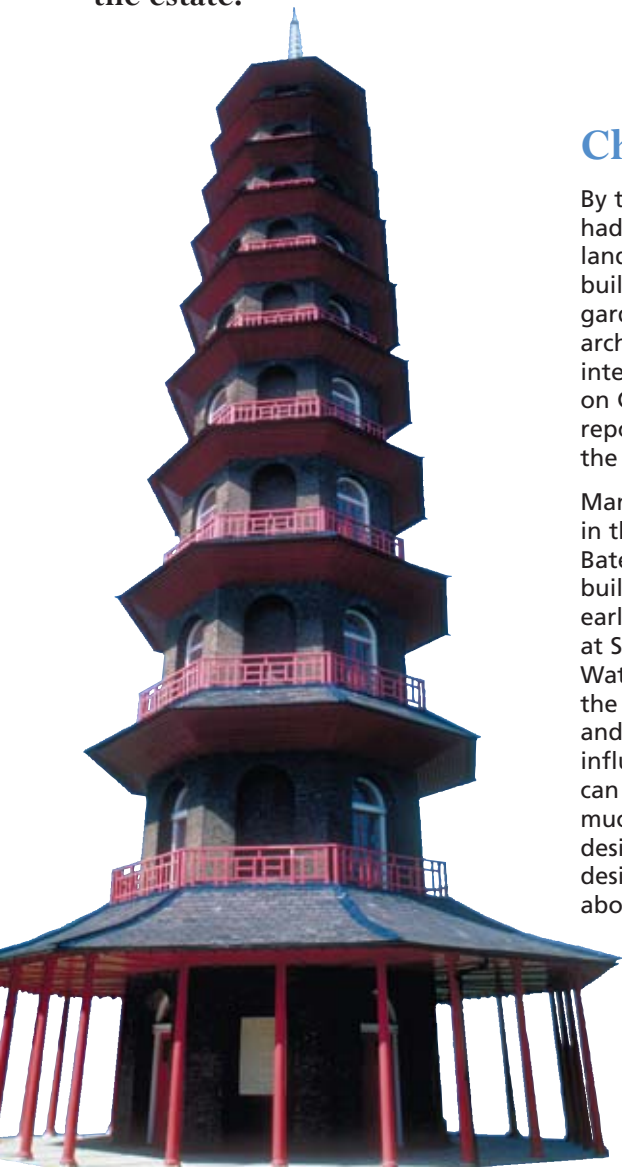


The Pagoda

& Sir William Chambers

The Pagoda is one of Kew's best known features. It was completed in 1762 as a surprise for Princess Augusta, the Dowager Princess of Wales and mother of George III. Princess Augusta had continued developing the estate at Kew after the death of her husband, Frederick, landscaping the site in accordance with the prevailing fashions of the day. The Pagoda was one of several buildings designed by Sir William Chambers, Princess Augusta's official architect, to ornament the estate.



Chinese style

By the middle of the 18th century it had become fashionable among the landed gentry to have decorative buildings and follies erected in their gardens and estates. A style of architecture that excited particular interest was *chinoiserie*, loosely based on Chinese design and inspired by reports from travellers who had seen the wonders of the Orient.

Many gardens of the time indulged in this fanciful rococo period; Richard Bateman had a number of *chinoiserie* buildings in his garden at Windsor as early as the 1730s, while the gardens at Stowe, Shugborough and Virginia Water also had Chinese effects. By the 1750s *chinoiserie* was widespread and expanded to include other influences both exotic and gothic, as can be enjoyed at Painshill. Very much a western idea of Chinese design, *chinoiserie* was often designed to make a political point about British interests overseas.

Construction

Construction of the Pagoda began in the summer of 1761. Horace Walpole, then living in Twickenham, wrote to a friend, 'We begin to perceive the tower of Kew from Montpelier Road; in a fortnight you will be able to see it in Yorkshire.' Its ten-storey octagonal structure, reaching a height of nearly 50 metres (163 feet), was at the time the tallest imitation of a Chinese building in Europe and a skyscraper of its day. (To be authentic, it should have had an odd number of storeys and used more sympathetic building materials.) The Pagoda was designed to add a final flourish to the furthest reaches of the garden and was flanked by two other exotic buildings. The Alhambra to the left was a bright Moorish creation, elaborately decorated both inside and out. To the right, on the mound where the Japanese Gateway sits today, was a Turkish Mosque, complete with slender minarets and yellow banners fluttering in the breeze.

A few commentators thought that such an enormous building would never support itself, but Chambers cleverly tapered the design, each floor diminishing in size by 0.3m (1ft) in both diameter and height. The construction was carried out by the Richmond bricklayer Solomon Brown and his work has certainly stood the test of time.

