

Richard Forrest - *Son Éminence Grise*.

The most interesting character in the *Imatophyllum aitoni* / *Clivia nobilis* naming affair is the head gardener of Syon House in 1828 - the mysterious "Mr Forrest". His name crops up in the protologues of both these 'species'.^{11,12} Could he perhaps be regarded as someone who was seconding both contestants in a duel?

So who was this 'Mr Forrest'? We fortunately have access to a document or two that reveal something of the man, as well as occasional mentions in other places. To offer a basic biography, I can do no better than to quote from an anonymous article from *The Monthly Magazine*³, happily written in elegant, Georgian English prose:

"[Richard Forrest was] Born at Dalkeith [a town a few kilometers south east of Edinburgh in Scotland], where his father was a nurseryman and florist, he very early in life was placed under the tuition of Mr. Macdonald, the very talented horticulturist to the Duke of Buccleuch [the Duke's estates were in the Dalkeith area], whose labours in promoting his favourite art are well known. Thence he went to the Royal Gardens at Kew, and finished his professional education under Mr. William [Townsend] Aiton, with full benefit of the study of all the plants in the royal collection. While yet but a youth Mr. Aiton recommended him to Earl Grosvenor (now the Marquis of Westminster), for whom he executed the gardens and pleasure grounds at Eaton Hall [near Chester, Cheshire], where, in the course of six years, he converted a marsh into a paradise. After this he planned and executed, for the Duke of Northumberland, the magnificent improvements at Sion House, where the gardens and grounds are not surpassed, and the rack work [trellising ?] and conservatory are unequalled.

"Mr. Forrest's talents and acquirements were, however, too great for being permanently devoted to any one place; and therefore, when the works at Sion were perfected, he offered his services to the public, first as a landscape gardener and designer of works, and secondly, as the same and a nurseryman and florist jointly. In these capacities he has already designed many ornamental works for public purposes; among which we may mention the Great Western Cemetery of London [Kensal Green Cemetery - 1831]; and the Zoological Gardens [and arboreta] at Bristol [1835-1836], at Cheltenham [1836], and at Manchester [1837], the first of which has an arboretum containing every tree which will stand the English winter in the open air." He was also involved with the design of Hyde Park Gardens.¹⁶

In 1829 Forrest became a Fellow of the Linnean Society⁸ and in 1837 he became a CMHS - a corresponding member of the Horticultural Society of London (established in 1804; which later became the RHS).¹⁵ He had been utilised by the Horticultural Society of London as a flower judge in 1834.¹ In 1836, John Claudius Loudon, a popular author and publisher on horticultural matters claimed that "as a garden architect, we know of no man to be compared with Mr Forrest".¹⁴ Loudon himself is a fascinating man and well worth looking up on Wikipedia and other Internet sites. In about 1835 Forrest acquired the nursery business of William Malcolm in fashionable Kensington and traded as Kensington Nursery, "under the Especial Patronage of the Queen."¹⁶ At times the business was also known as 'Forrest & Black' and possibly 'Forrest & Hill'. The original Kensington Nursery had been established on this site in 1710, and had thereafter remained so named under a succession of owners. Malcolm had taken charge there in about 1804. Forrest's tenure was notably short, and he ceased trading in 1847.¹⁷ With Forrest's departure the nursery ceased to exist. Regarding the nursery during the time of Forrest, our anonymous columnist from *The Monthly Magazine*³ says: ".... a vista opens from the public road, almost opposite to the Royal Gardens, and invites one in so winning a way that, if time will at all permit, it is not easy to pass by. The most elegant shrubs, the most lovely flowers, and a succession of caves and shells on pedestals, all in the purest taste, render the place quite an optical feast. Then the perfect order and cleanness of the borders and beds; and the vigour of the plants, as if they were running a race as to which should be the finest. Every thing in fruit, in shrub, and in herbaceous plant, for the open ground, the shelter of the green-house, or the heat of the stove, is there, up to the very last importation from any part of

the globe."

