

# A Visit to Kew Gardens<sup>17</sup>

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WE SET OFF FROM DOVER on Saturday, 21st September. Skies were leaden, but it was dry and the mood at least was sunny. The coach took us to the main gate in the northern area of Kew Gardens by 11 a.m. and we were told to reassemble at the Victoria Gate in the eastern area at 5 p.m. if the weather was dry – at 4 p.m. if wet! Mercifully, we all had maps, so we went our several ways with enough information to make an informed choice. This account, therefore, is of the day spent by one couple.

We began in the Filmy Fern House and went from there to Kew Palace and the Queen's Garden. We didn't choose to go into the palace, but found the herbal garden quite fascinating. The palace was a retreat for Queen Charlotte and George III and the many herbs were grown to deal with smells and ailments as well as to disguise such unpleasantness as bad meat. Pot-pourri is the modern equivalent.

We then took a walk down an avenue brought to life by the bright orange zinnias.

The Princess of Wales Conservatory provided us with welcome warmth and many things to interest us. Looking at the cacti, I was reminded of the Biblical promise from Isaiah ".....and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose."

We spent some time at the lily pond, marveling at the leaves of the giant water lily. We were interested and a little amused, to note that the captions for the aquarium referred mostly to the plants. The fish merely added a little local colour – geranium red, mauve and bright orange – enhanced the scene. The tropical orchids, as always, provided an exotic contribution, but I was more surprised at the sight of the immature pineapple that was red on the outside.

We continued to the lake and entered the Palm House. This is a Victorian building and as we entered my glasses misted over forcing me to remove them. I did not object to the warmth. I saw fascinating things such as *acalypha*

*hispida*, which looked to me like pink lambs' tails or catkins. I learned that the Madagascar Periwinkle has been used so successfully in the treatment of infantile cancer that the incidence of leukemia and Hodgkin's has been reduced by 80%. We saw many contributions to our culinary enjoyment such as pepper, coffee, coconuts, bananas, allspice, papaya and breadfruit. Breadfruit is known to us from our literary knowledge, but I remember eating it in Jamaica. Even the pollution problem in our car-dominated world was represented. We saw the information near the sugar cane which told us that in Brazil 50% of cars use the alcohol from sugar cane as fuel, which is renewable, cheap and causes less pollution than petrol and oil.

The panama hats gave us a mirthful reminder of our schooldays and uniform panama hats – usually stuffed into satchels as soon as we were out of the sight of authority!

By the time we were out of the Palm House, we were able to enjoy the seats outside, overlooking the lake. It was sunny, peaceful and colourful, thanks to the massed flower beds. We decided we had insufficient time for the Temperate House, but did visit the Evolution House. We went back in time 3,500 million years, but the development based on the spreading of seeds was vividly explained in modern terminology as delivered by airmail or courier.

We were given the appalling information that in all those years of evolution humans had done more to bring about the rapid extinction of plants in 300,000 years than had ever taken place before. More positively, we are now beginning to conserve the plant diversity.

We had time to walk back to Victoria Gate, have a cup of tea and visit the gift shop. Because the sun was shining, the leaves delighted us with their huge variety of shade, as the early signs of autumn revealed themselves. It was a fitting end.