

The Wood Collections at Kew: From Toys to Totem Poles (Part I)

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The Sir Joseph Banks Building at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew on the outskirts of London, is home to one of the most extensive and intriguing wood collections in the world. Here you will find the Economic Botany Collection which includes nearly 35,000 wood specimens. The woods range in size from small reference samples to gigantic planks and cross-sections. In addition many wooden objects collected over the years have ranged from toys to totem poles!

Woods and the Museums of Economic Botany

The history of the Economic Botany Collection is as fascinating as the objects themselves. In 1847 the world's first Museum of Economic Botany opened in the grounds of the Royal Gardens at Kew. Its founder, William Jackson Hooker, described its audience as not only the scientist, but also 'the merchant, the manufacturer, the physician, the chemist, the druggist, the dyer, the carpenter and cabinet-maker, and artisans of every description'. His aim was to show entrepreneurs and craftsmen the vast range of plant raw materials that were available throughout the British Empire and to provide examples of how they could be used. So as well as wood specimens, the Museum also featured wooden artefacts and manufactured items. By 1910 there were four museums, two of which – the Timber Museum and the Museum of British Forestry – were devoted entirely to woods.

The collections grew rapidly through donations and exchanges, particularly from voyages of exploration, world's fairs, and other research institutes.



Museum No. 3 – the Timber Museum in the Orangery at Kew (opened 1863). The totem pole can be seen in the centre.



Museum No. 4 – the Museum of British Forestry (opened 1910) in Cambridge Cottage which now houses the Kew Gardens Gallery.

One of the earliest wood accessions of significant size came from Kew's own Joseph Hooker, son of William, who travelled to the Himalayas from 1848 to 1851. Joseph brought back 643 woods relatively unknown outside the Indian sub-continent at the time. His specimens are clearly those of a botanist; the bark is left in place, a transverse section is usually taken, and the altitude at which the tree was growing, carefully noted. Many of them, like the *Euonymus* illustrated, were to become mainstays of gardens in Europe and America in the years following their arrival.



EBC 3782 *Euonymus grandiflorus* Wall. with Joseph Hooker's original label reading: '353. Euonymus. Khasya. 5000 ft.'

Many other nineteenth-century collectors contributed woods, and Kew still holds specimens sent by botanist John Kirk from David Livingstone's ill-fated Zambezi Expedition, Richard Spruce in the

Amazon, and Charles Sargent, based at Harvard. Kew's involvement in imperial botany means that Britain's former colonial and imperial territories are particularly well-represented in the Collection; for example, Henry Ridley at Singapore Botanic Garden was a significant contributor. And in 1879 Kew received a donation from the Indian Forest Department of over 1,000 timber specimens. The value of the collection lay in its breadth and presentation: each specimen was labelled with its botanical name, vernacular name, geographical provenance, and details of uses; in short, they had been 'accurately determined by its scientific officers'. They represented a duplicate set of one prepared by the Department for the Paris International Exhibition of 1878 and, with their highly specific descriptions - 'used for house- posts' or 'tough, durable, and takes a beautiful polish' – language previously more suited to the timber merchant than to the museum, they represented a new era in wood collecting practices.



Massive trunk of Honduras rosewood (*Dalbergia stevensonii*), labelled with uses, probably from the British Empire Exhibition which took place at Wembley, London, 1924-25



Palmyra palm wood (*Borassus flabellifer*) collected by Dr. John Kirk on Livingstone's Zambezi Expedition, Malawi, 1864.

In the twentieth century, trans-Atlantic exchanges were one of the means by which the Kew collection continued to grow and extend its geographical representation. In 1930, 500 woods came from the Yale Firestone Expedition of Liberia (1928-31). The woods, collected by George Proctor Cooper, were shared between Kew and Missouri, illustrating the degree of international collaboration which goes to make a world-class wood collection. Again they included species previously unknown, such as *Cassipourea firestoneana* and others, like the *Amphimas* and *Klainedoxa* genera, which had not been known to occur in Liberia.

Wooden Artefacts

One of the most iconic artefacts in the Kew Museums was the totem pole from British Columbia which can be seen in the photograph of Museum No. 3. Carved from western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), it must have attracted much attention when it first went on

display in 1898. The Museum, by showing indigenous uses of woods, aimed to inspire new applications. The Museum guide-book gave the pole's age and details of its original function: to help keep the ridge pole of the house in place. By doing so it was emphasizing the wood's durability and suitability as a construction material for external use.

At the other end of the scale were the lathe-turned German toys acquired by the Museum in 1862. The toys were Noah's ark figures made of spruce (*Picea* sp.), and came from the Erzgebirge region of Saxony. For Kew Director William Thiselton-Dyer they were 'a most beautiful example of the economy of labour'. The wood was first turned to produce a large disc, the longitudinal section of which represented the silhouette of an animal. The disc was then sliced

up, producing multiple copies of the same figure. Both disc and figures were displayed in the Museum. The technique of showing a product in the



German lathe-turned discs and cut figures, as displayed in the 1970s.

various stages of its production was called the 'illustrative series' and was used extensively in the Kew Museums.

By 1987, however, the Kew Museums were closed and the collections were data-based and transferred to their current location in the Sir Joseph Banks Building, where they continue to grow. In this environmentally-controlled store, they are arranged according to the Bentham & Hooker taxonomic system and can be accessed by researchers and special-interest groups.

Part II of this article will explore the recent development and use of the Economic Botany Collection. Further details of Kew's museums can be found at www.kew.org/collections/ecbot.



The Southeast Regional Meeting

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Jerry Zipprich and Garry Roux ran the silent auction throughout the meeting. Members had the chance to bid on smaller, high value woods and some donated finished pieces. Attendees exchanged friendly banter around the auction table. Garry donated a large cocobolo board for the Pot Shot card.



Jerry and Garry at silent auction

Duane Keck provided the Mystery Wood ID exhibit to test the knowledge of the attendees. The 'test' species, a hard, yellow wood, was *Firmiana simplex*, grown in South Carolina and donated to the Wood Auction.



David Mather, dressed in 'huaso' (Chilean cowboy) regalia. He has just finished reading from his novel, One For The Road, and is explaining the items in his display of the Chilean 'campo'.

There was a talk by Mihaly Czako on "Woods of China". Mihaly showed slides of many trees and woods that he encountered on his two visits to China. He shared some cultural experiences as well.

Donald L. Rockwood, Professor Emeritus at University of Florida, Gainesville, talked about selection and genetic improvement of *Eucalyptus* species as well as promising clones and hybrids for Florida and the Southeast.



Donald giving his talk



Jerry with burls from all over the world.

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