



PLANTS PEOPLE
POSSIBILITIES

Press Information: September 2010

History of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives

The present-day Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives building at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is a Grade II listed structure of the much expanded Hunter House, originally built between 1748 and 1771. The expansion of the building reflects the growth of the Herbarium thanks to the fruitful expeditions of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's botanists and partners, and generous donations from private collectors of botanical specimens. These collectors include some of Britain's most celebrated scientists and explorers of the past. Charles Darwin, Joseph Hooker, David Livingstone, John Hanning Speke, Richard Spruce, Ernest 'Chinese' Wilson and Miles Joseph Berkeley are just a few of the famous names whose collections can still be studied in the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives at Kew.

Kew's Herbarium is the most important and diverse in the world, and provides a huge resource of botanical knowledge to scientists and botanists around the globe. Its collections include some eight million plant and fungal specimens and 350,000 type specimens, all of which are identified and their geographical origins documented. Some 35,000 to 50,000 new specimens are acquired yearly. The Library holds the world's most comprehensive collection of botanical literature comprising some 300,000 volumes, 200,000 works of art and archives of some seven million documents.

Carrying out surveys of vegetation in many different parts of the world is the very foundation of plant research and biodiversity conservation projects. Once in the Herbarium, plants are identified, named and classified, and correctly stored to form a resource for researchers for years to come.

Every day the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's scientists and visiting researchers from around the world refer to these collections to support studies on a wide variety of topics: from simply determining the correct name for a particular plant, to assessing its conservation status, to finding out all the plants that are known from a particular area, to understanding how plant diversity is distributed on the earth's surface and how that distribution is changing over time.

An overview of the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archive's unique history:

1748-1771	Hunter House is built between 1748 and 1771 as a private residence. Merchant and natural historian, Pete Theobald, purchases the house from the Hunter family
1831	William I, who believed Hunter House to be Royal property, presents the house to his brother, the Duke of Cumberland. With the Duke's ascension to the throne of Hanover, his trips to Kew become less frequent
1852	With the bottom floor of Hunter House empty, due to the absence of the Duke, it is temporarily given to Sir William Hooker, the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's first Director, to use for his Herbarium. This arrangement eventually becomes permanent
1853	Sir William Hooker establishes the official Kew Herbarium in Hunter House, appointing its first keeper, A.A Black
1877	A Grade II building status is awarded to the Herbarium

	With Sir William Hooker sending plant collectors worldwide, the growing collection has a greater need for space. This leads to Wing C being built
1931	The four-storey Wing A is built
1931-1968	Wings B-D are added on to the original building to form a quadrangle and basement
1989	The Herbarium is further expanded into the quadrangle
2008	Professor David Mabberley is appointed Keeper of the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives the first with that title. The Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art opens. It provides an exhibition space for Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's botanical art collection (totalling some 200,000 items)
2009	The restoration of the Marianne North Gallery building and art collection begins. This work is due to be completed at the end of 2010. Over 250 new plant and fungi species are discovered by Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew's botanists in its 250 th anniversary year
2010	The new wing of the Herbarium, Library, Art and Archives is opened – the sixth extension since 1852

Ends

For more information please contact the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew press office on +44 (0)20 8332 5607 or email pr@kew.org

Notes to editors

- What is a Herbarium?
A herbarium (plural: herbaria) is a collection of preserved plant and fungal specimens, used as reference material, to document the identity of plants and fungi. Some specimens are 'types' – the original specimens on which new species descriptions have been based and a key reference point for the application of scientific names. Specimens will usually be in a dried form, mounted on a sheet, but depending upon the material may also be kept in boxes (eg bulky plant parts such as palm fronds) or in alcohol (see Kew's spirit collection <http://www.kew.org/collections/spiritcol.html>)