

James Parsons (1705 – 1770)

James Parsons was born in 1705 in the old English borough of Barnstaple, Devon, and grew up in Ireland, his father having been appointed barrack master at Bolton. After finishing his general education in Dublin he studied medicine in Paris, where he was a pupil of French botanist Bernard de Jussieu (1699–1777). Jussieu and his two brothers Antoine and Joseph had trained to be doctors when medical science was based on the use of herbs and plants to treat injury and disease. Their interest in the discovery and cultivation of healing plants grew, and they became renowned as among Europe's earliest botanists. Bernard had gone to Paris in 1722 to assist his older brother Antoine, then director of the Jardin du Roi (the King's Garden).

After graduating MD at Rheims in 1736, James Parsons moved to London where he was to remain for most of his life. His first appointment was studying and working with the Scottish physician and anatomist James Douglas, writing papers, sketching and painting. In 1738 he became a physician to the public infirmary of St Giles, specialising in obstetrics. He later married Elizabeth Reynolds; they had two sons and a daughter, and their home became a meeting place for people interested in science and antiquities.

James Parsons was a typical gentleman of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, with a wide range of interests in medicine, natural history and the arts. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1741 and was a member of the Society of Antiquities and the Society of Arts. His particular interest in the strange or unusual led to his paintings of a young male rhinoceros that had been transported from Bengal to England in June 1739 and displayed in Eagle Street, Red Lion Square, in London. His report and description of the animal, which was read to the Royal Society four years later, along with his sketches and paintings, updated earlier inaccurate images that had persisted for centuries. He also studied sea life and plants. Both featured in his 31 scientific papers, many of which were also illustrated by him.

James Parsons died at his home in Red Lion Square on 4 April 1770, at the age of sixty-five.

In 1810 botanist Robert Brown, in his paper *On the Asclepiadeae*, named and described the genus *Parsonsia* in honour of James Parsons, English physician and fellow of the Royal Society.



Parsonsia heterophylla

Parsonsia is a genus of about 40 species of woody vines with opposite leaves, occurring from tropical Asia to New Zealand. The three New Zealand species are endemic. *Parsonsia heterophylla* (Greek *heteros* 'different'; *phyllon* 'leaf') is known locally as New Zealand jasmine, or by its Māori names kaihua or akakiore. It is a twining, woody liane that climbs high on forest trees to reach full light. The leaves are variable in size and shape; in young plants usually long, narrow and variously lobed; in older plants shorter and broader, but still variable in shape – hence the name *heterophylla*. Panicles of sweetly scented white to yellow five-lobed tubular flowers appear from September to March. After fertilisation the ovary lengthens to form a capsule 10–15 cm long, which splits when ripe to release numerous seeds, each tipped with a tuft of silky hairs. The dry empty pods persist on the vines, their white lining catching the light as they twist in the wind. Kaihua occurs in coastal, lowland and lower montane forest from Three Kings south to Stewart Island. Observed by Solander on Cook's first voyage to New Zealand in 1769, the species was rediscovered at the Bay of Islands by Allan Cunningham in 1826, and named by him.