



RIGHT ON KEW

Roger Wheeler rediscovers the beauty of Kew Gardens

Many years ago when I was very small (yes many years ago), and living in south west London, we would visit **Kew Gardens** as an occasional special treat. All I recall about those visits is the Tube trip and the number of ice creams I was allowed to eat. It was just after the war, and I remember walking for what seemed like miles (it was) and being told to admire all the plants, flowers and the wonders of the exotic Palm House.



Fast forward a few years, maybe half a century, to Kew Gardens today. I rediscovered this wonderful place a couple of years ago and while it is very popular with tourists, we who live virtually on its doorstep hardly ever visit. Basically the **Royal Botanical Gardens** at Kew, to give it its proper title, is 121 hectares (300 acres) of gardens and glasshouses, founded in the early 18th century. It became the **National Botanical Garden** in 1840; under various patronages by both royalty and aristocracy it has flourished, celebrating its 250th anniversary in 2009.

Enough of the history lesson; today a visit to Kew is one of life's easier and more simple pleasures, although it does involve quite a lot of walking if you are to fully enjoy the many wonderful things to see. Okay, it's just a huge park with some very interesting buildings, for example **Kew Palace**, the smallest of the British royal palaces, built around 1631 and the **Chinese Pagoda**, a 50m high structure built in 1752. I could go on with the **Orangery** built in 1761, now a restaurant and of course the magnificent glasshouses. The fantastic **Palm House** was constructed in 1844; the **Princess of Wales Conservatory** opened by Diana in 1987; the **Waterlily House** and the **Temperate House**, the largest

Victorian glass structure in the world, started in 1959 and took 40 years to complete.

By now you will have realised that I quite like Kew; it's not just these astonishing glasshouses with all their amazing exotic plants from all over the world, but it's the gardens themselves that are the real pleasure. No matter how many visitors there are, and they get about two million a year, you can still lose yourself, and not see another soul, down the hundreds of secluded pathways leading through forests of trees that you will not see anywhere else in the UK. Suddenly you come out right next to the Thames, with groups having picnics, although there are four restaurants. It's all very beautifully looked after; this really is quintessentially English with a capital E.

Today it is an internationally recognised centre of excellence for the study of the world's largest collection of living plants with a staff of 700 scientists, curators and of course quite a few gardeners. It is sponsored by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs who seem to have a hands off approach, and is naturally a World Heritage Site. Most people spend a whole day there, you need to. Access is quite easy; I wouldn't recommend driving, street parking is almost impossible and extremely expensive when you can find a space. Conveniently, the nearest Tube is Kew Gardens on the District Line, just five minutes' walk to the main gate.

To quote their press release "*Escape to different worlds and discover Kew Gardens as never before. Experience the heat of the tropical rainforest and the tranquility of the Alps. Stroll from elegant East Asia to dramatic desert landscapes.*" I couldn't have put it



PALM HOUSE



KEW GARDENS PAGODA

better myself. Admission is **£13.90** or **£11.90** for concessions. Have a day at Kew you, won't be disappointed.

WAKEHURST PLACE

Kew leased the National Trust's **Wakehurst Place** in 1965. Now known as Kew in the Country or Kew's country garden, it is situated at **Ardingly** just a few miles north of Haywards Heath in West Sussex. This late 16th century mansion is surrounded by 500 acres of gardens, wetlands, woods and lakes. In spring the bluebells, azaleas and rhododendrons are breathtaking; even in midsummer when all the flowers are over it is still one of the loveliest places to stroll through. The great storm of 1987 destroyed nearly 80,000 trees, but 20 years later the experts from Kew have redesigned the estate creating walks through some of the world's temperate woodlands, including a walk through the **Himalayan Glade**, the southern hemisphere garden, the pinetum and the stunning walled garden.



The star of the show, however, is the **Millennium Seed Bank**, originally tasked to store seeds from all of the UK's native plant species, which was achieved in seven years. They then set themselves a goal of banking seeds from 10% of the entire world's flora by 2010, which was achieved in 2009. Their next goal is to store seeds from 25% of all the world's plants. All life depends on plants - sorry to sound like a school teacher - so this work is absolutely vital. By March 2011 they had collected 1,843,280,920 seeds - that must take some counting! You can wander around absorbing this building while watching scientists in their white coats peering into microscopes, fascinating. Wakehurst gets about 450,000 visitors a year; when we went we had the place to ourselves, mornings are popular with school visits, but the afternoons seem to be the best time. Admission is just **£11.50** for the entire estate which includes the gardens, the house and the Millennium Seed Bank. I think it's great value for money.

So choose your Kew, both are great days out.

- www.kew.org
- www.kew.org/visit-wakehurst