

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WILLIAM TOWNSEND AITON

In 1759 when Princess Augusta decided to form a botanic garden at Kew, William Aiton (1731-1793), a young Scottish gardener serving in the Apothecaries Garden at Chelsea, was recommended as suitable to assist her chief gardener, John Haverfield (1695-1784) in laying out the proposed new garden. So began the Aiton family's influence at Kew and here William Aiton's son, William Townsend Aiton, was born two centuries ago on February 2nd, 1766.



At the age of 16 W. T. Aiton became assistant to his father and in 1796 was appointed "His Majesty's Gardener at Kew and Richmond".* He was much esteemed by George III—who spent a great deal of time at Kew—and by other members of the royal family.

His Contract reads : —

"It was this 24th Day of April one thousand seven hundred and ninety six contracted and agreed Between Henry Strachey Esqr. Master of His Majesty's Household** for and on behalf of His Majesty's on the one Part and William Townsend Aiton Gardener to His Majesty at Kew on the other Part as follows : The said Wm. Townsend Aiton for the considerations hereafter mentioned undertakes and agrees to maintain and keep His Majesty's Kitchen Pleasure & Flower Gardens at Kew & Richmond for one whole year commencing on the eleventh day of October last in the manner and in the condition hereafter specified. Viz. He covenants, promises & engages to maintain and keep the whole of the Kitchen Garden at Kew containing the Measure Twelve Acres One rood and thirteen Perches and the several Fruit houses and Pinestoves in or belonging thereto in a good and perfect state and Order by cultivating the same in the best manner possible providing as constant and regular a succession of every article of Vegetables Herbs Roots & Fruits for His Majesty's Kitchen and Tables . . ."

Aiton had to defray all expenses including labourers' wages, fuel and manure, frames, glasses, tools, implements, seeds, trees

and plants. Full instructions for a whole year's work were given in the Contract, no small detail being omitted.

During the same year Aiton published *Delineations of Exotick Plants Cultivated in the Royal Gardens at Kew 1796* by Francis Bauer. Some of Bauer's original beautifully executed coloured drawings are preserved in the Library of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

With the assistance of Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) and Bank's librarians—Dr. Jonas Carlsson Dryander (1748-1810) and Robert Brown (1773-1858)—Aiton published between 1810 and 1813 the second edition of his father's *Hortus Kewensis* in five volumes. An epitome of the same work appeared in 1814.

In 1820 he arranged the gardens of Brighton Pavilion and made a number of alterations at Windsor. In 1830 the MS for a new catalogue was ready for publication but never printed; it is thought that this was burned after his death by his half brother, John, together with his immense correspondence and some Kew records.

He resigned his control of the Kew Botanic Garden in 1841, but still retained control of the Pleasure Grounds until 1845. He died at Kensington on October 9th, 1849, aged 83 and was buried in an eastern corner of Kew churchyard. A memorial tablet in Kew Church describes him as "Director-General of all the Royal Gardens".

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In Michaelmas 1801 the Botanic Garden had been placed on the Household Establishment which was controlled by the Board of Green Cloth, an ancient Court of Justice belonging to the Lord Steward's Department daily sitting in the Counting-house of St. James's Palace. They met around a table which had a green cloth upon it, hence the name and were chiefly concerned with household accounts, provisions and payments for same. The Board still exists but it is now only concerned with the licensing of pubs and taverns within the Palace of Westminster.

The "red tape" that existed at Kew during the time of W. T. Aiton is amazing! The mere reading of history books suggests that George III had only to command something to be done and work was instantly commenced. Before any building operations could take place in the Royal Gardens permission had to be sought from the Board of Green Cloth. They in turn had to get permission from the "Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury", who then issued warrants to authorize the work. The following incident illustrates the way in which George III was kept waiting.

