

U3A Bike Rides
Richmond Park and the Isabella Plantation
Tuesday 2nd May 2023

The numbers for our ride, originally a dozen, were progressively depleted over the preceding days by: the afflictions of getting older; a house removal in Wales; and by grandparenting duties as a result of the teachers' strike.

So it was that just eight of us who gathered at Brockwell Park Lido and pedalled our way across Clapham Common to Wandsworth Common and a coffee stop at the Skylark Café.

With a right turn past HMP Wandsworth, across Garrett Lane and along the side of King George's Park, we tackled the modest incline of West Hill Road, paused for breath (and "the view"!), then past some delightful properties adorned with wisteria, and on to join the A3.

This busy route has a very good cycle path along its length and provided a nearly flat route to the underpass at Tibbet's Corner taking pedestrians and cyclists under the dual carriageway.

We continued on past the **Telegraph pub** where a semaphore telegraph signalling system once connected the docks at Greenwich to the naval fleet at Portsmouth.

Telegraph Road took us across Putney Heath and down into quiet, attractive Roehampton High Street. Once across the lights at Roehampton Lane there was the joyous ride down the gentle incline of Danebury Avenue, past council properties, some much in need of repair and redecoration, and so to Priory Lane and the Roehampton Gate entrance to Richmond Park.

Priory Lane continues through the Park, past the Colicci Café, and crosses the Beverly Brook and on towards the Robin Hood Gate.

At this point attention was drawn to a gravel path running parallel to the road which offered an alternative route. Two horse riders approached and trotted past us. Then, at a gallop came two more riders - heading directly towards us with much waving and shouting! The message, delivered sternly, was that the path we were on was reserved for horses. A fine was payable if we were caught!!



Disputation (beyond pointing out that we had seen no signs about use of the path) seemed rather a waste of time and effort, so we trundled our cycles across to the road and continued on our merry way. And the road surface was much better anyway.

Soon we came to the finger post directing us left to the Isabella Plantation.

Plenty of cycle racks are provided at the entrance and here we secured our cycles, then walked into the gardens. We had hoped that Peter would have been there waiting near the entrance at Peg's Pond, but after a phone call to him it was apparent that had not been able to join us.



There is always some uncertainty about the best time to visit and it had been a cold and wet spring. However, we had timed the visit well; the heather was still in full bloom and further on, the azaleas and rhododendrons were just coming into bloom all along the path beside the little brook (called Main Stream) from Peg's Pond. At its best the woodland garden are a riot of colour, with beautiful shades of pink, red and purple.

Thompson's Pond was soon discovered but it took us longer to find our way to the spectacular Still Pond, with a panoramic arc of flowering azaleas as a backdrop to the pond itself. It is found to the right, along Side Stream.



An hour or so later, we left the Plantation, crossed Queens Road and enjoyed the lovely downhill run to Ham Gate. The route continued through Ham Common Woods, across Upper Ham Road and on to Ham Common.

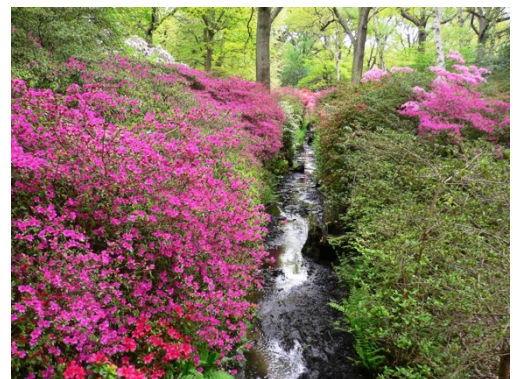
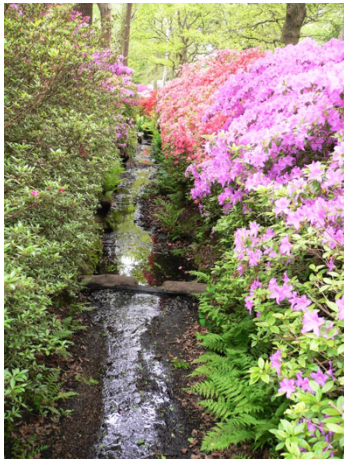
At Riverside Drive we took the path down to the Thames, with Teddington Lock down-river to the right and the Weir up-river. We crossed the two foot bridges which provided a view of the Weir, in full flow.

At The Anglers pub, tables were available for us. Chicken and sweet corn soup was a good choice. (Those who joined the ride in 2022 recollected that on that occasion we were served by a waiter, Rida, who came from Tenerife. The conversation turned to the neighbouring island of La Gomera, famous for inhabitants having an ancient way of communicating across deep ravines by means of a whistled speech that can be heard two miles away. To our amazement and delight, Rida had given us a demonstration of some of these whistles!)

The route home was a short ride along Teddington High Street to Teddington Rail Station for the half-hour journey back to Clapham Junction or on to Vauxhall. A colourful outing, for sure!

Time: about 5 hours. Distance cycled: 15 miles.

Additional photos from Isabella Plantation



Notes

The **Isabella Plantation** is located in what was a boggy part of Richmond Park. It was shown on a 1771 map as "Isabell Slade". Slade, or sleyt, meant a bog or open space between woods or banks. Rather prosaically, "Isabel" meant dirty or greyish brown, referring to the colour of the soil here.

I prefer to think of Isabel as the Spanish version of Elizabeth which means "God is my oath" or "God is abundance", and also associated with beauty, grace, and elegance!

The Isabella Plantation was established in the early 19th century when Lord Sidmouth, who was Deputy Ranger of Richmond Park, and a former Prime Minister, fenced it as an area of woodland to keep the deer out.

After World War II it was transformed into a woodland garden while retaining many ancient trees (oak, beech and sweet chestnut). It is organically run, resulting in the rich flora and fauna to be seen today. It was opened to the public in 1953.

A survey in October 2012 found that about 40 per cent of the Isabella Plantation was covered with Rhododendron ponticum, a non-native and invasive variety of rhododendron introduced here (and in many other gardens all over Britain) by the Victorians. Over the next five years this was removed and the gardens were planted with azaleas, camellias and other varieties of rhododendron. Further improvements included de-silting of all three ponds (Peg's Pond, Thomson's Pond and Still Pond) in the Plantation and establishing new waterfalls in the streams which are such an attractive feature of the garden.

It is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

For a virtual tour of the Isabella Plantation have a look at:

<https://piccoloexplorer.com/isabella-plantation-richmond-park/>

The **Telegraph pub** was named after Admiralty Telegraph, a shutter station which stood at the site in 1796 to convey messages between London and Portsmouth at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Long before the electric telegraph came on the scene, a method of communication existed that relied on using relay stations connected by line of sight. This was not a new idea as a similar system was used by the Romans to communicate from hilltop to hilltop. The system was set up by the Admiralty in the early 19th century in order to communicate quickly between their London headquarters and various naval ports. The line from London to Portsmouth operated from 1824 until December 1847 when it was superseded by the electric telegraph. It ran over 72 miles and cost latterly between £3,000 and £3,500 a year to work. In addition to this substantial sum, it was allegedly only fully operational for one-fifth of the year; being interrupted regularly by fog, rain and even by gloomy weather. The Admiralty semaphore was abandoned at the end of 1847.

See: https://www.brunningandprice.co.uk/_downloads/telegraph/telegraph-history.pdf

Acknowledgement: Source material from Wikipedia and Piccolo Explorer

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Ride leader: John Clements

Report and photos by John Clements, 4th May 2023