



The Founding and Founders of the Royal Horticultural Society

Jules Janick

All horticultural societies including the International Society for Horticultural Science are related to the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS). The origins of the RHS are contained in a letter dated June 29, 1801, by John Wedgwood to William Forsyth, gardener to King George III:

I have been turning my attention to the formation of a Horticultural Society and have drawn up such heads as have appeared to me necessary for the first formation of the Society. It would be proper to add a preamble, just stating the ideas of the first founders of the Society, and intimating that we wish to clash with no society at present instituted whose plans are different from ours. By this means we shall give no offence to any party. By not binding ourselves to publish annually we shall not be obliged to expose ourselves to the world in an imperfect state by publishing papers not worth making public.

In a postscript Wedgwood requested Forsyth to contact Sir Joseph Banks for his opinion of the plan, detailed in an enclosure (see Box), for the development of a Horticultural Society, and to seek his patronage. Banks, President of the Royal Society and Royal Adviser to the Gardens

at Kew was a shaker and a mover; he approved of the plan in a letter and indicated he would be honored to be an original member. His interest led to an inauguration meeting in Piccadilly, London, on March 7, 1804 with the attendance of seven remarkable and colorful personages: Wedgwood, Banks, Forsyth, Charles Greville, Richard Antony Salisbury, James Dickson, and William Townsend Aiton (Fig. 1). Five of these men now have genera named in their honor (Fig. 2). This meeting is considered the origin of the Horticultural Society (later the Horticultural Society of London) and when it received Royal patronage, the Royal Horticultural Society. The history of the Society is detailed in a book authored by Harold R. Fletcher, entitled *The Story of the Royal Horticultural Society 1803-1968* and published in 1969 by the Oxford University Press, and is the source of the present sketch.

THE EXTRAORDINARY SEVEN FOUNDERS

John Wedgwood (1766-1844) was a hobby horticulturist from a famous family. His father Josiah Wedgwood was the great English potter, and his

sister Susannah, wife of Robert Darwin, son of the botanist Erasmus Darwin, was the mother of Charles Darwin. Wedgwood grew many of the seedlings of fruit trees bred by Thomas Andrew Knight (1759-1838), who served as the President of the Society from 1811-1837.

Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820), a wealthy landowner, served as President of the Royal Society of London for 42 years where he was known as the "Dictator of British Botany." He collected plants in Newfoundland and Labrador and then sailed with Captain Cook on the Endeavour at the age of 25 and explored Brazil, New Zealand, and Australia. He returning after three years with a vast collection of plant specimens. He was named Director of Kew Gardens in 1772 by George III and encouraged many expeditions to bring back new plants for the garden and the herbarium. The genus *Banksia* was named in his honor.

William Forsyth (1737-1804), gardener to King George II at Kensington and St. James, started his career under Philip Miller, the great gardener-botanist in charge of the Apothecaries Garden at Chelsea and author of the *Gardeners*

Figure 1. The seven founders of the Royal Horticulture Society.



Figure 2. Five genera bearing name of the founders of the Royal Horticultural Society.



