

## John Rea, Florist of Kinlet, 1605(?)–1677

BRIAN STEPHENS

John Rea (1605[?] – 1677) spent his life at Norton's End, Kinlet, acquiring and cultivating garden plants and fruit trees, becoming one of the finest plantsmen in the Country with one of the largest collections. Over forty years, he assembled species and varieties from Europe and exotics from newly developing trade centres and colonies world-wide. Many of these he propagated as stock to sell to nobility and gentry, keen to show off their fashionable, new gardens, and displays of newly introduced, novel plants. It is said that by 1600 about 6000 plants were known, and by 1700 another 12000 had been added. This brief article can be only a glimpse of the life and work of this remarkable man, and the times in which he lived.

So what should attract our attention? Who was he, what did he do, and why should we bother? Firstly, he was locally born and bred, a self-made family man, who built a substantial property, 'my remote residence', and developed a thriving enterprise in what he described as 'the rural desert where it was my unhappiness to Plant'. Secondly, through reputation and publication he made a considerable contribution to the practice of horticulture, particularly fruit growing and garden design. He acquired recognition nationally, and is still regarded with respect as a pioneer. Anyone exploring the history of horticulture and agriculture soon finds references to John Rea in the literature. Thirdly, his contemporaries and the remarkable events during his life span, viewed now from a modern perspective, add more significance to his achievement.

It is not certain when John Rea was born, probably between 1600 and 1610, nor when or why the family settled at Kinlet, nor whether the name was pronounced 'Ree' or 'Ray'. Biographical details are few and leave many questions unanswered. Francis Engleheart (2007), gives an accessible summary. John was buried at Kinlet 8th October 1677. Probate was not granted until 1681, which may explain why some sources (Dict. Nat. Biography), give 1681 as the date of death.

John Rea is known through his three books, FLORA, CERES and POMONA, which describe his ideas on garden design and construction, and his plant collection. This was published in 1665, as one volume of 250 pages, plus an index, about A4 size and 20mm thick. A second edition of 1676, included even more varieties, and there was a third edition in 1702.

The 1665 work reveals Rea's huge collection of plants which he recommends for gardens, and the vast experience and expertise he must have had, to acquire,

nurture and propagate such a stock. He described himself as a Florist, growing flowers for their own sake, a new trend in gardening. Based on his own empirical observation, developing the tradition of the Apothecaries like Gerard, (1597) and Parkinson, (1629), Rea aimed to update Parkinson's work, and 'describe every worthwhile plant then in cultivation in England'.

The catalogue begins with several pages of prose and poetry dedicating the work to friends and sponsors, forming an introduction to the book. Extra to the main text there are 16 carefully hand drawn, scaled designs, for knot gardens, two per page. Knot gardens were fashionable during the 15th century to about 1620, and Rea practised as a garden designer, (e.g. Gerard's Bromley, Staffs.) His career, however, spanned the transition to a different style of garden, as new species were introduced. Continental fashions changed and, with economic stability after the Civil War, the new gentry had smaller properties and fewer resources, but great enthusiasm for collecting exotic introductions.

The first book, FLORA, begins with thirteen pages of instructions on how to actually set up a new garden. (P. Goodchild, 1981). This is the first such description in the literature, giving details for walls, setting out beds, tilling and manuring, building hot beds, planting fruit trees, setting up and painting fencing and trellis, preparing grass areas and laying paths and walks. Many of the notable gardens we visit to-day, were founded on the principles laid down by Rea, and have been successfully applied to present day reconstructions, e.g. Hanbury Hall.

The remainder of the Flora 'book', 157 pages, is in 40 chapters, listing hundreds of perennial plant species and varieties which Rea recommends for gardens, having grown them himself and discovered where and how best to grow them. He gives brief descriptions, advice on suitable positions and hints for cultivation. This was a reversal of the traditional Herbal format of herbs, shrubs and trees which were considered superior, to place trees first, then shrubs, climbers or bulbs etc. listing species and varieties which he could offer. For example; Chapter IX, Fritillaria, 14 varieties; Chapter X, Tulipa, 32 early, 134 mid season, 10 late, totalling 176. (311 in the second edition), Chapter XI, Narcissus, 36 varieties. (The peak of 'Tulip Mania' was February 1637, with a financial crash, when Rea, about 30, would have been building up his business). It was said that he had the best collection of tulips in the Country. CERES, the second book, pages 175-199,



# Wyre Forest Study Group

again in chapters, deals with annual plants in similar manner and we can pass on.

