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Glasgow Botanic Gardens Tour. Friday May 16th 2008.

Lindsey Loughtman, Manchester Museum

A beautiful sunny afternoon saw a group of 7 of us from NatSCA walk up to the Botanic Gardens in Glasgow's West End. It is free, open every day from 7am till dusk and therefore accessible to all. It was also very busy with picnickers, dog walkers and families – and has around 500,000 visitors per annum. Paul Matthews, Curator, gave us an informative tour on the history, development and activities of the Gardens.

The gardens date back to 1817, but have occupied their current grounds since the late 1930's. Professor William J. Hooker, Regius Professor of Botany at the University of Glasgow (1820-41), took an active part in the development of the Gardens, and went on to become the first Director of Kew Gardens. Local man John Kibble started building his enormous glass house near Loch Long in the 1860's. It was then decided to move it to Kelvinside so it was dismantled, moved to Glasgow by barge and rebuilt in the Botanic Gardens. Its original function was as an entertainment venue, but ventilation was added in 1880 to allow plants to be grown. Kibble was quite a local character. Having inherited money from his parents, he cycled across Loch Long on a floating bicycle, and also built himself the world's biggest camera – a horse-drawn one!

The Kibble Palace closed for restoration in September 2003 and reopened to visitors in November 2006 at a cost of £7.2 million, funded jointly by Glasgow City Council, Historic Scotland and Heritage Lottery. During this time, the plants were moved out of the Grade A listed glass palace, although there was more concern from the public about the fish in the pond; some of the carp were over 30 years old! Of the cast iron structure, over 500 parts were dismantled and transported to Yorkshire to be restored. Now, more than 98% of the original structure remains, with new strengthened glass, benches, and artist designed glass interpretation panels.



The Kibble Palace, after restoration.

The Kibble Palace, one of Glasgow's most famous attractions, now holds a wonderful display of Killer Plants, showing convergence of evolution, and a geographical representation of many well known plants in the main dome, such as Rhododendrons, Jasmine, *Camellia* and *Banksia*. We also saw the National Council for the Conservation of Plants and Gardens (NCCPG) Tree Fern Collection.

The other large glass house in the Glasgow Botanic Gardens, known as the Main Frame, has 11 sections, including economic plants, arid plants, a tropical pond and Orchids, including the National Collection of Dendrobium. It also houses the National Collection of Begonias, and volunteers from the Begonia Society manage a potted begonia display in this glass house, which is rotated to ensure there are always flowers on display.

Education. In the past, the Director of the Botanic Gardens has also held the post of Professor of Botany at Glasgow University. Plants here were then used to teach taxonomy. Now there are around 90 school visits a year, looking at topics such as rainforest, woodland, and plant uses. There is one member of education staff. The Horticultural College in Ayr, Plant Kingdom courses at Strathclyde and Glasgow Universities and the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh visit annually. During our visit a school had taken over the grass area in front of the Kibble Palace for their sports day, which was wonderful to see.

The Glasgow Botanic Gardens holds an annual Weekend Orchid Fair which attracts around 5 to 6,000 visitors. Other events held here include such as Moths, Bats and Owls Night, Shakespeare plays and meetings of local horticultural societies are hosted.