

# Visit to Kew Palace and the Economic Botany Collection

## Kew Gardens

25 June 2009

The brightly painted brickwork on the façade of Kew Palace reminded me of the make-up on a pantomime dame, but there were historic precedents for such treatment, according to Lee Prosser, head of building conservation and Sebastian Edwards, head of collections. Certainly the colouring unifies the building and hides various repairs and replacements of bricks over the centuries.

The house was built in the 'Dutch' style in 1631 by a city merchant, Samuel Fortrey. In less than a century it became, first, a place for accommodating royal courtiers, then a schoolhouse for young princes and, by the middle of the 18th century, the family home of King George III, Queen Charlotte and three of their daughters. The principal rooms have been decorated and furnished in the style of that period, and the story of the King and his apparent insanity is sympathetically told, starting with a dramatic wax head of the king modelled by Madame Tussaud herself.

In the King's Library, a room of modest size, were various drawings, scientific objects and bits of natural history, one of his many interests. I noticed a gold and ivory snuff box with an elaborately turned lid, made by George himself. There was also a collection of very early jigsaw puzzles, kept by Charlotte Finch, the royal governess. The Pages' Waiting Room tells the story of Queen Charlotte and the 15 children she bore to the King; there is a door, now closed, which led to the King's apartments in the west wing long since demolished, in which on occasion he was restrained by his conscientious but mistaken doctors.

The King's Dining Room is elegantly furnished in a restrained manner after the original. Here he dined, apparently frugally, with friends and politicians, and listened to music, one of his passions. Next door in his breakfast room is a large dolls' house decorated and furnished by his daughters. On the first floor a wall in Princess Elizabeth's bedroom has been exposed to reveal the back of an original 1631 lath and plaster wall and later joinery right up to 1805. Parts of the building that were not meant to be seen were very crudely put together – nothing changes!

The painted brick facade of Kew Palace.





Queen Charlotte's Drawing Room contains the elegant harpsichord that had belonged to the King, while her bedroom contains her medicine cabinet and reading table. Here she died in 1818, by which time the King himself was incarcerated at Windsor castle, unaware of her death. The family left the house thereafter and it remained virtually empty till 1898 when Queen Victoria gave Kew Palace to the nation. It was open to the public as an art gallery until 1995 when major restoration and refurbishment took place, providing the spectacular and charmingly intimate experience we were able to enjoy.

By the accident of benign neglect the attics have been preserved almost untouched since 1818. Paintwork and fragments of wallpaper remain, while a recent discovery shows wall decoration of balusters, indicating that the original staircase went on up into the attics, a real warren of rooms divided from each other by thin wooden partitions showing signs of having been rearranged more than once. In Princess Amelia's bedroom is a gothic stone fireplace originally from Richmond Palace.

Kew had been a popular place for royal residences: opposite Kew Palace, which had been part of the Richmond estate, and on the other side of a public highway (now closed) was the White House, in what is now Kew Gardens. In 1728 the Prince of Wales added more buildings but by the 1890s all had been demolished save for the building housing the royal kitchens. To guard against the risk of fire the 18th century kitchen was built well away from the palaces, and food was carried across for meals covered with great domed metal covers.

Like the attics, the kitchen building is not open to the public, but the society's members, yet again, had a special dispensation and were escorted by Lee Prosser and Linda Hall, whose enthusiasm was infectious. It has been left almost untouched and though most of its contents have long gone there is a remarkably full inventory of what it used to contain. Lee pointed out that its design, similar in many respects to the kitchen at Hampton Court, was cutting edge for the time, being an attempt to enable food production on a large scale to be undertaken fast and efficiently.

What remains is a large range of spits, spit hangers and other assorted ironmongery, the great fireplace and ovens, and a range of charcoal grills. The serving hatch was bricked up in the 20th century, so we had to go out of the building and enter it again from the other end in order to see a scullery containing George III's tin bath. He apparently insisted on walking to the kitchens to have his bath to save his servants the labour of carrying the hot water to the palace. There is a bake house too, with two ovens and a copper added in 1830 for washing clothes; sadly the copper itself was stolen in recent times. This room was used as a domestic kitchen in the 1830s, but

apart from that the building has survived more or less as it was in 1818. Those members who went on the visit to Hampton Court will have been able to visualise more easily just what this relic might have looked like in its heyday.

We celebrated a glorious summer day in the way that George and Charlotte and their children might have done, by walking the length of Kew Gardens through beautiful trees to Queen Charlotte's Cottage. Built in 1771, it has a print room on the ground floor and an upstairs picnic room, reached by an elegant staircase. This is painted with a floral trellis ceiling and walls and is thought to have been the work of Princess Elizabeth. I noticed two good Windsor armchairs with cabriole front legs and fine cresting rails. Downstairs there is a small room that served as a kitchen.

