

London's secret garden

A SHORT WALK FROM SLOANE SQUARE UNDERGROUND STATION ALONG CHELSEA'S ROYAL HOSPITAL ROAD BRINGS YOU TO ONE OF LONDON'S LITTLE-KNOWN GEMS: THE CHELSEA PHYSIC GARDEN.

BY ROSAMUND BURTON



Surrounded by high walls, the Chelsea Physic Garden, a 3.8-acre plot in the heart of London, was first cultivated in 1673 by the Society of Apothecaries of London so their apprentices could learn to grow medicinal plants and study their uses. The site was chosen because it was on the River Thames. Not only did the apothecaries need somewhere to house the brightly painted barge they used for royal pageants and plant-collecting expeditions; access to the river was essential because at the time it was considered safer and quicker to travel across the city by water than by road.

STARTING WITH SLOANE

It's a warm, sunny day in May. Groups of women in broad-brimmed hats and cotton floral dresses walk slowly along the narrow paths studying the plants, toddlers waddle across the lawn while their mothers sit watching them and a middle-aged man snoozes on the grass, his panama hat covering his face. The scene is quintessentially English.

This oasis owes its existence to Sir Hans Sloane. As a medical student in the late 17th century, he studied at the garden. Then, in 1712, he bought the Manor of Chelsea from Charles Cheyne and also took over the freehold of the garden. He granted the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries a lease on the land for a rent of £5 a year in perpetuity, on the condition that "it be for ever kept up and maintained as a physic garden".

Today, the large statue of Sir Hans Sloane in the centre of the garden is a reminder of this man with such benevolence and foresight. As property prices continue to rise and land becomes ever more in demand, the Chelsea Physic Garden curator still makes an annual rental payment of £5 to Sloane's heirs. Several times in its long history the garden has been threatened with the prospect of closure, most recently in the early 1980s, and it has been Sir Hans Sloane's covenant that has ensured its continued existence.

Sir Hans Sloane also appointed Philip Miller as head gardener and, during his half-century tenure from 1722 to 1770, Miller made the garden renowned throughout the world. He corresponded with botanists across Europe and exchanged seeds and plants with them. A huge variety of plants from many different climate zones was cultivated here and many were the first of their type to be grown in England. In this little garden were grown plants that would later become established industries overseas. Miller sent the first long-strand cotton seeds, developed here at the Physic Garden, to the new British colony of Georgia in 1733 and that was the start of Georgia's cotton industry.



ROCKING

Near the statue of Sir Hans Sloane is the rockery. It is the oldest man-made rock garden in Europe and, because of its heritage, has Grade II listed status. In it are pieces of carved stone that were once part of the Tower of London and bits of basaltic lava that were used as ballast on Sir Joseph Banks' ship on a voyage to Iceland in 1772. The two large shells originally on it were brought back by Captain Cook from Tahiti, though these have now been replaced by reproductions.

VARIETY SHOW

In addition to his contribution of the lava from Iceland, Sir Joseph Banks gave the garden a huge variety of seeds from many different countries. There is a Sir Joseph Banks bed on the Historical Walk along the western side of the garden with several species of banksia growing in it. Realising these plants are derived from seeds that Sir Joseph Banks collected when he travelled to Australia with Captain James Cook in 1770 makes me appreciate what an achievement this garden is. Currently, there are 5000 plants growing here, each with its specific requirements for light, heat, soil and water.

Another Australian in the garden is the Wollemi pine. This tree had only been known through fossil records and the oldest fossil had been dated to 200 million years ago. It was thought the tree no longer existed until it was discovered in 1994 in a remote area of the Wollemi National Park in NSW.

LETHAL AND LOVELY

I join a tour with the excellent volunteer guide, Anne Edwards, who has a touch of the schoolmarm about her and a wonderfully dry sense of humour. She tells the group we are not to eat any of the plants and then recounts how two ladies recently decided to sample some deadly nightshade and spent the next four days in intensive care.

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As we manoeuvre our way between an oleander tree, known for its extreme toxicity, and a hemlock plant, the juice of which killed the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, it appears the garden has many plants suitable for ending a person's life rather than restoring it. Hearing that famous murder mystery writer Agatha Christie trained here as an apothecary assistant convinces me that what she learnt about the plants in this garden was the inspiration for some of her characters' lethal concoctions.

Most of these poisonous plants, Anne Edwards explains, also have healing properties. In the Pharmaceutical Garden, deadly nightshade is growing in the cardiology bed because it is a source of atropine, which is used to speed up the heart rate. In the oncology bed grows a yew tree. Renowned for its poisonous red berries, yew is also the source of taxol, which is used in chemotherapy for certain cancers.

When Anne points out a mandrake plant, a couple of people start muttering about Harry Potter and Professor Sprout's herbology class. The mandrake root was used in the Middle Ages as an anaesthetic, and hyoscine, the substance found in the root of mandrake, is now synthesised for use in pre-operative anaesthesia in hospitals worldwide. Most surprising is the broadbean plant growing in the psychiatry bed. From this, apparently, comes levodopa; synthesised L-dopa is now the basic treatment for Parkinson's disease. →



Clockwise from top: Allium 'Purple Sensation' is a flowering onion; Echium wildpretii, from Tenerife, is high in nectar and pollen and a beekeeper's favourite; Apollo fights disease on the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries' coat of arms.



