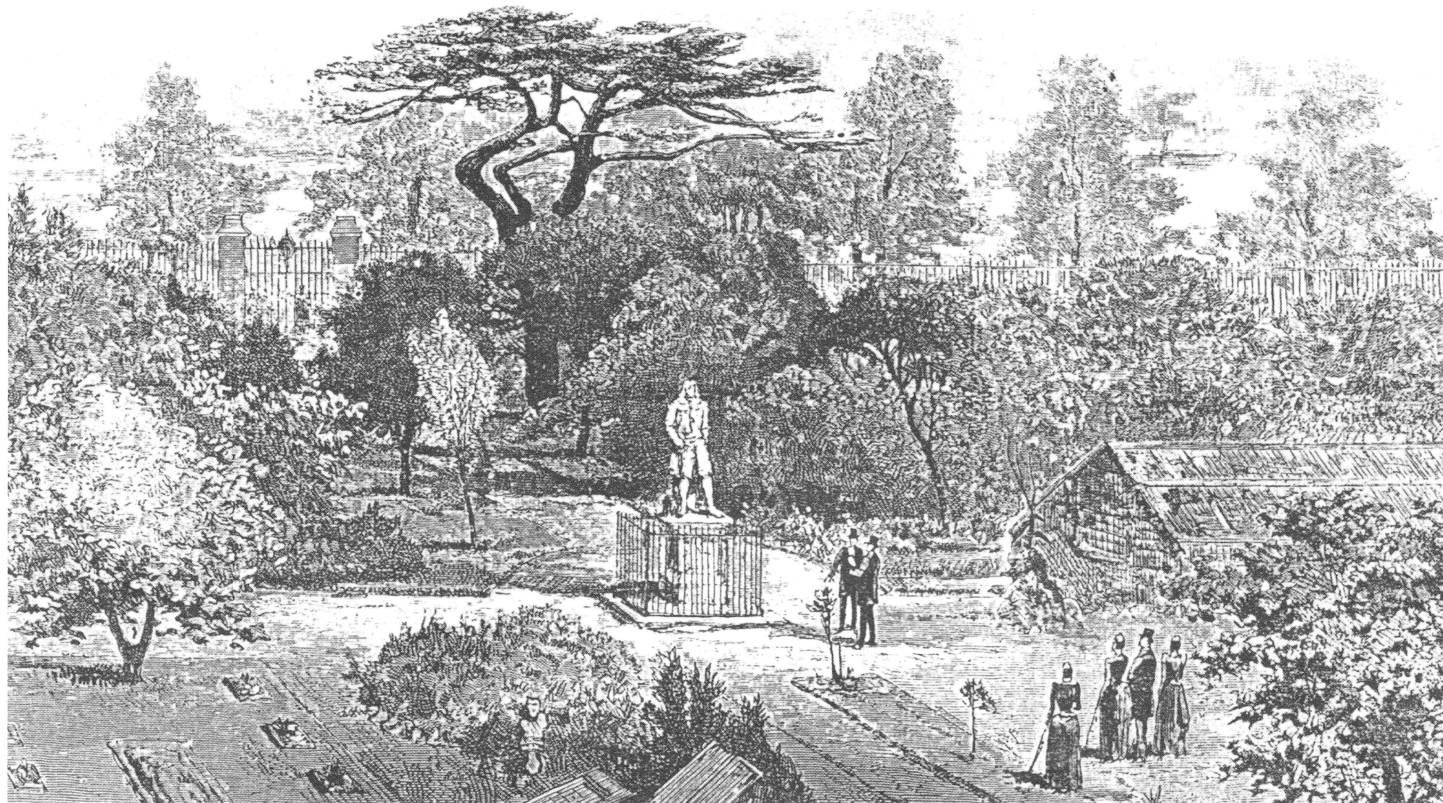


Chelsea Physic Garden — A Brief History

Founded 1673 Patron: HRH The Prince of Wales KG KT GCB OM



Chelsea Physic Garden by Walter Burgess (1846–1908)

The Garden's founding

In 1673 the Society of Apothecaries of London founded a Physic Garden at Chelsea, so that their apprentices could learn to grow medicinal plants and study their uses. In England, this is unusual because it was not attached to a university. When the Garden was founded the word 'physic' meant 'pertaining to things natural as distinct from the metaphysical'. Now the New Oxford English Dictionary defines physic firstly as 'medicinal drugs', and secondly as 'the art of healing'.

