

Peter Collinson, who lived in Ridgeway House, now Mill Hill School, from 1748 to 1768

Illustrations supplied by the Authors

Mill Hill School — The Collinson Connection

Part of Mill Hill School's NW London site was once the home and garden of the early botanist Peter Collinson. Following the connection proved a fascinating research project for COLYN & BARBARA REECE...

Mill Hill School in north west London celebrated its bicentenary in 2007. Although the School has a rich history with many famous alumni, of particular interest for us was that before the School came into being part of the site was the house and garden of one of Britain's most famous and influential botanists, Peter Collinson.

Collinson was born in 1694 and he inherited his father's textile business with an office in the City and extensive trading with America with ships sailing to and from the Colonies. As a Quaker he was prohibited from going to University but he was self educated, reading voraciously and corresponding with men of learning throughout the world. In 1728, at the age of 34, he became a member of the Royal Society.

Street view of Mill Hill School (formerly Ridgeway House) as it is today



Collinson was passionately interested in plants and trees, especially 'exotics' from the American Colonies, which were considered to be hardy enough to grow outdoors in England's climate. He established a contact with John Bartram, a retired farmer from Pennsylvania and a fellow Quaker. For over 30 years Bartram sent boxes of seeds and cuttings to Collinson, who distributed them to aristocracy, stately homes and nurseries throughout England. Altogether, Collinson was responsible for the introduction into this country of hundreds of plants, either for the very first time or reintroducing them where they had died out here and been lost to English horticulture.

In many cases, Collinson brought in and distributed plants in quantity where previously they had been extremely rare, and the effect of all this was to bring about a major transformation of the landscape and horticulture of England.

Moved from Peckham

Collinson moved to Mill Hill in 1748 when his wife inherited on the death of her father Ridgeway House with its eight acres of grounds, the house having originally been built about 1525. Collinson brought with him all the plants and trees from his previous house in Peckham and then continued to add to his collection, which became one of the finest and most comprehensive in the country.

One of Collinson's particular friends was Benjamin Franklin, a frequent visitor to England and later one of the Founding Fathers of the USA. Collinson agreed to



Ridgeway House in about 1820

become the unpaid London agent for a Library Company established by Franklin in Philadelphia in 1731, books in the Colonies being scarce and expensive. This became America's first subscription library, and Collinson continued to select and send out books for the library for the next 20 years.

In 1745 Collinson, who was sending to the Colonies information of all the latest discoveries and thinking in Europe, sent to Franklin an account of new German experiments with electricity, together with some equipment, which Franklin then used for his famous experiments with lightning.

Daniel Solander

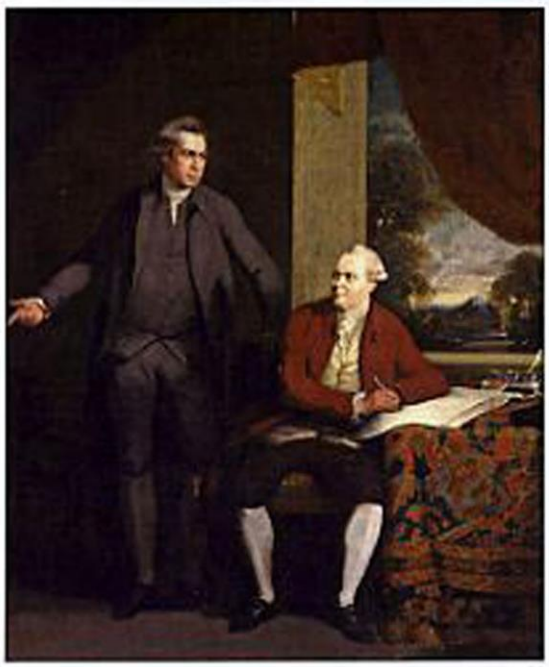
One of the visitors to Collinson's previous house in Peckham had been Linnaeus but a very frequent visitor to Mill Hill was Daniel Solander, Linnaeus' principal assistant, who stayed in England. Through Collinson Solander got the job of classifying Sir Hans Sloane's collection after it had been given to the newly founded British Museum. Through the efforts of Solander and Collinson, Linnaeus' system of plant nomenclature became accepted in England and so became the universal method of plant classification. Solander later joined the crew of *HMS Endeavour*, accompanying Joseph Banks and Captain Cook on the voyage to Terra Australis Incognita.



John Bartram's house in Pennsylvania

Peter Collinson died in 1768 and from 1801 Ridgeway House was owned by Richard Anthony Salisbury, a founder member and the founder Secretary of the Royal Horticultural Society. In 1807 Salisbury sold Ridgeway House to a new foundation, the Protestant Dissenters Grammar School, later to become Mill Hill School. The requirements of the School meant that most of the plants and trees disappeared but nevertheless there are still six trees on the site planted by Collinson himself. Ridgeway House itself was demolished shortly after the completion of a new major school building in 1826.

Although the whole history of Mill School from its foundation in 1807 is very rich and fascinating, the earlier connection with Peter Collinson made our LPGT research project particularly exciting and satisfying.



Daniel Solander, principal assistant to Linnaeus, with Joseph Banks

A sweet chestnut tree, planted in the grounds of Ridgeway House by John Collinson



● *Colyn & Barbara Reese are members of the LPGT London Research Group. The group carries out research projects related to parks and gardens in London. You can find out more at the 'Recent Results' evening on July 14th (see p33). There is also a Bromley Group.*