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## THE EARLY INTRODUCTIONS OF CAMELLIAS TO ENGLAND FROM CHINA

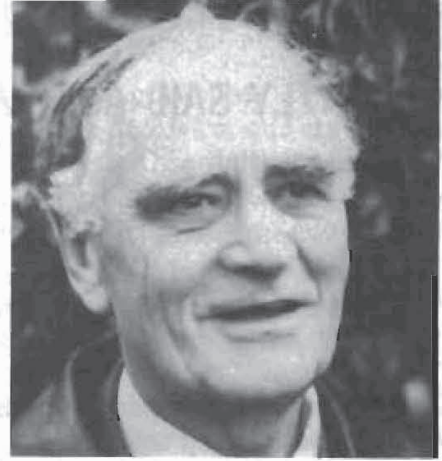
**JOHN TOOBY**

*Bransford, Worcester, England*

European trade with the far east was pioneered by the Portuguese. Foreign contacts with Japan were gradually reduced from about 1600 when that country was unified under Tokugawa Ieyasu, and almost excluded from 1640, from which date strictly limited facilities were permitted the Dutch at Nagasaki only. Trade with China was similarly limited and restricted to Nagasaki, though there was some remission between 1711 and 1735 when two ships a year each from Nanking, Ningpo, Amoy, Canton and Taiwan were allowed in. These ships took many plants in pots on their return trip to China, including camellias, citrus and tree-paeonies<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore quite likely that some of the varieties of camellias subsequently brought from China were of Japanese origin.

For almost the whole of the period 1730-1860 Canton was the only Chinese port open to Europeans. British traders had reached China in 1684 and for a few years there was a trading station on Chusan Island. It was from here that Cunningham sent the first specimens and drawings of camellias to England. Even at that time he complained of lack of freedom to ramble. The Jesuits had sent scientists and craftsmen to China so that in their early years they were welcomed. In time, however, missionary zeal overcame self-restraint and they became unpopular, many being deported to Macao in 1732.

A hundred years after the event Harrison wrote: "the Jesuit Georg Joseph Kamel visited Japan as a missionary in 1739, contrived to procure two plants of the single red camellia which he brought to Europe and sold to Lord Petre for a considerable sum. His lordship had them sent to his gardens at Thorndon Hall in Essex, where, being kept in a hothouse temperature, they were killed. The gardener was a Mr James Gordon who, in 1742, commenced a nursery at Mile End near London. He, being somewhat aware of the value of a plant so ornamental as the Camellia, managed soon to produce another plant which he put out into the open conservatory where it continued to grow for 94 years till the nursery was broken up in 1837: from it, it is supposed, many thousands of young plants have been raised as stocks on to which to bud, inarch etc. the subsequent double



kinds... Mr Gordon died in 1780 and he had not only obtained the single red but the double white and red striped"<sup>2</sup>. It is not easy to separate fact from fiction here. Kamel died in 1706, never having visited Japan. And if Jesuits did bring the camellias they probably came from China. A Chinese origin is also suggested by Edwards<sup>3</sup> who tells us that the plant he drew at Thorndon in 1745 was called the Chinese Rose. Lord Petre was a Roman Catholic as well as an enthusiastic collector of exotic plants and so likely to be approached by Jesuits. Ehret's illustration in Trew<sup>4</sup> worked up from a partly painted drawing<sup>5</sup> in the British Museum (Natural History) with the note "in hortus My Lord Petre 1740" supports Aiton's date "before 1739"<sup>6</sup>. The colours are so different as to suggest different varieties. Gordon's 94-year-old plant was presumably rooted from a sucker — we know the Chinese sent grafted or inarched plants. A tea plant was sent to Gordon in 1768<sup>7</sup> and a catalogue of his that can be dated between 1771<sup>8</sup> and 1775<sup>9</sup> included: "118 true Green Tea, 119 true Bohea Tea" among greenhouse plants and "63 Double Scarlet Chinese Rose" under hothouse plants<sup>8</sup>. The latter may have been a camellia — and if so Ehret's because of the colour — as also may "Althaea, Double-flowering or Japan Rose" in the 1775 catalogue of Telford's of York who are thought to have had trading links with Gordon<sup>10</sup>. Stove treatment seems ridiculous now but was, after all, not unnatural for new plants coming from the latitude of the Bahamas, southern Egypt and Calcutta. When Gordon retired in 1775, his sons brought in John Graefer as a partner. Graefer must have left the business by 1781 when it became Gordon Dermer and Thompson. A catalogue of theirs running to 154 pages, which can be dated 1791-1795<sup>9</sup>, includes "Camellia Japonica Evergreen Japanese Rose" under both greenhouse and hothouse plants. So if James Gordon grew any double camellias they had been lost. Graefer, like James Gordon, had a great reputation in his time and in 1786 we find him appointed gardener for the Queen of Naples' new English garden at Caserta on the recommendation of Sir Joseph Banks. The English garden

