

12/06/2020



Dear Club Members,

The garden here in Wales is really starting to look spectacular. A warm spring, and finally some much needed rain has brought everything to life. So it seems appropriate that our inspiration for June comes from a plant and a botanist.

June 19th marks the 200th anniversary of the death of Joseph Banks. He was President of the Royal Society for 40 years, and one of the key figures in the establishment of Kew Gardens, and its enormous botanical collections. He brought home 30,000 specimens from his many expeditions, and was the first to describe and record around 1,400, though of course many of the plants would have been known by the indigenous populations.

His early life was one of privilege and connections. He received an excellent education by attending Eton and Oxford, and the early death of his father meant he inherited a large wealthy estate at the age of just 21. Good connections led to him becoming an advisor to George III, and he utilised that position to advocate for exploratory voyages around the world, knowing that they would allow him to indulge in his passion for botany.

His first expedition was to Newfoundland and Labrador in 1766, and he was the first scientist to classify and categorise many of the plants and animals using the newly established Linnaean classification system. In 1768 he formed part of the team of scientists on Cook's first voyage of exploration (more information on the voyages of Captain Cook are in the August 2018 Time Travellers Club letter). This expedition took Cook to Australia, where Banks and the rest of the scientists aboard documented and recorded a large number of plants that were unknown in the Western world.

This voyage went on to shape much of Bank's scientific life. He was a major proponent for the settlement of Australia in New South Wales, and almost every ship returning from the settlement was tasked with bringing him more specimens for his collections.

Banks was also a professional acquaintance of Alexander Humboldt (more information about him in September 2019 Time Travellers Club letter). Banks formed a leading part of an international group of scientists who remained connected despite the Napoleonic Wars and hostilities between the countries in which many of them lived.

Your fibre this month is inspired by a genus of plants that is named after him, *Banksia* is a genus containing 170 species from the Proteaceae family. They're found all around the coastal regions of Australia, and Banks was one of the first to formally record these plants.

Banks was a product of his time, and all this scientific endeavour can't be separated from the British vision for their place in the world. He was part of the building of the British Empire, and was happy to plunder local vegetation to find resources that may further the establishment of British colonies. In 1789 he oversaw the fitting out of *The Bounty*, the ship captained by William Bligh. A

voyage now notorious for the mutiny that took place, but the main object of the voyage was to bring breadfruit from Tahiti in the Pacific round to the Caribbean islands to provide a food supply for the slaves that were working in the plantation. Banks was a firm proponent of slavery, and with his wealth no doubt had investments in slave plantations, and was made richer as a result of the work of enslaved labourers.

In addition to his botanising he also did a lot of research and experiments on his estates in England. He worked with selective breeding to improve livestock, and one of his most well known papers at the time was a paper published in 1809 entitled "Some circumstances relative to Merino Sheep". In 1788 the first Merino Sheep had arrived in the UK, prior to that they had been strictly controlled by the Spanish Monarchy, and Banks recognised that this bloodline could be used to improve the fleece of British flocks. The end of the 1700's was a revolutionary time in British agriculture. Many of the modern breeds we know today were developed during this time, in particular by Robert Bakewell, whose breeding work established the Leicester Longwool family of sheep breeds. Banks would no doubt have been familiar with his work.

Banks is a man to whom Western science owes a lot. He was a leading light towards the end of the period of enlightenment, but like many leading figures of this era we can find his views on slavery as abhorrent, and recognise that the British attitude towards Empire caused a great deal of harm.. History is never simple, and we can look back at the past and recognise the achievements of a person whilst recognising that they exploited others in order to reach that position.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Further Reading-

Banks in the light of empire building-

<https://theconversation.com/joseph-banks-traveller-botanist-and-agent-of-the-british-empire-130618>

Sir David Attenborough talking about the scientific voyages of Joseph Banks-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2nziaekY-c>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXFH6pNVNuY>

Rethinking Joseph Banks, a video from The Royal Society-

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TUVvGXdYVfc>

Banks Collections that are held by The Natural History Museum have been digitised and are viewable online-

https://data.nhm.ac.uk/dataset/56e711e6-c847-4f99-915a-6894bb5c5dea/resource/05ff2255-c38a-40c9-b657-4ccb55ab2feb?q=joseph+banks&_ga=2.190441643.1803724803.1591976862-881446442.1591976862

<https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/joseph-banks-scientist-explorer-botanist.html>

Robert Bakewell

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bakewell_\(agriculturalist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Bakewell_(agriculturalist))

Banksia-

<https://www.anbg.gov.au/banksia/>

<https://www.gardendesign.com/plants/banksia.html>

The Enlightenment

<https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-enlightenment>

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

80% Merino

20% Bamboo