

Royal Botanic Gardens
Kew

Inspiring futures



Harriet Gendall

Tell us about your job

I am the Project Officer for the Mobile Museum Project, which is a research initiative looking at the history of the movement of plant-based objects into and out of the economic botany collection at Kew, since the mid-1800s.

Why is science important in your career?

Environmental conservation is my passion, and I love plants, so I wanted a career that was aligned with this. Science is important for deepening our understanding of plant-life, and helping us learn more about the relationship between human culture and the natural world. Science can help us tackle the most pressing environmental and social issues of our time.

What is your average work day like?

My work is mostly desk-based but I also work in the economic botany collection, carry out research in the library, and attend meetings. When the weather is good, I spend lunchtime outside.

I am responsible for a little bit of everything, including managing the project's social media account and researching objects. I give tours of the collection, take photographs of objects, design posters and booklets, and am involved in organising an international conference.

Did you go to university? If so, what did you study? If not, what did you do after leaving school?

My first degree was a foundation course in art and design, as I wanted to be a designer. I later spent time traveling and working in South America, and my interests changed. I studied for a bachelor's in International Development. More recently, I went to Copenhagen to study Agricultural Development, at Masters level.

What sort of personality traits do you have that help you in your career?

Being a good communicator has helped me to network with future employers and exchange expertise with my peers. I am also creative, which means that I communicate my research interests not just through writing and presentations, but also through photography, illustration and other media. Because I am curious, I am an enthusiastic scientific investigator; and because I am well-organised, I am good at managing research projects.

What helped you get your role at Kew?

Being enthusiastic, having perseverance and talking to people. I was presenting the research I carried out for my Masters degree at a conference in Portugal when I met the Curator of the economic botany collection and heard about the fascinating research undertaken by Kew Scientists. It was though talking to him and then later coming to Kew to do some work experience that I found my route into my current role.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career like yours?

Talk to and get to know people in the field. Scientists who work in conservation tend to be very passionate about what they do and willing to share tips and expertise. Be inquisitive about the world around you and find your own passion(s). Visit museums, gardens and wilder landscapes outside the city, read books, listen to podcasts and watch documentaries about conservation and plants. You could also gain work experience through volunteering.

What do you want people to know about your work?

That you don't have to work in a laboratory to be a scientist. I did not consider this kind of career until my late twenties, because I thought that all scientists were geeks and that I could not be creative if I worked in science. I couldn't have been more wrong.

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