

Sefton Park Palm House Past & Present

There is so much to discover about the Palm House! Here are some of our favourite facts to share with you to help build context and an understanding of our past, our plants and our architecture. You will also find our timeline at the end of this document.

Palm House past - the facts

- The Palm House **opened in 1896** to be a home for plants from around the world. These plants were considered to be exotic to Liverpool.
- The plants were chosen for their looks and scent. They were also chosen to share what Victorian explorers from the United Kingdom obtained on their travels around the world. At the time, many of these plants would have not been seen before by many people in Liverpool.
- When it was built, there were **70 different plant species** planted here.
- **How much did it cost to build?** When the Palm House was built in 1896 it cost £10,000. In today's money this would be over £820,000!
- **Who built it?** MacKenzie and Moncur Ltd of Edinburgh & Glasgow designed and built the Palm House. They were commissioned by the Liverpool Parks Committee to create the Palm House. They were the leading glasshouse suppliers in the late 1800s.
- **Who paid for it to be built?** The build was paid for by Henry Yates Thompson. He was a newspaper proprietor, manuscript collector and philanthropist. He donated £10,000 to create a 'great conservatory' as a centrepiece for Sefton Park, which opened in 1872.
- **Where did Henry Yates Thompson's wealth come from?** Henry was born into a wealthy Liverpool family and inherited money. His father was a banker who had involvement with a bank established by the Heywood family, who were involved in the transatlantic slave trade. His grandfather had also worked there and had worked his way up to become a partner. His mother was the daughter of Joseph Brooks Yates, a West India merchant who owned many plantations in Jamaica that used slave labour. Many Liverpool merchants were involved in the transatlantic slave trade and profited from it, as did the city itself and its economy. Joseph Brooks Yates received compensation in 1833 following the abolition of slavery. Henry's family wealth was generated predominantly through the transatlantic slave trade economy. He had a privileged upbringing and studied at Cambridge University. In addition to his inherited wealth, Henry was also given ownership of the Pall Mall Gazette from his father-in-law. After a few years he sold the newspaper to pursue his main interest, collecting manuscripts. Henry was opposed to slavery and supported abolition.
- **How big is it?** The Palm House is 25 metres high (82 feet) and 40 metres wide (131 feet).

- **What is it made from?** The base is made from concrete and red granite from the Isle of Mull in Scotland. The dome of the building has 3 tiers, or layers. The structure is made from wrought and cast iron sections with steel arched girders and cast iron decorations. Hundreds of bolts and screws hold this metal frame together. The glass domes have 3,710 panes of glass. Each pane was cut to size to fit. Each pane is flat, but the domes were designed to have a curved effect. From above it has an octagonal shape with 8 sides.
- **The Palm House is built to be a giant greenhouse!** It keeps tropical and subtropical plants thriving in our cold winters. Running around the edges of the Palm House you can see the large pipes that are filled with hot water to keep the temperature warm. It was originally heated by two Cornish boilers located in a separate boiler house. The Cornish boilers used coal for fuel to provided the heat for the water that circulated in the 1,200 metres of 4-inch cast iron heating pipes that encircle the inside of the Palm House. We now have underfloor heating in the Palm House and a new gas-fired boiler system.
- **It's a giant compass!** The 4 porches at the Palm House each correspond to a compass direction. The main entrance faces north. If you are inside the Palm House facing the main entrance, to your right is east, to your left is west, and behind you is south.
- **All these plants get thirsty and need lots of water to thrive.** The Palm House was designed to collect water. Rainwater from the dome flowed through the large pillars into collection tanks to provide water for the plants. This is no longer in use, so we water and mist them regularly.
- **It's a survivor!** The Palm House has stood through time in Sefton Park. If it could talk to us it would have many stories to tell. A suffragette left a bomb on the East Porch in 1913, but it didn't detonate. We think that activist Kitty Marion planted the bomb. During World War II the Palm House was painted to camouflage the glass and hide the reflection from the glass from planes flying overhead which would reveal their location in Liverpool with this being a key landmark. The glass was painted grey and green to look like roads and trees. Although it avoided getting bombed, the glass panes were shattered in the 1941 blitz when a bomb hit nearby.
- **It was a roofless building at one point...** Following the damage to the glass during WW2, the War Damage Committee helped to fund repairs to the glass in the 1950s. The putty used to hold the new glass panes in place proved troublesome. It became loose when the metal of the dome heated and cooled, causing the building to expand and contract. The glass started falling out. By the 1980s, the damage was so severe that the Palm House was closed to the public.
- **The power of the people helped to bring the Palm House back to life.** In 1992, a petition signed by 5,000 people was submitted to the City Council. £254,000 was secured for urgent repairs. This made it possible for the Palm House to re-open but

it was missing many of the glass panes. The public helped to raise money, along with support from funders, to complete the repairs needed.

- **We took the whole building apart to rebuild it...** The whole Palm House was taken apart to be repaired off site. All that remained were the 8 large pillars and roof arches. Everything was catalogued, repaired, repainted and some parts were replaced. To keep the rust away, 5 coats of paint were applied to all of the metal parts.
- The Palm House **reopened in 2001** after a multi-million pound refurbishment and with the support of many people who campaigned for it to be restored.

Our Palm House Present - our story continues

- With the glass back in place, the plants in the Palm House are thriving! We have 20 different types of palm trees, over 50 types of bromeliad and 35 species of food plants.
- The Palm House is open year round, so you can see how the plants inside and outside change through the seasons. You'll notice changes in the leaves, flowers, fruit and growth.
- We have added new plants to some of the older plants that have been here for a long time. Our oldest plant is our 'survivor' Canary Island Date Palm. It has been growing here for around 100 years.
- Some of our plants are endangered or extinct in the wild. This includes the Kentia palm, cycads, Queen Sago, Lady Palm, the Dragon's Blood tree and Angel's Trumpet.
- The plants take lots of work and care to thrive here. We are fortunate to have an in-house gardener named Colin who tends to the plants each day. This includes watering, misting, pruning, and pest management. Instead of pesticides, Colin uses natural biological controls. This means that good bugs are used to get rid of the harmful bugs that can cause harm to the plants.
- The Palm House holds lots of history in the plants, architecture and the statues. As we look at the past through what we know in the present, we can see history through a wider range of perspectives. For the *Statues Redressed* project, artist and fashion designer Taya Hughes dressed the statues of Christopher Columbus, Captain Cook and Henry The Navigator in elaborate Elizabethan-style ruffs as part of a contemporary art installation. The ruffs are made from fabrics associated with indigenous populations in Africa, New Zealand and Australia. The ruffs present a unique opportunity for us to examine and discuss these explorers, who claimed to 'discover' these parts of the world.
- The Palm House is a place where everyone is welcome. You can explore with your senses to connect to nature, find inspiration from the natural world and learn something new each time you visit.

The Palm House Timeline

