

The Glasshouse Industry of the Lea Valley

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by The Lea Valley Growers' Association

THE GLASSHOUSE INDUSTRY OF THE LEA VALLEY

THE BEGINNING AND EXPANSION

In a comparatively short period of time a huge industry sprang up in the Lea Valley, and then shrunk in an amazingly quick manner.

It is only some seventy years ago that the first glasshouses began to appear in this district, but it was soon apparent that there was a good demand for hot-house tomatoes, grapes and cucumbers, and the spread of glass at Waltham Cross, Cheshunt, Goff's Oak, Turnford, Waltham Abbey and, later, Nazeing, was rapid.

Soil was good, water from underground sources was plentiful and produce could be transported to Covent Garden Market by horse and cart.

From Covent Garden much of the produce was diverted to midland and northern markets by rail.

The first world war brought prosperity to the industry, and the demand for food made it policy for the Government of the day to encourage production and expansion by taxation reliefs. Thus, as and when materials were available the "sea of glass", as the Valley was often called, grew and grew.

The pattern of crops changed, and between the two world wars the grape section almost disappeared. The release of shipping made it possible for outdoor, cheaply produced grapes to come in from warmer climes such as South Africa, added to which the money available for this type of fruit became less and less. The great slump and unemployment saw the end of the once famous grapes, and tomatoes were produced here in greater numbers as a result.

However, prices were poor and the industry went through a very lean period. Just prior to the 1939-1945 war, a worker in glasshouses was paid 11½d. an hour, if a skilled man, and a grower could consider himself fortunate if he averaged more than 4d. a pound for his tomato crop, which averaged only about 40 tons from each acre of glass, in those days. Flowers had also come to stay in the 1920/1935 period, and there had been a large increase in the area of roses and carnations.

Came the second war, and the shortage of fuel and need for food brought out an order that, apart from a small percentage for keeping stocks of roses, all areas of glass should be given over to the production of tomatoes. The penalty for non-compliance would have resulted in the cessation of coal supplies to any transgressor.

Tomatoes became, therefore, the sole produce from glasshouses which, at that time had reached an area of some 1,100 acres. Prices were controlled and distribution over the country was put in the hands of a panel and consignments left by rail daily from Cheshunt, Waltham Cross and Broxbourne Stations. With coal arriving, somewhat spasmodically, and fruit going out, the local railheads were hives of activity by day and night.

At the end of the war, control of tomato marketing gradually became free once more, and then, over a period of a few years, the brake was gradually released from production control respecting flowers and cucumbers. As materials became available some more new glass appeared, mainly in the Nazeing and Roydon areas but some, damaged by enemy action was never replaced. However, it was about 1950 that the peak was reached and heated glass around that time was in the region of 1,200 acres, easily the greatest area in the British Isles.

The pattern of crop production changed once more. Outdoor tomatoes from Spain and the Canary Islands spread their season to overlap the British production time, and Holland proceeded apace to increase their glasshouse area devoted to this fruit. Added to this, the Guernsey area of glass was enlarged, and therefore the English grower turned his attention to more cucumbers and flowers.

Do not imagine, however, that these cucumbers and flowers do not suffer from competition. This country accepts huge quantities from other lands from as far as South Africa and home producers face the most severe competition from countries where there is no need to burn expensive fuel and where labour

is cheap. The small tariff payable by those exporting to our markets seems to be no barrier to those sending in vast amounts of produce, and the Government appears to pay scant heed to the expenditure of money paid to those countries.

MODERNISATION

There has, in the last short period of some ten years, been some tremendous strides in production increase and labour decrease within the industry, perhaps forced by the very necessity of economy. Heating patterns have changed, at great initial capital expense to the grower, from solid fuel-burning boilers to those fed by oil. Conversion costs have been very high, but the savings have been in quick delivery of supplies, obviating the need for stacking coal which takes much space and deteriorates, and the reduction of labour for stoking purposes and removal of clinkers and ash. The old many "stokers" who had to work on their fires throughout long winter nights have been replaced by the few technical persons who can trace and rectify faults in the modern boiler houses.

Although the Government has made available grants of money to those growers who will undertake modernisation to increase production by up-to-date efficient systems, the contribution is only a percentage of the cost, and there are many growers who are without the necessary balance of funds to enable conversion of heating units to be undertaken.

Another stride forward has been the introduction of efficient, mechanical and automatic watering systems, whereby plants can receive the desired amount of water at the base of each plant with chemical treatment added as and where needed. This is another man-power saver which has expanded at a time of labour shortage.

The cultivation of crops has improved technically to a tremendous degree. This is in no small measure due to the work and trials carried out by the Experimental and Research Stations of the Ministry of Agriculture, plus the efforts of the Chemical Companies who are always carrying out research to find ways and means of crop increases and pest controls to further the sale of their wares.

It is only in recent years that growers have been able to determine the needs of the plants and treat soils accordingly, by automatic applications such as enrichment by CO_2 , and other aids to growing.