was under the general supervision of Sir William Hamilton and both he and to a less extent Graefer corresponded with Banks. When in England, Hamilton spent some time with his nephew the Hon. Charles Greville, another keen naturalist and gardener. Before moving to a larger house and garden at Paddington, Greville lived in a small house in Edgware Row with a housekeeper, Mrs Hant and her young daughter Emma. Greville treated Emma almost as an earlier "My Fair Lady" seeing that she had lessons in singing and in music and art appreciation. She became a favourite subject of the artist Romney who painted her many times. Hamilton was enchanted and when returning from leave in 1786 he took both mother and daughter back to Naples where Emma soon became the second Lady Hamilton<sup>14</sup>.

As trade with China increased the floral designs on imported goods raised a demand for drawings of flowers and these could be purchased in every stationer's shop in Canton<sup>11</sup>. Collections of them were received by the East India Company about 1780 and among them were double camellias. These drawings served to redouble exertions to obtain living plants as it was found that seeds perished before they reached England. Then William Curtis published his illustration of the single red *Camellia japonica* with a recommendation for conservatory rather than stove treatment<sup>12</sup> and camellias became very much wanted.

Among the foremost in bringing in Chinese plants were the brothers John and Gilbert Slater. They compiled lists of plants with figures of boxes and manner of packing: "each year large boxes of plants were received, not a tithe of which were found alive and such as survived the voyage were only the same sorts as had frequently been received before"<sup>11</sup>. Eventually in 1791 or 1793 Gilbert Slater sent James Main who gives a vivid account of his experiences. He received advice and instructions from many of the top gardeners of the time including Sir Joseph Banks — written in his own hand. Banks had gone with Captain Cook to Australia, was President of the Royal Society, a friend of King George III and the man who inspired the transformation of Kew Gardens into a great botanic garden. On arrival in Canton Main "first visited the picture shops and then explained to Samay, the old gardener as he was called by the English residents, what he wanted. At first he bought some, mixed with a few false ones; the latter were instantly rejected. Samay was astonished but on being told that a few dollars was no object he relented and afterwards told us at once that such and such plants could not be obtained at Canton." This is the traditional nursery custom of substitution and no

doubt explains various disappointments. He interpolates "the Chinese now" (i.e. in 1836) "have nothing like (we have lately been told) the vast variety of their native camellias which are now common in Europe." We can perhaps conclude that little hybridisation was going on around Canton.

When Main was almost home the ship was in a head-on collision and the mast fell on his precious boxes. Worse still, when he reached port he learned that his employer had died and the unsympathetic executors disowned him as he had no written contract. However he soon found other work and eventually became editor of the *Horticultural Register*.

'Alba Plena' then known in Canton as 'Pak Cha'<sup>13</sup> and 'Variiegata', 'Fa Cha' were brought in for John Slater in 1792. Berlese mentions that very beautiful sub-varieties have been obtained from its seed. Two years later Sir Robert Preston received 'Rubra Plena' which could have been one of Main's plants.

The return of Lord Macartney's Embassy to the Emperor of Chien Lung in 1798 — with *C. oleifera* — which did not survive — and the foundation of the Horticultural Society in London in 1804 added fresh impetus to plant hunting. Among the founding fathers of the Society — later the Royal Horticultural Society — were Sir Joseph Banks, W. T. Aiton of Kew Gardens, John Hawkins of Trewithen and the Hon. Charles Greville of Paddington<sup>14</sup>. Camellias now came in in quick succession, 'Carnea' (Middlemists') in 1804<sup>15</sup> and 'Anemonaeflora', 'Po chu cha' in 1806, both to Kew. 'Anemonaeflora' was an important early parent, and was also noteworthy because in China (though not in England) it produced some single flowers<sup>13 16</sup>. Also in 1806 Sir Abraham Hume imported 'Incarnata' long known as 'Lady Hume's Blush'. The year 1808 saw 'Semiduplex' brought in by Greville and the first scented camellia 'Myrtifolia' by Kew. 'Myrtifolia' caused some confusion by producing hexangular or tiered flowers in China but not in England. It was known as 'Hexangularis' and caused repeated disappointment up to the time of Fortune<sup>15 16 17</sup>. It is not the easiest to propagate or grow but still a charming plant. In 1809 Loddiges nursery imported 'Atrorubens' and the following year Captain Wellbank brought in 'Paeoniaeflora' for Charles Turner of Rooksnest Park in Surrey while 'Paeoniaeflora Alba' reached Kew. In 1811 Kew received 'Pomponia', another of the 'Paeoniaeflora' family, and Captain Wellbank brought '*Camellia sasanqua*' for Sir Joseph Banks<sup>15 16</sup>. This was known as 'Lady Banks's Camellia' and has been referred by the botanists to *C. oleifera*.

