

# **Sir Joseph Banks: President of the Royal Society and foremost botanist of the 18<sup>th</sup> century**

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The speaker is a local historian, having been Hounslow Local History Librarian for 25 years. Her interest in Sir Joseph Banks arose from the fact that he lived in Hounslow and is buried in a local church.

Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) was interested in all matters scientific and was the youngest ever President of the Royal Society, to which position he was elected in his 20s and remained President until his death. His ancestral home was Reseby Abbey in Lincolnshire with a London home in Chelsea. His father died when he was 8 years old and his younger sister, Sarah Sophia remained unmarried and was his lifetime companion and assistant. He was sent to Harrow School and then to Oxford University, where he did not get on with his tutor, as a result of which he paid for his personal tutor to travel to Oxford from Cambridge University. He rented a house in the West End and started his travels as a young man, leasing a ship and taking people with him to gather plants in places such as Greenland, Iceland and Newfoundland. He was a friend of George III.

In 1768 George III commissioned a trip to observe the transit of Venus, which was led by Captain James Cook with Banks as the Chief Scientist, though the two did not get on because of Banks' alterations to the ship carried out without asking Cook. The *Endeavour* set off in the autumn of 1768, carrying live animals for fresh food. The first port of call was Rio de Janeiro, where they spent Christmas and New Year before rounding the Horn and sailing across the Pacific to observe the transit in March 1769. They came to New Zealand and sailed between North and South Island, visited Tasmania and landed on the Australian mainland at Botany Bay – named because of the profusion of plants, one of those collected being *Banksia*; he also recorded the animals seen, including kangaroos. They went up the east coast of Australia and the ship was damaged on the Great Barrier Reef and had to stop for repairs. They then visited Papua New Guinea and several of the South Sea Islands. On one island, they met a handsome young man called Omai, who expressed a desire to go to England so they took him back to England, where he met George III, had a play written about him and was the talk of the town. He became homesick after 2 years and Cook took him back on his 2<sup>nd</sup> voyage, though he did not live for long after his return. Banks decided not to go on this voyage and was also absent on Cook's 3<sup>rd</sup> voyage, during which he was murdered on Hawaii.

Banks' London home was in Soho Square and once settled back in England he married Dorothea Matchpole, a wealthy heiress. They rented Springgrove House in Isleworth just by Smallbury Green as a country home, which was easily accessible, being less than a day's ride by coach from central London. He sent plant collectors out around the world and peonies from China and cranberries from America were planted at Springgrove House. He also developed an apple, the Springgrove codling, and specimens were given to George III and grown in the gardens of Kew Palace. Banks claimed Smallbury Green and took it into his estate.

He started experimenting with sheep, crossing a Southdown ewe with a Spanish ram to produce merino wool, some of which George III had at Kew Palace and a young man called Trimmer took some to Perth in Western Australia, where they became the foundation of the merino wool industry of Australia.

After his campaigns in Scotland against the Jacobites, General Wade complained about the absence of accurate maps, the result of which was a decision by General Roy to measure a baseline for mapping across Hounslow Heath, which was to be tied in with one in France. Banks got involved in this project, experimenting with what should be used for the measurement. Ship's masts absorbed and lost water so did not provide a stable measurement and steel chains expanded and contracted with changes in temperature so it was decided to use yard-long glass tubes, which were

stable, laid across Hounslow Heath for 5¼ miles to take this measurement. It started at Kingsarbour, where there is now a plaque on the London Airport North police station, which now occupies the site, and ended at Roy Grove, Hampton, which is now marked by an upturned cannon. 10 years later it was re-measured and the discrepancy was about 2.5 inches. In 1997, on the bicentenary of the 2<sup>nd</sup> measurement, computerised measurement found a similar discrepancy of 2.5 inches.

In 1808, Banks bought the freehold of Springgrove estate, adjacent to the Great Western Road, a Roman road, which is now the A30. He was confined to a wheelchair with gout in his later years and after George III's illness he liaised with Queen Charlotte, who died in 1818, 2 years before George III. Banks died on 19 June 1820 at the age of 77 and specified in his will that he should be buried in the local parish church with no monument to be erected. He was buried in the crypt of Heston Church with just a coffin plate featuring his name and dates on it. Sara Sophia died in 1818 and was also buried in Heston Church, as was Lady Banks later. In the 1880s, Heston Church was being reconstructed and a monument was erected to his memory in the form of a plaque on the north wall of the nave. Springgrove House was demolished and a new house erected on the site for the owner of Pear's Transparent Soap. This was used as a grammar school during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is now a college of further education.