

Introduction of “The Palm House” published in 2012

By Brendan Sayers.

“In my nineteenth year I entered the Great Palm House in the Botanic Gardens at Glasnevin for the first time a majestic structure, though by then dishevelled and aged. Rust had eaten into the wrought and cast iron, paint flaked from the teak frames, gaps and cracks showed in the glass. Nothing mattered once the atmosphere inside enveloped, assailing all senses. The moisture-laden air carried the scents and strangeness of another world. The sight of exotic palms, cycads and other tropical plants brought a sense of amazement. Am I really going to spend my formative years in horticulture here? Brought back to reality by the sound of water being hosed onto pathways, leaves and the high-pitched screech of a small, excited child. I stretch out my hand to feel the texture of a cotton-coated leaf and a love affair begins.

Twenty years later the affair is stalled for good reason. The great structure is dismantled, removed, restored, returned and reassembled. Some improvements have been made to ensure another century of life. But the question is sometimes asked, why a Great Palm House, and why an exotic and costly plant collection cossetted in artificial conditions? Initially man created glass structures to move plants successfully from one area of the world to another by boat. These were lengthy journeys and the cargo was important – new food crops, trees for construction, garden and estate rarities. Larger structures were needed to cultivate these plants and show the populations of developed nations the marvels that abounded elsewhere. Today the Great Palm House is part of a range of horticultural and botanical tools that demonstrate the dependency of the human family and our planet on green things, to open our eyes to the spell-binding wonders of the web of life.

The house first came to Glasnevin from Paisley, Scotland, from the yards of Boyds, glasshouse builders in 1884. It replaced an unstable structure that was removed after damage from successive storms and was nestled between this original building’s wings and supported on its north face by a substantial stonewall. The new glasshouse dominated the highest point of the garden, visible from the entrance. There are three walkways attached to the house for maintenance of the structure and the plants within, Two are external, sitting at the base and top of the central curving tier. The internal one is level with the lower of those outside.

The scale of the house, and its light-filled interior suggests an outdoor

space, but the world it evokes is strange and 'other'. The all-enveloping warmth and humidity is still and scented. The light is doubly filtered, firstly by the opaque, moisture-frosted glass, then by the green veil of leafy plants reaching for the roof, their varied shapes casting intricate and mysterious patterns below. A whisper carries in the muted air."