At this point another important figure enters the story. John Reeves was an outstanding judge of tea as well as a good naturalist and gardener. In 1812 he was posted to Canton as Inspector of Tea for the East India Company; in due course he was promoted Chief Inspector and remained in China, apart from leaves, until 1831 often travelling in the "Warren Hastings" with Captain Rawes. In the early years he was in constant touch with Sir Joseph Banks and on returning for his first leave in 1816 — when he created a sensation by having 90% of his plants alive — he arranged with the Horticultural Society to send them not only plants but drawings of plants and a stream of plants and plantings followed. At this period Captains Rawes and Wellbank appear to have been rivals, many of Rawes's plants going to his brother-in-law and sister, Mr and Mrs T. C. Palmer of Bromley while Wellbank's plants mostly went to Charles Turner. In 1816 both brought 'Wellbankii' and Rawes' *C. maliflora*<sup>19</sup> then considered to be a form of *C. sasanqua*. Colvil, a nurseryman of the King's Road, Chelsea introduced 'Fimbriata', and Wellbank also brought 'Variabilis' called by the Chinese the 'Variable Flowered' and the centre of the 'Paeoniaeflora' family of sports<sup>16</sup>.

Sadly the failure rate for plants sent from China returned to normal and in 1819 we find one of Reeves's East India Company colleagues in China, John Livingstone writing to the Horticultural Society at great length, complaining that only about one plant in a thousand got through and begging the Society to send a gardener to accompany plants on their long (4-6 months) journey<sup>20</sup>. Reeves made a garden where he established plants in pots for some months before sending them and designed little greenhouses, the fore-runners of the wardian case, which were mounted on the decks and he was careful to ensure that plants requiring the same treatment travelled together. He employed Chinese artists who lived in his house and worked under his supervision to produce work of accuracy and beauty. Eight portfolios of paintings are in the R.H.S. Lindley Library of which one is devoted to camellias. Some are numbered, some bear English names, some English and Chinese, and some Chinese names only<sup>13</sup>. Some paintings given Chinese names are difficult to relate to our varieties and others may be erroneous. Among them is 'The Eighteen Teachers' which looks very like the 'White Moutan'. Huang Teh Ling's 'The Eighteen Scholars'<sup>21</sup> is surely the same name and his attribution of it a freely sporting variety ('Variabilis') seems much more likely to be correct. There is a second set of Reeves's Chinese paintings in the British Museum (Natural

History) which also includes a number of paintings of camellias. They are stamped with the Reeves family crest and were donated by his daughter-in-law.

Captain Rawes brought another consignment to the Palmers in 1820 of which the most important was the semi-double garden form of *C. reticulata*. Also in 1820 Sir Charles and Lady Long brought in 'Involuta', probably a sport of 'Myrtifolia' and Mr Kent 'Crassinervis' while the Horticultural Society completed the 'Paeoniaeflora' family by importing 'Paeoniaeflora Pallida'. In 1821 Captain Le Blanc brought 'Rosea' for the Horticultural Society<sup>16</sup>.

It is odd that 'Rosea' in Booth is 'Le Blanc's Red' and 'Carnea' is 'Middlemists' while in Chandler and Booth 'Rosea' is 'Middlemists'. There is no explanation except that 'Rosea' is the commonly used name for 'Middlemists'. The descriptions differ in several respects so for the present they are treated as distinct. The same year the Horticultural Society leased 33 acres of land at Chiswick from the Duke of Devonshire. As part of the deal the Society made a door in the wall between their gardens and those of Chiswick House so whenever the Duke or any of his family wished to see the Society's gardens they only had to ring the bell. The gardens attracted a number of gifted horticulturists, among them Joseph Paxton, William Beattie Booth, David Douglas, John Damper Parks and Robert Fortune<sup>14</sup>.

