

Plants crossing continents: Brunel's SS Great Britain showcases the ship's role in botanical history

- A fascinating exhibit at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival sheds new light on the role of steamships in transoceanic plant hunting.
- RHS Gold Medal winning garden designer Jane Porter helped museum staff create a display featuring Wardian cases.
- Museum staff including a costumed Victorian botanist bring these floating glasshouses to life and delve into stories of plant migration in the 19th century that changed our parks, landscapes and gardens forever.
- Brunel's SS Great Britain is a museum and attraction in Bristol. Visitors explore two museums and the *SS Great Britain* – the world's first great ocean liner, designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Wardian cases containing living plants have returned to the ship for the first time in 150 years.

Photocall: 1 July, 11am - - join gold-medal-winning garden designer Jane Porter and a Victorian botanist at the Brunel's SS Great Britain stand in the Floral Marquee. Jane – who co-designed the visitor attraction's display with staff – will open two Wardian cases and give the plants their 'once-in-a-voyage' watering. Museum interpretation staff (Iona Keen and Natalie Fey) will also be available for interview, talking about how these "floating greenhouses" onboard what was the world's fastest steamship travelling to Australia in 1859 led to the global migration of living plants on a massive scale. Many of the once exotic plant species now common in our gardens were first introduced to our shores following sea voyages onboard steamships such as the pioneering *SS Great Britain*. There will also be complimentary tastings of 6 O'clock Gin's new Botanist's Gin – inspired by the Victorian plant cargoes.

Museum experts are also available on the stand for interviews during the day.



Illustration of Brunel's SS Great Britain's exhibit at the show [Justine Howlett Illustration]

At this year's RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival, Brunel's SS Great Britain will be showcasing the ship's horticultural history in a fascinating floral exhibition.

In the Victorian era, the iconic steamship became a floating garden, transporting rare plant species between Britain and Australia in Wardian cases. These mini glasshouses were early types of terraria, and their protective capabilities enabled plants to survive long and arduous voyages.

Originally, shipping companies had tried to transport plants overseas using traditional greenhouses – but these would often smash during storms. The creation of the Wardian case transformed plant migration overnight. Resistant to salt spray and able to maintain temperatures, the vessels allowed plants to survive for months at sea with very little watering required.

The SS Great Britain Trust will be displaying two Wardian cases at the RHS Garden Festival, which is taking place from 2 to 7 July 2024. The Wardian cases will celebrate the inbound and outbound plant species carried by the ship between 1859 and 1875. Museum staff have created the display with RHS Gold Medal winning garden designer Jane Porter, in line with new research conducted by the charity's Brunel Institute.

In its day, the *SS Great Britain* was the fastest way to travel to Australia and many nursery owners, plant-hunters and botanists relied on the ship to carry their precious cargo. The Victorians had a love-affair with ferns (often referred to as 'fern fever') and the ship imported many species, including antipodean ferns and tree ferns, to collectors in Britain.

The *SS Great Britain* also brought rare Australian orchids to British shores. These could sell for up to £300, equivalent to £25,000 in today's money.

On outbound trips to Australia, the cases carried roses, rhododendrons, and even the invasive bramble to sell to people who had emigrated to Australia and were hoping to recreate their English gardens and hedgerows.

Iona Keen, Head of Interpretation at Brunel's SS Great Britain, said:

"We can't wait to share the story of the *SS Great Britain's* horticultural history at RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival."

"Many of the once exotic plants now commonly found in the UK are here thanks to steamships like the *SS Great Britain*, and we hope visitors to the festival enjoy learning more about the vital role of steamships in global plant migration."

Visitors to the RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival will be able to view the Wardian cases in the festival's legendary floral marquee.

- At the *SS Great Britain's* launch in 1843, it was by far the largest ship in the world; and the first ever to combine a metal hull and screw propulsion. These innovations transformed the way we travel and transport cargo. The *SS Great Britain* made crossings between Liverpool and Melbourne faster than any other sailing ships or steamships at the time.
- The *SS Great Britain* now rests in the very dock where it was built in Bristol.
- Known as 'the world's first great ocean liner', the ship sailed around the world 32 times, travelling more than 1,000,000 miles at sea.
- Voted the second Greatest Briton of all time, (after Winston Churchill), Isambard Kingdom Brunel was one of the 19th century's engineering heroes.

Available for interview

Iona Keen

Iona Keen is Head of Interpretation at Brunel's SS Great Britain. She has led the development of new exhibits revealing the significance of the *SS Great Britain's* botanical cargoes, working with partners and informed by new research from the Brunel Institute – the charitable trust's specialist centre for collections, and learning.

Natalie Fey

Natalie Fey has been Interpretation Manager at Brunel's SS Great Britain for 13 years, overseeing the museum's exhibition content, costume, sounds, sights and smells to give visitors a real sense of what life was like aboard a 19th century passenger ship. Natalie's main role is to communicate the history of the ship and its passengers and crew. She is an experienced guest and interviewee on radio and television. She holds a master's degree in history from the University of Bristol.

Jane Porter

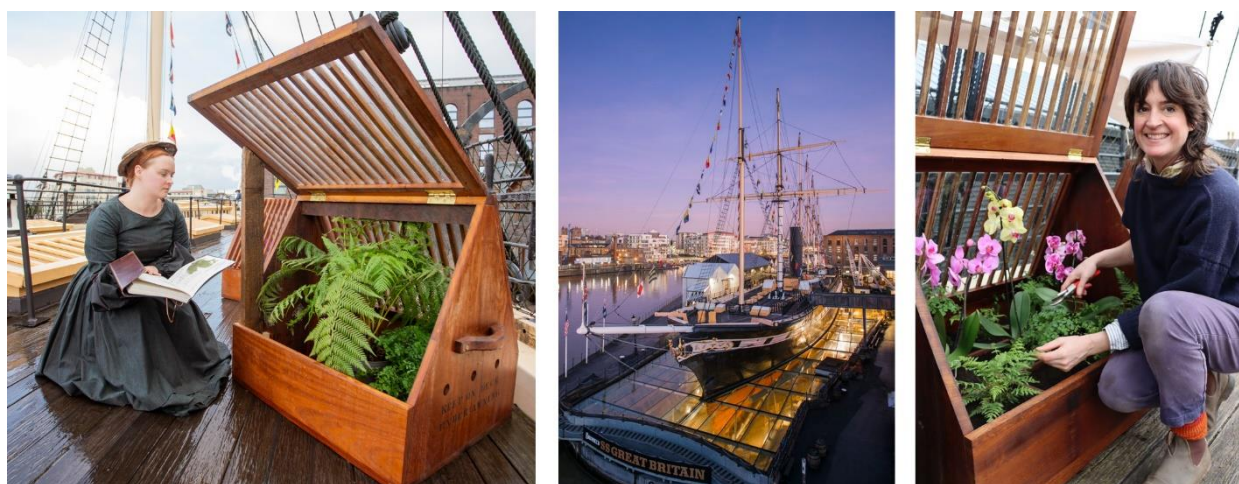
Jane Porter is an award-winning gardener based in Bristol. The Still Garden earned her an RHS Chelsea Flower Show gold award in the Container Category in 2022. With her passion for creating beautiful outdoor spaces, she cares for two historic gardens on behalf of Bristol Museums and the Royal West of England Academy in Bristol. www.plantypjects.co.uk

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High-res photos [available on Dropbox](#)