

A Commentary on the work of Peter Collinson FRS (1694 – 1768)

by Roddy Braithwaite and John Living



Introduction to the Peter Collinson Heritage at Mill Hill

You would have found his garden on The Ridgeway, the high escarpment upon which Ridgeway House was built towards the end of the 17th century and where Peter Collinson lived from 1749. On this site, with its already renowned garden, Mill Hill School was founded in 1807 as the first Protestant Dissenters' Grammar School.

Because of those brave Nonconformist roots, the school has always valued the heritage of Quaker merchant, Peter Collinson, and his pioneering garden of rare trees, shrubs and plants. The school's first on-site house for boarding pupils, built in 1902, was named after him and it still stands on reclaimed ground where one of his ponds was once situated. There is a small garden there called the Peter Collinson Garden but it is in remembrance only and does not stock any of his plants.

The Mill Hill Preservation Society (MHPS) wished, via their website, to honour the heritage of Peter Collinson, a man who, in the 18th century, was at the forefront of plant collection and distribution of seeds from original species collected from the USA, Europe, the Far and Near East. This article sketches how he coupled his inter-national textile business with a passion for plant introduction and scientific study

The team for this tribute has involved, past school staff, the chairman of MHPS, and the former school historian and other people committed to providing a legacy for Peter Collinson. The evolution of the idea has benefited from the advice of botanists and arboreal specialists on both sides of the Atlantic, especially the John Bartram Garden, Philadelphia and Painshill Park, Cobham, Surrey. The inspiration and support given by the personnel of both these garden has been greatly appreciated.

The Peter Collinson garden, with its 'Field' and 'Best Garden', its trees, shrubs and plants, is lost, with only a few original trees remaining. Through his letters to friends and colleagues all over the world we can study with admiration the enterprise of a citizen of 'The Age of Enlightenment'. One of the major botanists in the world of his time, he liaised with Carolus Linnaeus in Sweden, John Bartram and Benjamin Franklin in the USA with and with Lancelot Brown, Lord Petre, Hans Sloane and other influential people to pursue his dream – collecting rare species for the benefit of future generations. His achievements give a glimpse of what was once achieved by one of the early 'Makers of the English Garden'.

The purpose of this commentary is to inform your knowledge of the man and his importance in the 18th century. At the end of this document there is extensive chronology and a list of sources that will facilitate further academic study.

Emerging from the shadows of history

There are several reasons why Peter Collinson's place in history may have become obscured. Firstly, it is clear when reading his letters that, although highly intelligent and scientifically minded, he was a relatively self-educated man. His misspellings and elaborate Georgian phrases can seem a little off putting today.

Secondly, all his American transactions took place before the Great War of Independence of 1775. This simple accident of history means that his work has inevitably been eclipsed by the impact of the war on post-colonial historians.

Recent research (see 'The man who crossed Carl Linnaeus' by Stephanie Pain, 2007) offers a third possible reason insofar as Linnaeus may well have influenced whether Peter Collinson's work was sufficiently accredited during his lifetime. Linnaeus was a man "as ruthless as he was ambitious", and, we know from their correspondence that Linnaeus was grudging in his relationship with Peter Collinson, often being chided for his lack of response to letters.

The research shows that when a young Swede called Daniel Rolander, an Apostle of Linnaeus, returned from a botanical expedition to Suriname, they fell out as Linnaeus wanted all the credit for the work himself, stole Rolander's collection of specimens and made it very difficult for him to obtain further work. Linnaeus could obviously be vengeful when he felt crossed – naming a beetle after him *Alphanus rolandri* that had the Greek meaning of 'ignoble and obscure'. Conversely, by naming a genus *Collinsonia*, Linnaeus ensured that Collinson's name would be remembered for "as long as men and books endure". A penultimate barrier has been that of the contemporary journalistic emphasis on the broad design of gardens, rather than the secondary details.

As O'Neil & McLean write...

"It is at Goodwood that we find Peter Collinson's single claim to have contributed to garden design as such. Just as the plant *Collinsonia* is known only to enthusiasts, the development of the 'American garden' in Britain has, to a great extent, been overlooked in spite of all that has been written about 18th century landscape design and gardens. In the first part of the 20th century, the term 'American Garden' was eclipsed as American plants were outnumbered by the influx of Asiatic species."

