

# JAMES GORDON, MILE END'S FAMOUS NURSERY MAN

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## SUMMARY

*In 1973 the late Dr John Harvey described in the LAMAS Transactions the Mile End nursery of James Gordon, whose company could be traced from the early 1740s until 1836. Subsequent articles have confirmed the importance of Gordon at an international level and his great skills in cultivating plants from many parts of the world.*

*The letters of Dr Daniel Solander and the recent re-discovery of a Sun Insurance policy describing the hot-houses enable confirmation of the size and importance of these nurseries, which are now shown to go back to at least 1738.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 18th-century London there were two equally famous nursery men: James Gordon in Mile End Old Town (MEOT) and Philip Miller at the Chelsea physic garden. The importance of James Gordon was noted by John Harvey who wrote that Gordon, 'launched himself into trade about 1740 by starting or taking over a nursery at Mile End. The poor soil and the bitter weather there were the cornerstones of Gordon's plantsmanship: if a plant could be grown against such adverse conditions, it would succeed anywhere. Gordon is chiefly famous for the original single red *Camellia japonica* and for *Ginkgo biloba* ... he was probably the first to introduce the China Rose' (Harvey 1990).

Gordon was well known to all the great plant collectors from 1740 until 1780 (Desmond 1994). Thus John Ellis, FRS, a famous naturalist, told Linnaeus in 1758 that if you want a correspondent 'I shall recommend you to James Gordon, gardener, in Mile end. This man was bred under

Lord Petre and Dr. Sherard, and knows systematically all the plants he cultivates. He has more knowledge in vegetation than all the gardeners and writers on gardening in England put together, but is too modest to publish anything. If you send him anything rare ... he will make you a proper return' (Henrey 1975).

In 1760, Dr Daniel Solander, a young Swedish botanist, wrote with even more enthusiasm to Linnaeus that he had travelled outside the city 'to a gardener named Gordon, considered here in London to be the greatest in his art, to have the most beautiful and the most abundant garden and to have far more insight than Miller and to cultivate several plants not found at Chelse[a] ... The owner has become rich through his garden, since there are people here who pay well for rare plants. To receive 10 to 15 pounds for a *Magnolia*, he considers common' (Duyker & Tingbrand 1995). Solander went on to take a room at the nursery and was permitted to roam around the gardens at will. In 1763 he became an assistant at the British Museum and in 1764 a Fellow of the Royal Society. Later he was to accompany Sir Joseph Banks on Cook's first voyage to the Pacific.

Dr Harvey also described Gordon's nursery and stated that 'it was opened in 1742' (Harvey 1973) and a 1963 note from Tower Hamlets Local History Library states that Gordon 'came into the district in 1751'. In this note 'district' referred to the parish of Bromley St Leonard and no mention was made of the nursery in MEOT. Finally, Harvey noted that, 'By adding a seed-shop in Fenchurch Street, Gordon was able to secure a substantial slice of the London trade, and his was by far the most influential

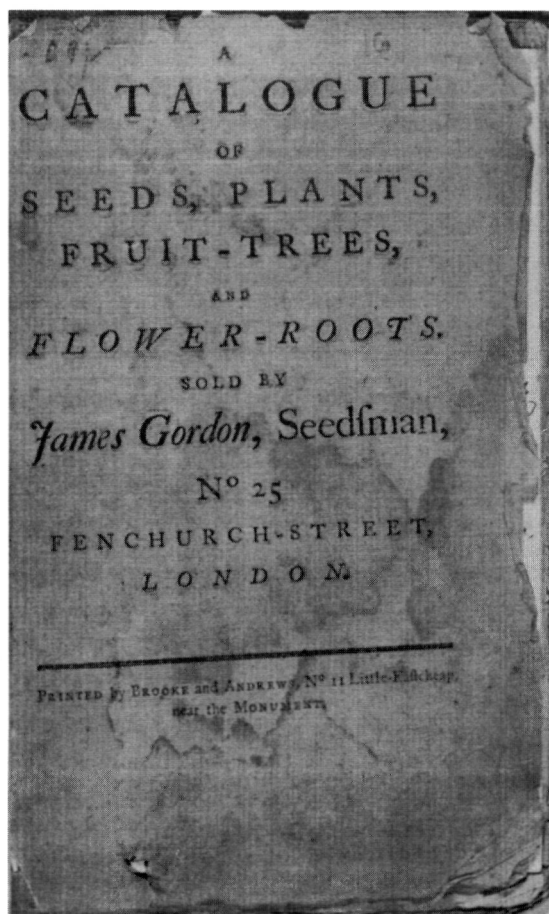


Fig 1. *James Gordon's Catalogue* (Photo: Royal Horticultural Society)

firm in the country during the whole of the third quarter of the century' (Harvey 1974).