What a change this modern age has seen. As stated, fierce competition has brought growing to a fine art, but costs of modernisation are great, and new aluminium glasshouses with modern heating, watering systems, appliances for soil steam sterilisation, automatic ventilation and the like can be as high as £21,000 an acre. Much money to invest in a battle with nature, but what a challenge !

SCIENTIFIC, INTERESTING OPPORTUNITIES

Gone are the days when the work in glasshouses was considered a drudge, meaning only digging, tending fires, humping coal and ashes, picking produce, watering and hum-drum chores. Those days offered no attraction to the average youth. All that is changed. There is now scope for young persons, male and female, who are prepared to learn and think what they are doing. The correct mixing of "feeds" and "dressings" to be learned, records to be kept, experiments to be carried out, knowledge to be stored and, on the mechanical and electrical side, enough switches and controls on instrument panels to please the most modern person who wants to make growing a scientific and very worthwhile career.

THE FORMATION OF ORGANISATIONS THE ASSOCIATION

In 1911 a few growers got together and decided that there was need for an organisation to be formed to protect their interests in many matters, and in October of that year it was agreed that what is now known as the "Lea Valley Growers' Association" should be established. An office at Bank Corner, Turner's Hill, Cheshunt, was rented.

The first President elected was Mr. H. O. Larsen, J.P., of Waltham Abbey, and he retained that office until his death in 1933.

Mr. Larsens' successor was Mr. J. P. Rochford, V.M.H., J.P., and he presided until the Golden Jubilee year of 1961 was through, when he relinquished his office. It must be a unique record for an Association to have only two Presidents spanning the first fifty years of its existence.

Mr. Bernard Rochford, O.B.E., V.M.H., J.P. took over as President upon the retirement of his brother, and after serving for many years on the Executive Committee (five of these as Chairman). He resigned on the grounds of wishing to hand over to a younger person, after two years as President, but accepted a Life Vice-Presidency.

His place was taken by Lt. Col. L. R. Leach, M.C., J.P., D.L. (a son-in-law of the late Mr. J. P. Rochford) and who had served on the Executive Committee from 1946, including three years as Chairman, and he is still the Association's President.

One of the first tasks of the Association was, back in 1912, to get glasshouses placed in the same category as farm land and this, which excluded payment of rates, was when agriculture and horticulture first became firmly tied, one to the other. The Association, membership of which has always been entirely voluntary, grew in numbers and strength, and its tasks became more numerous as laws affecting growers increased. In 1949 all known glasshouse owners were members, some five-hundred and twenty-seven of them, having an average of just over two acres of glass each. This huge glasshouse expanse was in an area measuring some ten miles by eight, but in addition some who had started their growing in the Lea Valley retained membership from Devon, Worcester and even Scotland.

PURCHASE AND SALES COMPANY

The Association was responsible for the formation of other organisations, and in 1920 it was decided to introduce a Society known as Nursery Trades Ltd., the object of which was to buy in bulk, at consequential lower cost, such items as glass, hot water pipes, paint, putty, tools and solid fuels. These goods were then invoiced out to growers at the prices which they would have paid elsewhere, and the profits realised, after administration expenses were deducted, paid annually to members as a rebate. This Company amalgamated with Glasshouse Growers Sales Ltd in 1947, and registered the new name of Nursery Trades (Lea Valley) Ltd. The organisation taken into the Company handled the direct sales of tomatoes and cucumbers to stores. In 1949, land was purchased and a packing station built specially for the grading, packing and marketing of members' tomatoes. Owing to many circumstances this expansion into grading was not a great success and, after a few seasons, the sorting and packing was discontinued, the premises sold and a move was made to Turner's Hill on the site of the old Experimental Station. Here, from a small outbuilding, the grading and packing of cucumbers was undertaken and, from a small start, has proved a great success, developing into expansions to cope with the output of some forty-four acres of cucumber production in 1968.

EXPERIMENTAL STATION

In June 1912, a sub-committee was set up to consider the possibility of establishing an Experimental Station in the district, and Mr. W. B. Randall offered to place land at the disposal of the Association at a nominal rent.

In five months the sub-committee reported that they had obtained estimates for twelve glasshouses, each 100 feet in length, a laboratory, an office, water supply and sheds at a figure of £2,500. Some public-spirited members agreed to raise half the initial cost of the Station, and to guarantee £500 among them, annually, towards running expenses. (The salary of a Director and wages of a foreman and assistants plus fuel and manures were estimated at a total of £800 annually !)

This venture was quite a bold step, considering that the total income of the Association during their first year was £60. 9s. 6d. and the cash at Bank was £5 19s. 2d.!

Grants were received from the Board of Agriculture and County Councils, and it was agreed to go ahead with the building of the Station and to form an independent Society known as the Nursery and Market Garden Industries Development Society Ltd.

