



Derry and Toms

a history of the building and roof gardens

Between 1929 and 1931 a new department was constructed in Kensington High Street to rehouse Derry and Toms, part of the John Barker dynasty.

Barker's own in-house architect, Bernard George set about designing a department store that would rival those found in America. The plans were actually based on the 'horizontal' system much favoured in the United States. The system called for open floors thus enabling greater use of the retail space.

(Derry and Toms (Kensington High Street) circa 1938).

C.A. Wheeler of Chicago was employed to design the floor space and with Bernard George they combined to make Derry and Toms a commercial success.

Based on the 22-foot grid, the need for central staircases was dismissed. These were moved to the outer boundaries of the floors and encased in self-contained shells. A battery of eight lifts in onyx and black marble were sited against the rear wall of the retail space.

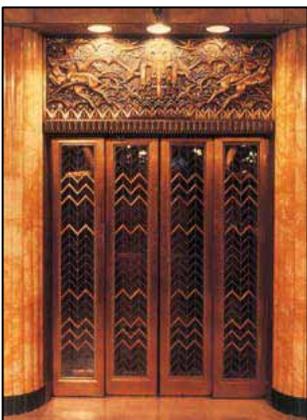
Six floors, including the basement, were designed in the English Art Deco style and were lavishly appointed. On the fifth floor a restaurant - the Rainbow Room - was built. Lit by concealed neon lighting and a long elliptical skylight it gave the restaurant a feel of suave restraint.

Furniture, blue and gold carpets, balustrades, lifts and other fittings, brought Derry and Toms renown as a classic of the Art Deco style. In the words of one observer, "...it had spirit and sparkle!"

The exterior of the building was also given the Art Deco look. The base of the building had polished Hopton Wood stone surrounds to the windows on a plinth of dark granite. Through the middle floors there were broad fluted pilasters (in a stripped Ionic and Egyptian style) The upper frieze stage has voids which were covered by elegant metal grilles with figures representing the signs of the zodiac. The spaces above the grilles were devoted to metopes – rectangular architectural element that fill spaces – these had carved panels depicting 'productive labour'.



(Trevor Bowen shows the plans to the board)



These panels as well as other bronze panels over lifts and stairwells were designed by Walter Gilbert and carried out by J. Starkie Gardner Limited.

A seventh floor was due to be added but strict London County Council rules forbade its construction due to the limit of the London Fire Brigade ladders. At that time turntable and extendable ladders were not available to the fire service.

Five years after principle construction was completed the famous roof gardens were begun.

(left, bronze panels welcome shoppers to Derry and Toms)



Rival London department store Selfridges had been the pioneers in roof garden construction. Barkers themselves had a makeshift example since 1921. But Trevor Bowen, Chairman of the Derry and Toms parent company planned to out-do them all.

Bowen had been to America and had seen the roof gardens on the eleventh floor of the Rockefeller Center. So impressed was he with what he saw there that he commissioned their designer, Ralph Hancock, to build similar gardens in Kensington.

Before construction could start a thick bitumastic base was laid on the roof, followed by a layer of loose brick and rubble which was arranged in a fan-like pattern to aid drainage. On top of this was a 36 inch layer of topsoil into which the planting was made. Water came from Derry and Toms own artesian wells.

In New York Hancock had designed and built eight distinct gardens. In London he was to build just three. But, the difference was, in London he had over 1 ½ acres to work with. His plans were to include.

A *Spanish garden* built to resemble the Alhambra. Complete with Moorish pergolas, a court of fountains and the well of St Theresa. The planting was typically Mediterranean. Palm trees grew side-by-side with exotic shrubs and plants.

Hancock had designed a similar garden for New York. The Moorish pergolas had been cast from moulds taken from those used at Rockefeller Center. Later, at the 1939 Chelsea Flower show, he was to successfully use the design again.

A *Tudor garden*, complete with magnificent Tudor arches, herringbone brick pathways and a wrought iron water pump. Like the Spanish garden Hancock had used elements before. In New York the arches and brickwork had been used in the English garden and in 1937 Hancock had exhibited a Tudor court yard at Chelsea.

The third garden was based on an *English woodland*. A cascade and a river ran the length of the roof crossed by arched bridges and stepping stones. The planting incorporated maple, poplar and sycamore. Soon after opening a family of mandrake ducks took up residence.

In the centre of the gardens Bernard George designed a tea pavilion with a terrace. A smaller restaurant could also be found in the Spanish garden. The original plans for Rockefeller Center's *Gardens of the Nations* had also called for an English tea room but due to financial constraints the plans never saw realisation. On opening over 500 different varieties of trees and shrubs could be found in the three gardens. And in each year after 15,000 bulbs were purchased and 38,000 bedding plants were laid out, having been produced in the nursery on the roof.