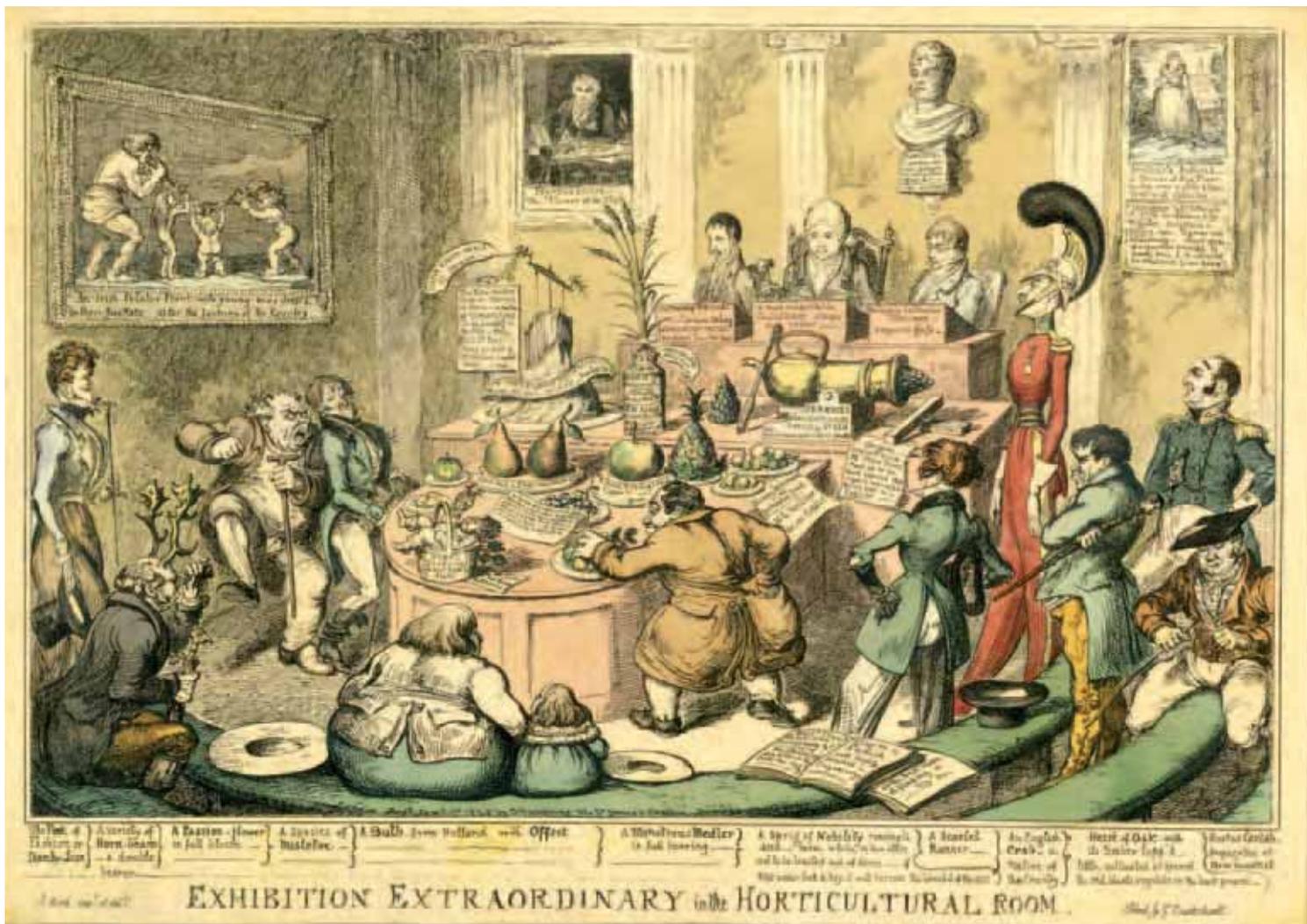
Dictionary (1731). Forsyth was known for the development of a “plaster” to cover pruning wounds (much criticized by Knight) and wrote a treatise on fruit trees. The genus *Forsythia* bears his name.

Charles Francis Greville (1749-1809), dashing dilettante, and collector of minerals and gems, developed a famous private garden where many new plants were grown and illustrated. Greville was to be long time treasurer of the new Society. His name is enshrined in the genus *Grevillea*. His beautiful mistress, Emma Hart, became a *cause celebre* in British history, first as the model for a series of portraits by George Romney and others. When Greville considered marriage he passed the beautiful Emma accompanied by her mother to his widowed uncle, Sir William Hamilton, envoy to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, who became enamored of the young beauty and married her (!). Lady Hamilton was to become a close confidant of Queen Maria-Caroline’s husband Ferdinand IV and drew the eye of the famous British naval

Figure 3. Thomas Andrew Knight, father of horticultural science, and *Knightia excelsa* named in his honor.