It is the purpose of this note to provide an up to date account of the early days of the nursery and a description of the previously unrecorded hothouses.

### THE EARLY DAYS OF GORDON'S NURSERY IN MILE END OLD TOWN

There is some confusion about the exact date at which Gordon started his nursery in MEOT and this perhaps arose because of the sudden death in June 1742 of the young Lord Petre, who had employed Gordon at his gardens at Thorndon Hall, near West Horndon, Essex; the implication is that Gordon only moved to Mile End after

June 1742 and perhaps purchased his first plants from the Petre estate.

Prior to Gordon's arrival in MEOT there was a nursery in Mile End owned by James Field and the manorial records make it possible to trace the landlord and tenants of this piece of 'garden ground' from 1738 until 1777.<sup>1</sup> The customary tenant from 1738 was John Field, a 'Seedsman' in Lower Thames Street, London. Subsequent mentions occur in the manorial records in 1759, 1764, 1770, and 1777, and the question arises of the relationship, if any, between Field and Gordon. The reference which ties everything together is the manorial record M/93/36 p108 (1764) 'admission of Hannah Field in fee by will of John Field, Thames Street, Seedsman, all that Garden Ground in Mile End containing one and a half of acres and three poles now in occupation of Gordon'. This is also confirmed by the description in the land tax of 'James Gordon for land late Fields'. This plot was on the south side of the Mile End Road and Gordon's nursery was just to the west of the Plow Inn on Rocque's map of 1747 (Fig 2).

There is also evidence for the presence of James Gordon, Snr., in MEOT from 1741 (which is the date of the earliest land tax return) until 1764 and subsequently for his sons James and Alexander.<sup>2</sup> But Middlesex Deeds Register MDR 1738/2, No. 178 refers to a 'messuage or tenement in occupation of James Gordon, Gardiner' and this is now the earliest known reference to Gordon in MEOT.

Little has been recorded about Gordon's civic activities but typically of a 'middling sort' man he was fully involved locally with the Vestry – being in election for headborough in 1744, elected surveyor in 1748, and in 1763 being in the election for churchwarden. In 1749 he insured for £100 his now 'Dwelling House, brick, plaister and tiled situate at Mile End Old Town' and in 1757 increased this to £200 with an equal amount for his household goods and stock.<sup>3</sup>

Being at the centre of an international trade in plants means that references to Gordon occur in a variety of documents and throw some light on his reputation and working methods. Thus in the papers from the Counting House of John Norton & Sons, merchants of London and Virginia (Mason 1968), can be found entries such as:

27 February 1768

Goods received by the L. Camden: which are come in good time especially the Garden Seeds ... tho' Mr. Gordon hath

