

Liverpool back on song

Stephen Lyus brings exciting news of a modern resurgence in a historically important orchid collection



PHOTOGRAPHY: GERARD WEAVER UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

LIVERPOOL BOTANICAL TRUST

THE CREATION OF Liverpool's Botanic Garden is owed to several eminent gentlemen of the city who decided it would be a great thing for its citizens to have a place to be able to view the amazing plants flooding into the country from all over the British Empire. They issued a prospectus, and in November 1800 all interested parties met to agree on the rules and regulations of the new organisation. A private subscription club was formed to collect living plants with 300 shares available at 12 guineas each and an annual subscription fee of 2 guineas.

Liverpool Corporation (forerunner of the town council) leased land in the Mount Pleasant area, at that time in the countryside. A triangular walled garden was created over the following year and in May 1802, William Roscoe, the new president, gave the inaugural address.

Boom town

Economic products such as food, fibre and medicinal plants were the focus of attention and very quickly Liverpool joined Glasnevin (Dublin), Calcutta and Kew as the major botanic gardens of the British Empire. Plant specimens flooded in from all over the globe through Liverpool's extensive trading connections.

By 1808 a large 240ft-long glasshouse had been built with five environmental zones. In its first plant catalogue, 4,823 different species and cultivars were listed, including 16 hardy and 14 tropical orchids. The great days of the orchid collection were still to come but in 1827 it was reported: "No Public Garden in the UK is in a higher state of cultivation, and in no similar institution are stove and greenhouse plants in a more healthy and vigorous state."

A *Cattleya loddigesii* was sent from Sao Paulo, Brazil, by a Mr Woodforde to John Shepherd, the garden's first curator, which flowered in 1810 and appears to be the first example of *Cattleya* cultivation. Nathaniel Wallich at Calcutta Botanic Garden was the source of many new orchids collected in Nepal. These included *Cymbidium lancifolium*, *Dendrobium fimbriatum*, *Dendrobium moschatum*, *Dendrobium pierardii* and *Paphopedilum insigne*. Between 1820 and 1845, *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* featured 18 new orchids from Liverpool.

By the late 1820s the town had subsumed the gardens, and the consequent pollution was threatening the health of both plants and visitors. In 1831 a new site was chosen beyond the city limits, in Wavertree. On his death, John Shepherd was succeeded by Henry Shepherd, his cousin. Henry was not as outgoing as his relative but was

Funding has been secured to repair the Peach House at Croxteth Hall (left) to house its exceptional orchid collection.

The first Liverpool Botanic Garden (right) was situated in Mount Pleasant.



PUBLIC DOMAIN

still recognised as a first-class botanist. He was the first European to understand how to grow ferns from spores. Since then, ferns have been an important component of the collection.

Following financial difficulties in the 1840s, the corporation had to take over ownership in 1846. After a few years it realised it must invest money in the collection and by the 1850s the garden was highly regarded. It was the orchid species capital of the UK, famous for its ferns and tropical plants.

War and peace

All was well for nearly a century until November 1940, when a stray Nazi parachute bomb hit the Wavertree glasshouses. Most plants inside were shredded and, as it was winter, the survivors were hurriedly moved into nearby private glasshouses.

This would have been the end of this story had not Percy Conn become superintendent of Liverpool Parks in 1947. He aimed to create a new garden worthy of its predecessor. In 1951 he started planning to build in the newly acquired Harthill estate and in late 1953 work began, the complex slowly growing over the next 13 years.

Mr Blackwood Dalgleish was appointed as orchid grower in early 1951. He brought with him 42 seedling *paphiopedilums* raised by himself and his father. In January 1951, four *Paphiopedilum* hybrids were registered under the names of the major parks of the city, namely Calderstones (*P. Swanbourne* × *P. Megantic*), Sefton (*P. Rishworth* × *P. Anthony Eden*), Stanley II (*P. Moloch* (1932) × *P. Mist O' the Moon*) and Sudley (*P. Moloch* (1932) × *P. Anthony Eden*) – the Fab Four! A fifth, Wavertree (*P. Moreton* × *P. Stanley II*), was registered but when the flowers opened, the pouch was found to be deformed. These hybrids have a direct link with the species



RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY

Cynoches chlorochilon 'Calderstones', AM 1957.

Wallich sent in 1820, as the initial cross which began the Park's hybrids was *Paphiopedilum insigne* × *P. spicerianum*, created by Sir Trevor Lawrence in 1884. Dalgleish died while arranging an orchid display at a meeting of the Manchester and North of England Orchid Society in December 1957.

