

A black and white photograph of a greenhouse interior. The top half shows a dense canopy of leaves and branches, possibly from a tree or large shrub, partially obscuring the glass roof. The bottom half shows the interior structure of the greenhouse, with vertical support poles and horizontal beams. A large, dark, cylindrical object, possibly a pipe or a large container, is visible in the foreground. The overall scene suggests a historical or industrial setting related to horticulture.

a growing history under glass

THE JEWEL IN THE CROWN OF THE WALLED GARDEN

Delve a little deeper into West Dean's extraordinary collection of glasshouses and you'll find they have more than a well-turned ankle to reveal about Victorian life at 'the big house'. Here's a taster, just for Friends.



In October 2014 we launched our Glasshouse Appeal to help preserve the jewel in the crown of our walled kitchen garden; a very big thank you to every Friend who's been moved to donate. Your gifts are already hard at work, helping to restore this wonderful collection of glasshouses to their former glory; a vital endeavour, especially as West Dean's glasshouses have so much to tell us about the social history of the estate – aubergines, orchids, the Artichoke House and all.

Pleasure and plenty; the heyday of the walled kitchen garden

As our archive reveals, it was William Dodge James, father of our founder Edward James, who commissioned an extension to the impressive range of glasshouses for West Dean's walled kitchen garden, during the period 1891–1900.

William and his wife, Evelyn moved in glamorous circles, counting HRH the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) among their friends. As millionaire socialites they entertained on a lavish scale; something that required a year-round supply of edible and decorative fare, all grown to perfect ripeness and worthy of display.

From sweetly succulent Muscat grapes (so loved by the Victorians) to richly-hued aubergines, prized for shooting party dinners, the big house demanded – and the gardens provided.

It took 11 gardeners to keep pace with production when the James's were in residence, plus the Head Gardener, not to mention mountains of manure and trainloads of coal. And the beating heart of all this activity were West Dean's magnificent glasshouses.

A kingdom of glass; the lasting vision of William James

Whether by foresight or fortune, William James made the smart decision to commission his glasshouses from Foster & Pearson; a manufacturer whose client list read like a who's who of late Victorian high society – and even included Queen Victoria herself.

The quality of materials (mainly Archangel pine), the craftsmanship and the attention to detail employed by Foster & Pearson (right down to the easy-to-open brass latches designed for hands laden with gardening tools) help to explain why West Dean's glasshouses have survived to this day, all be it in a time-worn and weather beaten state.



Photo left: *The Mid-Season and Early Vinery glasshouse in the early 1900s.*

Insert: *The original Foster & Pearson mechanism in the refurbished Seasonal Display House.*

From sweetly succulent Muscat grapes, to richly-hued aubergines... the gardens provided.

Inside these glass wonders, gardeners could – for the first time ever – create almost any climatic condition using valves and vents to adjust the temperature, and evaporating pans, placed on the cast iron hot water pipes to provide humidity.

Now, after years of providing for West Dean, these glasshouses need us to return the favour.



Photo above:

Grape vines in the Mid-Season and Early Vinery glasshouse.

Inserts: The glasshouses had suffered much deterioration from time and the elements.

Fruitful wanderings; feeding the poetic imagination

When William James died in 1912, West Dean was left in Trust to his four-year-old son, Edward James, who would inherit the estate at age 25.

While the lasting influence of his childhood wanderings in the gardens is hard to determine, we do know that Edward – a writer, patron and collaborator of surrealist art - adored orchids and that he left a trail of horticultural references in his own creative output.

A labour of love; rebooting the engine room

Despite these influences, it was during Edward's time at the helm that the kitchen garden at West Dean began its slide into genteel decline.

This was the fate of many large country house kitchen gardens in the first three quarters of the twentieth century as garden boys and journeyman gardeners were called up to fight in the First World War never to return. Then the Second World War effectively put an end to what was left of the 'horticultural Oxbridge' once represented by the walled kitchen garden.

For West Dean however, that wasn't the end of it. In 1987, the BBC's 13-part television series, *The Victorian Kitchen Garden*, re-enlivened public interest – and also caught the eye of Sarah Wain and Jim Buckland, the husband-and-wife team who would come to West Dean four years later to take on the formidable task of returning our gardens to a state of glory.

The Second World War effectively put an end to what was left of the 'horticultural Oxbridge'.

In his novel, *The Gardener Who Saw God* (1937), Edward writes about a young head gardener transformed by a visionary experience, while his idea for an Artichoke House pavilion, co-conceived with leading British architect, Christopher Nicholson, recently came to fruition in a bold re-interpretation by George Charman, (see page 6).



Our glasshouse appeal

Preserving a precious legacy

As Head Gardeners, Jim and Sarah have shown great passion, skill, leadership and determination to restore the walled kitchen garden in a way that respects its historic layout and character.

In the 13 glasshouses, they have created 26 growing environments that nod respectfully to the old (with the dessert grapes, melons, cucumbers and figs so loved by the Victorians) while embracing the new (with their red hot collection of chillies).

While some glasshouses have already been restored, our late vinery, nectarine and fig houses are now in need of urgent repair. And whilst we have already raised a significant sum we're still well short of our fundraising target – with around £40,000 needed for this next phase of refurbishment – if we are to preserve all our glasshouses for another century.

Could you become part of this remarkable history by helping us again today?

To make a gift to our Glasshouse Appeal, please call the Friends Office on 01243 818256 or donate securely online at westdean.org.uk/appeal

£25 from every reader would take us almost to our target, but whatever you can give will help us preserve these important glasshouses so that you, your children and grandchildren can continue to enjoy them. Thank you so much for your support.