“An ever-expanding universe of information”: Joseph Paxton and his followers in the communications revolution

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A slightly modified version of a presentation given at the ‘Paxton 150: histories and futures of public parks’ conference, University of Sheffield, 11 September 2015
Abstract (1 of 3)

Joseph Paxton, and his protégés and followers in the domain of the public park, lived through the mass communications revolution of the nineteenth century, and played a very active part in it. This presentation examines how Paxton and his followers, as writers, editors, and publishers, were leaders in the dissemination of information on horticulture and landscape design, and in particular of the design and operation of public parks.
Abstract (2 of 3)

This presentation examines the ways in which Paxton and his followers used, and contributed to the development of, these new media, particularly in respect of their work in public parks. It considers what, and how, they wrote, edited and published, and what this tells us of their views on parks, and of the parks themselves; and what immediate and listing effects these writings have on public perceptions of parks, and on the design and operation of parks.
Abstract (3 of 3)

This presentation examines the ways in which Paxton and his followers used the new communications media, establishing the knowledge base of horticulture and park design in a way which has continuing influence to the present day.
“his literary ability was of a high order, as the eminence of his professional writings attest, and yet withal he was thoroughly practical”
[Obituary of Edward Kemp, Birkenhead News, 1891]
A slide added in March 2017. A Google search for ‘Edward Kemp’, disambiguating the name, describes Kemp as an ‘author’.
“it is impossible to study landscape and garden design in the nineteenth century without recognising the enormous influence of a rapidly developing technology, allied with an expanding communications network”


I am by no means the first to draw attention to this
These were the people I focused on in the presentation. There are, of course, others who could be mentioned; particularly John Lindley, as Brent Elliott reminded us in questions after the presentation.

- Joseph Paxton
- Edward Milner, John Gibson, Edward Kemp (George Eyles, J.C. Niven)
- Frederick Law Olmsted
- Predecessors (J.C. Loudon)
- Contemporaries (Robert Marnock, Joshua Major)
Paxton and his wife, Sarah. The presentation focused Paxton, his closest associates (Sarah, and his secretary Samuel Hereman), his protégés (John Gibson, Edward Milner, Edward Kemp, and George Eyles) and his American follower, Frederick Law Olmsted
“a voracious reader on all subjects horticultural .. though perhaps not as prolific a writer as Loudon”

– *Practical Treatise on the Culture of the Dahlia*
– *Pocket Botanical Dictionary*
– *Calendar of Garden Operations*
– *Horticultural Register, Magazine of Botany, Gardener’s Chronicle, Paxton’s Flower Garden*
– *Daily News*
– *Punch magazine*
– pamphlets, reports, letters

The quotation is amalgamated from Colquhoun’s *A thing in disguise* biography and Chadwick’s *Works of Sir Joseph Paxton*. As a writer and editor he produced, *inter alia*, a monograph on the dahlia, a botanical dictionary, several horticultural magazines, and a newspaper, not to mention pamphlets and reports on numerous subjects including the Crystal Palace, Kew Gardens, and schemes for rebuilding London.
John Gibson, came to the attention of Paxton by writing an article for the Horticultural Register at the age of 17, and worked with Paxton on several of his publishing ventures. Edward Milner wrote numerous articles, and his son, Henry, wrote *The art and practice of landscape gardening*
Edward Kemp wrote *How to lay out a garden*, which ran into three editions, plus *Parks and Gardens of London*, and numerous articles in *Gardeners Chronicle*, and assisted Paxton with his magazines.

The quote is from the preface of the first edition of *How to lay out a garden*; it seems that Kemp had noticed what be later be called information overload. The first two editions of the book did not have any form of index; the 3rd edition had a detailed subject index, and indication of the need for better documentation of the information.

“It is a salutary axiom, especially this book-making age, that no volume should be sent before the public without something beyond a private reason for its appearance”
Olmsted was the author of the well-known *Walks and talks* and other books
Paxton was not, of course, the first to draw attention to the increasingly knowledge base of horticulture; Loudon was a prolific author himself.

"A gardener can no more acquire his profession without books than he can without tools"
(J.C. Loudon)
Others included Robert Marnock (*Floricultural Magazine, Florigraphia Britannica*, an illustrated guide to native plants, and articles in other journals), Joshua Major (authors of articles and books). Also John Lindley, a very prolific writer and editor who collaborated with Paxton.
Gardening was foremost among the practical professions in being information oriented. Their influence is not just in their parks and designs (Birkenhead and Battersea shown here) but in their communication of information.
Mass communications revolution followed on the Industrial Revolution, due to tax changes, mechanised printing, steam transportation, and postal services. The slide shows: a steam press at the *Illustrated London News* in 1843; oleander from *Paxton’s Magazine of Botany*; and the WH Smith stall at Crystal Palace Station in 1907.
Ancient bridge in Shanghai and Millennium Bridge London exemplify the change to a society based on abstract recorded knowledge, rather than tacit and experiential knowledge. This is one aspect of the emergence of an information society.
“an information society is defined as one in which theoretical knowledge occupies a pre-eminence which it hitherto lacked ... By theoretical knowledge is meant that which is abstract, generalizable and codified in media of one sort of another”

{Frank Webster}
“I hope to see in all these large towns places of instruction and amusement combined ... I believe it would lend much to the advancement of our social condition to have all these advantages brought into one focus”

Paxton, speaking at, and of, the Huddersfield Mechanics Institute in 1855. This was the peak of the self-improvement and useful knowledge movements
“It is significant that early 19th century gardening publications all carry numerous articles dealing with “self-instruction for young gardeners ..from temperance to literary composition, from botany to Sir Uvedale Price” (Chadwick, Works of Sir Joseph Paxton)

Apprenticeships, mechanics institutes, public libraries were emerging ways of linking procedural and tacit knowledge. [London Mechanics Institute, Chancery Lane, mid-19th century]
“.. the best way to appear original – at least in your own eyes – is to be ignorant of the past”
(Brent Elliott, *The Garden*, 1998)

Coming to a conclusion – Recorded knowledge can act as a stimulus to innovation in gardening as much as elsewhere. Paxton and his followers have had such a great influence because they participated fully in the communication and dissemination of their work, and were to a large degree pioneers in this respect.
Paxton’s *Gardener’s Chronicle* continues to this day, after several changes of name, as a web resource.
The *Horticultural Register* is on Google Books. Paxton and his followers used the information and communication technologies of the time fully. So should we