

# Taking Interpretation Forward

The Interpretation dept for the Living Collections and Landscape at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.  
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The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew is **devoted to increasing knowledge and understanding**, so that the diversity of plants and fungi can be conserved for future generations and used in sustainable ways for human benefit.

The challenge for Kew's interpretation team is to bring our mission and message to every visitor in an easy to understand, interesting and vibrant way.

## New ways to view Kew...

Technology offers us a myriad of ways to bring our message alive: from the web to interactives such as touchscreens, to a vast array of audio and visual guides - we can be spoilt for choice! However, only the most robust interpretation survives the rigours of the public's enthusiasm, and choosing the right method can make or break a project's success.

Here are a few projects that have embraced technology and proved a great success at Kew in 2005/6:



Two touchscreens were developed for the new interpretation for the Davies Alpine House, which opened in April 2006. Each touchscreen – one set at a height for adults to use, and the other for children and wheelchair users – had a comprehensive package of searchable pages with a series of bright, simple menus. Topics such as the construction of the house, fast facts, the alpine habitat, conservation and an ever expanding database of alpine plants were included. The content was developed in-house using a software package called Site Kiosk, and the touchscreens themselves were chosen for being robust with screens that are easily visible outdoors, and were sourced via Broadberry Systems. The touchscreens sit alongside traditional exterior panels, and changeable 'plant of the week' panels inside the house. The plant database can be updated by the alpine collections manager daily via Kew's network system. The intention is to place all the pages on the Kew website so that information about our alpine collection is available to all.



For some time there has been a visitor interest in the wildlife at Kew. Interpretation of the birds, insects and other wildlife has been temporary in the past, but in 2005 the interpretation team began to put together an interactive package for Kew's birds. Each panel has six birds described with images for identification, and a push button reveals the bird's call. This system was developed by ATS Heritage and is used extensively by Kew's visitors. There are four panels in total around the Kew site with details of a range of different birds. The panels run on solar power. These panels have proved very robust, and we hope to find further uses for this technology around the Gardens.



The Talking Trees initiative began in early 2005 in response to the need for audio interpretation at Kew. So far a solution to the problems of introducing audio to Kew has proved difficult: there is a lack of a suitable place and staff to hand out equipment and the site is considered too large to interpret on one device. Talking Trees works via the visitor's mobile phone – a simple sign is placed next to the tree to be interpreted with a phone number that the visitor can ring (with a cost of 10-20 pence dependent on the network provider). A recording, usually made by a member of staff who works in that area, is then accessed, lasting between 1 – 3 minutes. These audio files are also available on the web, to listen to, or, download for free. This technology has also played a part in our spring bulb festival and Woodland Wonders festival where mp3 players were also made available for hire. The initiative has proved popular, and is currently being developed.



## How Kew Grew

Today, visitors to Kew Gardens enjoy a landscape that is the product of many significant changes. Key features including buildings, treescapes and lawns have played a major part in shaping Kew through time by changing its purpose and its character. Many of these features have been lost forever, while some have changed their appearance through the passage of time.

King's Visualisation Lab (KVL) was commissioned by the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to reconstruct, using computer-based 3D modelling, two important periods in Kew's history focussing upon the years 1763 and 1882 for the Heritage Year Festival 2006. Using an extensive range of archival material including artists' drawings, maps and old photographs, KVL used 21st century computer technology to transform these traditional 2D resources into evocative 3D representations.

Buildings ranging from grand palaces to small follies were carefully modelled from surviving plans and written accounts studied by Kew's Interpretation Officer. This allowed KVL to accurately reconstruct dimensions, colour schemes and architectural details, and long abandoned and forgotten locations were brought back to life. In addition to modelling built structures, the KVL team also created a vast library of accurately represented 'virtual' trees, as well as recreating lakes, flower beds and paths for both the 1763 and 1882 landscapes.

The project 'How Kew Grew' was an extremely complex undertaking, due both to the vast extent of the Gardens, and the large amount of structures to be modelled, and would not have been possible without close collaboration between KVL and Kew. The final animated sequence aims to entertain and educate visitors to Kew through its exploration of the Gardens' changing landscape and architectural history, and truly brings Kew's history to life. The 12 minute film was shown to visitors in an auditorium space in the Princess of Wales Conservatory throughout the festival (May to September 2006) and is also available for sale in the Kew Shop.



An artist's drawing of Merlin's Cave, 1761.



Computer model of Merlin's Cave.



Kew has six festivals each year: the Orchid Festival in February is followed by the Spring Bulb Festival, Woodland Wonders, the Summer, Autumn and Christmas festivals. Each in turn has a large interpretation demand including displays, exhibitions and temporary themed signage. See [www.kew.org](http://www.kew.org) for details of our past festivals.

Everyone's behaviour is important and each individual can influence the future through both their lifestyle and political choice. At Kew we realise the need to do more through our Gardens and public profile to help engage and inform the public. Future generations should inherit an environment as rich, valuable and fascinating as that passed on to us. To succeed we must make each visitor's experience still more enjoyable – so that everyone understands the importance of plants to people and to the rest of life on our planet. Interpretation plays a large part in the visitor's experience of Kew; by continually evolving our strategy for how we present information we can meet the visitor's needs and effect change.



Over the last five years Kew's public profile and visitor numbers have gone from strength to strength. Kew Gardens was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 2003, and in 2004 the BBC series 'A Year at Kew' regularly reached three million viewers. Our annual visitor numbers to Kew and Wakehurst Place have passed 1.58 million, a 50 year record! Through the gardens we bring great enjoyment to the public – offering heritage and horticulture, art and science in two superb settings. We use this contact with visitors to strengthen awareness of the importance of plants and build public support for the cause of conservation – and we want to have more impact and be even more effective. In June 2004 we opened Climbers and Creepers, an innovative play and learn area for under-10s, and we gained over 50,000 more child visits. With help from donors we are now increasing the support offered to school parties, and we contribute to formal education at every level from primary to post-doc. We also reach out to new public audiences through the web. Working with Culture Online, a government initiative, we have helped set up Plant Cultures, a site that explores the links between Asia and Britain through the plants that we use: [www.plantcultures.org.uk](http://www.plantcultures.org.uk). This site invites viewers to add their own stories and introduces previously unseen items from collections at Kew as well as museums in Bradford, Leicester, London and Liverpool. Panels in the Palm House supplement the web information for visitors on site.