

THE EAST GRINSTEAD HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY: PART I
A RICH HERITAGE *

BY

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It is not known when the Society was first formed. There are tantalising glimpses. References to a Town Flower Show in the 1860's; a medal dated 1902. Written records of these earlier years may exist. It is possible readers of this article may be able to assist. One can hope. More likely, however, they have been lost in the mists of time.

It is not until 1942 that a consistent record commences. The war years put the British people to a severe test. The country had survived the Battle of Britain. The Battle of the Atlantic was now being waged in deadly earnest, and the Nazis were winning. Great food-carrying convoys were being regularly dispatched to watery graves as Hitler's navy tightened its ring round these Isles. If we were to survive we had to produce our own food. Drastic steps were needed, and quickly. It was out of this crucible of urgency that the Society emerged, and along with similar allotment groups and societies throughout the country, attained sudden and vital importance. We must "Dig For Victory".

DIG FOR VICTORY Under Whitehall directives Local Authorities were charged with the task of organising the effort. At East Grinstead the then-Urban District Council swung into action. On 16 June, 1942, at the Electricity Showrooms (then at 148 London Road) representatives from seven local allotment societies and several allied bodies, together with members of the public met under the chairmanship of St. John Payne, a respected local school teacher and keen gardener. He was assisted by the Council Engineer and Surveyor, H.A. Campbell Golding. To facilitate an effective food-producing initiative, a united body to plan and guide it was essential. The body created was the East Grinstead Urban Horticultural Society—in 1955, with the "Urban" dropped,

* This article has drawn heavily upon material in an unpublished manuscript by former Society Secretary, John Gobey, entitled "The East Grinstead Horticultural Society: The First Twenty Years". I am indebted to Mr. Gobey for permission to refer to this manuscript, and for other information and assistance he has generously given. I also wish to express my thanks to my husband Michael for his assistance in preparation of the first draft of this article. I would however stress that responsibility for the published article and its contents is, of course, mine alone.

becoming the East Grinstead Horticultural Society (EGHS). The inaugural meeting was successful beyond the dreams of its founders. With an overnight membership of 401, and 1 shilling (5p) annual subscription, the Society was up and running.

The Society devoted much effort to developing and maximising vegetable production. While members supplied much of their own seed and plants—supplemented by donated seeds from America, and shares from locally negotiated bulk purchases—the Society sought to assist in the provision of basic resources to aid healthy growth. Fertilisers, disease/pest controlling substances and, of course, water were essential. While manure appeared readily available, a hundred-weight of sewage sludge, sometimes free except for carriage—"and guaranteed to produce a fine crop of tomatoes from undigested seeds"—was highly popular. Lime was vital not only for production of brassicas, but also for controlling potato blight and club root. There was constant skirmishing with the Council over water supply. Often it was turned on "almost too late, and was not available at all sites".

Then, as now, there was keen competition for allotment tenancies. Once again the Council, being the allocating authority for public sites, was at the sharp end of often heated disputes. Also, then as now, vandalism was a serious problem, "not everyone wanting to work an allotment to secure free veg". War-time justice meted out to vandals apprehended is, however, not noted.

Not all was "work and production" during these urgent years. In October 1942, what was to become the Annual Autumn Flower and Vegetable Show was inaugurated. Despite "clocks-back and blackout" the then-evening show was a great success with a sizeable attendance of both adults and children. Admission was 6d (2 1/2p) for adults, children 2d (not quite 1p)—revealing charges when one considers that the average weekly wage was £3.

POST-WAR UNCERTAINTY When the War ended, the Nation's allotment and horticultural societies, now strong and vigorous—and not without influence—faced an uncertain future. On the one hand food still was in short supply and rationing was to continue into the 1950's. Hence, though the urgency had eased, there was still an important food-producing role for the Society. On the other hand, new priorities occupied the post-war Government. Top priority was housing. Many local allotments were on prime sites. The Council and building interests cast covetous eyes.