It is uncertain what colour scheme was first chosen for the Pagoda. Deep in the archives of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), there is a faded watercolour drawing in Chambers' own hand. The roofs are striped with green and white tiles and the balustrades multicoloured in blue, green and red. When Decimus Burton renovated the building in 1846 he replaced much of the woodwork. 25 different layers of paint have been found since then, in 49 different colours! The current external colour scheme is an entirely 20th century invention (last repainted in the 1980s) while indoors, paint evidence revealed cream and blue colours used in the earliest known scheme. Externally, the oldest colour scheme was in very dark green, cream and orange-red.

80 golden winged dragons once stretched out from the corners of the roofs, as if to ward off evil and defend those within. The dragons, carved from wood and gilded with real gold, lasted only 22 years and were removed along with the original roof tiles during maintenance works in 1784. William Townsend Aiton told William Hooker that he recalled them rotting away. Burton recommended restoring the original dragons (and reshaping the roofline to more authentic curves), but the cost of £4,350 was considered excessive.

The Pagoda has endured many trials and quite a few near misses. In the Second World War several bombs landed nearby damaging houses and trees. British bomb designers also did their own damage, cutting holes in each floor in order to drop models of their latest designs.

However, the Pagoda has survived to become an icon of Kew, a Grade I listed building and a proud symbol of the Gardens' heritage; one of many reasons that UNESCO named Kew a World Heritage Site.

The Pagoda reopened to the public in 2006. A full structural survey was carried out in 2005 to inform plans for restoring this *chinoiserie* masterpiece to enable it to be opened to the public on a permanent basis. It is hoped that funding can be raised to initiate a full restoration for Kew's 250th anniversary in 2009.

Sir William Chambers

Sir William Chambers first became interested in Chinese architecture when he visited China and stayed for several months in Canton during his travels as an employee of the Swedish East India Company. While there he made architectural drawings of typical buildings, which he later published as a book: *Designs of Chinese Buildings* (1757). At the age of 26 Chambers decided to further his studies and become an architect.

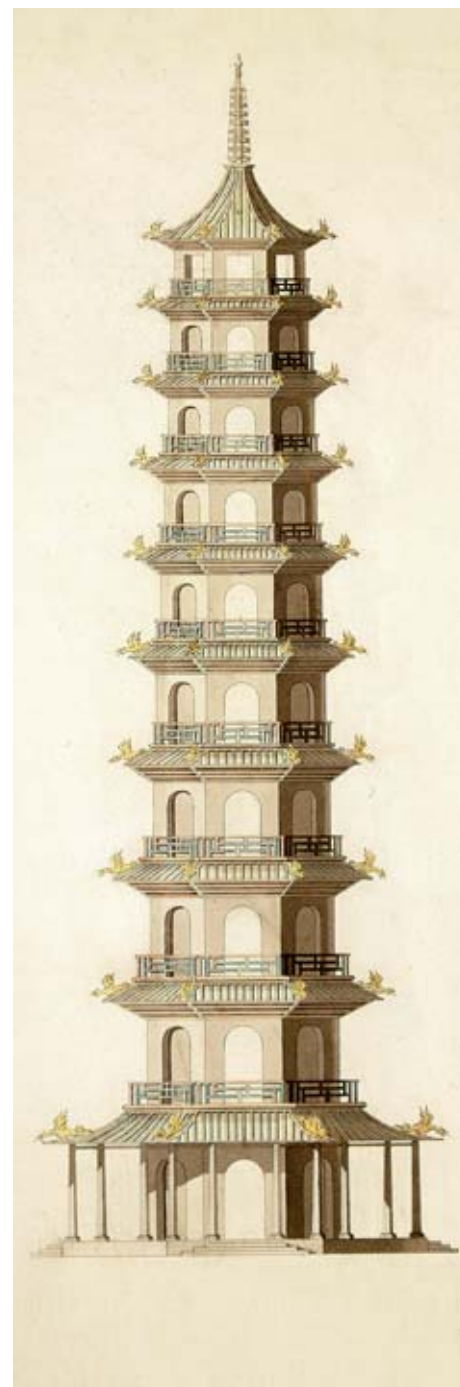
After spending six years in Paris and Rome, Chambers travelled to England. In 1757, he became Princess Augusta's official architect and tutor to her son (later George III). Over the following five years, Chambers designed more than two dozen buildings for Kew. Many such as the Mosque, Temple of Victory and Chinese T'ing have since disappeared, but among those remaining are the Orangery, the Ruined Arch and the Temple of Bellona as well as the Pagoda.

Chambers received many other commissions; his best known work is Somerset House in London. In 1771 he was knighted by Gustav III of Sweden and was allowed to use his title in England by George III. He died in 1796.

Further reading

Kew, The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens by Ray Desmond (Harvill Press, 1998)

Sir William Chambers, Architect to George III edited by John Harris and Michael Snodin (Yale University Press, 1996)



The view from the top: showing the Temperate House and Pagoda Vista