

The history of
Chelsea Physic Garden

Researched, written and produced by Chestertons.

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Founded over 200 years ago by a man named Charles Chesterton, Chestertons has continued as one of the most familiar names in property and is now one of the most respected international property companies. Chestertons is never afraid to take a lasting view on things. This means we promote activities and initiatives that will have long-term benefit for the communities in which we work. We are delighted to gift Chelsea Physic Garden – one of London’s true hidden gems – a booklet of its history, so it can continue to educate people on the importance of its existence and its impact on British history.





Introduction

Chelsea Physic Garden is London's oldest botanic garden, established in 1673 as a teaching garden and for growing medicinal plants.

Over its long history, the Garden has been at the heart of groundbreaking research which has not only furthered our understanding of plants and herbal medicines, but has also contributed to life-saving treatments for diseases such as malaria.

The Garden has also had an impact on our everyday lives in less obvious ways, such as its connection to the invention of the Wardian Case, which allowed for the long-distance transportation of plants and ultimately enabled the growth of the tea industry in India.

Nestled between Royal Hospital Road and the River Thames, Chelsea Physic Garden now offers a quiet haven for visitors to enjoy and relax. However, it is still passed by millions of people who are unaware of its existence or its incredible impact on the history of Britain and the world, and for that reason it has to be regarded as one of London's true hidden gems.

Early History

Market Garden to an Apothecaries' Garden

Chelsea Physic Garden, originally known as The Apothecaries' Garden, was established in 1673 by the banks of the Thames at Chelsea during the reign of King Charles II. Prior to this, the four-acre site had been used as a market garden, producing fruit, vegetables and flowers to be sold in the City of London. The Garden was established by the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries for the purpose of studying the medicinal uses of plants and for the practical teaching of apprentices.

As well as being ideally located, with a south-facing aspect, its riverside location (before the completion of the Embankment in 1874) also allowed the Apothecaries to moor their barge, which was then used for official ceremonies and botanical excursions to locations along the river.

The site of the established garden was leased from Lord of the Manor of Chelsea, Charles Cheyne, in 1673. The wall around the site was constructed the following year and by 1679 the Garden held 1,200 different plants.

The first curator of the Garden, John Watts, was appointed in 1680 to take responsibility for the growing and maintaining of medicinal herbs, and also oversaw the construction of the first glasshouse in England to be heated by an external stove.

Sir Hans Sloane

Despite the ongoing importance of the study of plants, the Garden struggled with financial stability. However, a level of security was acquired in the early years of the 18th century when Sir Hans Sloane purchased the Manor of Chelsea, and continued to lease the Garden to the Apothecaries in perpetuity for £5 a year, a sum which is still paid to his descendants.

Sloane had trained as an apprentice at the Garden in the early 1680s and went on to have great success as a society physician, serving the Governor of Jamaica before becoming a royal physician to Queen Anne in 1696, then King George I in 1716, and King George II in 1727. Whilst in Jamaica, he collected a stock of quinine, which was used to treat malaria (a disease common in marshy areas of Britain at the time) and also

observed local women mixing cocoa with milk to treat stomach ailments, a recipe he brought back with him.

The recipe was eventually bought by Cadbury's and helped Sloane become a very wealthy man, allowing him to purchase the Manor of Chelsea and the Garden where he had received his training, ensuring its survival for centuries to come.

An important requirement Sloane placed in the lease was that the Garden remain and continue as a botanic or 'physic' garden, which has been respected to this day.



Sir Hans Sloane
1736

The most famous Botanic Garden in Europe

When Sir Hans Sloane offered the lease to the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries in 1722, he also appointed a head gardener, Philip Miller, who would remain at the Garden for almost 50 years. It was during this time and for much of the 18th century, that the Garden gained a great reputation and became 'the most famous botanic garden in Europe for the number and rarity of species cultivated'. Miller himself became renowned for his extensive horticultural expertise, eventually retiring in 1771 when he was succeeded by William Forsyth, who created the Grade II-listed Pond Rockery which still stands today and is the oldest rock garden in Europe.

During the early 1800s, the Garden continued to improve and contribute greatly to the understanding of medicinal plants which, at that time, was so essential to the medical profession. Up until this point, the Garden had been completely private and could only be accessed by apprentices and teachers from the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, but in the 1830s access to the Garden was widened, making it available to all medical students and lecturers.

It was around this time that Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward joined the Garden's committee. Ward had been apprenticed as an apothecary before becoming a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. The Wardian Case – the first terrarium – was the outcome of Ward's experiments in hatching moths from chrysalises made in sealed bottles, after observing germinating plants in the leaf mould inside. Ward's accidental discovery led to the production of miniature glasshouses which allowed for the long-distance transportation of plants, and largely assisted the growth of the tea industry in India.



