Data Collection for historic camellias - a practical guide

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At the Pallanza Symposium on historic camellias, I spoke on the importance of data collection, the need for accuracy, for complete sets of data and for consistency, that is, the same data to be collected in the same way and to be recorded in the same way, so that data collected by any researcher in any part of the world is capable of being compared.

The following is a case study on the data collection of one unknown camellia.

Last summer, a notice appeared in the Royal Horticultural Society magazine, The Garden, asking readers if they knew of any ancient camellias, especially ones grown in glasshouses. Jennifer Trehane had put the notice in - it was inspired. Replies came from all over the country. Some of these replies referred to sites that were already known to have ancient camellias, although there is much work to be done to identify many of these old plants, but there were several replies that came from hitherto unknown sites, examples of 19th century glasshouses, built before 1850 that contain camellias planted when the glasshouses were built.

An itinerary was planned for last spring but adverse circumstances prevented its completion. I did manage to make one visit and it is this that I am using for the case study.

The village of Ashburnham has been the home of the Ashburnham family since the 12th century. The house, the remains of which you can see, was built in the 18th century. Two hundred acres of parkland surround the mansion, designed by Lancelot (Capability) Brown. In 1767, Mr Brown built a fine brick orangery.

Ashburnham Place

Lancelot (Capability) Brown’s orangery, built in 1767

Much of the house has been demolished; only the central portion remains intact, but the orangery has survived and it is here that two camellias are planted, reputed to be the amongst the oldest ones in the country. There is, I am told, documentary evidence that these two camellias were planted in 1833: the evidence for this is a letter written to John Ashburnham by a visitor to the house, complimenting the Earl on his new camellias.
Two old camellias planted in the orangery at Ashburnham Place

The prospect of seeing such old plants is tremendously exciting. Will there be something I recognise, or will there be something new?

The double white, recently pruned to a mere 4m, was recognisable as ‘Alba Plena’. The deep pink one was huge, 5.5m high with a spread of 8m, and I had never seen it before!

Sometimes there is only one chance to collect data from a particular camellia so you need to make sure you collect everything you need; hence the check sheet. The following is the check sheet for what I have called Ashburnham 2.

The data fields and options are essentially the same as the spreadsheet that is being formulated by the Spanish team, so the data is transferable. Once all of the information has been assembled, the next step is to transfer it onto the datasheet on the computer and to add the various photographs, taken where appropriate against a grid.

Then the really exciting stage - the search begins to try to find possible identifications.

I have compiled a photographic database of ancient camellias using the original 19th century illustrations. The database contains well over a thousand pictures and, in many cases, descriptive text as well, searchable for all forms and all colour combinations, together with a spreadsheet of all cultivars available in the UK in the 19th century, weighted rather crudely in terms of popularity, that is, by recording the number of nurseries that stocked any particular one.

While I appreciate that these illustrations and descriptions are not without errors, and variations occur for a variety of reason, they are the only primary source material for those historic cultivars.

Overleaf is the datasheet used to collect the information on Ashburnham 2, together with the possibilities for its identification.

To quote Sherlock Holmes,

“…………when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.”

When the camellia bloom

by Elizabeth W. Marshall

Brave, they seem
Beauty in the cold
Bold, they bloom
Bringers of hope
Bouquets of art in ash

Brave, they are
Bracing their blooms in the arctic winds
Braving the elements
Bringing merciful glory to a garden
Bunched or singular
Buglers of tomorrow’s new
Bastions of grace amid green foliage
All will be well with my soul,

When the camellia bloom.
Data Collection Sheet

Subject: Deep pink anemone form camellia at Asburnham Place

Country: UK
Address: Ashburnham Place, Battle, East Sussex, TN33 9NF
GPS/position in garden: Orangery
Accession no: 1 of 2 camellias planted in the conservatory

Morphological data
Species: Japonica
Cultivar: Not known
Synonyms: None known
Blooming period: Photographed December 2012

