

Livingstone Online

Livingstone Letters from Royal Botanic Gardens released (29 September 2008)

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew: Library, Art and Archives

Kew's extensive library is one of the most important botanical reference sources in the world. Library, Art and Archives contain more than half a million items, including books, botanical illustrations, photographs, letters and manuscripts, periodicals, biographies and maps. During the 150 years of the Library's history, material has been acquired by gift, purchase and exchange. Over 90 languages are represented, making the library a global resource for plant science, research and conservation.

The Library collections include 300,000 books and pamphlets and 3,800 periodical titles relating to plant taxonomy and systematics, 11,000 volumes of floras; some material relating to horticulture (particularly of historical interest); material on plant ecology and conservation; information on botanic gardens and herbaria; works on the history of gardening and garden design; material on the history of RBG, Kew; floras; biographical information on botanists and gardeners; and a selection of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, directories and other reference works.

The Art collections consist of original illustrations and prints, dating from the eighteenth century to the present, including 200,000 botanical illustrations. This collection is accompanied by material on botanical art, as well as fine examples of illustrated books.

The Archives contain the official records of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, and the papers of many eminent botanists, gardeners and other individuals. They form a valuable resource on the history of the discovery, study, transfer and use of the world's plants and fungi. There are over 7 million sheets of paper in 4,600 archival collections.



Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Surrey: Herbarium and library.

Credit: Wellcome Library, London



Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Surrey: lake in the arboretum.
Credit: Wellcome Library, London

The Livingstone letters held at Kew are mainly found in the collection "Directors' Correspondence", a series of 218 volumes of letters received by the Directors and Senior Staff at Kew, 1809-1928. One letter is held in the personal correspondence of Joseph Hooker. Papers relating to the 'Zambesi Expedition' can also be found in the "African

Expeditions" collection.

Botany and Livingstone's Expeditions

David Livingstone was one of many Victorian explorers who sent plants, seeds and written information to Kew Gardens, in London, England. His letters are addressed to William Jackson Hooker the director of Kew, and his son, Joseph Dalton Hooker, at that time assistant director. The majority of the letters went to Joseph Hooker. In the earliest letters Livingstone was back in Britain (1856-58) after his first African journeys and writing his book *Missionary Travels*. He asks for the scientific names of plants he encountered in Africa. In later letters he mentions indigenous plants that could have economic or medical value for British concerns. He discusses the staffing of future explorations and some of the difficulties of sending plant specimens from Africa. His letters to Hooker reveal that he knew quite a bit about botany from his medical training. Like other British explorers, he desired to expand scientific knowledge in the national interest.



A cinchona plant from which quinine is

By the middle years of the nineteenth century the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew had grown to become one of the world's most important centres for botanical science. Originally a royal park, the grounds became a research institution in the 1840s when the British government made Kew a national property and appointed William Jackson Hooker as director. In William Hooker's hands, the gardens became a popular public venue. William Hooker increased the research aspects of the herbarium dramatically and in 1842 opened a Museum of Economic Botany to display the many uses of plants as medicines, foodstuffs and commercial resources. John Kirk came recommended as economic botanist on the 'Zambesi Expedition'

extracted.

Credit: Wellcome Library, London

by William Hooker. Hooker's son and successor as director was Joseph Hooker. The latter travelled on James Clark Ross's exploring

voyage in the Antarctic, followed by an adventurous plant collecting expedition in the Himalayas, and returned in the 1850s to mastermind the development of Kew into the control centre of a network of British colonial gardens. Much energy went into supporting the government in establishing cash crops and commercial plantations across the empire, ultimately forming the economic backbone of imperial Britain. The relocation and development of tea, cotton rubber, and sugarcane industries in overseas British dominions formed a central part of Kew's activities. By corresponding with Kew, Livingstone was directly participating in the expansion of British interests overseas.

The identification and naming of new plant species, and the investigation of their useful properties, was of vital importance to science, medicine, economic development and trade in a rapidly-growing industrialised country like Britain. Medical botany was part of every doctor's training and the medicinal properties of plants formed an important aspect of the collecting of foreign specimens. Not least, for expeditions like Livingstone's it was important to be able to distinguish edible plants from poisonous ones. Livingstone briefly mentions the pods of what he believes to be a Cinchona, the South America tree from which quinine is derived. Quinine was the first effective remedy for malaria. Livingstone's supplies included quinine tablets and in other letters he discusses its use during his expeditions. To locate an African equivalent would have been a great discovery. Historians agree that the availability of manufactured quinine to Europeans was a significant factor in the colonisation of Africa for it reduced the danger of death by fever.



A 'Tabloids' Livingstone Rousers glass bottle with cork stopper. Produced by Burroughs Wellcome and Co, the tablets contained quinine as a treatment for malaria.

Credit: Wellcome Library, London

List of transcripts of Livingstone Letters in the Library, Art & Archives, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

- [Letter to William Hooker \(5 February 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to William Hooker \(16 May 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(11 July 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(28 July 1857\)](#)

- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(26 October 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(16 December 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(28 December 1857\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(9 December 1861\)](#)
- [Letter to William Hooker \(10 August 1863\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(9 August 1864\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(12 October 1864\)](#)
- [Letter to Joseph D. Hooker \(19 October 1864\)](#)

© Livingstone Online