

# Accessible Kew

**Anna McDermott, a member of Kew Gardens' Access Forum, reports on how to make the best of your visit.**



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*Who wouldn't want to visit Kew Gardens, if they could? It's a UNESCO World Heritage site set over 300 acres, only a short train ride from central London with the largest living plant collection in the world – that's more than one in eight of all flowering plant species.*

## Facts and Figures

So how easy is visiting, if you have a disability? Almost a fifth<sup>1</sup> of us has, according to Disability Discrimination Act definitions (now The Equality Act [www.equalities.gov.uk/equality\\_act\\_2010.aspx](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_act_2010.aspx)). That's over 10 million people. The prevalence of disability rises with age. Around one in 20 children are disabled, compared to around one in seven working age adults and almost one in two people over state-pension age.<sup>2</sup> Currently in Britain, there are more pensioners than there are children under the age of 16, and one in four babies born today will live to be 100.<sup>3</sup> With these numbers, access isn't only an issue of fairness, but a business concern too.

## Access Forum

To ensure all visitors feel welcome, plans for a paid External Access Forum were proposed in 2008. The forum has met on an ad hoc basis since 2009 to monitor and advise on improving access as part of Kew's commitment to a truly inclusive experience. We're a diverse group of five individuals with a huge range of abilities, disabilities, professional training and skills, with a member of Kew staff as co-ordinator. The forum's remit has covered all aspects of access, including lifts, parking, toilets, catering, public engagement, learning, the website, external events, signage, information leaflets, interpretation, use of Braille/Makaton/ hearing loops, lighting in buildings, ramps, seating, disability awareness training, liaison with external consultants – I could go on, but you get the picture. Access features in all areas of life within Kew and we like to be involved at the early stages of new projects to be of most help.

*Autumn Trees* © Anne McDermott



<sup>1</sup> DWP (Dept of Work and Pensions) Feb 2006 – 19%

<sup>2</sup> Family Resources Survey 2008/09

<sup>3</sup> 'Voice of Older People Annual Report' 2008/09 Dame Joan Bakewell

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So what is the best way to improve the experience of a visitor who needs some extra help? These are some tips to make life easier. (And Kew is always open to your suggestions too.)

### Getting there

- To be prepared, start with a call to Kew Gardens (0208 332 5655 press option 7 to speak to someone or 3 for recorded access advice), or visit the website [www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/access-guide/index.htm](http://www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/access-guide/index.htm)
- Public transport advice is available online from Transport for London [www.tfl.gov.uk/gettingaround/transportaccessibility/1167.aspx](http://www.tfl.gov.uk/gettingaround/transportaccessibility/1167.aspx). Arriving from central London by tube or overground train at Kew Gardens can be a problem, if you're a wheelchair user or find stairs difficult, as this route involves a hill or alternatively two flights of stairs. Better to continue to Richmond, one stop on, and get a train back to Kew Gardens arriving at a better exit with flat access to Victoria Gate. Buses stop closer to Victoria and Lion gates. Car parking is available on Kew Road for free after 10am, if you're lucky. The gardens' car park at Brentford Gate has disabled spaces. There are also three disabled parking bays at the main entrance on Kew Green.
- Lion gate is closest to Richmond station [www.nationalrail.co.uk/stations/rmd/details.html](http://www.nationalrail.co.uk/stations/rmd/details.html) which is served by national rail. Nearby there is some side-street parking after noon and at weekends; as well as on Kew Road, after 10am. There are also local buses connecting this gate with Richmond station.
- Always check before you travel, particularly at weekends when there can be disruptions on all lines.

### Paying for it

Now you're at the gate of your choice, you will need to buy a ticket unless you've booked online (at least 7 days in advance) and have your ticket with you, or have a season pass. The latter may be cheaper than you think, especially if you make a few visits a year. For example, until March 2012, a single adult entrance costs £13.90 or £11.90 for a concession (e.g. over 60 or long-term disabled). But season ticket members enjoy a year's unlimited free entry to Kew Gardens and Wakehurst Place from as little as £38 at the concessionary rate (save a further £10 paying by direct debit). Essential carers of wheelchair users and registered blind/partially-sighted visitors go free, as do under-17s, accompanied by an adult.

### Getting around

- Wheelchairs are available free at all gates – however, attendants to push wheelchair-users are not.
- Kew has eight mobility scooters, which are free but need to be pre-booked (call 020 8332 5121). Scooters can be collected at the Brentford, Victoria or main gates – please confirm gate on booking. You will need some form of ID with photograph, or home address, when collecting the scooter. Or you can bring your own scooter – i.e. pavement-use mobility scooters limited to 4mph on the footpaths, not for use on the grass.



