

The gardens of Buckingham Palace

In the very heart of London are 40 acres (16 hectares) of some of the finest gardens in the world. These are the grounds of Buckingham Palace, the London home of Britain's Royal Family. A recently published book by writer and journalist Peter Coats reveals many of the gardens' secrets, as BBC World Service discovered.

A stone wall surrounds Buckingham Palace's gardens. On one side is the endless noise of London's traffic, office blocks, hotels and Government buildings; on the other, 40 acres of exotic plants and wildlife, a kaleidoscope of colour, where the Queen of England often strolls in the evening, relaxing from her daily duties as constitutional monarch and head of the Commonwealth.

The garden's animal and horticultural wealth and variety are famous. There are over 200 species of wild plants, over 20 breeding species of birds, some 23 types of moth. On the lake there are a flock of pink flamingoes, kept pink by a diet of shrimps. The same kind of careful planning about colour goes in the plants in the garden, so that there is a pageant of colour throughout the year. The garden's herbaceous border burns brightly from May, when thousands of

tulips blossom, to autumn. One corner is now entirely planted with silver and grey leaved plants—an ingeniously appropriate Silver Wedding present to the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh.

The area near the palace itself is dominated by a spacious lawn. The spaciousness is needed because some three or four times every year, over 9,000 guests attend one of the Queen's garden parties. It is the one time when these private gardens have to display themselves to the outside world. They never fail to impress.

The gardens have a romantic history. They were started by King James I (1603-1625), who planted mulberry trees in a desperate effort to start a silk industry in Britain. He failed because he planted the wrong kind of mulberry tree. The Mulberry Gardens, as they were called, were open to the public, and by the time Charles II (1660-1685) came to the throne they had become rather notorious as a lover's haunt.

The famous diarist Samuel Pepys described the Mulberry Garden as "a

disreputable place of assignation, of rascally, whoring sort of people, only a wilderness that is somewhat pretty and wild".

Relative respectability came when the gardens were purchased by a wealthy young adventurer, John Sheffield, who aspired to court King Charles' daughter Anne, though the King refused to countenance such temerity. When Anne became Queen, she gave her disappointed admirer the title of Duke of Buckingham. His descendants sold their house

and gardens to King George III (1760-1820), who became the first king to live in Buckingham Palace.

His much loved wife, Queen Charlotte, was an enthusiastic amateur botanist who cultivated new strains of carnations in the gardens. She also had an unusual taste in pet animals which extended to a very bad-tempered zebra and an amiable elephant. The creatures were attended by natives dressed in oriental uniforms.

This exotic period in the garden's history came to an

end when George IV (1820-1830) came to the throne and decided to move permanently from St. James's Palace to Buckingham Palace. He got a popular landscape gardener of the time, William Aiton, to sweep away the formal gardens of a few hedges, fountains and statues in favour of a more natural landscape. Today's gardens are essentially the ones planned by William Aiton 150 years ago. They have since then provided a haven from the world for Britain's monarch.

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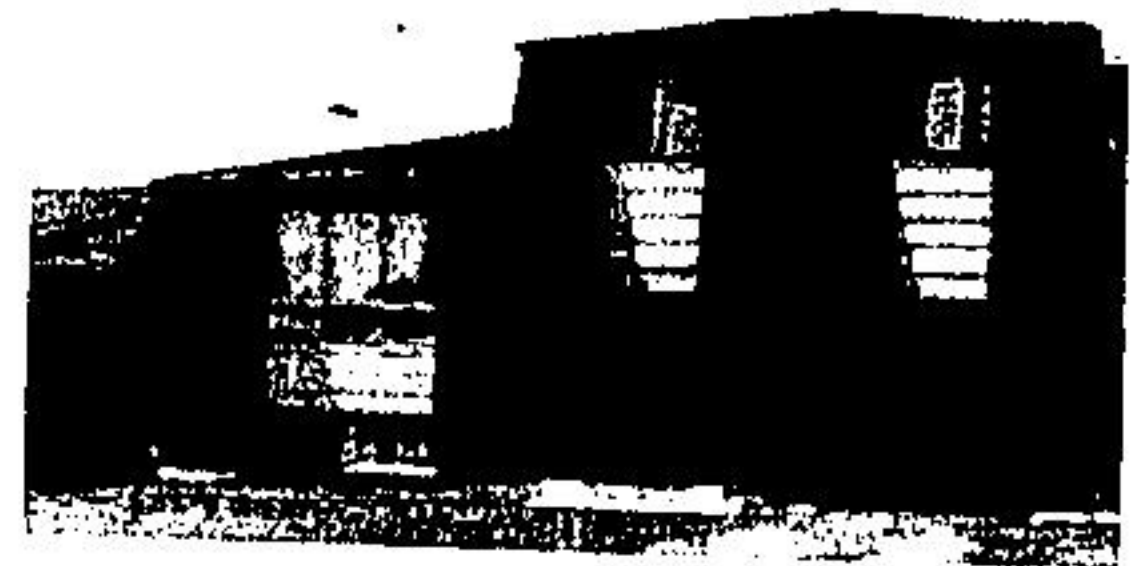


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