

u3a Bike Rides Richmond Park and the Isabella Plantation Tuesday 22nd April 2025

It being mid-April, it was time to revisit the Isabella Plantation in Richmond Park to see the display of azaleas at their best.

From Brockwell Park Lido we made our way across Clapham Common and Wandsworth Common, on to Garret Lane, then across King George's Park to West Hill, and the cycle path along beside the A3 to Tibet's Corner.

We continued on past the Telegraph pub, named after the *Admiralty Telegraph*, a shutter station built here in 1796 to convey messages between London and the fleet in Portsmouth at the time of the Napoleonic Wars through relay stations connected by line of sight.

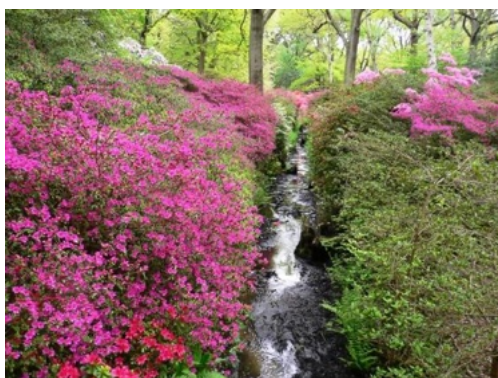
Telegraph Road took us across Putney Heath and down into quiet, attractive Roehampton High Street. The Village Café had space for us and we were soon served with coffee.

It was a free-wheeling ride down Danebury Avenue, past council properties, to Priory Lane and the Roehampton Gate entrance to Richmond Park.

On entering the Park, we passed Colicci Café, and took the road that crosses the Beverly Brook and on towards the Robin Hood Gate. Unusually no deer were seen in the park on this visit.

We found space to lock up our cycles and entered the plantation at *Pegs Pond*. On previous visits to *Pegs Pond* we had seen the beautifully plumaged Mandarin drakes, but none were here to welcome us today.

The best time to see the azaleas at their peak varies from year to year but we but we had timed the visit well with the azaleas and rhododendrons in full bloom all along the path beside the little man-made brook (called Main Stream).





Continuing along the path we arrived at *Thompson's Pond*, where we caught sight of the first Mandarin ducks and drakes.

Then it was on to spectacular *Still Pond*, with its panoramic arc of flowering azaleas as a backdrop to the pond itself.



Thompson Pond



Still Pond

We retraced our steps to Peg's Pond and continued the ride.

After about an hour we left the Plantation, crossed Queens Road and enjoyed the lovely downhill run to Ham Gate. The route continued through Ham Common Woods, across Upper Ham Road and on to Ham Common.



This brought us down to the Thames, and Teddington Lock and Teddington Weir. We crossed the two foot bridges which provided a view of the Weir, in full flow.

At The Anglers pub, tables were available for us, and as the sun was out we opted to be outdoors.



The route home was a short ride along Teddington High Street to Teddington Rail Station for the half-hour journey back to Clapham Junction or Vauxhall, and then on home.

Time: about 5½ hours. Distance cycled: 15 miles.

For a virtual tour of the Isabella Plantation have a look at:

<https://piccoloexplorer.com/isabella-plantation-richmond-park/>

Acknowledgement: Source material from Wikipedia and Piccolo Explorer

Riders: Andrew Burke Brian Heatley Caroline Strallen. Daniela Walther David Rosenfeld.. Gerry Gavigan Irene Skiadopoulou Jeremy Burke John Clements Judy Coutinho Martin Dale. Mary Burke. Valerie Greenfield,

Ride leader: John Clements

Report and photos by John Clements, 24 April 2025

Notes (as appended to the report of the 2023 ride)

*The **Isabella Plantation** occupies an area in what was a boggy part of Richmond Park. It was shown on a 1771 map as “Isabell Slade”, or sleyt meant a bog or open space between woods or banks. “Isabel” meant dirty or greyish brown, referring to the colour of the soil here.*

(I prefer to think of Isabel as the Spanish version of Elizabeth which means “God is my oath” or “God is abundance”, and also associated with beauty, grace, and elegance!)

The Isabella Plantation was established in the early 19th century when Lord Sidmouth, who was Deputy Ranger of Richmond Park, and a former Prime Minister, fenced it as an area of woodland to keep the deer out.

After World War II it was transformed into a woodland garden while retaining many ancient trees (notably oak, beech and sweet chestnut). It is organically run, resulting in the rich flora and fauna to be seen today. It was opened to the public in 1953.

A survey in October 2012 found that about 40 per cent of the Isabella Plantation was covered with Rhododendron ponticum, a non-native and invasive variety of rhododendron introduced here (and in many other gardens all over Britain) by the Victorians. Over the next five years this was removed and the gardens were planted with azaleas, camellias and other varieties of rhododendron. Further improvements included de-silting of all three ponds (Peg's Pond, Thomson's Pond and Still Pond) in the Plantation and establishing new waterfalls in the streams which are such an attractive feature of the garden.

It is designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

These plants found in the streams are identified as Bog (or Water) Arums.



Mandarin ducks

The beautiful mandarin duck was introduced from the Far East, where it can still be found in China, Japan, Korea and parts of Russia.

They were, in fact, brought over for private collectors in the early 1900s, then escaped. Fortunately, they're not invasive as a species, so other ducks aren't threatened by them.

Mandarin ducks are actually quite shy birds, often hiding beneath overhanging willows and usually only forming small flocks. They nest in holes in trees, sometimes high up and a long way from the water.

The male Mandarin Duck has very elaborate and decorative plumage with distinctive orange feathers on the side of the face, a purple chest, large orange feathers that stick up like sails on its back, and pale orange flanks (its lower sides). The female is not as brightly-coloured, with a grey head and white stripe behind the eye, brown back and mottled lower sides.

