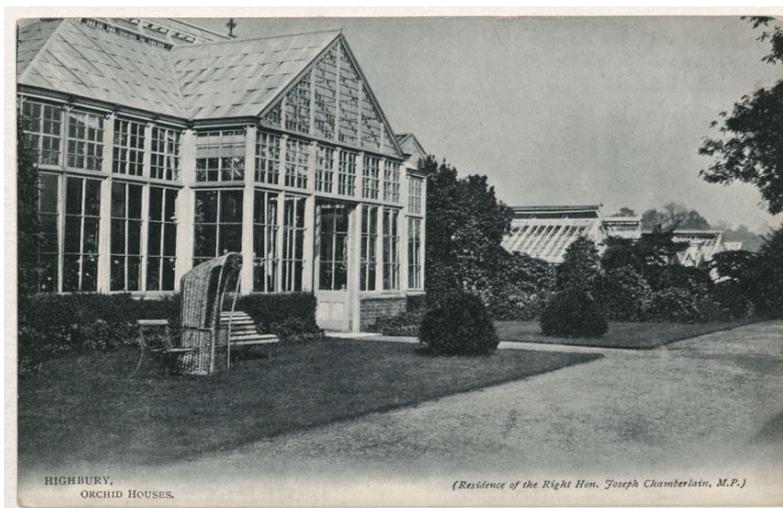


## The Highbury glasshouses and Joseph Chamberlain's orchid collection



**Highbury, the south front with the conservatory on the right, reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham, Wk/M6/46**

A distinctive feature of Highbury when the Chamberlain family lived there was the number of glasshouses. The main range by Henry Hope and Son of Birmingham was erected in 1878-9 when the house was built, and was contiguous with the mansion. A door in the east wall of the drawing room led into the conservatory or palm house which in turn led into a fernery and from there, a corridor two hundred feet long which, on its south side gave access to thirteen span greenhouses in succession



**The Henry Hope Conservatory and the span glasshouses courtesy of Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C4/7/26 postcard**

By 1888 a remarkable feature of glasshouses was that they were lit by electricity allowing for a tour after dark to see the treasures of the ornamental plant collection. The conservatory was a large house with a marble fountain on its rear wall. This had been designed by the architect of the house, John Henry Chamberlain. In October 1879 Joseph Chamberlain wrote that it was 'all marble and alabaster and I know not what besides. It looks charming on paper and I hope it may look half as well in reality.' The fountain had plantings of rex begonias and ferns, with some plants of water hyacinth in the basin. The terracotta floor had four large marble edged beds set into it and there was staging around the edges with a metal screen to hide the pots. There was some permanent planting of palms although the Chusan palm (*Trachycarpus fortunei*) noted as being thirty feet high in 1896, was removed in 1899 when it became too tall, and was sent to Kew. There was also a cabbage palm (*Areca sapida*), ginger lilies (*Hedychium gardnerianum*), a banana and Camellias whilst the other planting varied with the season. Among the flowering plants in pots were 'white dwarf lilac and flame coloured flowers' in spring, lilies in summer and Chrysanthemums in October. The furniture was cane seats and tables and coffee was taken after dinner by the family in the conservatory.



**Interior of the Conservatory, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/20, photograph [1888]**



**Interior of the fernery, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections,  
University of Birmingham, C9/20, photograph [1888]**

The fernery was described in the *Gardeners' Chronicle* of May 1884 as a 'fern rockery under glass, a really beautiful display of naturally arranged rockwork, tastefully planted with the rarest and most beautiful Ferns. Not a flower pot is to be seen in this large building; and the foliage of the Ferns and the mingling with the coloured leaves of the Begonias gives a very pretty and natural appearance to the whole.' Plants in the Fernery included tree ferns, cycads and bamboos and the rare *Anthurium chamberlainianum* with huge arrow-shaped leaves three or four feet across, named after Chamberlain in whose collection it first flowered. Its origins were obscure but it was said to have come in a consignment from Mr Sanders the orchid nurseryman.

