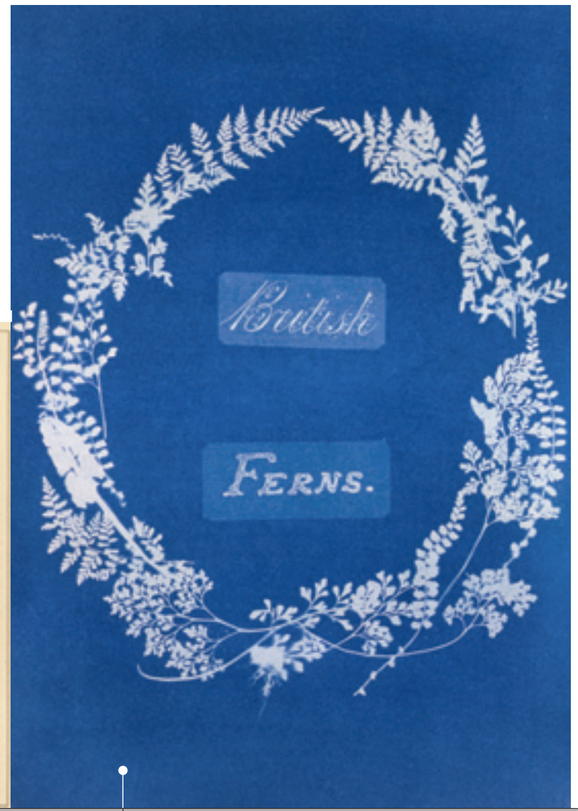
A photogenic drawing by William Henry Fox Talbot using botanical specimens from his garden. Taken around 1839, the year he announced his discoveries in photography.

William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) made his name in photography, but was also interested in archaeology and politics, serving as a reformist Member of Parliament between 1832 and 1835.

Talbot's photograph of his family home, Lacock Abbey, was taken in 1844 and appeared in his book *The Pencil Of Nature*.



Anna Atkins (1799-1871) produced a series of detailed plant portraits in her *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns*, 1854.

This image by Atkins, taken in 1871, shows how cyanotypes can reveal the delicate, almost transparent parts of some plants.

Dimbola Lodge, the Isle of Wight home of Julia Margaret Cameron, pictured in 1871. The house is now a museum.

Cameron and colleague Oscar Gustave Rejlander made this portrait of Kate Dore in about 1862; pictograms of ferns comprise the 'frame'.

The garden in early art photography

The first photographers found themselves drawn to plants and gardens – a natural affinity that continues today

WORDS MARY KOCOL

The garden had a significant presence in early photography during the Victorian era. Several British inventors and pioneering artist-photographers either kept a garden or studied botany.

Some of the first photographs ever taken were of plants. The founder of modern photography, William Henry Fox Talbot, took specimens from his botanic garden at Lacock Abbey in Wiltshire for these pioneering images. He used the paper negative-positive process he had invented in 1834, the precursor to the technology used in almost all photography of the 19th and 20th centuries. [The daguerreotype, invented in France by Louis Daguerre in 1839, briefly rivalled Talbot's system but proved too labour-intensive.] Talbot later wrote that 'The first kind of objects I attempted to copy by this process were flowers and leaves, either fresh or selected from my herbarium. These it renders with the utmost truth and fidelity, exhibiting even the venation of the leaves, the minute hairs that clothe the plant.' In 1844 he produced his first book of 'photogenic drawings', *The Pencil of Nature*.

Talbot had a huge range of interests, including botany. He planted many trees and replanted the kitchen garden at his home, Lacock Abbey. He also added greenhouses to enlarge his collection of tender and exotic plants. The gardens and greenhouse at Lacock Abbey are now in excellent condition, having been restored by the National Trust in 1999. Talbot's own notebooks helped the trust to recreate the gardens as they were in Talbot's day.

Talbot even played a role in safeguarding the botanical gardens at Kew. By 1838 the gardens were in decline and threatened with closure. Talbot petitioned the council of the Linnean Society to establish the National Botanic Garden at Kew, and his friend William Hooker was appointed its first director.

Botany meets the cyanotype

In October 1843 Anna Atkins, an amateur botanist from Kent, produced the first photo-illustrated book using the cyanotype process: *British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*. It was the also first book in any field printed using photography in place of typesetting and illustration.

Atkins chose the cyanotype process because it made outstandingly accurate impressions of details, and showed the transparency of the algae – specifically, seaweeds (collecting seaweed specimens was popular in the 19th century). She wrote: 'The difficulty of making accurate drawings of objects as minute as many of the *Algae*... induced me to avail myself of Sir John Herschel's beautiful process of Cyanotype, to obtain impressions of the plants themselves, which I have much pleasure in offering to my botanical friends.'

Cyanotype was a non-silver mixture of ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide, brushed on to ordinary paper under dim light, then dried. The flat, dried plant was sandwiched between glass and the coated paper and brought outside for exposure to the sun. The exposed paper was then taken inside and washed in water to bring out its Prussian blue colour and make it permanent.