Chelsea Physic Garden looking north. Today, The Physic Garden Café and lecture gallery are located in the building shown.

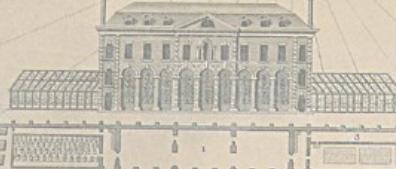
To the right, an accurate survey of the Garden in 1751 by John Haynes.

EXPLANATION.

1. The Green's Half.
2. The dry place in which the Plants are disposed one from another.
3. The large Parks Rivers where the tender Exotic Plants of the hot Countries are kept, placed it into Parks of Summer Park.
4. Is a large Room for rearing Young Plants.
5. A Glass Case where are kept the succulent Plants which require no artificial Heat.
6. A Glass Case with glass round it to warm them conveniently.

EXPLANATION.

7. A Room for sheltering such Exotic Plants as only regard to be protected from frost & heat.
8. A Room for the tender Exotic Plants.
9. The large Cedar of Lebanon.
10. The place where the Perennial Plants are placed & sheltered.
11. The Bulbous Rooted Plants.
12. Other Annual and Biennial Plants.
13. The Perennial Plants.
14. The Wilderness, in which kind of tree grow.



House in London.



*An Accurate Survey
of the
Botanic Gardens
AT CHELSEA,*

*with the
Elevation and Chronography
OF THE
Green House and Stoves,*

*and an Explanation
of the Several Parts of the
GARDEN,
showing where the most remarkable
Trees and Plants
are disposed,
The Whole Carefully
SURVEY'D AND DELINEATED
John Haynes.*

Scale of 1 Chain or 20 Yards.

After Haynes' Accurate Survey of the Botanic Garden at Chelsea.

Verdant Garden.
John Charles Bergman.
Foliage Garden.

Adapting to the times

In the mid-1850s, the Garden was struggling financially and the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries attempted to relinquish the lease to an alternative institution, as determined in the covenant agreed with Sir Hans Sloane, but were unsuccessful. The challenges faced by the Garden were not just financial, however, and included growing pollution from the expanding city, the creation of the Embankment (which cut off the Garden from the River Thames), the threat of the railway running through the site and the increased demand for land needed for new housing.

The Garden survived these challenges and in 1877, the Apothecaries allowed women to study medicine for the first time, helping student numbers rocket from just a few hundred to 3,500.

The following years saw continued challenges around the funding and management of the Garden, particularly as the study of plants and their connection to medicine declined, and by 1895 had been dropped from the medical syllabus altogether. A new solution to secure the future of the Garden was needed.



Statue of Sir Hans Sloane by Michael Rysbrack was erected in Chelsea Physic Garden in 1748. In 1983, it was moved to the British Museum and replaced with a replica.

Growth and improvement

The conditions laid out in the agreement with Sir Hans Sloane in 1722 meant that the Garden had to continue as a botanic garden and therefore could not simply be sold. However, with the assistance of the Charity Commissioners, a solution was found in 1899, when a relatively new charity, The City Parochial Foundation, stepped in to take over the Garden from the Apothecaries. The City Parochial Foundation had been established in 1891 to help fund the education of the 'poorer classes of the metropolis' at a time when there was no state funding for education beyond the age of 14.

The new arrangement meant that students from the Royal College of Science (which became Imperial College in 1907) and from London's new polytechnics (now known as University of Westminster) had access to the Garden for the first time to study medicinal plants and botany. At the same time, compensation paid for the widening of Royal Hospital Road enabled the construction of glasshouses and other buildings, including the laboratory and lecture room.

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The new century & the First World War

Once the building works were completed, the Garden was reopened in July 1902 by Lord Cadogan. The early years of the new century saw continued use of the Garden for scientific research and study, with involvement from the trustees, including several from Imperial College, and connections with famous names including Francis Darwin, the son of Charles Darwin. The Garden was still not open for 'pleasure-seekers or idlers' but only for research and education.

In 1916, during the First World War, the Garden was opened up to patients from military hospitals for rest and recuperation. The renowned war poet, Wilfred Owen, spent one of his last days in England at the Garden when he came to visit fellow poet and writer, Osbert Sitwell, who lived nearby in Swan Walk and suggested a visit along with another famous war poet, Siegfried Sassoon. Owen died in action only a few months later while attempting to seize and cross the Sambre-Oise Canal in France.

During the 1920s, the work of the Garden continued, with annual visitor numbers growing to around 3,500.

