



Figure 1: The Order Beds 10" x 14" on Arches Hot Press copyright Katherine Tyrrell

The first version of this article appeared on Making a Mark on 13th August 2007, followed by a revised version on Travels with a Sketchbook in..... on 28th August 2007. This has been further revised for this Making A Mark Guide.

I started this sketch at the [Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew](#) (or Kew Gardens as they popularly known) and finished the next day. It's a view of the [Order Beds](#) (in the north eastern section of the garden or no 28 on [the map](#)) from the centre of that bit of the garden - looking towards the [Temple of Aeolus](#) which sits on top of the artificial mound known as Cumberland Mount.

The Order Beds were originally introduced by [Sir Joseph Hooker](#) as a living library of flowering plants for students of botany and horticulture - the plants being systematically arranged so that they could be easily located for study. This process, and the science of understanding the relationship between plants, is known as taxonomy and is the basis of all research carried out at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. A pergola covered with climbing roses covers the central path of the area, and the surrounding walls provide shelter for many plants

[Kew website](#)

As part of my Gardens in Art month on "Making A Mark", I decided to write an article about my approach to what I do when I sketch plein air using coloured pencils.

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MY APPROACH TO SKETCHING PLEIN AIR WITH COLOURED PENCILS

This covers:

- Finding a place to sketch and getting used to the place
- Using a camera selectively as a tool and to collect reference photos
- The development of a 'thumbnail' sketch
- Considering and selecting colours
- Developing the sketch – working plein air
- Finishing the Sketch – back home/in the studio
- Gardens in Art

GET COMFORTABLE AND USED TO THE PLACE

- If you're new to sketching you can sometimes find it easier and more comfortable if you are with someone else. However you do need a willing partner for your expedition, rather than somebody who is going to find your sketching a tiresome and time-consuming activity! If your partner respects your dedication to sketching and you want to spend time with him or her, then you'll need to make it easy for them to accompany you on trips - so they don't get bored either!
- First off, when we go out with the intention of me sketching, the deal is that we always have to find a bench where "he who must not be bored while I sketch" can sit in the sun. He's not keen on shade! Then we make sure he has enough reading material. On Saturday he was armed with the Financial Times, the Economist, a professional journal and a book - he's used to my sketching trips.
- I generally start with a good walk around the place on my own. Being on your own makes it a lot easier to just stand and stare! It's also amazing how just 'being there' and letting your eyes do some work before you sit down to sketch helps to get your eyes attuned to colours particular to the place. In this case the order beds were past the early summer excesses in terms of flowers and were now either empty or had just the leaves.

USE A CAMERA SELECTIVELY AS A TOOL AND TO COLLECT REFERENCE PHOTOS

I use my camera to:

- Take general photographs of the place.
- Try out different crops of the scene I'm thinking of sketching - using the viewfinder. It's great when the shape is the same as the camera's and not so useful if a different shape would suit better. If you think you'd like to crop down take a shot which is larger than the view you'd like to do.

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- Take photos at the beginning and the end and as the light changed while I was sketching and then again at the end. If you're not used to sketching plein air you'll be amazed at how fast the light and shadows change - particularly at either end of the day.
- Very often when I do a worked up version of a sketch, I may change things. With this one the issue is whether to have a long thin version looking down the long strip of grass or whether to include all the nuances of the foliage in the landscape view. Having photos helps with the structure of compositions even if they are less than perfect at recording both colour and values.

DEVELOP A "THUMBNAIL SKETCH"



Figure 2: "Thumbnail" sketch for *The Order Beds* (8" x 11" in Daler Rowney Sketchbook) copyright Katherine Tyrrell

- For this view I first developed a thumbnail sketch for the design and value pattern. Except my idea of thumbnail is 8" x 11"!!! I'm just more comfortable doing them big. Plus once I've got the mono version done and I'm happy with it I quite often put in key colours to remind me of what and where they are in case they disappear. I am after all sketching outside - and the sun moves as do the clouds.
- I then usually lay my thumbnail sketch in my sketchbook on the ground at my feet so I can glance at it easily while sketching. This is the other good reason for doing them big because they look a lot more thumbnail sized when lying on the ground!

CONSIDER AND SELECT COLOURS

- Coloured pencils are really great for being able to make colour studies and provide much more accurate information than the colour you get from photos. I find that photographs taken on sunny days (as this one was) often distort both values and colour quite badly.
- If you want to lay down a base for producing a finished work you need to make sure you're working with pencils which are lightfast. However, if you're working in a sketchbook then you don't need to be quite so careful - and sketchbooks are a wonderful way of using up all those pencils which you've discovered are not quite as lightfast as you thought they were!