Atkins' second cyanotype book, of ferns, engaged another popular botanical theme of the era. Her publications were timely, as interest in botany was high ▷

Julia Margaret Cameron often photographed her subjects with flowers, each of which was imbued with symbolism. Roses carried multiple meanings, but in general signified oblivion or imagination.

Maud, 1875. Cameron's portraits for *Idylls of the King* by the Poet Laureate Alfred Lord Tennyson were designed to look like contemporary oil paintings.

Gathering Water-Lilies, 1886, by Peter Emerson (1856-1936), who excelled at naturalistic shots of the Norfolk countryside.

John Cimon Warburg (1867-1931) was a pioneer of colour photography known for his portraits of children, such as *Peggy in the Garden* (1909).

American artist Amanda Means (b. 1945) uses leaves as photographic negatives, making prints without using a camera.

From *Hackney Flowers*, 2007. British artist Stephen Gill (b. 1971) creates multi-layered images using plants collected near his home in East London.

Rachel Warne's images of plants on a lightbox won the International Garden Photographer of the Year Portfolio award in 2009.

> *"Talbot, Atkins and Cameron were all great pioneers of photography, and were all enthusiastic about the horticultural trends and botanical discoveries of their time"*

▷ among the public: horticulture periodicals were popular and other innovations were attracting interest, such as Wardian cases – sealed glass boxes for collecting and cultivating new, exotic plants.

The accidental photographer

In 1863, Julia Margaret Cameron's daughter presented her with her first camera. Cameron, then aged 48, soon made a photo studio and darkroom in her home, and went on to become famous for her soulful portraits of family, friends and luminaries. Her subjects included poet and playwright Robert Browning, scientist Charles Darwin and actress Ellen Terry. Sometimes they were posed with legendary themes, and often in the garden.

Like Talbot and Atkins, Cameron experimented with photograms of botanical subjects. The portrait of Kate Dore (page 77, far right), a collaboration with fellow photographic pioneer Oscar Gustave Rejlander, features a border decorated with photograms of ferns. Using Rejlander's glass plate negative, Cameron placed ferns on the glass during exposure of the light-sensitive albumen paper.

Dimbola, Cameron's home on the Isle of Wight, is within walking distance of the lush downs and dramatic sea cliffs of Freshwater Bay. In Cameron's day ivy, climbing roses and honeysuckle grew on the house walls, with ornamental and kitchen gardens in the back. She planted roses and primroses in front for passersby to pick. Her home smelled of photo chemicals and sweet briar, according to her grandniece Virginia Woolf.

Cameron's appreciation of flowers and their Victorian symbolism is evident in her photographs, which included ivy (representing fidelity), sunflowers (adoration), camellias (graciousness) and magnolias (dignity). Lily-of-the-valley, laurel, daisy, morning glory, magnolia, grapevine and wheat also feature.

In 1868 she photographed Joseph Hooker, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens (and son of his predecessor, Talbot's friend William Hooker). Working with the labour-intensive wet-plate collodion process, her subjects endured long exposures of several minutes.

The Poet Laureate, Alfred Lord Tennyson, was Cameron's neighbour and friend. His wife Emily helped Mrs Cameron to landscape the gardens when she bought the house in 1860, according to Dimbola's director Brian Hinton. In 1874 Cameron created ornate tableaux, many set in the garden, to illustrate Tennyson's book *Idylls of the King*. Informed by Rembrandt and the Pre-Raphaelites, Cameron broke from the traditional portrait and revealed a more intimate, approachable image of her subject.

A long-term affinity?

Talbot, Atkins and Cameron were all great pioneers of photography, and were all enthusiastic about the horticultural trends and botanical discoveries of their time. As a result, the garden figured prominently in early photography's most original works.

The garden remained an important subject for photography into the Pictorialist Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even today this influence continues in the work of modern photographers such as Amanda Means, Stephen Gill and Rachel Warne. Perhaps the bold simplicity of plant forms, and the peaceful atmosphere of the garden, mean that photographers will never abandon this favourite subject of the pioneers. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

VISIT Henry Fox Talbot Museum
ADDRESS Lacock Abbey, near Chippenham, Wiltshire SN15 2LG. TEL 01249 730459
WEBSITE www.nationaltrust.org.uk

VISIT The Julia Margaret Cameron Trust
ADDRESS Dimbola Lodge Museum, Terrace Lane, Freshwater Bay, Isle of Wight
TEL 01983 756814
WEBSITE www.dimbola.co.uk

"In this digital age, it's refreshing to revisit early photography."

MARY KOCOL

Working as an essayist and photographer, Massachusetts-based Mary has photographs displayed in London's V&A museum and New York's Museum of Modern Art, among others. She examines the presence of gardens in early Victorian photography on page 74.