As local persons will know, the staff of the Station eventually moved to establish the Glasshouse Crops Research Institute at Littlehampton, the old glasshouses were pulled down, and at the request of the Lea Valley Growers' Association, the new Experimental Station for the Lea Valley was sited at Ware Road, Hoddesdon.

ADVERTISING

In 1922, the Association formed yet another organisation registered as the British Glasshouse Produce Marketing Association Ltd. The aim of this Company was to advertise British and endeavour to combat the ever-growing importation of foreign fruit.

Voluntarily, members paid 1d. for each package that bore the label of the Marketing Association, which incorporated the slogan "British and Best" surrounding a glasshouse. Various forms of advertising were undertaken, including exhibitions of fruit and flowers at shows, the issue of recipe books and shop posters.

The income was not great enough to launch national campaigns, and when the slump of the mid-twenties came, and at a time when advertising was perhaps most needed, many growers ceased to contribute and the Company was wound up.

TRANSPORT

Just before the 1939/1945 war, a bulk system of fruit distribution by rail was seen to have advantages and another Company, Lea Valley Growers' Transport Ltd. was formed and put into operation.

The objects of that concern were economy and speed. The railways reserved trucks for the carriage of fruit to principle markets, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Southampton, and these were placed in position at local stations daily. By each individual grower sending his fruit to be placed in the appropriate wagons, much sorting and time was saved, it was possible for departure times to be fixed for wagons to join trains en route for the cities and the rate charged, being based upon total consignments, was reduced. Growers were invoiced by Lea Valley Growers' Transport Ltd. at the normal rate paid for small consignments, and the profits made by the Company distributed as a rebate each year to those using the service. The war, with distribution of tomatoes being organised by the panel set up for this purpose, caused the Company to suspend their activities, but they now operate once more, and the growers again benefit from this service.

THE SHRINKAGE OF THE GLASSHOUSE AREA

With the after-war expansion of industry and the spread of London in all directions, it was only natural that land near the expanding towns of Enfield, Waltham Cross and Cheshunt should be in demand, and many nurseries, some of which had got into serious disrepair, gave way for houses, factories, schools and roads.

Last year, 1967, the Greater London Council acquired about 270 acres of land in Cheshunt and a very similar area in Waltham Abbey. Both sites contained a considerable number of glasshouses, and a further some one-hundred and twenty acres of nurseries have disappeared almost overnight. Many people think that the growers concerned have rebuilt on the south coast but this, apart from some half-a-dozen, is not true. Most have just not been replaced, and the home-produced glasshouse crops have lessened even further, to the benefit of those who push their crops into our markets.

The spread of London has made great inroads into the main industry of the Valley, and the newly conceived Lea Valley Regional Park Plan will obviously, in due course, cause even more glass to disappear. Add to this the fact that some nurseries stand on land which contains valuable gravel deposits, and it is easy to see that total shrinkage has not yet been reached. An assessment by some is that many growers will still wish to be sited near the biggest market in the country, at Covent Garden or on the proposed new site for it, and the spread of the populace in the south east of the country will give an outlet that will repay the lesser number of growers who are prepared to use their skills and modern methods to provide fresh home-grown tomatoes, cucumbers and flowers.

THE ASSOCIATION'S WORK GOES ON

Readers must not imagine that the work of the Lea Valley Growers Association has been only the setting up of organisations. That has been a very small part of their operations. In 1928 the Association became a Branch of the National Farmers' Union (the Glasshouse Specialist Branch) and some members of their Executive Committee (numbering twenty) serve on National Committees, dealing with horticultural matters. Locally the offices deal mainly with problems of the surrounding growers, and with new regulations coming into force nearly every month. they are always called upon for supplying advice and representation on hundreds of matters of various natures. In pre-war days there was little need for clerical assistance at the nursery level. A grower had to pay wages and affix National Health stamps to cards. Apart from this an office worker was hardly necessary, but since that time there have been so many increases in forms, records and statistics necessary, that the disliked desk-work has to be faced by every nursery owner. Since the blissfully free-from-record days there have entered employment payments, pay-as-you-earn, contracts of employment, water abstraction applications and records, oil tax reclaiming forms, accident record books, fuel stock records, selective employment tax, poison record books, graduated pensions details, building licences, vehicle registration, vehicle testing, compulsory third party insurance, clean air act specification compliance, records of drivers' hours, weights and measures, import licences for various goods, planning permission for buildings, compulsory grading of produce, protective clothing for certain substances, and a hundred-and-one other time-taking administrative problems and tasks.

It can be imagined that with hundreds of members seeking and needing advice on each of these matters, the offices of the Association are kept more and more busy, and the work of the voluntary Executive Committee members is constantly increasing, not only on matters such as those listed, but on local panels, committees and other bodies connected in any way with matters dealing with affairs which affect horticulture in general, and glasshouse cropping in particular.

The registered offices of the Association are situated at 37/39 Turners Hill-Cheshunt, Herts.