When the Apothecaries chose this four-acre site beside the River Thames, it was already famed for its market gardens, orchards and some great houses belonging to King Henry VIII, his Chancellor Sir Thomas More and Sir John Danvers. In those days they would all have preferred to travel by river, which was both safer and quicker than road.

The riverside position also appealed to the Apothecaries because they needed somewhere to house the gaily painted barge they used for royal pageants and for their celebrated 'herborising' expeditions to collect plants. No doubt the free-draining soil and southerly aspect would have been an added attraction. Even today the special microclimate enables us to cultivate many tender species, including the largest olive tree growing outside in Britain.

For the first ten years the Apothecaries had difficulty in finding a good Gardener, as the Curators were called. Then they appointed John Watts who was also an apothecary. Watts made contact with Paul Hermann, the Professor of Botany at Leiden University, and by 1683 the two men were exchanging plants and seeds, the most notable being four seedlings of *Cedrus libani*, the Cedar of Lebanon, which were amongst the first cultivated in Britain. These distinctive trees feature in many of the old prints and pictures of the Garden and the last was eventually felled in the winter of 1903. You can still see the offspring of the Chelsea Physic Garden cedars in the Cambridge

Botanic Garden and in other old estates in Britain. The Garden continues to publish an *Index Seminum*, and still exchanges seeds with botanic gardens around the world. Glasshouses have always been an important feature of the Garden. As early as 1685, on one of his many visits to the Garden, the celebrated diarist John Evelyn describes the heated glass-house, thought to be the first in Europe.

The era of Sloane and Miller

When Dr Hans Sloane (1660–1753) bought the Manor of Chelsea from Charles Cheyne in 1712, he also took over the freehold of the Garden. Sloane had studied at the Garden in his youth, and was sympathetic to the Apothecaries who were struggling with its upkeep. Sloane, who was knighted in 1716 and who became President of both the Royal Society and the Royal College of Physicians, granted the Apothecaries a lease on the land for a rent of £5 a year in perpetuity, on condition 'it be for ever kept up and maintained as a physic garden'. This deed of covenant, established in 1722, secured the future of the Garden and required that 50 plant specimens be delivered each year to the Royal Society until 2,000 pressed and mounted species had been received; by 1795 the total had reached 3,700.

When Sloane died, aged almost 93, his collection of curiosities and his vast library became the nucleus of the British Museum, later moving to the Natural History Museum. Sloane's name lives on in local streets such as Hans Crescent and Sloane Square, and the rent of £5 per annum is still paid to his heirs.

Sir Hans Sloane made another great contribution to Chelsea Physic Garden when he appointed Philip Miller as Gardener. Miller (1691–1771) made the Garden world-famous during his fifty-year tenure. He trained William Aiton, who became the first

Gardener at Kew, and William Forsyth, his own successor at Chelsea, and after whom Forsythia is named. Miller's correspondence with the leading botanists of the day generated an exchange of plants and seeds, many of them cultivated in the Garden for the first time in Britain. Miller also wrote eight editions of his famous *Dictionary of Gardening*, which became the standard reference work for gardeners in Britain and America.

Carl von Linné (Linnaeus), the great Swedish botanist, made several visits to the Garden in the 1730s and many species first described by Miller still retain the names he ascribed to them. Between 1731 and 1768 Sloane instructed Miller to arrange for various crops, including cotton, to be sent out from the Garden to the new colony of Georgia in America. Miller also introduced madder, which is used to produce red dye, as an agricultural crop in Britain.

In 1732 Sloane laid the foundation stone for a glorious orangery where Miller lived for a short time with his family; sadly this elegant building had to be pulled down in the mid 19th century when the Garden's fortunes went into decline. In 1899 the Apothecaries finally gave up the management of the Garden. It was taken over by the City Parochial Foundation. During this period, university and college students continued to use the Garden for scientific research, but it remained closed to the general public.

