

Pineapple mania

Christopher Columbus was one of the first Europeans to see pineapples when he reached the West Indies but the first fruit did not reach England until the 17th Century. In 1721 it was still headline news when a ship arrived from the West Indies with a large quantity of pineapples. The fruit was presented to the Royal Family and 'other persons of quality and distinction'.



Pineapples became the must-have status symbol for the very wealthy. By the 1770s 'no garden is now thought complete without a stove [hothouse] for raising of pine-apples'. The Dutch had already perfected ways of cultivating pineapples in glasshouses and several English gardeners were sent there to learn their methods and enable owners of the great estates to have freshly grown fruit. Individual pineapple plants in pots, such as the one shown left, were set in pits with manure over pebbles at the base topped with oak chippings soaked in water (tanners' bark) providing warmth for the plants in addition to warm air circulated in glasshouses known as pineries.

Pineries were built for example at Cannon Hall, Castle Howard, Chatsworth, Clumber Park, Cusworth Hall, Frickley Hall, Nostell Priory, Sandbeck, Sledmere House, Temple Newsam, Welbeck Abbey and at Wentworth Woodhouse where the 'Camellia House' (right) became a Grade II* listed building in 1968. Not only pineapples but other exotic fruits were once grown here. Firbeck Hall probably had a pinery too (the 1909 sale catalogue listed an excellent range of glasshouses where vines, peaches and melons were grown, but the stove house and ranges of pits might suggest pineapples were once cultivated there).



In addition to the Camellia House, Wentworth Woodhouse had this extensive collection of glasshouses. (Picture courtesy of Phil Wydell)

The pineapples were very expensive to grow, not only needing constant heat but skilled gardeners. The cost of a young pineapple plant was 4/- to 5/- and it took two years to fruit. One estimate is that it cost £80 for each hothouse pineapple to be brought to maturity (c. £1,890 in today's money). Following a theft at Temple Newsam in 1777 when 10 or more pineapples were stolen, Richard Taylor, the gardener to Viscount Irwin, offered a 10 guineas reward for information leading to a successful prosecution. It is not known whether they were stolen to eat or to provide stock for propagation, possibly both. The 6th Earl of Scarbrough, who died in 1832, so prized the fruit he had gardening staff at Sandbeck pack up ripe pineapples and send them by stage coach to his London home.



Such was the popularity of pineapples that inns and confectioners adopted the name 'Pineapple' cashing in on the fruit's desirability. Designs on finials, wallpaper, teapots (like the one, left, made c. 1760) even court dress reflected its status as the 'king of fruits'. At celebrations for the Queen's birthday in 1792 the Duchess of York wore 'the most superb elegant dress ever seen at Court'. Its decoration included a pattern of pineapples embroidered with spangles (sequins). Still a fashionable decoration 16 years later, one of George III's daughters, Princess Augusta, at an event to celebrate the King's 70th birthday, wore a court dress with a silver border of pineapples ornamented with rich silver tassels.

From the 1760s books were written by gardeners giving advice on growing pineapples: 'A treatise on the culture of the pineapple and the management of the hot-house', 1779, by W A Speechly, 'The hot-house gardener or the general culture of the pine-apple', 1789, by John Abercrombie and 'A treatise on the culture of the pine apple', 2nd edition, 1813, by W. Griffin, gardener to I M Sefton Esq of Kelham, Notts, are just three examples.

Prime specimens of pineapples were exhibited at horticultural shows. For example, Mr Thompson, gardener to Earl Fitzwilliam, won first and second prizes with two pineapples at Sheffield Horticultural Society Show in August 1839 (having won second prize the previous year). At Doncaster Horticultural Society's show in 1837 a pineapple weighing 6lbs 12oz from Frickley Hall was particularly admired. Much heavier pineapples had been recorded. In 1817 a pineapple weighing 9lbs with a circumference of 23 inches was grown in the hot house of John Rawson of Halifax. In 1825 at Viscount Anson's home of Shugborough Hall, a fine pineapple weighed 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ lbs with a circumference of 2 feet. This was believed to be the largest fruit of its kind ever cut in Britain. Pineapples were still judged at the Doncaster Horticultural Show as late as 1870 when they were the 'most excellent fruit shown'. Mr W Aldam of Frickley Hall won the first two prizes for his pineapples.

Between 1843 and 1846 nearly 500,000 pineapples were imported from the West Indies as steam ships were introduced. Not only Covent Garden Market was selling pineapples - London costermongers could do a good trade selling pineapple slices for 1d each. In 1848 the Ebor Sale Room in York held a pineapple auction after 250 prime West Indian pineapples were imported. Where once only the aristocracy and wealthiest gentry could decorate their dining tables with the fresh fruit, pineapples were becoming more widely available to the general public. After refrigerated ships began to import pineapples from the Azores in the 1880s a more consistent quality could be guaranteed as well as greater quantities of the fruit. When canneries opened near pineapple plantations the fruit was well preserved and cheap to buy. It was no longer the preserve of the well-to-do but a product available for mass consumption and commonplace in grocery shops. Even pineapple jam was available in Edwardian England and pineapple drops at 2oz for 1½d were being sold by confectioners from the 1870s. Pineapples were no longer a status symbol.

No evidence has yet been found of pineapples growing at Tickhill, possibly residents here were not quite wealthy enough to indulge in pineapple mania. Local horticultural shows did not feature pineapples. However, apart from gardeners at Sandbeck, another gardener skilled in growing pineapples did not live far away. Abraham Crowder, who tended pineapple plants at Cusworth Hall, was from Loversall where he was buried on 4 December 1831, aged 97. In an obituary Abraham Crowder was described thus: 'To the lovers of flowers and plants he was during his long life a great favourite, from the primitive simplicity and honesty of his deportment; and he closed his long, kind and simple life, respected, beloved, and lamented by all to whom he was known.' (Stamford Mercury, Friday, 6 January 1832).

A few former pineries remain such as those at Cannon Hall and Wentworth Woodhouse. All that remains of Cusworth Hall's pinery is part of a flue in the north east corner of the ruined northern greenhouse. Two places where working pineries can still be seen are at Tatton Park and the Lost Gardens of Heligan.



Fresh pineapples as well as tinned ones are now an everyday commodity readily available in supermarkets, where this fruit from Costa Rica, left, was on display costing £1.50 each. Costa Rica ships 100,000 pineapples a week to the UK.

However, the pineapple has lost none of its appeal to designers, one of its latest incarnations being the design of a disposable paper platter, below, two costing £1.50. Articles of clothing continue to feature the pineapple, such as the T shirt below, while high end jewellery, such as the brooch, right, still retains a link with the exclusivity once the hallmark of the pineapple.



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