

KEW – The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens

By Ray Desmond

Kew gardens, currently covering 326 acres with over 50,000 living species and 6 million dried specimens, had its origins in two royal gardens. Richmond Lodge became a royal garden under the auspices of Queen Caroline in 1727 and the adjacent Kew house property was added in 1802. It once had a 12 acre kitchen garden to supply the royal household. The fortunes of the gardens depended very much on the botanical interests of the monarch, which could change dramatically upon succession. It was decided in the mid-18thC, following the rest of Europe, that a national garden was desirable. About that time national gardens were changing from physic to botanical in nature as global exploration surged. As a result Joseph Banks, who was the botanist aboard Cook's 1767 voyage to the Pacific on HMS Endeavor, was appointed the first director in 1772; and remained in the post for 50 influential years.

Banks oversaw the transformation of the gardens and initiated worldwide plant collecting programs. The frequent huge losses of plant material in transit and after arrival necessitated the development of suitable transportation techniques and much improved growing environments at Kew. Banks used his diplomatic skills and connections so that and Kew's collectors were regularly taken as part of Royal Navy ships' crews and shipments of plants were routinely transported by the navy from the far corners of the earth. Embassies and consulates regularly sent shipments of regional plants and seeds.

Ironically, Captain Bligh showed more interest in the welfare of the breadfruit he was transporting from the Pacific Islands to the West Indies than his men. In contrast, Captain George Vancouver had little interest in his botanical cargo and had his botanist arrested at one point, over a plant dispute.

Hooker, and later his son, made significant contributions to Kew in the 19thC. Despite its threatened closure, Kew had assumed an important role in the economic development of the Empire. Commercial plants and seeds were

propagated and assessed at Kew for re-establishment in the colonies. A network of botanical gardens was established around the empire to complement and extend the work at Kew. Way-stations were also established on primary shipping routes to allow intermediate care of specimens on their stressful travels around the globe. Kew advised regularly on overseas crop plantings and was, for example, central to re-establishing a diverse ecosystem on a denuded Ascension Is.

The gardens became the centre of controversy on more than one occasion. Once it was due to perceived conflicts between its educational and commercial roles and that of a publicly accessible national garden. The huge development of the railway system during Victorian times, including the construction of a nearby station, allowed easy access for the burgeoning working classes of London, keen to spend their Sundays in the country – quite a culture shock for middle class Kew! The suffragettes twice attacked the gardens in the 1920's, smashing greenhouse windows.

In the 20thC. Kew's emphasis turned to more scientific endeavors, including health properties of plants as well as the creation of a seed bank. Current programs include the re-establishment of rare species back into their native environments and the saving endangered species through cloning and micro-propagation.

Over the years many significant buildings were constructed and most remain through careful and on-going restoration. The iconic Palm House is probably the most famous (see picture) at 362ft long and 66ft high – well worth the climb. Site development continues to the present day.

Ray Desmond has written an extraordinarily comprehensive history of Kew – weaving together social, architectural and botanical strands. At almost 450 pages, including fifteen appendices, it is a detailed and somewhat academic tour de force – so much so, I had to will my way through it. However, I'm certainly glad I did, as there are many fascinating episodes within. I feel there are, potentially, several books within the material covered by this book, since the time and geographic spans are so large. A book focussed solely on the botanical history of Kew would be an amazing read.

For further information on Kew and the Palm House visit the following links: -

<http://www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/index.htm>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0mduBlbdk>

<http://golondon.about.com/od/londongardens/ig/Kew-Gardens->

[Photos/http://www.archiplanet.org/wiki/Palm House at Kew Gardens](http://www.archiplanet.org/wiki/Palm_House_at_Kew_Gardens)

Reviewed by David Broomhead