For a man who "as a garden architect, we know of no man to be compared with Mr Forrest", I have found it interesting that no information regarding him can be found in the horticultural literature after the closure of Kensington Nursery. By 1876 he was being described as "the late Richard Forrest"²⁰, but no where can I find an obituary. Considering myself to be quite a dab hand at finding genealogical resources and using these to clarify aspects of the lives of various people, I have come completely unstuck with Richard Forrest.

I can find no birth record in any place, and so I have tried to apply what I know of him to estimate this. In 1838, Forrest claimed that he had been in horticulture for 25 years ¹⁶ - meaning that he started in the trade in about 1813. We know that he became apprenticed at a very young age ("... he very early in life was placed under the tuition..."), and in c. 1820, when he commenced work at Eaton Hall he was "yet but a youth".³ My guess is that he was born in about 1800.

It has been said that regarding Forrest and his nursery, "after it closed in the early 1840's he moved to the north of England, his date of death has not been traced".^{7b} I have come across an entry in the publication *The Jurist* for 1852 ² referring to a "Richard Forrest, Battersea, Surrey, landscape gardener", describing him as a prisoner scheduled to appear on August 5, 1852 at 11 am before the Chief Commissioner of the Court in Portugal St., Lincoln's-inn-fields, London. The latter was the address of the Insolvent Debtors' Court! As there is no other Richard Forrest that I could find who could in any way be considered a 'landscape gardener' at this time, I suspect that our Richard was thus bankrupt. As a result of this, upon his later death he was probably not considered deserving of an obituary in any decent publication. Of course, his death would have had to be registered in a BMD (births, marriages and deaths) Register. I have not found a likely candidate in the BMD of England and Wales. Perhaps he may have gone home to Scotland to die. I also find no record of any marriage or offspring, but as compulsory BMD registrations were only instituted in 1834, such would probably have predated this.

More specifically related to our enquiry; about the beginning of April 1826, Richard Forrest commenced employment at Syon House, the estate of the Duke of Northumberland, situated on the banks of the Thames in Middlesex, over the river from the Royal Gardens, Kew. The garden of Syon House was originally designed in 1760 by Capability Brown ²¹ (prime practitioner of the maxim that 'nature abhors a straight line'), but according to an observer the gardens had fallen into a parlous state; overgrown by unwanted vegetation, with the beds and kitchen garden in an absolute mess.¹³ Forrest obviously had his work cut out for him to return this estate to the required glory. This is not to say that there were not well grown collections of plants being maintained there at this time and Hooker's comment in 1828 regarding Forrest's guardianship of "the whole of those truly princely collections"¹¹ was probably not simply sycophancy. Forrest also laid out a new section known as the 'botanic garden' and a rock garden, and was responsible for a number of other ingenious contributions to horticulture at Syon House.

The famous Conservatory of Syon House, an outstanding example of English horticultural architecture, being "surmounted by a graceful cupola, upwards of sixty feet in height..... altogether a range of three hundred and eighty feet in length", was designed by Charles Fowler in 1828 and completed in 1830 ²⁰ and was thus not the original greenhouse in which the 1827 and 1828 flowerings of *Clivia nobilis* took place.

The length of time that Richard Forrest was employed at Syon House is not easily determined. It has been said that when he was laying out the grounds at Kensal Green Cemetery in 1831, his "time was wholly at the disposal of the Duke of Northumberland".^{7a} John Thomson who trained through apprenticeship to the Royal Gardens, as Forrest had done, said in 1898 (when he was 91) that he became head gardener at Syon House in 1830, and he does not mention Forrest in any sort of relationship to Syon House, listing him only as "head gardener to Earl of Grosvenor, Eaton Hall, Cheshire".¹⁹ Strange and stranger! I suspect that Forrest left the employ of the Duke in about 1833, after seven years at Syon House and went almost directly to Kensington Nursery. In 1831 the

Alphabetical Catalogue of the Plants of Syon Garden was published, with Richard Forrest given as the author.

There are only three primary sources concerning the introduction of *Clivia nobilis*. One of these, Herbert's *Amaryllidaceae*.....,¹⁰ does not mention Mr. Forrest.