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- (See [How lightfast are your artist grade coloured pencils?](#) and [CPSA Lightfastness Test Result Workbook - Version 5 published](#) for more information about the lightfastness of coloured pencils)
- When looking at and trying to work out colours I find it helpful to:
 - Mentally name the colours as I look at them - giving them a name somehow helps to make that stick in my head.
 - Select all the colours I expect to use and put the pencils in a separate box. Bear in mind that what I'm looking for is the colour in the colour. So it's less about looking for greens and more about looking for the red/blue/yellow in the green.
- The critical issue with this particular scene was to notice all the different sorts of greens which existed - from the intense apple green of the nasturtiums (bottom left) top the intense acid yellow of the grass where the sunlight was hitting it in the centre to the yellow ochre green gold of some of the trees in the middle background to the sea greens of some of the plantings (the overgrown sweet peas right of centre) and the black cherry/pine green of some of the trees in the background.
- I very often start with the 'other than green' colours I can see in the greens and build up from there. With coloured pencils you can lay down a colour and then glaze over the top. Optical mixing makes for much more interesting colours which I think adds depth to sketches. If you look through [my sketchbooks](#) you'll see a lot of examples.
- It's an interesting fact that – from an aesthetic perspective – all greens always work with all other greens. It's quite difficult to get colour clashes when using greens next to one another!

DEVELOPING THE SKETCH – WORKING PLEIN AIR

- Using a mechanical pencil I sketched in the main structure quickly. I then start to roughly dab colour around the piece - generally starting with the darks at the junction with the lights.
- One of the things which happens when working plein air is that the light keeps changing – especially on a cloudy day. You need to keep working and this is where the sketchbook and the thumbnail sketch help enormously – for example when the sun goes behind a cloud and you lose all the values. I make sure to keep looking at my sketch to check where the darkest darks and the lightest lights are – in this instance it's around the little temple on the hill.
- I use a hatching movement for most of it, changing the angles to suit the form. The hatching is loose so that when I hatch on top with a different colour you can see through it. My guess is most people would have a fit if they could see how imprecise I am and how much I simply scribble. It always feels a bit like sculpting where I get closer and closer to finding the real form and 'look' of a piece.
- I'm planning to try and organise it so that "must not be bored" takes a video of me while working at some point in the future. Either that or I remember where the instructions are for the remote control for my camera!

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FINISHING – THINGS TO DO BACK HOME / IN THE STUDIO

- It's rare to get everything done while I'm out. However sketching a lot outside means that I've developed a very good visual memory of a place which usually lasts as a good quality image for about 24 hours. I then use the next 24 hours to both recall what more needs developing and also to look at the piece far more critically from an aesthetic viewpoint.
- Being away from the place means that I can now adjust for what 'feels right' as opposed to 'what actually is'. You can make a choice about sketching for accuracy or sketching for aesthetics - there is no requirement to sketch everything exactly as seen. You are an artist and artists are allowed to change things!
- On return home I did a few more things:
 - I finished hatching the areas where I'd just put down enough to know the colour. Essentially this is very often a "more of the same" exercise. It almost always applies to the sky area once I've worked out any cloud edges. It often applies to big and somewhat similar masses - I've got the initial colour down and I have photos to check shapes - essentially it's very often "more of the same"
 - I then worked on the relative values. This is very often something which I don't get quite right on site - usually for no other reason than that white paper in sunlight causes problems with evaluation. I find getting the sketch back indoors means I get a better sense of the extent to which I've hit the right values. My method involves always mentally telling myself where all the darkest patches are as I'm drawing and then my memory prompts a checklist when I get home. In this instance the trees at the back were very dark in patches and I needed to develop that further - which I did using complementary colours so the areas would vibrate rather than look 'dead' holes.
 - Using my battery powered eraser, I then lifted out some birdie holes and lightened some areas where light coloured flowers exist and places where and grasses and tendrils had got backlighting. I then put back some of the clean light colours - the pale pinks and the lemon yellows.

While at Kew I had great fun inspecting all the vegetables in the beds developed by the horticulture students and taking photographs - only to discover when I got home that I'd inadvertently adjusted something on my camera and the photos were a lot smaller than intended. C'est la vie! But I've decided I'm definitely going to develop a series about vegetables.

GARDENS IN ART

In August 2007, in order to develop my art and artwork involving gardens I did a project on Gardens in Art on my main blog [Making A Mark](#). If you enjoy sketching gardens and also would like to look at different ways of looking at gardens and various other resources relating to gardens you might like to take a look at and read the project posts. I've included links to all of them in [Gardens in Art – Resources for Artists](#).

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LINKS:

- [Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew](#)
- [Map of Kew Gardens](#) with links to all the different parts of the garden
- [The Order Beds, Kew](#)
- [My website: Travels with a Sketchbook](#)
- [Making A Mark: Gardens in Art - The Order Beds at Kew Gardens](#)
- [Gardens in Art - Resources for Artists](#) (a site with lots of links to more information plus links to all the posts in the Making A Mark - Gardens in Art Project (August 2007))

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Portfolio Website: <http://www.pastelsandpencils.com/>

Publications Website: <http://www.makingamark.co.uk>

Art Blog: <http://makingamark.blogspot.com/>

Travel sketchbook blog: <http://travelsketch.blogspot.com>

You can find more 'Making A Mark Guides' with advice on sketching on the portfolio or publications websites listed above.

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