The long top lit corridor range had a collection of climbers planted in the left hand bed, which clothed the walls and arched over the roof. They included cobeas, jasmines, plumbagos, lapagerias, passiflora, kennedyas, abutilons, stephanotis, hoyas, dipladenias, begonias, fuchsias and scarlet honeysuckles with Palms, ferns, and clivias in the beds on either side of the doors into the span glasshouses.



The glasshouse corridor, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/35, photograph

When the range was first built there were thirteen span glasshouses but by 1896 the corridor was described as leading to twenty glasshouses, additions having been made on the north side, the eastern end and on the south side. The range terminated with a rose house added for Mary Chamberlain in 1888. Each glasshouse had one type of plant. In March 1896 nine houses held variously ferns, hippeastrums, Indian azaleas, greenhouse rhododendrons, cyclamen, primulas, cinerarias, begonias, and roses. Seven hundred pots were used to fill each house.



**Begonia display house at Highbury, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, JC4/12/6 photograph from *The English Illustrated Magazine* XXV 1901**



Main orchid display house, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/20

One of the span glasshouses was the main display house for tropical orchids of which Chamberlain was a notable collector and was rarely seen in public without an orchid in his buttonhole. At Highbury by 1896 fourteen houses were devoted to orchids, of which eleven were reached from the corridor. Orchids were regarded as a rich man's hobby and *The Moseley and King's Heath Journal* of 1894 recorded that Chamberlain had placed an order for £1,800 with Messrs Sanders and Co, the leading orchid nurserymen. Writing to Beatrice in November 1879 when the glasshouses were just built he wrote 'on Friday I met a nursery man from York who tempted me into 'some horrid extravagance'. I gave him an order for half a dozen extremely fine orchids, of which he brought me the flower or description and which will be very beautiful though awfully dear.'



**Interior of an orchid display house, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/38 Photograph**



**Joseph Chamberlain's orchid grower, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, C9/58, Photograph c.1905**

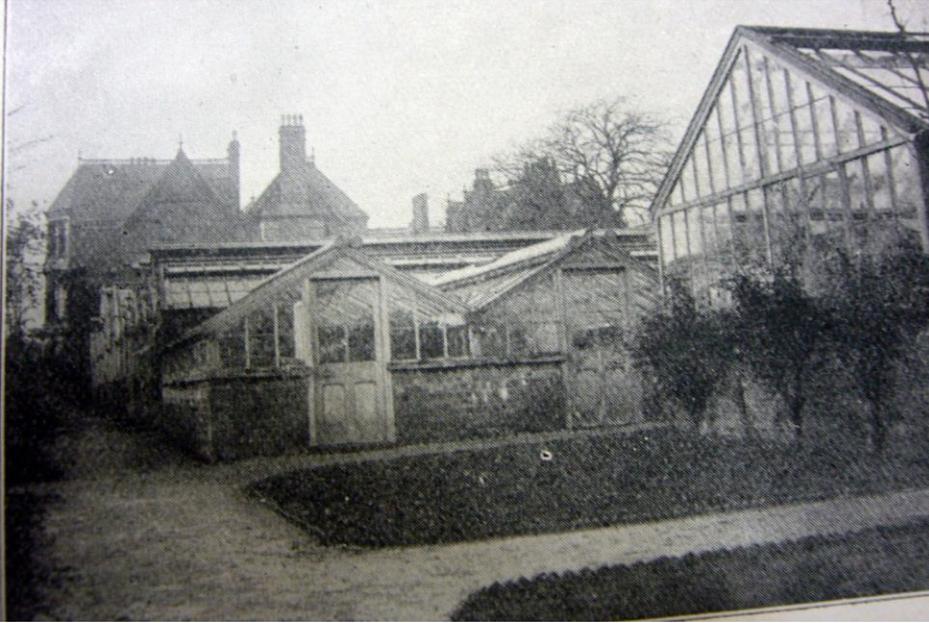
Chamberlain's interest in orchids was probably influenced by the collection of his father-in-law, Archibald Kenrick, the West Bromwich hollowware manufacturer, at Berrow Court, Edgbaston and Chamberlain first formed a collection of orchids at Southbourne in Augustus road where they were displayed in a conservatory and adjoining greenhouse. *The Gardeners' Chronicle* of 1884 commented that a 'noted collection [of orchids] exists at Highbury' and the first edition of *The Orchid Review* of 1893 devoted an article to the collection with a further article in 1898. Initially the

orchid collection was managed by the head gardener, but from 1891 onwards a second head gardener, Mr Burberry, was employed solely for the orchids, together with three men. In 1898 *The Orchid Review* commented 'the collection generally is in excellent hands and reflects great credit on Mr Smith who has succeeded Mr Burberry in its charge. The third of Chamberlain's orchid growers was Mr John Mackay.