On August 13th, 1806, Aiton wrote to Sir Henry Strachey (1736-1810), Master of the Household, the Board of Green Cloth:—

"I have the honour to submit for your Information that the succession Pinery in His Majesty's Garden at Kew is in a very bad state; and so much decayed that the same will require to be taken down and rebuilt; I therefore humbly represent that if this

Business is deferred acting upon till another year, His Majesty's Table cannot be supplied duly with succession Fruit ; presuming therefore that you will be pleased to take it into consideration ; & I trust that you will approve of the propriety of this building being erected & fit for use before winter. . . .”

Regarding Aiton's request Sir Henry Strachey eventually wrote on September 8th, 1806, to George Harrison (died 1841), Assistant Secretary to the Treasury Office† at the Treasury Chambers :—

“ Mr. Aiton His Majesty's Gardener at Kew and Kensington having represented to me that Certain works are wanted in those Gardens before Winter ; I have the honour to enclose for the Information of My Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury, his representation of the Particulars, which appear to me to be necessary, presuming that their Lordships will give Orders thereupon. . . .”

On December 9th, 1807, over a year later, Sir Henry Strachey again wrote to George Harrison at the Treasury Chambers about his previous request :—

“ Mr. Aiton has now represented to me that the said works are not yet done, and that unless they are executed as expeditiously as possible there will be a great deficiency in the Supply of Table Fruit for His Majesty's Use during the next year.”

The Hon. Henry Wellesley (1773-1847)†† wrote from the Treasury Chambers on December 31st, 1807, to Sir Henry Strachey :—

“ Having laid before the Lords Commissioners of His Majesty's Treasury your Letter of the 10th Inst. respecting the repairs and alterations wanted at Kew and Kensington Gardens.

I am commanded by their Lordships to acquaint you that they have directed Warrants to be prepared forthwith authorizing the works in Question.”

A new hot-house—called the Great Hot-house—was eventually erected in 1808 at a cost of £143 8s. 0d.

On September 25th, 1810, Aiton wrote to George Stone, Clerk of the Household, the Board of Green Cloth, about the deplorable state of decay of the old Pine-pit in which the pine-apples were grown. He goes on to say :—

“ . . . I trust therefore it will meet your Approval that this Hot-house may be rebuilt without delay, and I could wish it executed before the new Year. . . .”

George Stone, Clerk of the Household,§ wrote on September 28th, 1810, to George Harrison corroborating Aiton's representation of the Pine-pit's decayed state having inspected the building himself.

The new pinery was built in 1811 at a cost of £50.

Several transcripts of account books for Kew Botanic Garden kept during the early nineteenth century are preserved at the Public Records Office from which the above-mentioned correspondence

and contract were extracted. The following items have also been taken from these books. Officials and tradesmen have been identified by the aid of directories and other reference works of the period.

A great deal of loam was transported to the Gardens during the early nineteenth century, for Kew as we know it today was only just taking shape. Most of the loam came from barges belonging to Mrs. Martha Layton of Kew Bridge Wharf, Old Brentford. For lighterage of a barge of loam from Teddington on February 4th, 1804, she was paid £2 15s. 0d.

"Hot dung" was received by barge from Charles Hutchins, cowkeeper, of 13 Water Lane, near Fleet Street. On March 29th, 1807, a barge of hot dung was purchased for £6 7s. 6d. Horse dung was obtained from John Raban of Blackfriars at £8 8s. 0d. per barge.

Tan was also received by barge for "working the Old Pinery". Samuel Purkis, tanner, of New Brentford supplied 8,000 bushels in 1803 at a cost of £66 13s. 4d.

Matthew Bowden, basket-maker of Old Brentford, supplied baskets and bundles of osiers which were used to support plants in pots. Garden pots were bought from Mrs. Sarah Morris, potter, of Church Street, Deptford and tubs from Samuel Tunstall, cooper, of Old Brentford.

Barrows, brooms, implements, matts [= mats] and stationery were obtained from Hugh Ronald, nursery and seedsman, of New Brentford. On September 8th, 1801, 12 cedar pencils cost 6/- and an india rubber 1/6d.

