hither, by order of His Majesty William IV., from Buckingham Palace in 1836. It is one of the three* Conservatories that had been erected in the gardens there, heated by innumerable coils of small pipes, fixed by Mr. Perkins, and is now filled with an extremely rich collection of Australian trees and shrubs, chiefly *Myrtaceæ*, *Leguminosæ*, *Proteaceæ*; the latter a family of plants, so named in consequence of the very varied character of the stems, leaves, and inflorescence, yet agreeing in the essential character of the flowers and fruit. They are handsome evergreen shrubs, or small trees, constituting much of the so-called "*Scrub*" of New Holland. Among the numerous kinds of this extensive group the *Banksias* and *Dryandras* are the most remarkable, and the handsome *Waratah*

* The second is still a Conservatory at Buckingham Palace, while the third has been there converted into a Royal Chapel.

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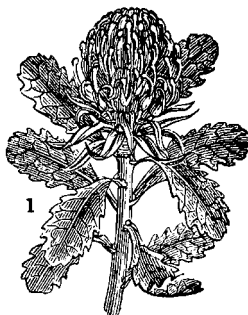
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THE CONSERVATORY.

(*Telopea speciosissima*, fig. 1.) Their foliage, though harsh and rigid, has something of the Fern character; and the flowers, especially of the *Banksias*, are arranged in bunches or tufts resembling a bottle-brush. It is in the winter and spring season generally that they are in flower. The smaller and younger plants in this house are raised chiefly from Swan River seeds, sent by Mr. Drummond, and are of great rarity and value. Here, too, is placed the curious *Hand Plant* (*Cheirostemon platanoides*, fig. 2.) of Mexico, with leaves resembling those of a Plane-tree; the stamens, resembling the fingers of the human hand, probably recommended this curious plant as an object of worship. At the period of Humboldt's visit, the only tree then known in Mexico was held sacred.

We are supposed to have entered this conservatory by the eastern door: on quitting it at the west end, the path leads towards the Palace, with a vista in front; of which the view extends past the front of the Palace and across the river to the grounds of Syon House, the mansion of His Grace the Duke of Northumberland. The main walk soon takes a southerly direction a little before coming to a CLOAKROOM, where ladies will always find a place of rest or shelter in wet weather, and where their umbrellas or cloaks can be deposited by those who contemplate a long walk, under the care of an obliging female attendant. Here, on turning to the left, the visitor enters upon the grand and favourite promenade of the Garden. Proceeding, the attention is drawn by a large edifice on the left facing the south, which we still call by its original name,



TELOPEA SPECIOSISSIMA.



THE HAND-PLANT.

No. 2. THE ORANGERY ;

Which is used to shelter, in the winter, numerous large and half-hardy trees and shrubs, especially tender *Pines*, many of which are of great rarity and value. The house was erected by Sir William Chambers in 1761*, and it bears on the front, in two

* Not 1751, as incorrectly inscribed on the shields in the facade.

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THE ORANGERY.

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shields, the initials of Augusta, Princess Dowager of Wales, who, as already mentioned, took a great interest in the Gardens of Kew, and to whom Sir William Chambers dedicated, in 1763, his "Designs of Her Royal Highness's magnificent Villa at Kew." The two ends of this edifice were altered and furnished with large windows in 1842, and they bear the royal arms and that date accordingly. It was originally destined for, and filled with, orange trees, till 1841, when they were removed to Kensington Palace (with the exception of a few), and their places supplied by a very miscellaneous collection of trees and shrubs, which had become too large for the other greenhouses. The tenderer *Pines* (*Coniferae*) constitute, perhaps, the most prominent feature in this house, when it has received its inmates for the autumn and winter. Here, at the latter seasons, may be seen the noblest specimens in Europe of the *Norfolk-Island Pine* (*Araucaria excelsa*), remarkable for their beautifully drooping and graceful branches, which almost vie with ostrich plumes;—the *Araucaria columnaris* of New Caledonia, where its stately column-like appearance was noted by the circumnavigator, Captain Cook, under the name of *Cupressus columnaris*; the *Pencil Cedar*, as it is commonly called,—no cedar, indeed, but an American *Juniper* (*Juniperus Bermudiana*);—the *Moreton-Bay Pine* (*A. Cunninghami*), together with another species from Moreton Bay, N. E. Australia, resembling, in its foliage, the Chili Pine (*A. imbricata*), and long the only specimen of the tree in Europe. It was discovered in the high lands, near Moreton Bay, by the late J. G. Bidwill, Esq., and having been by him presented to the Gardens, it justly bears his name (*A. Bidwilli*): its full-grown cones are as large as a child's head; and, as the seeds of the Chili Pine are eaten in South America, so are these eagerly sought for, as an article of food, by the aborigines of Australia, who at the proper season migrate to the pine-woods for the sole purpose of collecting them. The *Brazilian Pine* (*A. Braziliiana*), the *China broad-leaved Pine* (*Cunninghamia lanceolata*, fig. 3.), graceful *Pines* from the Himalaya Mountains, and several others, equally rare, from Mexico and elsewhere, are here; all needing protection during the winter.

In this house some large *Gum-Trees* of Australia (*Eucalyptus*) are easily recognizable, — one kind is the rapidly-growing *Gum-Tree* described by Mr. Backhouse, when he says: "It is the most gigantic tree of Van Diemen's Land, and there called *Stringy Bark*."



CUNNINGHAMIA LANCEOLATA.