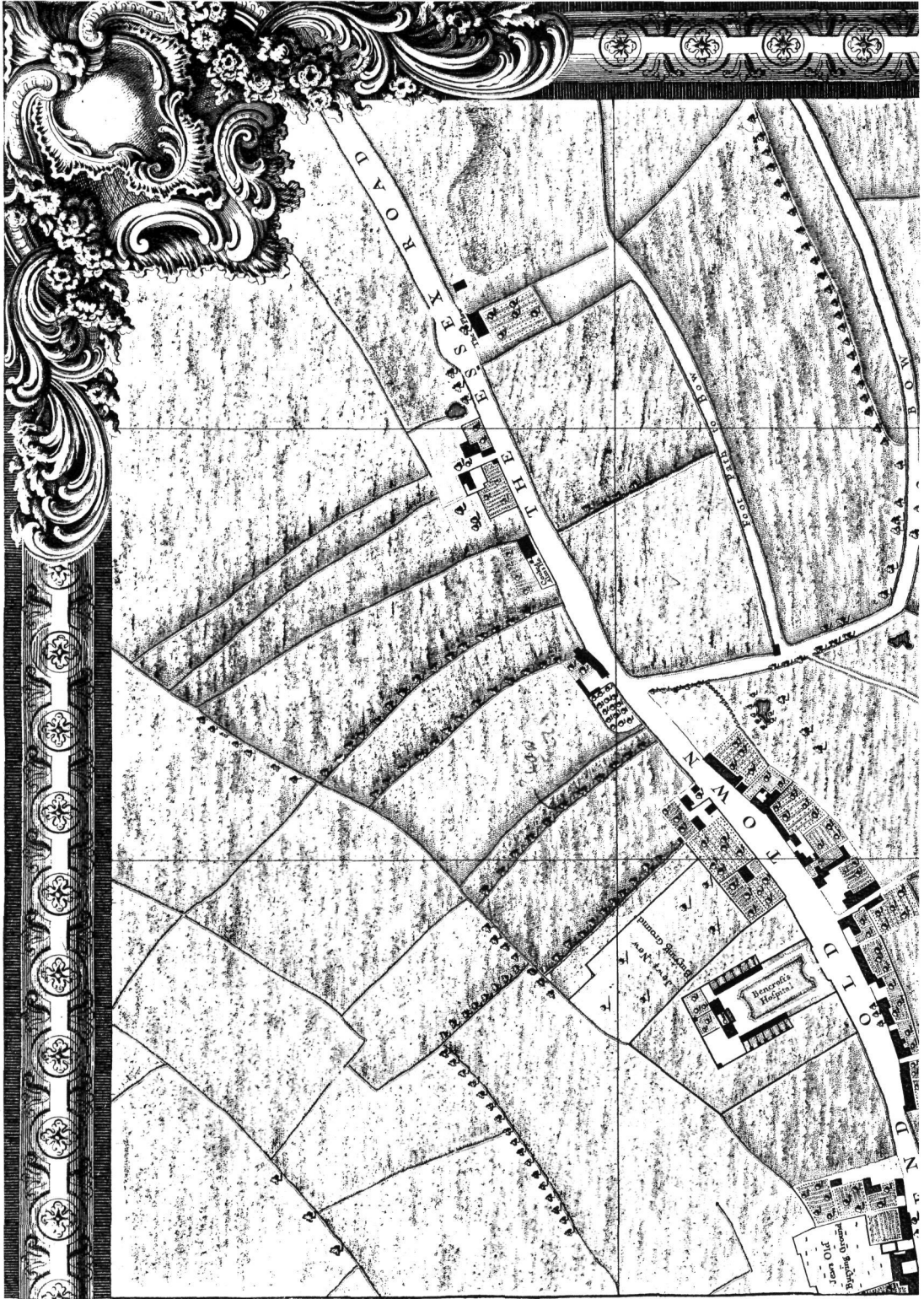


Fig 2. The A-Z of Georgian London Sheet 8, Gordon's nursery was near The Plover (Photo: Guildhall Library, Corporation of London)

omitted to send Carrot and parsnip Seeds; wch I hope he will remember another Year.

18 March 1771

The seed would have come Safe in the box with the rest. at the foot of the invoice Mr. Gordon acquaints me, that if I disapprove of his fashion of sending plants instead of seed, he will not insist upon being paid for them, provided I will send him some plant ... wch grows wild her, which at the proper season for their removal I certainly will do ... and should be very glad of a little of the Palmatoo Rhubarb seed fresh and good from Mr. Gordon by the first opportunity.

Dwelling house, Shop and Counting house, brick	£500
Utensils and Stock therein	£200
Green and Hothouse, adjacent the dwelling house Glass Fronts and Covered with Glass	£100
Utensils and Stock	£100
Carthouse, Stable, Offices and Lofts over adjacent each other, Timber and Tiled	£100
Utensils and Stock	£60
Utensils and Stock in the Yard	£40
A Range of buildings in the Garden used as a Green and a Hothouse, Stoves therein covered with Glass and Glass Front, the ends Brick	£600
Utensils and Stock	£800
Tenement in the Garden in the Tenure of their Servant Timber	£100

## TRADE DIRECTORIES 1750–1780

Trade directories are not always reliable but the following references to Field and Gordon occur in London directories as follows:

- 1753 Field, Prentice, Field, Seedsmen, Lower Thames Street, near Fenchurch Street.  
20th edition of Kent's London Directory.
- 1755 William & John Field, Seedsmen, Lower Thames Street.  
Ralph Prentice is now listed separately but is still in Lower Thames Street.
- 1760 William Field & Co., Lower Thames Street.
- 1777 John Field & Son, Lower Thames Street.
- 1780 John Field, 119 Lower Thames Street.

The only reference before 1780 to James Gordon, Seedsman, 25 Fenchurch Street, occurs in the 1765 edition of Kent's Directory and this may refer to either the father or the son.

## THE HOTHOUSES IN MILE END OLD TOWN

In the 18th century glasshouses and hothouses were an increasingly important feature, not only in the larger country houses, but also in commercial nurseries (Woods & Warren 1988; Solman 1995). So it would be a surprise if Gordon relied for too long on his expertise with 'the poor soil' before erecting glasshouses. The date of Gordon's first glasshouse is not yet known but they were in existence by 1772.

On 16 January 1781 James Gordon and Thomas Dormer of Fenchurch Street and Archibald Thompson of Mile End, Seedsmen and Nurscrymen, insured for £2600 a wide range of buildings in Mile End, which illustrate the continuing growth of their business:<sup>4</sup>

From the point of view of the Sun Insurance Company the important features were the relative proportions of brick and timber in a building and whether buildings were contiguous, which would increase the spread of a fire. Typically only half to two-thirds of the true value of a business would be insured in the 18th century.