Lastly, the very breadth of his enlightened mind has given problems to later generations accustomed to putting people in neat boxes. Peter Collinson's interests, like those of his friend Benjamin Franklin, ranged from electricity to palaeontology, from ornithology to climatology. Yet his prime interest was the plants themselves. His contribution to garden history was as a discoverer, cultivator, planter and provider – not as a designer in the modern sense of the word.

The Scientific contribution of Peter Collinson

Peter Collinson wrote to John Bartram... "There is no end of the Wonders in Nature". Apart from his horticultural contribution he contributed to the new age of reason, learned societies and mass publications. His contributions were significant. As Peter Collinson had an enquiring nature he came to adulthood at an auspicious time. Early 18th century London facilitated the exchange of ideas and curiosities among the Fellows of the Royal Society and their colleagues. Moreover, printing and publishing were coming of age. As well as books, handbills and advertisements started to appear with the first garden catalogues.

It was largely due to the patronage of Sir Hans Sloane that Peter Collinson became a flourishing Fellow of the Royal Society. Collinson helped Sloane with his collection of natural curiosities by importing specimens from overseas, utilising his own trading activities. The list is wide ranging from, insects, animals, shells, fossils, wasps' nests made with clay, to maple sugar. In this way he contributed to the establishment of British Museum in 1753 which was largely based on the Sloane collection.

Peter Collinson also acquired specimens for himself – a sloth from Jamaica and the horns of a stag from New England were among those exhibited at the Royal Society. Within three years he became a member of the Council and introduced many distinguished visitors to weekly meetings and sponsored seventy-six candidates for election. Among these were Mark Catesby, Georg Ehret, George Edwards, John Fothergill, Benjamin Franklin, Johannes Fredericus Gronovius, Emanuel da Costa and the celebrated Carolus Linnaeus in 1753.

He presented written works to the Royal Society – "Wasps nests made with Clay", "Observations Concerning the Salt Marsh Muscle, the oyster-Banks, and the Fresh-Water muscle, of Pennsylvania" and Bartram's "Observations on the Dragon Fly or Libella of Pennsylvania". There were approximately 80 works in all, either his own or representing others including one "Account of American Ginseng". In addition he had regular articles published in the Gentleman's Magazine over many years.

One of his significant services to science was the introduction of Benjamin Franklin to electricity in 1745, sending new German experiments in electricity to him, together with equipment and instructions for the various experiments and thereafter keeping him abreast of developments in Europe. It was Franklin who went on and took electricity from a novelty to an organised science.

Through the study of Mastodon fossil teeth, Peter Collinson was ahead of his time in understanding the extinction of animals. This was in contradiction to the religious belief in the "Great Chain of Being ... the fixity of species and the perfection of God's Creation". He also argued against another currently held view that swallows hibernated under water during the winter – an idea supported by Linnaeus. He even had an interest in Druids, Stonehenge and other monoliths through his association with William Stukeley, being a founding member of the Society of Antiquaries.

The Re-Discovery of Peter Collinson and his Heritage

Apart from a few minor books in the 19th century that purport to tell the story of Peter Collinson, the first serious attempt to do him justice for 20th century eyes came with the publication of 'The Life of Peter Collinson' by Norman Brett James MA B.Litt. This book carries no publication date but it is probably 1925.

Brett James came to teach at Mill Hill School in 1902, almost immediately after reading History at Lincoln College, Oxford. He was a fervent Old Millhillian and a considerable scholar, later to write histories of Stuart and Georgian London, and the Mill Hill district, which still survive as reliable authorities. Brett James was the prime mover in organising the Peter Collinson 'Blue Plaque' that now faces The Ridgeway.

Brett James' book on Peter Collinson is a never-ending mine of data. We owe a lot to his work, not least for the detailed listing of his garden plants in the Hortus Collinsonianus. This document forms the basis for the plants that we know he had in his Mill Hill garden. Brett James' tribute to Collinson remained the single most comprehensive source until the late 20th century.

Then an American scholar – Alan Armstrong – came over from Philadelphia on behalf of the Philosophical Society of America to do research for a collection of Peter Collinson's letters. He carried out this work both at the Linnaean Society in London and at the School itself. The outcome was "Forget Not Mee and My Garden – The Letters of Peter Collinson" (2002); it is an outstanding work, a book of both beauty and historical eminence. It has acted as a launch pad for all the subsequent academic work about Collinson and Bartram, and for the campaign to acknowledge the Peter Collinson Heritage at Mill Hill School.

