The Kew Palaces

The name of ‘Kew Palace’ is nowadays synonymous with the red-brick, Dutch-gabled building which stands in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, about 300 yards inside the main entrance. This house, in fact, is only one of 3 royal palaces which have stood in this vicinity. Today there is nothing on the riverbank to remind us of the strange Gothic palace which was once erected there for George III; but just west of the Orangery there is a Tompion sundial which marks the site of the other ‘lost’ palace – Kew House or the White House, built for Frederick, Prince of Wales. The sundial, marked with the initials of William III, was originally at Kensington Palace and was placed on the lawn by William IV.

The White House

Prince Frederick, the eldest son of George II, spent most of his childhood and youth in Hanover. He was summoned to England in December 1728 and in the following year was made Prince of Wales. Self-willed and sometimes devious, Frederick’s relationship with his parents was as unfortunate as that between his father and grandfather in the previous generation. In 1730, having been denied the right of occupying an official residence in London itself, Frederick took the lease on a house in Kew, situated scarcely a mile from his father’s house, Richmond Lodge. In the middle of the 17th century, the house had been the property of Richard Bennet, the son of a former Lord Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Bennet. Richard’s daughter and heiress, Dorothy, brought the property to Sir Henry Capel, afterwards Lord Capel of Tewkesbury and Lord Lieutenant of Ireland. John Evelyn recorded a visit he made to the house in August 1678:-

"I went to my worthy friend Sir Thomas Capel [at Kew], brother to the Earl of Essex. It is an old timber house, but his garden has the choicest fruit of any plantation in England, as he is the most industrious and understanding in it."

John Macky was equally impressed by the gardens in 1724, when he visited the same house, by this time in the occupation of Samuel Molyneux, astronomer and politician, whose wife Lady Elizabeth Capel had inherited the property in 1721 after the death of her great-aunt , Lady Capel.

"Mr. Molyneux, secretary to the Prince of Wales [afterwards George II], hath a fine seat here with excellent gardens said to have the best fruit in England, collected by that great statesman and gardener my Lord Capel."

By this time, Samuel Molyneux had redesigned the house and had built a private observatory in the east wing. He died in 1728 and his widow remarried the same year. The house was repaired and substantially rebuilt for Prince Frederick, whose architect, William Kent, designed new faces for the building and redecorated much of the interior.

Approaching the house from Kew Green, the visitor came to a central court, while on the right and left respectively lay the kitchen and stable courts. After entering the house and

crossing a vestibule, he came into the central hall which was two stories high and lighted from windows in the upper storey, A suite of apartments for royal use and, to the left, the apartments of the bedchamber women. A great staircase ascended to the first floor, where there was another suite of apartments and rooms for the royal children and their attendants. The rooms of the housekeepers and servants occupied the second floor. The wings on either side of the house contained the apartments of the equerries and other officers. Throughout the building the decorations and furniture designed by Kent were much in evidence.

The Prince died in 1751. Although during his lifetime he had taken a considerable interest in the gardens of the White House, it was his wife, Princess Augusta, who was responsible, after his death, for enlarging them from 7 to well over 100 acres. In doing this she created gardens that were not only beautiful to behold, but which were to form a valuable source of research for botanical students. She was assisted by a powerful trio; William Ashton as gardener, Lord Bute as botanist and chief adviser and William Chambers as architect. It was Chambers who designed a number of ancillary buildings for the gardens, including various classical temples, an Alhambra, a Mosque, a Menagerie, a Palladian bridge and, of course, a Chinese Pagoda. Many of the buildings no longer survive, but it is fortunate that the one which is probably the most notable from an architectural point of vies is stall in existence. This is the Orangery, which Chambers himself described in his **Plans…of the gardens and buildings of Kew** (1763):-

"The front extends one hundred and forty five feet: the room is one hundred and forty feet long, thirty feet wide, and twenty five high. In the back shed are two furnaces to heat flues, laid under the pavement of the Orangery; which are found very useful, and indeed very necessary in times of hard frost."

The Orangery did service as a museum for many years and is now used as a shop and restaurant.

The Princess Dowager died in 1772 and thereafter the White House became the home of her son - who had become George III in October 1760 on the death of his grandfather - and his wife, Queen Charlotte. The royal couple, no doubt relieved to escape from the discomforts of Richmond Lodge, found their new home equally restricted for space. Some of the junior members of the family were, therefore, accommodated in neighbouring buildings. Prince William (later William IV) and Prince Edward were placed in the house later to be known as Cambridge Cottage, the Princes Ernest and Augustus in a house at the top of Kew Green and the Prince of Wales (later George IV) and Prince Frederick in the Dutch House – the present-day ‘Kew Palace’.