Frank Kingdon Ward was partly sponsored by Liverpool on his 1953 and 1957 expeditions to northern Burma, resulting in the introduction of several new orchid species to Liverpool, including *Cymbidium aloifolium* KW22138, *Dendrobium chrysotoxum* KW21807 and *Dendrobium primulinum* KW22205. Colin Leakey also donated material from Uganda in 1972 including *Bulbophyllum* »



Pictured left to right: *Bulbophyllum medusae*; *Thunia brymeriana*.

falcatum, *Eulophylla quartiniana*, *Oeceoclades saundersiana* and *Podangis dactyloceras*. Wild material was also added to the collection from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and Edinburgh.

In May 1955 the RHS invited Liverpool to have a stand at the Chelsea Flower Show when it received a Silver Gilt medal. In 1956 they got an island site and received a Gold! Liverpool also exhibited to the RHS including a plant of *Cycnoches chlorochilon* 'Calderstones Belle' which received an Award of Merit and a Cultural Commendation in November 1957.

The Manchester and North of England Orchid Society first visited the Botanic Gardens in 1956 and in 1960 moved its AGM and show from Manchester to Liverpool.

Harthill finally opened in 1964 with an amazing complex of 16 connected glasshouses. There followed 15 years of good times with many skilled horticulturists trained and Liverpool representing Britain at international shows including Paris, Cologne, Vienna, and the Floriade in Amsterdam, as well as Chelsea and Harrogate. Laurence McGuire, known as Olly, was now in charge of the extensive collection of some 7,000 orchids.

On the ropes

But bad times were on their way. As a money-saving measure the glasshouses had been constructed using spruce rather than teak and by 1979 the wood was decaying and was not repaired. By the early 1980s the local economy was in a dire state, with Tate & Lyle and Cammell Laird closing and unemployment at 25%. By now, a complete rebuild of the glasshouses would cost £200,000! Encouraged by the curatorship of

future RHS Director of Horticulture, Jim Gardiner, councillors voted in 1982 that the money would be provided in the 1983–84 financial year, only to cancel the funds later. The Friends of Harthill & Calderstones campaigned vigorously for other grants but without success.

A further blow came when Liverpool Council decided that all the

glasshouses should be closed for health and safety reasons. All the plants were moved to glasshouses and polytunnels in the council-owned Greenhills Nursery at Garston and the whole complex was demolished. For the next 23 years, five horticulturists tended 10,000 plants, invisible to the world, apart from an occasional attendance at



Left to right: Jim Gardiner, Reg Anson and 'Olly' McGuire at the Southport Flower Show in 1982.



Pictured left to right: *Encyclia radiata*; *Neobenthamia gracilis*; *Angraecum giryarnae*.

Southport Flower Shows.

However, a lucky break occurred in early 2006. As Liverpool was due to become the 2008 European City of Culture, the artist Jyll Bradley was commissioned to write a book to celebrate some aspect of Liverpool's cultural history. She happened to speak to several people who remembered the botanic gardens. As a result, she wrote a book, *Mr Roscoe's Garden*, to document her findings. The publication of this book reminded the council of the existence of the remaining plants, and in 2008 a third of the plants were re-housed in five redundant glasshouses connected with Croxteth Hall's walled gardens.

Back from the brink

By now, only three horticulturists remained, soldiering on with few funds beyond their wages and the heating bills. In 2014 they received redundancy notices, but these were rescinded when I encouraged the *Liverpool Echo* to publicize the move. The council decided, again, they would no longer fund the botanic collection from 1 April 2023. This time, a story I persuaded the *Liverpool Post* to run forced another about-turn.

The gardens were saved again but it could not go on, and at this point I and others formed the Liverpool Botanical Trust to try and safeguard them for the future. Our aims are to build up the stock of our orchid species, National Plant Collections (*Codiaeum*, *Dracaena*, *Solenostemon*, hardy *Fuschia*) and gingers. Since then, the

council has had a successful Heritage Lottery Fund bid to restore the Peach House. Once this has been completed, the aim is to steadily work through renovating the rest of the glasshouses. My dream would be to build a new Orchid House to house our collection, which now mostly comprises *Dendrobium*, *Cattleya*, *Coelogyne*, *Oncidium*, *Paphiopedilum* and *Vanda*.

As to future funding, the Trust will be organizing regular seminars on the lines of a recent very successful orchid seminar sponsored by Liverpool John Moores University. Orchid expert Phil Seaton was the excellent keynote speaker, with contributions from locals on the Liverpool orchid story and from the university on the impact in literature of the arrival of non-native orchids. There will also be bookable guided tours. Collaboration with several other John Moores University departments and the collection is already being planned, as well as contributing to education in the local primary schools. There are two more universities in Liverpool as well as the nearby RHS Bridgewater which are in our sights for collaboration.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the orchid lovers who have already helped us start our recovery, particularly members of the West Devon Orchid Society who have donated several species. ○

Stephen Lyus is Chairman of the Liverpool Botanical Trust.