Between 1801 and 1810 the various small bills were paid by William McNab, one of the Kew gardeners. Among the items were a pint of ink purchased for 8d. on March 26th, 1806, and 3 packing needles purchased for 6d. on March 19th, 1806. A Chinese gardener was placed under the care of McNab who paid the expenses of his board. On April 20th, 1803, "Fruit Trees for the Garden in China" were bought from Richard Chandler & Co. at a cost of £19 17s. 6d. Included in the bill was a packet of mustard and a packet of cress at 8/- each.

Many plants were bought from Lee & Kennedy, † nursery and seedsmen of Hammersmith and other leading horticultural firms of the period. Some were purchased from botanical collectors such as John Fraser (1750-1811) of Sloane Square, Chelsea and private individuals, such as Sir Joseph Banks who was George III's botanical adviser from 1772 until 1820. Items from Sir Joseph include:—

1802

- | | |
|----------|---|
| Sept. 17 | Large Case of Plants from
Sr J. Banks 5/-
Paid Porter 2/- |
| Sept. 23 | Basket of Plants from
Sr J. Banks 1/6d.
Paid Porter 9d. |

For July 5th, 1805, is the following botanical item, "Mrs. Teesdale's Acct. For the Herbarium and a Collection of Plants, late Mr. Teesdale's, £25 . 5 ; Mr. Aiton took as much of the above Plants etc as amounted to £5 5s."

Robert Teesdale died at Turnham Green on December 25th, 1804. He was gardener at Castle Howard and afterwards seedsman in the Strand. The genus *Teesdalia* was named after him and he was the first to discover *Carex filiformis* in England in 1799.

Food must have been rather costly during this period through Britain's continuous war with France. During George III's visits to Windsor fruit was sent there by caravan from Kew for his own use. In 1810 the total expense for the carriage of fruit, which totalled 47 visits, amounted to £58 1s. 3½d., including toll fees.

An interesting sidelight of the period—kangaroos from Botany Bay—is shown in this letter to Sir Henry Strachey from Aiton dated December 20th, 1806 :—

"I have the honour to inform you that having received His Majesty's Command to convert into a Flower Garden the Paddocks of the Cottage in Richmond Pleasure Grounds, lately occupied by the Kangaroos from Botany Bay ; consisting of about three acres ; the same has been accordingly executed, and that the Expense thereby incurred merely for Labour, and which I have disbursed, amounts to Two hundred and forty-five pounds six shillings. Enclosed is a correct copy of the Weekly Account Kept by the Foreman of the Work."

The early nineteenth century was an important epoch in the history of Kew and a thorough search through newspapers and parish records of this period would reveal many more interesting facts. Much additional information can also be found in the MS Kew *Record Books*, 1793-1847, and the MS Kew *Inward Books*, 1805-1843. This account is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely to give some idea of what Kew was like during the time of William Townsend Aiton.

JOHN L. GILBERT.

* According to the *Gentleman's Magazine*, vol. 63, 1793, William T. Aiton was appointed by the King to succeed his father as His Majesty's chief gardener at Kew in May, 1793.

** Henry Strachey, afterwards Sir Henry, was Master of the Household, 1794 until 1810.

† George Harrison, afterwards Sir George, was Assistant Secretary to the Treasury from August 19th, 1805, until February 24th, 1826. He was the first person to hold this office.

†† The Hon. Henry Wellesley, later First Baron Cowley, was Secretary of the Treasury, 1807 until 1809, according to Doyle's *Official Baronage of England* (1886).

‡ James Lee (1754-1824) and John Kennedy (1759-1842). For further information see *James Lee and the Vineyard Nursery, Hammersmith*, by E. J. Willson, 1961.

§ The Master of the Household, Sir Henry Strachey, had recently died and his successor, William Kenrick, M.P., had not yet taken over.

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POSITIONS TAKEN BY THE FIRST GROUP OF STUDENTS
 COMPLETING THE THREE-YEAR COURSE

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R. D. Bowen	Student, The Grotto, Institute of Parks Admin.
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C. Hart	
P. M. D. Hitchin	Student, The Grotto.
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Miss J. Lee	Waterperry Hort. School, Wheatley, Oxford.
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