



Local History: William Curtis

William Curtis, a Quaker, was born in Lenten Street, Alton, on 11 January 1746/7. From an early age he developed a passion to study natural history. Following a local education, he moved to London in 1766 to become apprenticed as an apothecary. Soon however, his interest in natural history became dominant, and eventually he gave up his practise to devote himself to this. In 1772 he was appointed Demonstrator of Botany to the Society of Apothecaries, at the Chelsea Physic Garden. His first publication was Instructions for collecting and preserving insects and this was followed by many others. His life's work, *Flora Londinensis*, was never a success. Being a lavish folio work which took many years to complete, it all but ruined him financially. Success came towards the end of his life when he started publishing his *Botanical Magazine*, a periodical which continues virtually unchanged to the present day.

In the late 18th century there was a great demand for literature on the vast number of plants which were becoming available to the British gardener. There was exchange of material between enthusiasts and the seed catalogues of the day served to fire their enthusiasm. After his success with *Flora Londinensis*, William Curtis became the focus of this interest and met the demand by producing his botanical magazine. In William Curtis' own words in the preface to the first issue:-

'The Botanical Magazine owes its commencement to the repeated solicitations of several ladies and gentlemen subscribers to the author's botanic garden, who were frequently lamenting the want to work, which might enable them not to enquire a systematic knowledge of foreign plants growing in their gardens, but which might at the same time afford them the best information respecting their culture.'

William Curtis was an active man, he became involved in many ventures, and at times struggled hard to meet his commitments. His correspondence concerning the magazine was enormous. The first number of the *Botanical Magazine* appeared in 1787 and during William Curtis's lifetime two thousand copies of each number were sold. The plant which was given the distinction of being the first figure was Iris Persica, a rare and beautiful Juno iris from the Middle East. Although available in small quantities from specialist Dutch bulb growers today, it is notoriously difficult to cultivate. This does not agree with the 18th century experience. The magazine states that *"like the hyacinth and narcissus, it will grow within doors in a waterglass, but stronger in a small pot of sand, or sandy loam."*

Following Curtis's death in 1799, his brother Thomas Curtis took over the publication. However, it was his nephew, the biographer Samuel Curtis who really established the Magazine.



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THE ARTISTS

There were three stages in the production of a plate for the *Botanical Magazine*. First an artist produced a drawing or painting of the plant, a plate would then be produced by an engraver, and finally each plate was hand coloured by a colourist. On each plate is written the name of the artist, then 'del', then the engraver's name followed by 'sculp'. One of the two main artists involved in the earlier *Botanical Magazine* was Sydenham Edwards, who was William Curtis's main artist. He remained with the magazine until 1815 when, following a disagreement with Samuel Curtis, he started a rival production, *The Botanical Register*.

James Sowerby (1757-1822) was the other principal artist. Although he was responsible for the first plate, his main claim to fame comes from work he did after the *Botanical Magazine* and he was not responsible for many of the illustrations.

ENGRAVERS

The main engraver for the *Botanical Magazine* was Francis Sansom. Although he was responsible for a few drawings for Curtis, he was the main engraver for the magazine.

COLOURISTS

When the *Flora Londinensis* was published, it could be bought uncoloured, coloured or finished with extraordinary care. It is thought that the latter was done by colourist William Graves. A Quaker like William Curtis, the men become close – William Hugh Curtis noted in his article on Graves son George in *Watsonia*: 'It was in March 1781 that William Curtis FLS (1746-1799), suffered from a severe attack of rheumatism which kept him indoors, by way of amusement set himself to design a beer jug and mug. This jug bears the designer's initials and the date 1781. The spout is so shaped as to form the upturned brim of a hat beneath which appears a cleverly moulded face believed for many years to be that of George Graves. ...[but] the face on the jug is of George's *father* William Graves, "the constant and undeviating friend and assistant of Mr Curtis"'. These items can be seen at the Allen Gallery in Alton.

Plates were hand coloured until as late as the 1950s. A team of young women were employed, each with a single colour to apply. This was a monotonous activity, and nowadays with the advent of good quality printing, hand colouring is no longer necessary. Following *Flora Londinensis*, the *Botanical Magazine* and less successful publications such as *Materia Medica* and Linnaeus' systems of botany, William Curtis had plans to produce a natural history of the British Isles. He made copious notes on



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many aspects of Britain's natural history, and commissioned artwork for it from Sydenham Edwards, but it was never produced.