Rare Blooms in a Glorious Setting
Diane Schaefer

The History of the Chiswick House Conservatory and the Rescue of the Camellia Collection

For a structure celebrating its creation 200 years ago, the Chiswick House Conservatory is looking very sprightly. It welcomed nearly 2,500 visitors during the annual Camellia Festival, February-March 2013, and even more are expected during the Festival in March 2014.

Since the grand re-opening in 2010 of the Conservatory, rebuilt and restored almost from the ground up, more than 18,000 people have strolled along its 300ft. pathway of historic camellias.

The Conservatory was built for William George Spencer Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire (1811 – 1858); better known as the ‘Bachelor Duke’. He never married despite being one of the richest and most eligible men in England. It was designed by Samuel Ware in 1813. Now a Grade I listed building, it was one of the earliest glasshouses to be built and thus a forerunner of Decimus Burton’s glasshouse at Kew.

The Camellias Arrive
Originally the Duke grew fruit in the Conservatory – grapes, peaches, figs and pineapples. However by the mid 1820s, the Duke had made a fashionable switch away from produce and introduced camellias, an exciting new import from China, which were originally grown in pots. In 1855 the Duke extensively modernized the Conservatory. It was probably in this period that the dividing sections in the building were removed, enabling the camellia plants to be transferred from their pots into the beds where you see them today.

Care and restoration
In 1933 the Conservatory was completely rebuilt with several updates but the glasshouse was damaged by a bomb falling on the gardens on the night of 28 September 1940. Repairs were made during and after the War, and by 1948 the Conservatory was back in use.

Camellias for sale
In 1965, Chiswick House and Gardens became the responsibility of the London Borough of Hounslow and the Council began to use the Conservatory and the walled gardens as a nursery for the Borough. Local residents remember purchasing camellia plants in the Conservatory, and many survive in gardens around Chiswick today.

International Camellia Society rescue the camellias
However, by the 1980s the camellias were still surviving in the Conservatory - but only just. Yet again, the Conservatory needed major and expensive repairs. The Council carried out significant work in 1983, but by the 1990s the woodwork and the ironwork needed complete restoration or replacement, the cost almost certainly beyond the budget of the London Borough of Hounslow. The dilapidated state of the Conservatory led to vandalism and the building became unsafe for visitors.

The camellias were also in a forlorn condition. They had nearly succumbed to mealy bug and sooty mould and were disfigured by masses of dead leaves. It was only the intervention in 1995 of three local members of the International Camellia Society – Jane Callander, Marigold Assinder, and Herb Short – that saved them. The plants were sprayed, pruned, watered, ventilated and shaded from hot sun and after two years of expert hard work, the camellias began to bloom again.
**Restoration mission**

In 2005 English Heritage and the London Borough of Hounslow collaborated to establish the Chiswick House & Gardens Trust, and applied for a Heritage Lottery Fund grant to finance a major restoration of the gardens and the Conservatory. The bid was successful, and between 2008 and 2010 the Conservatory was virtually dismantled and then rebuilt. The camellias stayed in situ during the whole of the restoration. Thanks to the care of the International Camellia Society members, they were in good shape before the build began, and the contractors and the Trust staff ensured that they were well protected during the major reconstruction work, which went on around them.

**An historic collection for the nation**

Today, thanks to the commitment and the work of members of the International Camellia Society and the Trust, the Chiswick House Camellia Collection, housed in the Conservatory, is a national treasure and probably the oldest large collection in the Western world.

The camellias that grow at Chiswick are all of the species *C. japonica*. William Lindsay, the 6th Duke’s Head Gardener, ordered the bulk of the collection from Alfred Chandler’s Vauxhall nursery in 1828. The number and name of all the varieties were not detailed but visitors’ descriptions include references to varieties of *C. japonica* such as ‘Alba Plena’, ‘Welbankiana’, ‘Lady Grafton’, ‘Lady Hume’s Blush’, ‘Woodsii’, ‘Bealei’ (now ‘Leeana Superba’), ‘Nobilissima’, ‘Imbricata’, ‘Chandleri’ and ‘Elegans’. Today’s Conservatory collection of 33 different varieties includes many of the earliest varieties introduced to Britain. Using stem girth as an approximate guide it is probable that the camellias identified as *C. japonica* ‘Variegata’, ‘Imbricata’, ‘Chandleri’, ‘Alba Plena’, ‘Pompone’, ‘Aitonia’, ‘Corallina’, ‘Rubra Plena’ and ‘Rubra’ are all from the original 1828 planting.

**Rare Bloom**

‘Middlemist’s Red’ was originally brought to Britain from China in 1804 by Londoner John Middlemist, a nurseryman from Shepherds Bush. It is believed to have been presented by one of his descendants to Chiswick sometime after 1823 as the 6th Duke added to his growing collection of camellias. Despite its name, the plant blooms a deep pink and is normally in full bloom during the months of February and March. The only other known plant of this variety is at the Treaty House, Waitangi, New Zealand, identified following a series of molecular analyses in 1997 and 1998, and reported in the 1999 *International Camellia Journal*.

**Chiswick House Camellia Festival**

Chiswick House and Gardens Trust will bring a burst of glorious colour to the winter season with the fourth annual Chiswick House Camellia Festival running from 1 – 31 March 2014, from 10.30am – 4pm (closed Mondays)

Chiswick House exclusive Festival weekend openings 10am to 4pm

**Priority 20% discount for International Camellia Society members’ group bookings.** For details of group bookings and tours please contact: groups@chgt.org.uk

Or Tel: +44 (0)20 8742 3905