The third book POMONA, pages 203-239, deals with fruit and is closer to our local interest. Space precludes details of Rea's suggested varieties, which can be presented elsewhere. All levels of society had access to the common 'top' or tree fruits in Mediaeval times, but with little choice. Rea was one of the first to bring a new range of choice to a wide public, with reliable information.

Chapter I, APPLES; For the smaller gardens of his time he recommended apples grafted on to the Paradise stock, giving dwarf trees, leaving 'many others out of my province' for traditional orchards. Twenty sorts are listed, with comments on how and where to plant them in the walled fruit garden.

Chapter II, PIRUS; Twenty one varieties of pears are listed and described. Most of these were recent imports from France which Rea believed to be the best source. He preferred them planted against walls and grafted on to dwarfing Quince stocks.

Chapter IV, CERASUS; 24 varieties of cherry are listed and described. Here, for the first time, Rea introduces 'Duke' cherries, hybrids of sweet *Prunus avium* and sour *P. cerasus*, and also a variety he calls The Carnation Cherry, which still survives.

Chapter V, PRUNUS; 45 varieties are listed and described, including damsons.

Other chapters of POMONA list 6 Quinces, 6 Apricots, 11 Nectarines, 35 Peaches, 5 Nuts. He was first to refer to several gooseberries by name, of which 'Amber' and 'Hedge-hog' still exist. (Roach, 1985).

A feature of Rea's book which may surprise modern naturalists is the consistent use of Latin binomials, often misconceived to have been first used by Carl Linnaeus. The work of Kaspar Bauhin overlapped that of the later herbalists. His "Prodromus Theatri botanici" published in 1620 and "Pinax" 1623, distinguished many genera and species by name with a binary system, with many natural groups of genera recognised. It was not until John Ray (1627-1705), (the inspiration for the Ray Society), described the 18600 species then known, in 1686, that a natural system began to emerge. The genera and species and even trinomials for varieties, used by Rea are quite familiar to a modern botanist. Even though 100 years before Linnaeus, Rea was 'up to date'. Thus it was the task of Linnaeus

to standardize naming and produce his sexual system, "Systema Naturae" 1735 and in 1737 to systematically diagnose all known genera arranged in his new system; an artificial system, using only a few characters instead of the whole plant.

Rea was not alone in his enterprise. His daughter Minerva married Samuel Gilbert, Rector of Quatt, on the Dudmaston estate, who was also a physician and chaplain to Lady Jane Gerard of Gerard's Bromley. They had six children and lived at Norton's End, inheriting the property and continuing the business. Gilbert himself wrote 'Florist's vademecum' 1682, and developed his own special interest in plant groups particularly Auriculas.

Rea dedicated his books to his patron, 'The Right Honourable, Charles Lord Gerard, Baron of Gerard's Bromley in the County of Stafford', for whom he had designed the gardens. A further dedication to his good friend 'The truly Noble and perfect Lover of Ingenuity Sir Thomas Hanmer, Baronet'. Hanmer, also a Florist, had property just in Wales, at Bettisfield east of Ellesmere, near the Parish of Hanmer, and at Bettws Cedewain west of Montgomery. He and Rea exchanged many plants and Hanmer also wrote books on his own plant collections. Hanmer was a friend of John Evelyn (1620-1706) to whom he recommended John Rea in 1668 as 'the most skilful and best stored in those parts is Mr Rea of Kinlet in Shropshire, whose florilege is in print'. So Rea would have had good contacts and it is interesting to realise that this original work was continuing locally near Wyre Forest during the turbulent times of the 17th century, 350 years ago.

## REFERENCES

- Dictionary of National Biography.
- Engleheart, Francis, 2007. Kinlet; the life and times of a Shropshire Village. John Rea of Norton's End. Kinlet History Group.
- Shropshire Parish Register Society.
- Goodchild, Peter, 1981. John Rea's gardens of delight: Introduction and the construction of the flower garden. Garden History Vol 9 No.2.
- Quest-Ritson, Charles, 2001. The English Garden: a social history. London, Penguin.
- Rea, John, 1st Edition, 1665; Flora, seu, De florum cultura, Flora, Ceres and Pomona. London
- Roach, F.A., 1985. Cultivated Fruits of Britain; their origin and history. Blackwell.
- Shropshire Archives, Shrewsbury, 1988. Documents Concerning the Parish of Kinlet.