

‘THE BEAUTY OF EVERY PLANT AND FLOWER MAY BE SEEN’

Phillada Ballard

The collecting of tropical orchids, regarded as ‘a rich man’s hobby’, reached its zenith in the years before the First World War. Joseph Chamberlain was one of the leading orchid collectors in the Midlands and was rarely seen in public without an orchid in his buttonhole.

Chamberlain’s interest in orchids was probably influenced by the collection of his father-in-law, Archibald Kenrick, the West Bromwich hollowware manufacturer, at Berrow Court, Edgbaston. After being widowed in 1863 Chamberlain lived at Berrow Court for some years before moving to Southbourne in Augustus Road where he first formed a collection of orchids, displayed in a conservatory and adjoining greenhouse.

When he built Highbury at Moor Green in 1879–80 he had an extensive glasshouse range designed and erected by the Birmingham firm of Clark and Hope. Doors from the drawing room opened into the Conservatory which led to a fernery and then to a glazed corridor two-hundred feet in length, on the south side of which opened thirteen span glasshouses, many of which had specialist conditions for growing orchids.

By 1884 *The Gardeners’ Chronicle* commented that a ‘noted collection (of orchids) exists at Highbury’ and the first edition of *The Orchid Review* of 1893 devoted an article to the collection. From 1888 the glasshouses were lit by electric light and Chamberlain, having arrived home on Friday night from his Parliamentary duties, accompanied by his guests, could tour the glasshouses without going outside.

Orchid Varieties

Initially the orchid collection was managed by the head gardener, but from 1891 onwards a specialist orchid grower was employed solely for the orchids, together with three men. Chamberlain grew what were described as ‘showy species’ and the genera he favoured were butterfly orchids (*Odontoglossums*), moth orchids (*Phalaenopsis*) as well as *Dendrobiums*, *Laelias*, *Masdevallias* and *Cattleyas*. *Cattleyas* in particular, were used for hybridising, *Cattleya x Chamberlainiana* as well as *Laelia anceps Chamberlainiana* having been named after him, but he raised many hybrids of his own including *Cattleya x Miss Endicott*, named after his third wife, *Laelio-Cattleya Highburiensis* of 1896 and *Dendrobium x Burberryanum* of 1897, named after Mr Burberry, one of his orchid growers.

The main orchid display house had its iron supporting rods festooned with *Ficus stipulata* (creeping fig) and the stages were filled with maidenhair ferns grown in pots among which the orchids were arranged thinly so that ‘the beauty of every plant and flower may be seen’.



One of the numerous glasshouses at Highbury which contained Chamberlain’s famous collection of orchids.

Prize-Winning

Chamberlain was a successful prize-winner for his orchids at many horticultural exhibitions, including the Birmingham Spring Show in the Town Hall, the shows of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens at Edgbaston and the Royal Horticultural Shows in London. He made several donations of orchids to the Edgbaston Botanical Gardens and to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew.

Chamberlain died in July 1914 and his orchid collection, auctioned in London in April 1915, fetched £826, though many specimens had been transferred to the collection of his son, Neville Chamberlain, and filled the glasshouse at Westbourne in Edgbaston. ●

Dr Phillada Ballard is an independent historian.

Further Reading

Phillada Ballard, ‘*Rus in urbe: Joseph Chamberlain’s Gardens at Highbury, Moor Green, Birmingham 1879–1914*’, *Garden History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1986, pp. 61–76 (reprinted by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 1987).

H. A. Burberry, *The Amateur Orchid Cultivator’s Guide* 1894; 1895; 1900. Joseph Chamberlain, ‘Nomenclature of orchids’ *Orchid Review*, vol. 4, 1896.

Orchid Collection at Highbury in *Orchid Review*, vol. 1, 1893; vol. 2 1894; vol. 3 1895; obituary of J Chamberlain in *Orchid Review*, vol. 22 1914.