Chamberlain grew what were described as 'showy species' and he generally favoured butterfly orchids (*Odontoglossums*), moth orchids (*Phalaenopsis*) as well as *Dendrobiums*, *Laelias*, *Masdevillias* and *Cattleyas*. He did not favour *Cypripediums*. The *Phalaenopsis*, often difficult to cultivate, were described as indicating 'excellent culture'. *Cattleyas* in particular, were used for hybridising, *Cattleya x Chamberlainium* as well as *Laelia anceps Chamberlainiana* having been named after him, but he raised many hybrids of his own including *Cattleya x Miss Endicott*, named after his wife, *Laelio-Cattleya Highburiensis* of 1896 and *Dendrobium x Burberryanum* of 1897, named after Mr Burberry one of his orchid growers.

The various classes of orchids occupied separate houses which were managed to provide different climatic conditions. The large *Odontoglossum* house requiring cool conditions was on the left of corridor and faced north, whilst the *Phalaenopsis* house requiring hot conditions was double glazed. The *Masdevillia* house was not in the main range but was a span house facing north with a low floor and the plants were grown over dampened oak leaves. From 1896 the sun loving Mexican orchids including *Dendrobiums* were in two large lean-to houses at the ends of the new south facing fruit range erected on the boundary wall. The main orchid display house had its iron supporting rods festooned with *Ficus stipulata* (creeping fig) and the stages were filled with maidenhair ferns grown in pots among which the orchids were arranged thinly so that 'the beauty of every plant and flower may be seen'.

Chamberlain was a successful prize winner for his orchids at many horticultural exhibitions, including the Birmingham Spring Show in the Town Hall, the shows of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens at Edgbaston and the Royal Horticultural shows in London. He made several donations of orchids to the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. After Chamberlain's death his collection was auctioned in London on April 15-16 1915, and fetched £ 826, though probably many specimens had been transferred to the collection of his son, Neville Chamberlain, and filled the glasshouses at Westbourne in Edgbaston. The stove and glasshouse plants, but also including some orchids, were sold at Highbury on 22 April 1915.



The east end of the main glasshouse range and the rose house added in 1888, courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham, JC4/12/6 photograph from *The English Illustrated Magazine XXV 1901*

The productive glass was a number of pits, frames, forcing houses, peach cases, and vineries and these were partly behind, and to the east, of the ornamental glass.

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The new glasshouses erected at Highbury in 1896, advertisement from the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society's *Annual Report 1897*

Wright and Holmes additions of 1897 replaced a small vinery and peach cases and provided a new carnation house. A new boiler, by Weeks' of King's Road Chelsea, was installed to heat the

additional houses whilst the mansion and the corridor range, a span house for forcing flowers in Spring , a sixty foot long lean to for melons, and early tomatoes and four sixty feet long lean to pits were heated by a Trentham boiler. Altogether there was 15,000 feet of heating pipes which required 8 to 10 cwt of coke a week and more in the coldest months. A number of unheated frames were used to grow Christmas roses, violets and salads.

There was much use of specimen orchids in pots and cut flowers in the rooms at Highbury and flowers and vegetables were sent to Joseph Chamberlain's London house three times a week when Parliament was sitting.

After the contents of the glasshouses were sold in early 1915 the houses were never used again as plant display houses. When Highbury was a military hospital the glasshouses were used as recreation rooms and subsequently wards and workshops. The corridor range was demolished in 1922 and replaced by single storey pavilions for accommodation and operating theatres. These were in turn demolished in 1940 together with the conservatory and fernery when Chamberlain House was built. The produce from the 1896 range of fruit houses was harvested but the houses were unheated and repairs were not carried out. By the mid 1930s all these glasshouses had been demolished.