A more recent publication entitled 'The Omnipotent Magician – Lancelot 'Capability' Brown (1716-1783)' by Jane Brown (2011) gives more insight into the work of Peter Collinson. 'Capability' Brown was acquainted with John Bartram's seed boxes sent to his clients via Peter Collinson, whose effective organisation made sure that boxes of plants and seeds arrived safely - the plants "as fresh and lively as if that minute taken out of the woods". Mark Laird (Senior Lecturer in the History of Landscape Architecture, Harvard) has explained, this was the organisation responsible for the popularity of American plants in Europe, a craze that was to soar to 'almost manic activity, rather as tulips had done one hundred years before'.

From his office in the City, Collinson distributed the box contents, or a whole box, to his eagerly awaiting customers. He was shy of naming his patrons, but there were about sixty: they included members of the royal family, Lords Bute and Petre, the owners of Longleat, Blenheim and Syon (all these were Lancelot's clients) as well as the participating nurseries: William's, Gray's, John Bush at Isleworth, James Gordon of Mile End and James Wood at Huntingdon. Everyone wanted the colourful maples, thorns, robinias, ailanthus, red oaks, tulip trees and cornus, and garden makers soon learned to use them in the celebrated English landscape style.

Peter Collinson: one of the makers of the English landscape

The layout of country estates during the 18th century heralded the introduction of the celebrated English landscape style. In brief, Collinson was the source of many plants that transformed the appearance of English gardens, pleasure grounds, and parks.

Whilst Peter Collinson was not seen as a designer of landscape, a number of his colleagues were prepared to trust his instincts when it came to planting. Lord Petre, the Dukes of Bedford, Norfolk and Richmond, all sought his advice on planting schemes for their estates. He often wrote perceptively on the balance of colours and mass as evidenced by an article for the Gentleman's Magazine where he wrote:

"The American evergreen incorporated and mixed with our yew, laurel, pines, bays, hollies and box...give a surprising delightful effect, in the modern taste of planting, where little woods, clumps or groups of them, set here and there, interspersed with single trees, enrich the rural scene with their various shades of green."

In a wider sense, Peter Collinson can now be regarded as one of the foremost influences in domestic gardens and country estates that are enjoyed by millions today. His introduced into England over 180 flowers, shrubs and trees from all over the world, species that are now taken for granted as 'home-grown'. It is impossible in this short commentary to give a comprehensive list of all his plant introductions – but perhaps a few names will give a flavour of plants types now commonplace:

Acer Saccharinum (Silver Maple)	Ailantus Glandulosa (Tree of Heaven)
Aster Nervosus	Azalea Nudiflora
Betula Nigra	Clematis Reticulata
Collinsonia Canadensis	Cornus Paniculata
Crataegus Macrantha	Delphinium Grandiflorum
Fraxinus Caroliniana (Carolina Ash)	Hydrangea Arborescens
Iris Cristata	Kalmia Latifolia
Lilium Pensylvanicum	Magnolia Acuminata
Paeonia Tenuifolia	Phlox Maculata
Potentilla Floribunda	Rheum Palmatum
Rhododendron Maximum	Rhus Radicans
Sambucus Canadensis	Viburnum Dentatum
Yucca (5 different species)	Zinnia Multiflora

Garden lovers the world over have good cause to remember his plea – “Forget Not Mee and My Garden”. We can be grateful for the creative energy that he invested for more than fifty years on his shipments over the high seas, and his many plantings in the grounds of Ridgeway House some two and a half centuries ago.

The concerns of this century’s environmentally threatened world provide a modern context for Peter Collinson’s importance. His work has been seen as a forerunner of our contemporary campaigns to preserve endangered species, flora as well as fauna, before man’s appetite for growth ‘at all costs’ eliminates precious resources.

The Horticultural significance of Peter Collinson

Recent research in both England and the USA reveals that Peter Collinson has a special significance for those who are interested in garden history, and who share a love of gardens. The research shows there are two main geographical aspects:

In the UK his collected letters entitled...‘Forget Not Mee and My Garden...’ demonstrates that Peter Collinson was one of the most active of the 18th century group of enthusiasts, who propagated seeds for trees, shrubs and flowers that we now think of as part of the typically ‘English countryside’, following in the tradition of the father and son Tradescants of the 17th century. Many of the great public spaces we visit today still contain descendant examples of his planting introductions. Peter Collinson could indeed be regarded as one of the true facilitators of the English landscape garden.