Regarding the protologue of Hooker's *Imatophyllum aitoni*, the following extract has application to Forrest: "A specimen having flowered in October of last year, in the noble gardens at Sion House, Mr Forrest, under whose skilful charge is placed the whole of those truly princely collections, kindly requested His Grace the Duke of Northumberland's permission for a drawing to be made of the plant, from which, the accompanying figure is copied. Mr [W. T.] Aiton has likewise been so obliging as to send me a drawing and specimen of the fruit...."¹¹

From this it can be deduced that Forrest had a drawing made of the 1827 flowering of the plant, and apparently gave it to his former teacher, W. T. Aiton, as well as ripe fruit to study, which were forwarded to Hooker. He thus must have been aware that Hooker intended to publish this species. Forrest was beholden to Aiton not only for his early training but also for giving him his first break into the world of landscaping by recommending him for the job at Eaton Hall; and this may be the reason for his actions.

Lindley's protologue of *Clivia nobilis* says: "The plant from which our drawing was made, flowered for the second time in July last, in the princely Garden of his Grace the Duke of Northumberland, at Syon House, and was communicated to us by Mr. Forrest, to whom we are indebted for several observations upon its habit and characters."¹²

Lindley's plate was figured directly from the 1828 flowering, the arrangements for this being made by Forrest, who also gave some additional information. He therefore must have known that Lindley was intending to publish the species. I am not aware of any favours that Forrest owed Lindley, but perhaps the former saw benefit in the plant being named in honour of the family of his master's wife, the Duchess of Northumberland, and that is why he assisted here as well?

Two interesting things can be noticed on comparing the few lines from the two protologues. Is it sheer coincidence that both authors describe the plant collections of the Duke of Northumberland as 'princely'? Did the two authors use different forms of spelling of Sion/Syon House to give one the 'reassurance' that there was no plagiarism going on here?

Some of the ideas that came to my mind on contemplating Forrest's involvement in all this include: 'double agent', 'master of a two ring circus' and 'divided loyalties'. We will never know the mind of Richard Forrest, but speculating on his motives is an interesting exercise.

So, how does Forrest's landscaping stand up more recently?

Regarding the Bristol Zoological Gardens and Arboretum (taken off the current website): "The man responsible for the design was Mr Richard Forrest, a greatly admired landscape gardener who also created the gardens for the Duke of Westminster at Eaton Hall. Forrest's designs for the gardens, the large central lake, the expansive lawns, and the siting of enclosures around a perimeter wall all remain very largely unchanged to the present day, and a century and a half later, visitors would almost certainly recognise the zoo from nineteenth century plans."⁵

And "It is very evident that Forrest was a man of vision and imagination. He created the Gardens out of meadowland belonging to a near-by farm (long since demolished), and they became famous throughout the country."⁶

Regarding 'Battersea Park Pleasure Gardens': "Of all the public places I have seen, one must give 100 per cent. marks for layout of flower beds—it is a rather similar garden, though on a smaller scale—to the Bristol Zoo. I have no doubt that the right hon. Gentleman knows it, and I hope that between now and next summer he will find out who is responsible for those flower beds and ask him to come up and give advice."⁹

Regarding Kensal Green Cemetery (Taken off the current website): "Kensal Green was designed in the spirit of an English country park, to plans including those of Richard Forrest, a landscape gardener whose aristocratic connections included Eaton Hall, Cheshire, and Syon Park, Middlesex. Its plantings were much influenced by the theories of John Claudius Loudon (who is buried at Kensal Green), although an early experiment with cedars quickly gave way to horse-chestnuts and other deciduous species. The cemetery was much commended for the beauty and tranquillity of its landscape, and even maintained its own conservatory for the better part of a century."¹⁸

At Eaton Hall, they are not now aware of Forrest's involvement in the laying out of the garden, assuming that it was the work of Capability Brown; which in itself is very high praise indeed.²²

What this study has done, is to give me the chance of appreciating a 19th century man whose life still has relevance in the 21st century.

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