

u3a Bike Rides Richmond Park and the Isabella Plantation Tuesday 21st April 2026

The ride to the Isabella Plantation has been a favourite over the years and with experience we have found the best time to visit when the floral display is at its best.

However, this does vary from year to year but we were optimistic that the azaleas would be at their peak.... and that the sun would appear.

Group photo taken, we headed out from Brockwell Park Lido, 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 paused at 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.

A phone call from Jane – who was leading the second group - was from the coffee stop, which we had yet to reach. This was a puzzle as clearly the group had not passed us; in fact the group had taken a different - and apparently shorter – route through King George's Park. Which is why all the best seats in the Village Café, in quiet, attractive Roehampton High Street, were taken!



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

Entering the Park, we passed Colicci Café, and took the road that crosses the Beverly Brook and on towards the Robin Hood Gate.

Along the way we spotted a small group of red deer. Several had birds (jackdaws, I think) sitting on their heads, possibly cleaning the fur of parasites, or perhaps collecting fur for their nests.



We found space at the entrance 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 here, 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 our visit well.

Azaleas and rhododendrons were in full bloom all along the path beside the little man-made brook (called Main Stream). Here is a view down the stream from one of the little bridges.

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



As we headed back towards Pegs Pond and the exit we encountered this interesting piece of “natural art work”.

Before leaving Pegs Pond we took a photo of the group there.

For those of us who knew Peter, the late first Group Convenor, this was a special place.

After Peter had to give up cycling, we arranged to meet him here, in the company of his carer (Isobel), so Pegs Pond has a special meaning for us.

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.

Arriving at The Anglers pub, I learned that the kitchens were being renovated and so there was no food on offer.

So we moved to the adjacent Tide End Cottage where the menu included mint pea soup, among other dishes. The pub has links to the 18th century, and an information board declares that “in 1940 more than a hundred local seamen had their last drink and feed at Tide End Cottage before sailing down the Thames to Dunkirk to evacuate their fellow countrymen. To this day our hospitable reputation salutes those brave seadogs.”

After lunch it was just a short ride along busy 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: Ann May, Daniela Walther, Denise Davies, Jane Andrew, Joanne Skidwalls, John Clements, John Davies, Josie Ralph, Julia Carter, Martin Goffe, Mark Stones, Mary Burke, Tacey Kobayashi, Tom Parker

Ride leaders: John and Jane



Report and photos by John Clements, 23rd April 2026

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.

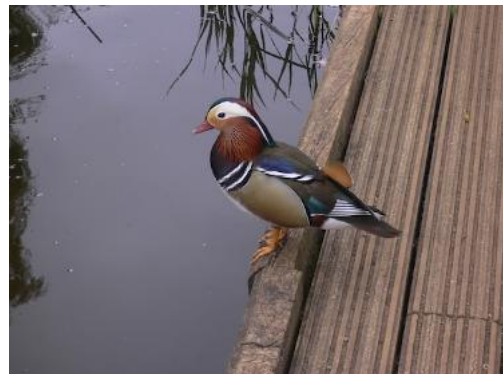
(I prefer to think of Isabel as the Spanish version of Elizabeth which means “God is my oath” or “God is abundance”, and also associated with beauty, grace, and elegance!)

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 desilting 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.