In 1983 the City Parochial Foundation decided that they could no longer maintain the Garden, so a new independent charity was set up, and it was decided that the Garden should be opened to the public for the first time in its 300 year history.

Chelsea Physic Garden today

Chelsea Physic Garden now covers 3.8 acres with Royal Hospital Road to the north, Swan Walk to the east, and the Embankment to the south. The main buildings – offices, lecture rooms, Curator's house and most of the greenhouses – are at the northern end. The remaining space is divided by gravel paths into quadrants, which are mostly sub-divided into the narrow rectilinear beds which are an original design feature of the Garden.

Many medicinal and other useful plants are grown at the northern end, while the Systematic Order Beds are set out to demonstrate the botanical relationship of plants, most of which have labels detailing their botanical classification and origin. The formal design of the botanical garden is broken by trees which often have a multitude of uses, and include the famous olive and an ancient yew.

A replica of the original statue of Sir Hans Sloane created by Michael Rysbrack in 1733 has pride of place at the centre of the Garden; the original, damaged by pollution, is now in the British Museum. Next to the statue are two carts, one created to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Sloane's death, and the other for Linnaeus' tercentenary in 2007.

Near the statue is the oldest man-made rock garden in Europe, which has Grade II* listed status. The rocks include pieces of carved stone which were once part of the Tower of London and basaltic lava used as ballast on Sir Joseph Banks' ship on a voyage to Iceland in 1772. By Chelsea Embankment is a wider area of flowering shrubs and rare peonies, with plenty of places to sit and absorb the atmosphere. Wildlife flourishes in the

Garden, and frogs, toads, and newts have come back to inhabit the Fortune's Tank Pond which was restored in 2004. Rare lichens and insects have also been identified in the Garden.

What else goes on behind our walls?

Today Chelsea Physic Garden is still dedicated to promoting education, conservation, and scientific research. The Natural History Museum's Botany Department grows a large collection of Asplenium ferns for taxonomic research, and botanists continue to work on species which we hope will explain some of the many mysteries of the plant kingdom. We are involved in a joint initiative, the Ethnomedica Project, with medical herbalists, the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew, the Eden Project, the Botanic Garden at Edinburgh, and the Natural History Museum, which involves collecting data about herbal remedies which have been used over the years in Britain. We welcome contributions from members of the public; if you have a 'remembered remedy' please enter it on one of the index cards in the red box in the foyer. Catering for the increased interest in plant-based medicine, the Garden of World Medicine was laid out in 1993, and shows the use of plants for medicinal purposes by the world's indigenous peoples. You will also find borders with plants employed in the perfumery and cosmetic industries, and others used for the manufacture of fabrics and for dyes. The Pharmaceutical Garden displays plants which are the origins of many of the drugs used in contemporary medicine. In the Historical Walk you can follow the Garden's own history, with plants introduced into cultivation by Curators and notable botanists, such as William Hudson, William Curtis, Sir Joseph Banks and Robert Fortune, who have been connected with the Garden over the centuries.

In 1997 Princess Alexandra opened our custom-built Education Department which is run by staff committed to demonstrating the importance of plants in our everyday lives. Over 2000 children and their teachers visit the Garden each year.

If you would like to find out more about the Garden and its activities, please see www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk. The Garden is much in demand for functions and wedding receptions, providing an idyllic setting for events of all kinds. See our website or call 020 7349 6459 for more details.

Friends Membership

Become a Friend of Chelsea Physic Garden and enjoy the year-round tranquility of this beautiful 330-year-old piece of living history. A self-supporting charity with no government funding, we rely on our members' subscriptions to help fund education, interpretation and research at the Garden. As a Friend you receive privileged free access to the Garden on weekdays throughout the year for yourself and one family member.

To join, go to the entrance kiosk or shop, call 020 7349 6459, email friends@chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk. or visit www.chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk

Open to the public until 31 October:
Tuesdays to Fridays, 12–5pm.
Sundays & Bank Holidays, 12–6pm.
Special Late Openings on Wednesdays
from 4 July–5 September until 10pm,
last admission 8.30pm.



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