The World War II years

In 1939, at the start of the Second World War, action was taken to protect the valuable assets of the Garden, including sandbagging the statue of Sir Hans Sloane, storing valuable books under sandbags and building a bomb shelter. The location, directly by the river, made bombing a very real threat and in April 1941 the Garden received direct hits from a landmine and incendiary devices, which destroyed the tool shed, set the lecture room on fire and shattered glass in eight of the glasshouses, wiping out many tropical plants. In 1945, further bombing saw the destruction of the last remaining barge house.

Recovery

After the Second World War, the Garden slowly recovered and in the 1950s continued with its work in research and education. In 1953, over 330 historic books belonging to the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries were sent to the Garden on permanent loan, which make up a vast portion of the library today.

By the late 1960s, financial constraints were once again becoming a problem. This was compounded by several institutions moving their research outside of London, as well as some establishing their own botanical supplies, along with changes in the teaching of biology and botany at schools and universities.

The Garden celebrated its 300-year anniversary and Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother visited on 13 June 1973. The following year, the Garden recruited its first volunteers, establishing a close relationship that still continues today. The question of allowing other visitors, including the general public as well as perhaps other students, was still deemed incompatible with the goals of the Garden. It was also during the 1970s that the first planting of what would become the valuable 'Historical Walk' was established. This covers plants introduced or named by the former curators and those connected to the Garden over its long history.

However, despite all these improvements, by the mid-1970s the City Parochial Foundation decided to withdraw, and the Garden needed to seek another guardian.



Children visiting
Chelsea Physic
Garden.
Date unknown

Chelsea Physic Garden – open to the public

As required under the covenant agreed with Sir Hans Sloane, the ownership and management of the Garden was offered to other educational and associated institutions in 1976 and 1979. However, none took up the offer and other institutions were approached, including The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries. Another option considered was the possibility of changing the Garden into an open garden square, but this would have resulted in the loss of its historic status forever.

After lengthy negotiations and discussions, The Landscape Institute and the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG) were given licences to operate in the Garden. With a donation of £60,000 from The National Heritage Memorial Fund, the Garden was opened to the public for the first time in 1983 and saw a staggering 16,090 people visit in the first year.

In June 1984, 'The Chelsea Physic Garden Company' became the official name, with the handover to the new company taking place in the presence of the Prince of Wales, who later became the first Patron of the Garden. The future of Chelsea Physic Garden had once again been secured.



Entry ticket
to Chelsea
Physic Garden.

THE object of the Society of Apothecaries' Garden at Chelsea being for Botanical Study, they find it necessary to limit the number of tickets granted to visitors.

The ticket, which is *not transferable*, and available for the year of issue only, will admit one friend with the holder daily (except Sunday), from 10 to 1, and from 2 to 5 p.m.

Children are not admitted.

Visitors are particularly requested not to take any Specimens without the express permission of the Curator of the Garden.

Modern Botanical Garden

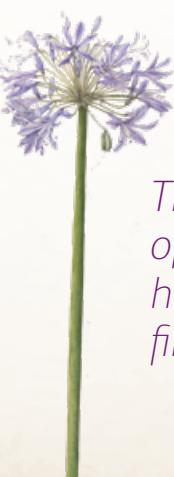
The establishment of the new Chelsea Physic Garden Company meant an evolution in the running and management of the Garden. The same principles were upheld regarding education and training, but were now combined with providing a haven in the middle of London for members of the public.

To help cover the rising operational costs of the Garden and make its future as secure as possible, fundraising became an important focus for the charity. This led to the establishment of the 'Friends of Chelsea Physic Garden' scheme, increased marketing to continue to grow visitor numbers and the redevelopment of the buildings to provide spaces for private events.

In 1985, the Pond Rockery – first constructed in 1773 – was listed Grade II. By 1987, over £800,000 was raised by the charity, but in the same year a hurricane swept through the south of England resulting in the sad loss of 18 of the Garden's oldest and largest trees.

The 1990s saw the appointment of Sue Minter as curator, alongside head gardener Fiona Crumley, the first women to take these roles. Meanwhile, a growing interest in herbal medicine saw an increase in visitor numbers, as well as continued work on education, including schools and colleges.

Alongside this, the volunteers at the Garden played a key role, including offering free guided tours for visitors, but also through their work in establishing a summer and winter fair each year. Further restoration of the buildings was undertaken, providing an area for a shop and exhibition space, a research and education centre, and a café.



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Today & the future of Chelsea Physic Garden

Chelsea Physic Garden not only values its heritage, but is also motivated by the future. In 2023, the Garden celebrates its 350th anniversary – an extraordinary testament to its importance and value. This is a key goal for the Garden in the coming years as it looks towards an amazing milestone, but also provides an impetus for future plans.