In the afternoon we visited the 1985 Banks Building, which houses the botanical research workers and the coolly air-conditioned Economic Botany Collection, to be instructed about its contents by Mark Nesbit, who works there full time, and Adam Bowett, who has recently been studying the collection. This amazing collection comprises

**Remains of wall decoration in the attics of Kew Palace.**







George III's bath, in the royal kitchens at Kew.

some 85,000 samples of seeds, resins, leaves, timber, and wooden objects from all over the world. Started in 1688, it is the oldest in the world; George III encouraged his friend Joseph Banks in his botanical collecting voyages, but when they both died in 1820 the pace of collecting declined until Sir William Hooker energetically revived it in 1845, in line with the expansion of the British Empire.

Until the 1970s the emphasis was on the economic usefulness of plants, particularly trees, but now interest is focused on wild trees and plants, and the botanical and ethnographic significance of specimens. As an ethnobotanist with an archaeological background, Mark Nesbit enthused about the global significance of the collection. For instance the St Helena Ebony, long thought to be extinct and with wood samples in the collection, had recently been identified with two seedlings found on the island.

In the gallery he had laid out a selection of treasures, including a circular table top inlaid with many different veneers from New Zealand trees, and samples of wood suitable for turning that had been collected and annotated by Charles Holtzappel, inventor of the ultimate lathe for ornamental turning. Another curio was a writing slope, made in Sydney in 1805 by a convict using Australian woods; it was brought back to Europe by Franz Bauer for his brother Ferdinand, both of them celebrated botanical artists. Its carcass was of eucalyptus with veneers of swamp and river oaks. Mark explained that the distinct green colour in the wood was caused by a fungus. Several examples of Tunbridge Ware were displayed, together with sample blocks of laminated veneers used in the finished products. There was an elaborate display of the 14 stages used in producing the Japanese lacquer known as *takamakiye*, while closer to home were alder clog soles from Ireland (1902), in three stages of manufacture, and a sweet chestnut candle stool of 1892 for lighting lace-makers. No Victorian gentleman would go without a



A Windsor chair in Queen Charlotte's Cottage.

walking stick for long, and we saw some singular ones, some made of palm tree, others of Jersey cabbage, which is grown for its stalk rather than its leaves, as well as sticks of olive wood and finally an 1888 stick cut to resemble a furred umbrella, of *Zanthoxylum martinicense*, from the West Indies.

Adam Bowett concluded the day with a rapid stroll through a bewildering variety of timbers, seemingly arranged with the same disregard for any kind of order, chronological, botanical, geographical or even alphabetical, as one might expect to find in the long forgotten attics of some large country house. He commented that the collection provides a panoramic view of British colonial history, as those stationed or settled in the colonies sent home samples of the local flora, but especially trees and woods, usually in the hope of profit from their being taken up by the timber trade in Britain. The high cost of transport meant that timber was really only carried as ballast on a ship's return trip, so that acacias and other timbers from Australia and New Zealand were initially used from the 1790s as veneers or in small section on high value cabinet making. The trade in timber did not begin to

thrive until steamships had been established as the transport of choice.

The racks were filled with varieties of timber; among those that Adam commented on were: *Haemotoxylon*, an important timber for grinding to make dyes of red and black, but worth notice for the name alone; *Olearia Argophylla*, its burr popular with Victorian picture framers; padouk from the East, particularly Burma, but so popular that several other species from further afield were traded under this name too. Next to samples of rosewood from Honduras and the Far East was a handsome piece of English field maple, a fine wood for cabinet makers, but rarer now that so many hedgerows have been lost.

*Robinia Pseudoacacia*, a wood harder than oak and for long used for treenails, still commands a premium price in France for fence posts because of its weather resisting qualities. There were several racks of mahogany, not all from Cuba, and indeed by 1900 African mahogany dominated the UK market; satinwoods from the East Indies were popular in the 19th century for reproduction Sheraton furniture; further along the aisle was a huge piece of speckled ebony from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) while opposite was a fine board of English sweet chestnut, and close by a large airscrew from 1914-1918 made of laminated strips of walnut and mahogany.

Finally Adam opened the drawers of a fine cabinet containing many small samples of woods, each with manuscript descriptions and notes written by the great Holtzapffel himself. The cabinet had been given to the collection some time ago having been discarded by the Worshipful Company of Turners! By four o'clock we had barely touched the surface of the collection but we were beginning to feel cold, as the whole room is kept at 14°C to inhibit the wood eating insects which only thrive in temperatures over 15°C, and so it was time to emerge into the warmth of the summer afternoon.

Thanks are due to Lee Prosser and Sebastian Edwards at the Palace as well as to Mark Nesbit and Adam Bowett for giving members such a varied and interesting set of history lessons.

**Nick Abbott**