

Made in London: The Ashmolean Museum

by David Long

These days the name John Tradescant can usually be relied upon to ring a bell among those who know London, and it is to be hoped that some readers will recall that there were actually two of them – father and son – and agree that neither is perhaps as well known as he deserves to be given Britain's apparently unquenchable passion for gardening and gardening programmes.

Keen gardeners both of them, and even keener collectors of strange plants from around the world - hoarders in fact of anything they could get their hands on, as long as it was weird or wonderful - they were among the first and most successful plant-hunters the world had ever seen, and as such helped kickstart a national obsession which encompasses everything from the sweeping landscapes of Brown and Repton to the tiniest inner-city window box.

The fragrant lilac, the acacia tree, Kew Gardens' celebrated yellow double daffodil, the ubiquitous London plane tree, and several edible fruits we now take for granted (including the pineapple and the apricot) are just a few of species first brought to these shores by the Tradescants. Yet today to the public the pair are all but unknown. The family of plants commonly known as spiderwort is more correctly named Tradescantia after them, as is Tradescant Road, an undistinguished residential street close to where they lived in Lambeth and where a church window pictures father and son alongside those other early gardeners, Adam and Eve. But neither father nor son could be said to be well known, even among gardeners.

John the father (c.1570-1638) originally cut his teeth as an explorer, in the company of the splendidly named Sir Dudley Digges, a classic gentleman-adventurer who high-tailed it to the Russian Arctic before returning home with many a tale of derring-do. It was whilst out adventuring - this time fighting Algerian pirates off the coast of Africa during a second expedition in the 1620s - that Tradescant discovered the apricot, and around this time too that he started laying out formal gardens for the odd earl or duke - the famous Hatfield House is one of his - and later King James I.

But even more than his enthusiasm for botany and gardening it was his mania for

collecting that really marked him out from the crowd. So much so that Turret Grove, his wonderfully eccentric South London home, was popularly known at the time as Tradescant's Ark because of its immense collections of diverse beasts and birds, fishes, shells, fossils and stones. When he died - and, as a true measure of the man's undeserved obscurity, we're not even sure when that was - John the son (1608-62) took over, adding yet more bizarre items to his father's collection.

The best of these included a stuffed dodo from Mauritius and something else, presumably a humble lizard of some kind, which Tradescant insisted was 'a natural dragon, above two inches long.' He also amassed a hoard of strange tribal artefacts, a sample of blood said to have 'rained down on the Isle of Wight', a deerskin and shell cape belonging to the father of the famous Pocahontas, and a 'brazen ball...to warm the Nunnes hand.' Also the remains of the lantern Guy Fawkes was said to have been holding when he was captured, and a painting of Thomas Parr who was believed (with no reliable evidence) to have lived to be 152 before being buried in Westminster Abbey.

Largely untravelled as they mostly were in those days, members of smart London society soon beat a path to his door to see such treasures from afar. The King and Queen too, apparently, clearly every bit as keen as their subjects were to see Tradescant's world of wonders, what he called his choice collections 'of what is rare in land, in sea, in air.'



John Tradescant the Younger and his wife.

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Made in London: the Ashmolean Museum (cont.)

By the time he died the Ark, by now renamed the Musaeum Tradescantianum in recognition of its preeminence as just about the finest collection of its kind in the known world, had attracted the attention of one Elias Ashmole. As crafty as any lawyer, three times married and a keen collector himself, Ashmole couldn't wait to get his hands on the Tradescants' rarities - twelve cartloads of curiosities, he called them - so that he even moved in next door to John's widow so he could harrass her into handing it over.

It worked too, for eventually the poor woman drowned herself in a pond. This left the scheming Ashmole to press home his claim on the questionable grounds that, whilst drunk, Tradescant the Younger had promised Ashmole that he could have the curiosities for his own. He won, and London's loss became Oxford's gain with a legacy to the university providing the core of what is now the Ashmolean, the world's oldest public museum.

Today amidst more than 300,000 exhibits many of the original curiosities are still there to be seen, the famous Dodo included, as it is open all year. Fortunately, if a good deal more recently, the Tradescants were to be remembered in London too, and on the banks of the Thames by the gates to Lambeth Palace London's unique Museum of Garden History joyfully celebrates this singularly impressive duo.

The Museum itself is based in the redundant church of St-Mary's-at-Lambeth, appropriately so as the entire Tradescant clan is buried here. As well as regular exhibitions on gardening and related

matters, there is plenty to see in this secluded corner of central London including a wonderful 1980s recreation by the Museum's President, The Dowager Marchioness of Salisbury, of an authentic 17th century knot garden of the sort created by the Tradescants.

Whilst wandering round don't miss the Tradescant family vault either for it is a riot of weirdness entirely in keeping with their extraordinary addictions. Beneath an engraved lid, you'll find a sarcophagus decorated with exotic carvings of ancient Grecian buildings and Egyptian pyramids, broken classical marble columns, sinister crocodiles pushing their snouts up through the primeval gloop, an obelisk, small carved trees at each corner and at one end a truly hideous many-headed hydra picking at a skull.

And for company they have another adventurer here too - Captain Bligh of the Bounty who was buried nextdoor in 1817 - at least two Archbishops of Canterbury (one of whom caused no small controversy by reading the sermon at the funeral of Nell Gwyn), and the generous Bryan Turberville who in 1711 left the parish £100 - but only on the condition that none of it was ever given to chimneysweeps, fishermen, or Roman Catholics.

The Garden Museum (The Tradescant Trust), St-Mary's-at-Lambeth, Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1. The museum is open Monday-Friday 10.30am-5.00pm, Saturday and Sunday 10.30am – 4.00pm, but remains closed on the first Monday of every month. <http://www.gardenmuseum.org.uk/>



Pic: Mike Paterson

Tradescant tomb at the Garden Museum, London.



Pic: Mike Paterson

Detail: exotic flora and fauna.

About David Long

An award-winning ghostwriter, under his own name David Long has written and illustrated many books on London with a particular emphasis on its rogue architecture and more curious corners. London Underground: Architecture, Design and History appeared at the end of 2011, and in May Random House published his latest: Murders of London: In the Steps of the Capital's Killers. (www.davidlong.info)