The Society now responded to Livingstone's plea by sending their gardener John Potts to China. Unfortunately Potts fell ill — he had contracted tuberculosis — and many of his plants including 40 varieties of chrysanthemum were thrown overboard when the ship ran aground. Sadly Potts died soon after reaching England. He had brought some camellias but only the stocks survived and these proved to be of a new species *C. euryoides*<sup>14 15</sup>. Also in 1822 Palmer found a new white camellia in a garden or nursery at Rouen in France. Apparently this was sent from China to England by a Mr Ball and it is not known how it got to France<sup>15</sup>. The following year the Horticultural Society sent Parks to China and he returned in 1824 with 38 cases of plants in 9 different ships, including he thought, 37 different varieties of camellia including some that had just come in from Fokien; his problem was that he was only there from August to January and so saw very few in flower<sup>22</sup>. He brought several plants of *C. reticulata*, recognising the foliage from having seen Palmer's plant. Captain Rawes called in while he was at Macao and confirmed that the foliage was the same. He noticed that Mr Beale, a merchant who gardened at Macao for 50 years<sup>17</sup>, had another new camellia which he called an 'Intermediate

'Sasanqua' being intermediate in vigour between *C. maliflora* and 'Lady Banks's Camellia'. Unfortunately the plant potted up for England was burnt in a fire at the factory in Canton so Parks, worked some more, and also budded some of the other plants he was bringing home. It is believed that most if not all of the British stock of 'Captain Rawes' descends from Parks's introduction. He also brought 'Imbricata', 'Sabiniana' and 'Parksii' which was fragrant<sup>15</sup>. Again some scions worked on *C. euryoides* had died and the stocks survived. It seems probable that many plants were passed on to Kew and it may, therefore, have been Beale's 'Intermediate Sasanqua' which was discovered at Kew in 1858 having been there for many years and labelled *C. euryoides*, which we know as *C. rosaeflora*<sup>23</sup>. Coming back to 1824 Captain Rawes brought 'Speciosa' back for the Palmers<sup>16</sup>.

On two dates in 1829 William Beattie Booth read an important paper to the Horticultural Society on "The Varieties of the Camellia Japonica which have been imported from China". Booth had gained quick promotion in the Society's gardens and was then garden clerk. He had an unrivalled opportunity to compare camellias which were sent in by members and so to track down synonyms. The following year he collaborated with Alfred Chandler, son of the nurseryman, to produce a magnificent illustrated part-work which included British as well as imported plants. The first volume was completed in 1831 but only one part of the second volume seems to have been published in 1837. Booth's two works comprise the best early accounts we have. After a spell as head gardener for Sir Charles Lemon at Carclew he returned to the Society as Librarian and, on finally Assistant Secretary.

Also in 1829 Reeves (or perhaps Beale) sent another new camellia to the nursery of Mr Tate. This was a striking red, 'Reevesiana'<sup>17,24</sup>. Two years later Reeves returned from China for the last time, bringing with him another new one called 'Bealei'<sup>15</sup>. The original plant came from Japan in the Dutch ship "Rotterdam" and Beale

exchanged Chinese plants for it and other Japanese plants.

No more camellias appear to have been imported for five or six years when Chandler's Nursery brought in the striped 'Albertii'<sup>25</sup>. It must have been about the same time that Sir John Broughton, of Bank Grove, Surrey planted his double reticulata, 'Robert Fortune' or 'Pagoda' which was 13 feet high and 16 feet across in 1849<sup>26</sup>.

After a period of increasing tension and the rather discreditable Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking promised more freedom of access and fresh opportunities for collecting plants in China. Reeves in particular pressed the Horticultural Society to send someone while the going was good. In 1843 they sent Robert Fortune who spent much of the next twenty years looking for ornamental plants for English gardens and tea plants for India. His brief included a request for a yellow camellia and after following several false scents he found one in 1850 in a nursery near Shanghai. This is another form of *C. oleifera*, 'Jaune' or 'Fortune's Yellow'<sup>17,27</sup>. In 1854 he found two fine formal doubles in gardens and nurseries around Ningpo and Shanghai, 'Cup of Beauty', a literal translation of the Chinese name, and 'Princess Frederick William'<sup>28</sup>. When well established both produced self-coloured as well as striped flowers. He was not the sort of man to have missed them on a previous visit, but whether they came from elsewhere in China or from Japan we cannot say.