The gardens of the White House were divided from those of Richmond Lodge by an old lane or footpath known as ‘Love Lane’, which led from Richmond Green to the ferry which operated between Kew and Brentford. The lane ceased to be of much use after the opening of the first Kew Bridge in1757 (when the present Kew Road came into use) and in 1785 it was closed by Act of Parliament. The two ‘rival estates’ were thus united to form the vast new expanse of Kew Gardens. The southern limit of the gardens was about 80 yards south of the Pagoda. South of this boundary was the parkland in which Richmond Lodge had once stood and which now became known as the Old Deer Park.

The White House was demolished in 1802-3, in anticipation of the completion of the Castellated Palace which is described below. The Dutch House then ceased to be merely an auxiliary residence and assumed a new importance as a royal home.

The Dutch House or Kew Palace

The site of the Dutch House had formerly been occupied by a 16th century house, possibly that known in Elizabethan times as the 'Dairy House', held from 1557 to 1562 by Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. In 1630, the house appears to have become the property of Samuel Fortrey (or de la Forterie), a prosperous London merchant of Dutch descent, who had married Catherine, daughter of James de Lafleur of Hainaut. Fortrey rebuilt the house in 1631, an event commemorated in the relief carving over the main entrance, comprising the date together with the initials of Fortrey and his wife.

From the time of George II, the Dutch House had been leased by the Crown for various members of the royal family and, as mentioned above, it was used as an annexe for some of the children of George III.

The Dutch House is 70 feet long by 50 feet wide and is built of bricks laid in the 'Flemish bond' (with the side and ends of the bricks alternating). There are three principal storeys. The windows originally had mullions and transoms, but by the middle of the 18th century these had been replaced by the existing sash frames. The interior, mainly a mixture of 17th and 18th century work, contains some fittings which were probably transferred from the White House when that was demolished. These include the brass door locks which are engraved with the initials and badge of Frederick, Prince of Wales. The only relics of the building's Tudor ancestry are the groined-vaulted crypt, the 'linen-fold' wainscotting in a room on the ground floor and a Tudor arched fireplace (probably transferred from the older building) on the second floor.

The Dutch House ceased to be a royal residence on the death of Queen Charlotte in 1818. In 1890 much of the service wing to the west of the building was demolished and in 1899 the house was opened to the public by order of Queen Victoria. The Dutch House now contains many items of historical and artistic interest, including a number of personal possessions of George III and his family. The garden has also been restored.

The King's Palace or Castellated Palace

Sir William Chambers, who had been appointed Surveyor General in 1783 and who died in 1796, exercised considerable influence on the taste of Princess Augusta and her eldest son. Chambers was succeeded by James Wyatt, who by this time had consolidated his reputation as a Gothic architect, despite the critical attacks which had greeted his restoration work in cathedrals such as Salisbury, Durham and Hereford. Attracted by the possibilities of the Gothic style and encouraged by Wyatt's work at Windsor Castle and elsewhere, the King commissioned the architect to build a new palace at Kew. This was to be situated by the river, west of the Dutch House. Work on its construction began in 1802,

but the king's advancing blindness in the years immediately following caused him to lose interest in the project. Joseph Farington wrote in his diary for 26th March 1806:-

"The great building at Kew after costing £100,000 is now at a stand. The workmen were discharged on Saturday last. The King not now being able to see what is going forward has lost his interest in it, & the Queen never liked it."

However, some kind of progress was maintained on the building until 1811, by which time the walls had been raised and staircases and many of the floors had been constructed. From existing plans and drawings the palace appears to have consisted of a large central keep, which was fronted towards the river by a large courtyard flanked by two projecting wings. The use of cast iron in the structure represents one of the earliest instances of the use of that material in a non-commercial building.

Sir Richard Phillips, in his **Morning's walk from London to Kew** (1817) called the new palace "Bastille Palace, from its resemblance to that building, so obnoxious to freedom and freemen." He continued:-

"On a former occasion, I have viewed its interior, and I am at a loss to conceive the motive for preferring an external form, which rendered it impracticable to construct within it more than a series of large closets, boudoirs and rooms like oratories. The works have, however, been suspended since the unhappy seclusion of the Royal Architect, and it is improbable, at least in this generation, that they will be resumed. The foundation is in a bog close to the Thames, and the principal object within its view is the dirty town of Brentford, on the opposite side of the river."

Sir Richard's supposition was correct; the Castellated Palace remained in its unfinished condition until 1827-28, when it was demolished by order of George IV, who disliked it, which left the Dutch House as the only remaining royal palace at Kew.

The Queen's Cottage

Although not a royal palace, the Queen's Cottage still stands at Kew and in the spring it is surrounded by bluebells. George III married Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg –Strelitz in 1761 and the couple were given Richmond Lodge and its grounds. (see **Local History Notes: Richmond Lodge***).* The cottage was built c. 1772 and used as a summerhouse, even after the king and his family had moved away. When Queen Victoria handed Kew Gardens over to the nation, she retained The Cottage and 37 acres for herself. They were given to the public by the Queen in 1898 to celebrate her Diamond Jubilee.

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More information on Kew and its palaces is available from the Local Studies Collection.