GARDEN OF WORLD MEDICINE

Next to the Pharmaceutical Garden is the Garden of World Medicine. Here there are plants used medicinally by the North American Indians, by South African tribes, in Traditional Chinese Medicine, by Maoris and Aborigines and in India's Ayurvedic medicine. Metal signs explain their applications; I learn the leaves and seeds of dill are used in Ayurveda as a poultice to relieve colic and hiccups in young children. It can be easy to forget in our busy, modern lives the value of plants, but it really hits home as we study these beds and Anne tells us 85 per cent of the world's population do not have access to modern medicine.

The most recent development in the garden is the Garden of Edible and Useful Plants. There's a bed of plants that were used for making colours, including woad, famous for its blue dye, and St John's wort, the flowers of which produce a deep red. In the raised beds in the centre are plants that provide vitamins. Parsley, chilli and blackcurrants are growing in the vitamin C bed and carrots, kumara and asparagus in the vitamin A one.

When I later speak to Chelsea Physic Garden curator Christopher Bailes, he explains the garden's "charitable purpose is to utilise the plants to educate people in the importance of plants both in the modern world and historically". He hopes visitors will recognise many of the plants in this particular section of the garden and also gain a great understanding of their value and many uses.

GARDEN OF MYSTERY

It is only in the past 30 years that the garden has been open to the public. Before that, whatever the apothecaries were growing behind its high walls was shrouded in mystery. Until 1895, the Materia Medica exam was compulsory for all students training in medicine, so medical students came to the Chelsea Physic Garden to study the plants.

In the glass fernery, Anne Edwards shows us a Wardian case. This sealed glass box was invented by Dr Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward in about 1830 and, for the next 100 years, Wardian cases were the main method by which plants were transported around the world. Dr Ward was on the committee of the Chelsea Physic Garden and, in 1858, Robert Fortune, who had been a curator here, used Wardian cases to transport tea seedlings from China to India. Disguising himself as a Chinese merchant — the Chinese government of the time forbade him to purchase tea plants — he smuggled 20,000 plants out of China to begin the tea plantations of Assam in India. He also took with him a group of trained Chinese tea workers. Although most of the Chinese tea plants he took to India died, the tea workers' expertise is thought to have been instrumental in the subsequent success of the Indian tea industry.

The building of the Embankment along the River Thames in the 1860s cut the Chelsea Physic Garden off from the river. Set in the garden wall facing the Embankment is a pair of high iron gates, on which is the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries' coat of arms. It features Apollo, the Greek god of healing, slaying the dragon of disease. Anne tells us these gates are opened on two occasions only: when a member of the royal family is visiting the garden and when the manure is delivered.

On the main path down the garden to these gates are two little carts. One was created to celebrate the tricentenary of the birth of Carl Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who developed the system of plant and animal classification still in use today.

The other cart commemorates the 250th anniversary of Sir Hans Sloane's death. Written on it is the story of how the garden's great benefactor went to Jamaica and brought back the recipe for hot chocolate. The Jamaican locals drank cocoa with water and he did not like the taste of that at all, but he noticed that for their children they added milk and a sweetener to the cocoa. He brought back this chocolate recipe and initially it was made and sold by apothecaries as a medicine. But by the 19th century, wanting to provide an alternative beverage to alcohol, the Quaker Cadbury brothers were selling tins of Sloane's drinking chocolate.



Clockwise from above: Trainee gardener Ngai Girdlestone; in summer the garden sells honey from its own beehives; poppies are used in the production of codeine.



LAVENDER SCONES

After the tour I head to the Tangerine Dream Café for lunch and sit at a round wooden table in the sun. All the food is homemade and the selection of salads I choose, including beluga lentils and beetroot, is delicious. But it's the fig, thyme and almond tart that is sensationally good. With its great selection of homemade cakes and lavender scones, it's not surprising this cafe is popular not only for lunch but also tea.

After browsing through the selection of botanical books and cards in the gift shop, and looking at the plants and seeds grown in the garden that are for sale, I spend the rest of the afternoon wandering happily through the garden again. I find a bright red poppy of the kind used in the commercial production of codeine and meet one of the trainee gardeners who is on her knees, trowel in hand, doing some planting.

In the south-eastern corner of the garden I discover a line of beehives buzzing with activity. Apparently, pots of the garden's honey are sold at the gift shop during August and September. The Chelsea Physic Garden beekeeper is Peter James. Like Anne Edwards, he is one of the 80 volunteers who give their time to ensure the continuing existence and upkeep of this green jewel.

The Chelsea Physic Garden is a serene oasis in the heart of London and to meander along its paths and through its glasshouses is like reading a history book. However, its greatest value is that after spending a few hours here you cannot help but come away with a greater appreciation of the importance and immense value of all the trees and plants in our world and an overwhelming desire to conserve them. ☺

For more information go to www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk.

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