The Garden is a small charitable organisation, with a staff of around 30, and running costs reaching £1.7 million, but with an income of £1.8 million. The Garden must strike a fine balance between providing a peaceful oasis in Chelsea, while also continuing valuable work in education and contributing to the scientific understanding of plants.



In 2018, visitor numbers reached close to 70,000 and there were almost 2,500 learners, including school children and higher education students. Chelsea Physic Garden receives no regular government funding and relies on donations, commercial activities and income from visitors and Friends.

The Garden has recently undertaken the first ever review of the entire plant collection. This will allow for a greater understanding of the plants, while also providing the tools to create a master plan for the planting, management and conservation of the Garden. These actions help prepare for the future and the continuation of this unique horticultural and botanical haven in London. The Garden will continue to educate and welcome visitors, but as Director of the Garden Sue Medway says, 'it's all about the plants.'

Key contributors

John Watts (1680)

The first curator of the Garden, Watts was appointed in 1680 and had the task of growing and maintaining medicinal herbs. He was also responsible for the construction of the first glasshouse in England to be warmed by an external stove, making it possible to grow exotic plants that would not normally survive the English weather.

Philip Miller (1722)

In 1722, Sir Hans Sloane appointed Miller as the head gardener. It was during Miller's 50 years in charge that the Garden gained a great reputation and became 'the most famous botanic garden in Europe'. Miller constantly introduced new plants and built up a wide circle of correspondents from across the globe.

William Forsyth (1771)

Forsyth was appointed head gardener in 1771 and became a noted specialist on diseases in fruit trees, publishing two works on the subject. Forsyth was also responsible for the Pond Rockery – the oldest rock garden in Europe – which is noted for the materials used in its construction, including carved masonry from the Tower of London and black Icelandic basalt. In 1784, Forsyth was also appointed superintendent of the Royal Gardens of St James and Kensington, and in 1804, the same year as his death, he was one of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society. Forsyth was the great, great grandfather of the late entertainer, Sir Bruce Forsyth.



Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward (1830s)

Bagshaw Ward was a surgeon by trade, but having previously attended lectures on botany as a student, he developed a love of plant hunting and gardening and joined the Garden's committee in the 1830s. The Wardian Case was the outcome of Ward's experiments in hatching moths from chrysalises made in sealed bottles, after observing germinating plants in the leaf mould inside.



Robert Fortune (1846)

Bagshaw Ward's accidental discovery led to the production of miniature glasshouses which allowed for the long-distance transportation of plants, and largely assisted the growth of the tea industry in India. Fortune – who briefly served as the Garden's curator in the 1840s – went on to use Wardian Cases on a large scale to transport tea seedlings from China while in the employment of the East India Company.

Thomas Moore (1848)

After the departure of Fortune, Moore became the new curator and is remembered for making the Garden 'the foremost collection of medicinal plants in Britain'. Prior to taking up the role, Moore had worked at several gardens including the Royal Botanic Society Gardens in Regent's Park, where he was noticed by Chelsea Physic Garden curator at the time, John Lindley.

William Hales (1899)

Hales took on the newly-defined role of curator and head gardener combined, which involved both expert knowledge of gardening and the cultivation of plants, but also the ability to hold classes and lectures for students. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Hales installed the glasshouses that are still used today.

Significant contributions

Chelsea Physic Garden has had a significant impact across several scientific fields, as well as contributing to a greater understanding of horticulture and agriculture. It has also been linked to many great names of the botanical world over several centuries.

Key contributions include:

- Establishment of the Index Seminum, the global seed exchange, first discussed by Professor of Botany at Leiden University, Dr Paul Hermann and the first curator of the Garden, John Watts, in 1682. Index Seminum is still in use today.
- The location for the first heated glasshouse in the UK (now demolished) enabling the propagation and study of exotic plants.
- A new recipe for drinking chocolate, promoted as 'medicinal milk', was introduced to Britain by Sir Hans Sloane after his return from Jamaica in 1689. The recipe was finally acquired by Cadbury's.
- Sloane was also credited with the popularisation of Peruvian bark powder (also known as Jesuit's bark) from *Cinchona pubescens* as a cure for malaria. A bitter alkaloid named quinine was later identified as the active ingredient in 1820. It also led to the popular gin and tonic cocktail. During the 19th century, men of the East India Company based in India added water, sugar, lime and gin to the quinine to make it tastier.
- In hotbeds of tanners' bark, Philip Miller grew native cotton from both Indies and sent *Gossypium hirsutum* to British settlers in South Georgia in 1732, which was key to the establishment of the cotton industry in America.
- The invention of the Wardian Case by Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward during the 1830s, which enabled the transportation of medicinal, economic and ornamental plants all over the world.



Statue of Sir Hans Sloane
in Chelsea Physic Garden.



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and Chelsea Local Studies Library and Archives.