Further light on these buildings can be found in a draft letter dated 29 January 1772 from John Ellis to his 'dear friend Gordon' when he wrote:

I observed in your stove, that the great heat of your flue obliged you to put boards supported by bricks to keep the violent heat from your pots. To answer the same end and to make it of real use to the health of your plants, I shall endeavour to lay down a plan to introduce a constant succession of warm fresh air, and at the same time to carry off the putrid steams that arrive from the tar and the perspiration of the plants ...

I suppose your flue is a foot over at the top, on this let there be laid in the best Mortar on their edges three rows of rubbed bricks, the middle row in the centre and the two outward rows on the edges of your flue, there will be then two channels or passages about 2 Inches & ½ broad and 4 Inches and ½ deep, let these channels be covered with the best Tiles a foot square with their edges rubbed perfectly even making use of the best mortar to cement them and the three rows of bricks together having thus two tight channels, let there be at or near the end of the outward channel a hole left or made to put in the end of a tin tube in the form of an L of a convenient length according to the breadth of your wall the end in the open to point downwards, to prevent the wet coming in, the other end to be well cemented and to communicate with the brick channel, on the other end of which there must be a hole for an erect tin tube to discharge the fresh warm air, that has passed along the channel over the flue, this flow of air must be directed against the ceiling or wall of the stove that it may be more equally diffused over the inside of the room.

Ellis continued with another page or so of detailed construction notes before concluding, 'by begging that you excuse my Impertinence in offering a man of your knowledge and great experience any hints of mine, If you think I am

not wrong in what I have offered it will be a sufficient satisfaction'.<sup>5</sup>

### JAMES GORDON IN BROMLEY, ST LEONARD

It appears that in 1751 Gordon was sufficiently well established that he decided to expand his nurseries into the adjoining parish of St Leonard, Bromley and here they can be traced in the land tax from 1751 until at least 1785 and the nurseries until they were sold in 1836. A full description of the development of this nursery can be found in Henrey 1975.

In the Bancroft library there is a deed TH 8155 24/12/1842 which in turn refers to an earlier indenture of lease between Isaac Lefevre and James Gordon, Thomas Denner, nurserymen, and Archibald Thompson. This refers to a three and a half acre piece of land opposite Tredegar House and on the south side of the Mile End road. This places it precisely a few yards east of the current Mile End underground station.

In 1751 Gordon appears in the 'Landholders' entries in the land tax register, which implies that he was renting land in Bromley but was living elsewhere and this fits with Gordon living in MEOT.<sup>6</sup> The land is referred to as 'Olands'; the Olands were landowners in both Mile End and Bromley, St Leonard; from 1766 the references are to Mrs Oland, widow.

By 1764 Gordon was planning further development and a move from MEOT for Sun Insurance policy 211605 shows that he insured for £400 his brick and tiled house at Bow 'not yet finalised'; this ties in with the 'Landholders' list for 1765 when he becomes an 'inhabitant' and his real rent of £26 for 'House and Sundry Offices and Land'.

From 1771 the land tax registers show that William Gordon appeared in the landholders with a real rent of £5 for Geo. Smart's field and £2-10-00 for a small house in the field and his brother had a real rent of £5-10-00 for land of Joseph Wright.

As the years passed by the Gordons continued to appear in the land tax records and by 1785 there is a reference to their 'Greenhouse' and in 1786 they are referred to as 'James Gordon & Co.'; the sums assessed have increased to £20-10-00 and the land belongs to Sir James Grant and Mary Oland.

### CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown that James Gordon first appeared in Mile End Old Town in 1738 and not 1742 as previously thought. By 1751 Gordon was expanding into adjoining land in Bromley, St Leonard, and the family's connections in the area continued until 1836. Glasshouses were erected in Mile End by 1772 and these were very extensive by 1781 in Mile End and also existed in Bromley in 1785, thus confirming the Gordons' international importance as nurserymen.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Stepney Manorial Records, LMA, M/93.

<sup>2</sup>Land Tax Assessments for Mile End Old Town, Guildhall Library, Ms 6012.

<sup>3</sup>Sun Insurance Company policy No. 117244, 1 August 1749, Guildhall Library MS 11936, vol 87.

<sup>4</sup>Sun Insurance Company policy No. 438106, Guildhall Library, Ms 11936, vol. 289.

<sup>5</sup>'Ellis Mss Note Book 2', pp 108-9, Linnean Society of London.

<sup>6</sup>Land Tax Assessments for Bromley, St Leonard's, Tower Hamlets Local History Library.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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