Figure 4. Exhibition Extraordinary in the Horticultural Room, a caricature of a meeting of the Horticultural Society in 1825 by George Cruikshank. The etching illustrates the Great Room at the back of the headquarters of the Society in Lower Regent Street. All the personages are caricatures of members of the society and have been identified by Harold Fletcher in Chapter 7 of his history of the society.



hero Admiral Horatio Nelson, who visited Naples after the battle of the Nile in 1798. He too succumbed to her charms. The scandalous ménage à trois between Emma, Lord Nelson, and Ambassador Hamilton, served as the source of a famous movie (*That Hamilton Woman* with Vivian Leigh and Lawrence Oliver, 1941, reputed to be the favorite movie of Winston Churchill) and was chronicled in a romance by Susan Sontag entitled *The Volcano Lover*.

Richard Antony Salisbury (1761-1829), botanist, amateur gardener, and great plant collector and cataloger of plants, was an inveterate proposer of new names for plants, when he thought the original inappropriate. The maidenhair tree *Salisburia adiantifolia* is named in his honor, a tree that unfortunately for him had been previously named *Ginkgo biloba* by Linnaeus in 1791.

James Dickson (1738-1922), nurseryman and seedsman, a friend of both Banks and Forsyth, was also a founder of the Linnean society. Dickson served as gardener to many clients including the British Museum and became known for studies on mosses, fungi, and grasses and later authored two large botanical works. His memory is preserved in the genus *Dicksonia*, a genus of tree ferns.

William Townsend Aiton (1766-1849), botanist and gardener to George III at Kew, was the publisher of a much enlarged edition (11,013 species) of *Hortus Kewensis* written by his father.

THE EARLY SOCIETY

In 1895, Banks invited his friend Thomas Andrew Knight (Fig. 3), a famous horticultural

and botanical researcher who had written the first paper on gravitational biology and a member of the Royal Society of London, to write a Prospectus, which became an important document in the history of the Society. Knight divided horticulture into two branches, the ornamental and the useful, and strove to put research on the forefront of the emerging Society. Knight is now considered the father of Horticultural Science, and the RHS issues the Knightian medal in his honor.

The early society formed a pattern of eight meetings a year in which society business was conducted and papers were read, many, if not most, on fruits and vegetables. Important papers were subsequently published in the Society's *Transactions*, which first appeared in 1807, and included hand colored plates, now considered some of the finest in horticultural literature. Other early activities included the development of medals, a library, and gardens. By 1825, the activities of the Society were well known enough to be spoofed by the famed caricaturist George Cruikshank, who parodied many of the members of the society in a famous engraving (Fig. 4), and a source of whimsy to this day.

ENCLOSURE IN THE ORIGINAL LETTER OF JOHN WEDGWOOD TO W. FORSYTH, JUNE 29, 1801

That a Society be formed to be called 'The Horticultural Society'.

That the object of the Society shall be to collect every information respecting the culture and treatment of all plants and trees, as well culinary as ornamental.

That every new member shall be balloted after a Society of original members has been formed, and that every such member at his admission shall pay one guinea besides his annual subscription.

That a certain number of honorary members may be elected, who shall be admitted to the sittings of the Society without paying any subscriptions; that two black balls be sufficient to reject such honorary members.

That the Society shall from time to time publish a volume of papers of the same size

and form as the Transactions of the Adelphi Society [now Royal Society of Arts] and that each member shall be entitled to a copy, but no honorary member unless he has furnished a paper judged worthy of publication.

That the Society shall annually choose a President, four Vice-Presidents, a Committee of Inspection, and a Secretary.

That the Committee shall have the power of selecting the papers for publication, and that no paper shall be published before it has been read as a sitting of the Society.

That no paper shall be published which does not treat of horticultural subjects.

That it shall be considered within the intention of the Society to give premiums for improvements in horticulture, whenever it shall be judged expedient to do.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jules Janick

Dr. Jules Janick is the James Troop Distinguished Professor of Horticulture at Purdue University and is a former Editor and President of the American Society for Horticultural Science. He currently serves as Director of ISHS Publications and is Science Editor of *Chronica Horticulturae*. Email: janick@purdue.edu



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