- Near Victoria Plaza you can join the Kew Explorer bus [www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/kew-explorer/](http://www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/kew-explorer/) which costs £4 for adults and runs hourly from 11am, offering an overview of the gardens with a commentary. You can get on and off throughout the day. There is space for foldable wheelchairs onboard and for one wheelchair-user to stay in their chair.

- If you'd prefer, there are Discovery tours [www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/access-guide/discovery-tours/index.htm](http://www.kew.org/visit-kew-gardens/visit-information/access-guide/discovery-tours/index.htm) designed for people with additional needs i.e. limited mobility, sight loss, learning disability and deafness. There is an adapted tour bus for groups of up to 12 people seated, plus one fixed wheelchair space. The Discovery Bus provides excellent visibility and protection from the weather. Each tour lasts around an hour and takes in all the major sights, including remote wooded areas. Depending on the group, passengers may visit a glasshouse en route or stop at a cafe. Tours with a guide and driver are available morning and afternoon, Monday to Saturday, to be booked in advance (call 0208 332 5643) for £30 per group.



*Volunteer guides and the Discovery bus*

- The Discovery Programme also offers walking tours for people with sensory and mobility difficulties. Discovery Guides are trained to escort those with visual impairment and some use British Sign Language. Tours must be booked in advance (call 0208 332 5643 or complete the Discovery Walking Tour booking form and return it to [tours@kew.org](mailto:tours@kew.org)) and cost £5 per guide, with one guide for five people, including carers.

## **Facilities**

- Now you're in and about, you may need a rest or a loo. Seating is varied and plentiful. There are lots of toilets marked on the 'Welcome to Kew' map available at the gates. There is a large print version of this map being updated soon, available, on request at the gates and Victoria Plaza information desk. There is a good distribution of accessible toilets, but no specific adult changing/nursing room at present, but do call if you need this facility.
- After that, you may need to re-fuel and there's a choice of cafes, all self-service (apart from an occasional table service section of the Orangery). The White Peaks café closest to the children's play areas has been refurbished recently. There are plans to extend the Victoria Plaza café. The Pavilion café will re-open shortly after its winter break. All have level access and nearby adapted toilets.
- A less busy time to visit is during term-time after 2pm, when most of the school groups have left - although school groups are limited to ease access generally. Bear in mind that the gardens are open later in the lighter evenings. (But please note, currently the Palm House is closed after 2pm on Tuesdays, to deal with an insect problem that is threatening the collections.) Winter time is less popular, but there's still lots to see and do. Some adults and children with learning difficulties may prefer this quieter environment.
- Of course, no visit is complete without some retail therapy at the level access shops at Victoria and White Peaks.

## **Buildings/structures to visit**

- The gardens also have buildings you can visit. The Marianne North Gallery has been refurbished to great effect and now has audio visual displays and lifts for step-free access through the modern Shirley Sherwin gallery next door. Museum No1 across the lake from the Palm House has exhibitions, which are low-lit and there are steps at the entrance. Some parts of the greenhouses are less accessible than others eg the narrow spiral staircases in the Palm and Temperate Houses and the downstairs marine displays in the Palm House and to a lesser extent in the Princess of Wales Conservatory. The latter is difficult in places with a variety of step sizes.
- The Alpine gardens and glasshouse have wide, mainly flat pathways.
- One downside is the continuing absence of a functioning lift to the 200 metre long Xstrata Treetop Walkway. Despite the best efforts of all concerned, the problem has yet to be resolved – do check

online or with visitor services to be updated. So for now, unless you are fit enough to manage the 118 steps on a fairly steep gradient 18 metres (59ft) up in the air, you'll be confined to youtube clips or a virtual tour online <http://apps.kew.org/trees/> . The Rhizotron educational display underground is accessible with a ramp and handrail.

- On your way there you can use the stunning and wheelchair-friendly, if very slightly bumpy, Sackler crossing bridging the lake.

## **What next?**

All too much to do in a day, and with every season showing a different facet of Kew, why not become a member? If you're too far away to visit, be first with the latest news, by logging onto facebook, twitter, youtube and flickr: [www.kew.org/followkew](http://www.kew.org/followkew). In the immediate future, Kew will be exploring the recommendations made in its Access Audit 2010. And I hear rumours of apps on iphones to read barcodes on plants for more information and that's just the beginning...

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[www.kew.org/](http://www.kew.org/)