The gardens were completed in 1938 at a cost of £25,000 and were officially opened by the Earl of Athlone on May 9 of that year. Visitors were charged a shilling (5p) to tour the gardens. Monies raised that year were donated to the Queen's Institute of District Nursing. Over the next 30 years over £120,000 was also raised for local hospitals.

Over the next 35 years the gardens thrived. Shoppers at Derry and Toms would take tea in the pavilion and promenade in the three gardens. Stopping to write one of the many postcard designs available. During the second world war they became a focal point for raising comforts for service men and woman. Hollywood's finest movie stars would be seen regularly partying in the gardens.

Two visitors books, now housed in Kensington library, contain the signatures of celebrities of the period. Sir John Gielgud, Leslie Howard, Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Ivor Novello amongst the many household names that graced the gardens. Royalty too were often seen at *Derry Gardens*. The books also contain the signatures of Queen Mary, King Haakon of Norway, Queen Marie of Yugoslavia and Prince Bernard of Holland.



(Mrs Pamela Churchill with Trevor Bowen, 1941)



Enemy action in the way of air raids saw some damage to the gardens during World War Two. A 250 pound bomb exploded in the Spanish garden destroying the campanile, whilst a 1000 pound parachute mine landed on the tea pavilion but failed to detonate.

This photograph shows the damaged bell-tower and the unexploded 1000 pound mine in the buildings open doors. The campanile was rebuilt after hostilities ceased.

The gardens remained largely unaltered until 1973 but were soon to see dramatic changes.

During the previous half century, *Derry and Toms*, *Barkers* and *Pontings* had operated as three separate independent stores within the John Barker Company. But after the purchase of the company by the House of Fraser it was quickly decided to sell-off the stores. Pontings shut in 1970 and Derry and Toms soon after in 1971. Barkers closed in 1973. The site at 99-101 Kensington High Street was sold to British Land - Dorothy Perkins for £4 million.



There soon followed a brief revival in the fortunes of the building when Biba, the smart boutique owned by flamboyant Barbara Hulanicki purchased the property. In a furious five months the interior of the store was transformed by Markwell Associates, better known for their theatrical and television work.

Escalators were installed and many whimsical features introduced. Over £14 million was spent, but the investment proved rash. Having opened in a blaze of glory in 1973 the store closed just two years later.



During this short period the gardens became the place to be seen once again. Pop music stars such as David Bowie, the Rolling Stones and Marc Bolan were regularly seen in this modern Babylon in the sky.

When Biba left the site in 1975 the store was divided into separate retail outlets. The roof garden became the property of Rama Superstores although it only received the minimal of attention. In 1976 Kensington and Chelsea Council placed a Tree Preservation Order on the trees growing in the gardens to ensure that unnecessary removal or harmful pruning works were not carried out.

In 1978 the gardens became the subject of a redevelopment. The tea pavilion gave way to Regine's restaurant and night club. New lifts were installed destroying the rear part of the garden and necessitating the removal of a bridge across the river. The cascades went too, their Pennsylvania rock was later used in an unattractive grotto by the new entrance to the roof gardens. The addition of a new air conditioning chiller unit also destroyed the line of the Tudor (cloisters) walk.

Over the intervening years, where previously a small army of gardeners had cared for the gardens, a single part-time and enthusiastic gardener took to looking after their well-being. The gardens continued to thrive, although root penetration from the maturing trees started to cause problems for the upper floor.

In 1981 the Virgin Group, headed by Sir Richard Branson, purchased the gardens. Regine's was replaced by Babylon restaurant and a *members-only* night club. According to the roof gardens own website they are now the part of a collection of exclusive properties known as *Limited Edition* owned by Virgin and are a glamorous playground of Sir Richard!

In 1986 the gardens were awarded Grade II listing by English Heritage. This means that no work can be carried out without permission and under their supervision.

The current head gardener, Becky Burns, continues to maintain the roof gardens and has recaptured much of the original planting ideas from their heyday. She too works alone but has the occasional help of two part-time gardeners. Together they have transformed the roof gardens into a lush parkland 100 feet above the traffic of London. (The photograph above shows the gardens in the summer).



There are plans (2007) by the buildings current owners to restore the gardens to as they looked in 1938. This has been necessitated because of damage caused to the buildings infrastructure by tree roots and the years of neglect from when Derry and Toms ceased trading to their purchase by the Virgin group.

These grand plans include the removal of some of the newer structures and the possible reinstatement of the cascades and alignment of the bridges.