Tree
Growth habit: Espaliered against conservatory wall
Growth rate: Not known
Plant style: Dense foliage
No.of trunks: 5 main trunks, each approx 45cms in circumference
Height: 5.5m
Crown diameter: 8m approx
Trunk circumference: 108cms at ground level
Shoot colour: New wood of twigs is reddish brown

Leaf
Length/width: 6 samples: 9 x 4.8cms, 9.2 x 5.2cms, 9.2 x 5.9cms, 9.9 x 5.9cms, 8 x 5 cms, 8.5 x 5.5cms
Apex: 1-1.5cm cuspidate
Margin: Flat not recurved
Base: Cuneate
Leaf edge: Coarsely and sharply serrate (pointing forwards), some leaves show widely crenate margins towards base
Blade shape: Elliptical
Blade curvature: Very flat
Venation: Not prominent

Leaf buds
Colour: Green, emerging leaves silvery green
Form: Pointed

Flowers
Main flowers:
Form: Anemone form with some stamens visible
Diameter: 7.5 to 9 cms, central stamen group 4 to 4.5 cms
Petals: Flower sample 1 25/26 main petals 4 x 4 cms
Flower sample 2 20 main petals, including 4 external petals/sepal stained purple
External shape: Cordate
Margin: Single or double notch
Colour: RHS Red Group 53C
Colour distribution: Homogeneous
Veining: RHS Red Group 53B

**Petaloids:**

- **Number:**
  - **Flower1:** 60 petaloids, 11 halfway between stamens and petaloids, 19/20 stamens with anthers
  - **Flower2:** 73 petaloids, 18 with anthers, 10 both anther and petaloid

- **Arrangement:** Irregular, very densely packed together
- **Colour:** RHS Red Group 53D with some white streaking

**Stamens:**

- **Number:** 19/20, fused last quarter of length
- **Arrangement:** Irregular
- **Colour:** Flushed pink

**Style**

- **Style division:** Deeply divided
- **Relative height:** Longer than stamens

**Flower buds**

- **Single/cluster:** Clusters of up to 7 buds
- **Shape:** Rounded
- **Colour:** Pale green, prominent dark brown to blackish edges develop as bud matures
- **Surface:** Pubescent

**Flower variations:** none

**Photographs:**

- Flowers: yes
- Leaves: yes
- Buds: yes
- Plant: yes

**Notes**

There is documentary evidence (a letter) that this camellia was planted on or before 1833. Assuming that the plants would have to be several years old (at least 6 to 7 years) old before being planted out, this implies a date of introduction of 1826 at the very latest.

**Photographs**
Trunks

Buds

Brown/black marking on the bud scales reminiscent of calyx of the Waratah

Flower

Incomplete/distorted androecium/ovary, deeply divided style
Possibilities

There are four cultivars that bear some resemblance

1. ‘Dernii’ - not registered until 1835, so if planting date and letter date are correct then it is too late.

2. ‘Rossii’ registered 1826
   Factors against Rossii; leaves said to be remarkably large with pale brownish green footstalks – outer petals 12-17 in number and arranged in 2/3 rows, deeply indented, petaloids narrow, pointed and irregular. This description does not fit.

3. ‘Woodsii’ registered 1828 and described by Chandler & Booth
   Factors against: bud colour, dull green expanding to a pale silvery green, leaves ovate, no mention of style or stamens; description of 3 rows of external petals and a number of inner ones rising upright is a reasonable description but from the illustration the style of the flower is wrong. Also date is too late if the planting date is correct.

4. ‘Colvill’s Florida’ Registered 1819
   Parentage: male parent is the Peony-flowered camellia: female parent is the Waratah.

Best fit is ‘Colvill’s Florida’

Original illustrations

1. Chandler and Buckingham 1825
   Note: style protruding from centre petals
   Also described as the Cluster Flowering Camellia

2. Baumann/Bollweiler illustration 1835