For Americans Peter Collinson has a different meaning as the book by Andrea Wulf, ‘The Founding Gardeners’, has revealed. One of his most farsighted and selfless activities, alongside obtaining American seeds from his protégé, John Bartram in Philadelphia, was to constantly encourage, inform and financially underwrite the work of that famous botanist in the length and breadth of the then British Colonies on the East coast of America.

It is historically important that Peter Collinson encouraged John Bartram. What has not been understood until recently is that John Bartram’s work played a vital part in helping to create a growing sense of ‘American-ness’ in those distant territories. The settlers of America wanted to recreate gardens to remind them of home – so plants imported from Europe were treasured. However, with the pressure from Peter Collinson for Bartram to procure American plants for his European clients, it slowly dawned that there were beautiful, interesting new plants native to the new America.

Research now shows that no less than four Presidents after George Washington developed their own extensive estates with Native American species simply to encourage a sense of ‘American-ness’. For these Presidents - John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe, the early Founders of the new nation, their gardens became for them, and for the thousands who would visit them over the ensuing years, a kind of American

floral 'Magna Carta'. Had it not been for Peter Collinson's letters, encouragement and friendly instruction of John Bartram (whom he never met) this form of 'national cohesion' may not have evolved.

Peter Collinson's public standing today, on both sides of the Atlantic, has dual significance. He lived and worked at a time when, as the famous Scots gardener Thomas Blaikie (1751–1838) pointed out to the French Empress Josephine – “most of the best and rarest plants were grown in England.” Of course, many of these plants were from America.

Tributes to Peter Collinson

Many tributes have been paid to Peter Collinson by established writers on gardens – and here are just two of them*:

In 'The Coming of the Flowers', a book tracing the origin of English flowers, A. W. Anderson, Curator of the Botanical Gardens at Timaru, New Zealand, has written:

'One of Bartram's most enthusiastic correspondents was Peter Collinson, a London textile dealer, who had one of the finest collections of American plants in England. Collinson was so delighted with many new plants coming from America that he persuaded a group of friends to contribute £10.00 a year towards the cost of Bartram's botanical explorations and the despatch of plants to England. John Bartram was a great reader, and as books were scarce in the new colony he was constantly asking for the latest London publications. At last even Peter Collinson thought he was overdoing things, and remarked that even Solomon did not get all his wisdom from books, but Bartram took the chiding in good part... Through the goodwill of his influential friends Collinson managed to obtain the appointment of "King's Botanist" for his friend in America... *Lilium superbum* flowered for the first time in Europe in Peter Collinson's garden [at Mill Hill] in 1738...'

Penelope Hobhouse, in what is now regarded as the definitive history of the garden "The Story of Gardening", wrote about the development of the English garden concept in the 18th century:

'The story of two Quakers, the American naturalist and plant hunter, John Bartram (1699-1777) and the English merchant Peter Collinson (1694-1768) best exemplifies the whole spirit of the 18th century expansion.... this was the era of a great exchange of plants and correspondence between Europe and America. The link between Peter Collinson and John Bartram lasted over 30 years, from 1733 to 1768 (the date of Peter Collinson's death). Between them they played a major role in changing the appearance of the English and American gardens. John Bartram exploring the woods of the northeast of America sent some 200 new plants to England. These plants were sent to several recipients, including Peter Collinson, who lived first at Peckham and then at Mill Hill, where he cultivated many of the rarities. Peter Collinson's Hortus Collinsonianus, discovered only in 1809, confirms his responsibility for at least 42 new introductions [later established at more than 180 introduction by Dilwyn in 1843 – see Brett James]. Peter Collinson shared plants and seeds with fellow naturalists in England and on the Continent. By 1765 John Bartram, through Peter Collinson's recommendation, was appointed King's Botanist. Elsewhere Peter Collinson suggested that "England was being turned upside down and America transplanted hither [sic] through the prodigious influx which, by the second half of the century, was transforming the appearance of landscape gardens and encouraging establishment of American gardens with specially prepared soil..."

*In modern times there have been many other tributes. Please see the bibliography.

Sources

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