Broughton's camellia shows that arrivals of notable plants were not necessarily reported, even near London. How much more likely that plants came unrecorded into the provinces. The evidence however strongly suggests that all the best varieties grown near the Chinese coast were known to be in England. Their origin in other parts of China or in Japan requires further study as does their subsequent history. How many are still grown here in England, in Europe or further afield? Perhaps members may know of old trees of unknown varieties. It is time we got together to identify them.



Curtis' (1827) illustration of *C. reticulata* (imported by Captain Rawes for T. C. Palmer).



Chandler & Booth (1831) illustration of *C. reticulata*.

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**Early Chinese Camellias in order of introduction to England.**

- |  |           |                                    |
|--|-----------|------------------------------------|
| 1. Tea (unsuccessful)                                    |           |                                    |
| 2. Lord Petre's Semi Double Red (possibly two varieties) | 1739      | Jesuits — Petre (— Gordon ?)       |
| 3. Single Red  | 1739      | Jesuits — Petre Gordon             |
| 4. Sinensis (Tea) successful                             | 1768      | Ellis - Gordon                     |
| 5. 'Alba Plena'  | 1792      | Connors - J. Slater                |
| 6. 'Variegata'   | 1792      | Connors - J. Slater                |
| 7. 'Rubra Plena'   | 1794      | Preston                            |
| 8. Oleifera (unsuccessful)                               | 1798      | Macartney                          |
| 9. 'Carnea' ('Middlemists')                              | 1804      | Middlemist - Kew                   |
| 10. 'Anemonaeflora'                                      | 1806      | Kew                                |
| 11. 'Incarnata'  | 1806      | Hume                               |
| 12. 'Semi-Duplex'  | 1808      | Greville                           |
| 13. 'Myrtifolia' FRAGRANT                                | 1808      | Kew                                |
| 14. 'Atrorubens'   | 1809      | Loddiges                           |
| 15. 'Paeoniflora' (Paeoniflora Rosea)                    | 1810      | Wellbank - Turner                  |
| 16. 'Paeoniflora Alba'                                   | 1810      | Kew                                |
| 17. 'Pomponia'   | 1811      | Kew                                |
| 18. 'Lady Banks'   | 1811      | Wellbank - Banks                   |
| 19. 'Maliflora'  | 1816      | Rawes - Palmer                     |
| 20. 'Fimbriata'  | 1816      | Colvil                             |
| 21. 'Variabilis'   | 1816      | Kew                                |
|  | 1816      | Wellbank - Turner                  |
| 22. 'Wellbankii'   | 1816      | Wellbank/Turner                    |
|  | 1816      | Rawes/Palmer                       |
| 23. Oleifera   | 1820      | Nesbitt                            |
| 24. 'Paeoniflora Pallida'                                | 1820      | Hort. Soc.                         |
| 25. 'Involuta'   | 1820      | Long                               |
| 26. 'Crassinervis'                                       | 1820      | Kent                               |
| 27. 'Captain Rawes'                                      | 1820      | Rawes - Palmer                     |
| 28. 'Rosea' ('Le Blancs' Red')                           | 1821      | Le Blanc - Hort. Soc.              |
| 29. Euryoides  | 1822      | Potts - Hort. Soc.                 |
|  | 1824      | Parks - Hort. Soc.                 |
| 30. 'Alba Semi-Duplex'                                   | 1822      | Palmer via Rouen                   |
| 31. 'Double Oleifera'                                    | 1823      | Capt. Drummond - Hort. Soc.        |
| 32. 'Speciosa'   | 1824      | Rawes - Palmer                     |
| 33. 'Imbricata'  | 1824      | Parks - Hort. Soc.                 |
| 'Captain Rawes'  | 1824      | Parks - Hort. Soc.                 |
| 34. 'Parksii' FRAGRANT                                   | 1824      | Parks - Hort. Soc.                 |
| 35. 'Sabiniana'  | 1824      | Parks - Hort. Soc.                 |
| 36. 'Reevesiana'   | 1829      | Reeves (or Beale) - Tate           |
| 37. 'Bealei'   | 1831      | Reeves (Japan - Beale, Macao 1828) |
| 38. 'Albertii'   | ? 1838    | Chandler                           |
| 39. 'Pagoda'   | ? 1838/40 | Broughton                          |
| 40. 'Rosaeiflora'  | ?         | Kew, many years before 1858        |
| 41. 'Jaune'  | 1850      | Fortune - Hort. Soc.               |
| 42. 'Cup of Beauty'                                      | 1854      | Fortune - Glendining               |
| 43. 'Princess Frederick William'                         | 1854      | Fortune - Glendining               |