

# Gardening by Ages

Lambeth's **Museum of Garden History** highlights the perennial British passion for gardens and gardening, from the Middle Ages to the Eden Project

THE BRITISH and their love of gardens is well known around the world. How well the British are aware of garden history down through the ages is another matter. From its early Edenic beginnings, through Roman and medieval times, up to the grandiose eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape parks of country estates, to the suburban garden lovingly tended to at the back of row upon row of terraced houses, or the very name 'garden city' are all symptomatic of this attachment. Bringing history up to date, the Eden Project exemplifies on this prevailing interest in gardens, their record visitor numbers possibly a sign of greater interest in the gardening (and garden centre) dimension of the centre, than the ecological story it tells.

Positively miniature by comparison to the Eden Project, the Museum of Garden History, sited in the deconsecrated church St Mary of Lambeth's, next to Lambeth Palace in South London, is a modest yet satisfyingly absorbing saunter through the different turnings, developments and technologies which have all been features of gardening history. The museum has opened twenty-eight years after the tombs of the father and son, John Tradescant, were discovered by Museum founders, Rosemary and John Nicholson. The Tradescants' were sixteenth-century plant hunters for the Stuart kings, travelling to the Middle East, Russia and North America in search of exotic plant species. These were brought back and planted in various estates and aristocratic gardens, including Hatfield House. There is a quite a bit in the exhibits about the evolution of the gardens of stately homes, including the knot, heraldic and maze or geometric gardens of Tudorbethan times, the high Georgian and Victorian Gardens which brought fame and glamour to the likes of Capability Brown, From the same period, Joseph Paxton's 1851 Crystal Palace represented the zenith of Victorian immersion in the culture of the garden. There is also a biographical section among the exhibits of four early plant hunters or botanists, including William Dampier, the first collector for Kew Gardens, and Joseph Banks who effectively turned plant hunting from an gentleman amateur pursuit into a profession.

If this sounds too much like a run through the gardens of the high and mighty, the museum also reminds the visitor that four-fifths of the country's population involve themselves in garden activities in one way or

another, and that gardening is a people's pursuit. There are sections on what is described as 'the Urban Experience', the early city parks, on allotments and the suburban home, as well as on the impact of television in bringing garden design to centre stage. Displays also focus on technological developments, from the early modern period through early twentieth-century industrialisation, from trowels to spades and forks, bird scarers to the first mechanised 'petroleum and steam' lawnmowers, manufactured, as it happens, by Shanks of Arbroath at the turn of the nineteenth century. Round at the back of the Church building is a knot-garden based on the design of the Tradescants.

The museum, which is closely connected to the Society of Garden History, reminds the visitor how wholeheartedly many in Britain have taken to the pastime of gardening, which even when working with wholly humanly created landscapes, may be the primary way by which so many in Britain connect to the world of plants, nature and growing things. *OL*

photo: Museum of Garden History



## FURTHER

The Museum of Garden History is at  
Lambeth Palace Road, London, SE1 7LB  
0207 401 8865 [www.museumgardenhistory.org](http://www.museumgardenhistory.org)