Starting in 1946, the Society and the Council were to be locked in more or less constant combat over the fate of these sites. With several, the battle was swiftly lost. Sites at Brooklands, Sunnyside, Sackville and Lewes Road disappeared under bricks and mortar. The Council also was keen to shut down King George's Field, located as it was on premier Town Centre land. But here it faced more determined opposition. The battle was to ebb and flow over the best part of eight years, the Council repeatedly threatening closure, only to rescind it after Society pressure

and negotiations. Officials of the National Allotments and Gardens Federation (NAGS) called in by the Society, ensured maximum pressure was maintained. In the end, after imposing 12-months' notice on tenants, the Council managed to prevail. The allotments were shut down in 1954. Only peripheral building, however, was approved. Most of the Field (site of today's King Centre leisure complex) remains an Open Space. As an apparent concession the Council supported improvements to the Mount Noddy site off St. John's Road. In 1957 the Society "disaffiliated from NAGS for reasons of economy".

NEW DIRECTIONS, OLD CHALLENGES By the early 1950's the change in the character of the Society was well underway. Allotments and vegetable production remained important, but new activities started to emerge. Shows had always been popular, but increasingly schedules made room for general and specialist floral categories—including "floral arrangement", a deceptively contentious area, arrangers finally (1953) securing a rule change "to waive the stipulation that all flowers used must be home-grown". The "Felbridge Quiz", a popular inter-Society fixture started in 1952, ran for many years. The first Society "outing" was in June 1950, to Wisley. There was "a solemn discussion about wives being allowed"—but no comment in the record on the outcome. A later outing was "marred when an [anonymous] complaint was made that the coach stopped at licensed premises to break the journey". The Monthly Meeting which was to become a back-bone feature in the Society's calendar was instituted the same year. From the beginning, these Meetings attracted speakers of high quality. Included were such famous names in the gardening world as Grace and Arthur Hellyer, Harry Wheatcroft and Fred Streeter. Will Ingwersen, Committee member, *protege* of the great William Robinson of Gravetye, and renowned alpine nurseryman, was instrumental in building and maintaining the high standard in guest speakers.

Society finances in the early years were perennially precarious. Time and again it was "the trading profit", principally from gardening supply sales, which kept the Society solvent. Shows and competitions, though popular, all too often ended up in the red. Outings too, along with other enterprising ventures, often produced the same result. In 1946 finances were so tight that prize monies were reduced by 50 per cent—an action not popular with many exhibitors. Always there were new schemes to attract funds. Retailers were enticed into renting stalls at shows. Local notables afforded another inventive source of revenue. Many, including Lord Glendyne, Alfred Wagg, and Lady Hudson were approached with the offer of Society Vice-Presidencies. In return for their generosity and the honour of presenting one or more of the growing number of trophies and prizes, each cashed up (Lord Glendyne first asking for "a list of existing VPs, and what they had paid") with a guinea—a few with 4 or 5 guineas—on appointment. Even the local MP, Colonel Clarke (1951), responded with a guinea for the privilege. Various alterations to fees, to membership categories—husband and wife, and junior categories were introduced—and to "show fees" for exhibitors were undertaken to encourage increased numbers and treasury balances. In December 1961 an Extraordinary General Meeting was called. The Society was said to be "in a state of crisis". Only 32 members attended, the sole

recorded decision being "to restrict shows to one a year". In other words, just as the zeal for competitions and shows had brought the Society to the brink in earlier years, so too in 1961. *Plus ca change!*

A RICH HERITAGE Tracing the early activities of the Society has—I hope!—been informative for readers. Certainly it has been for me. It has provided a rare and privileged opportunity to learn real things, about real and important activities, undertaken during a period of real National crisis, by very real people. Very simply, World Wars, Kings, Queens, Prime Ministers, pop stars and football heroes may come and go. But the allotment and horticultural societies of this country carry on much as they have throughout our history. Close to the land, resourceful, independent, steadfast in adversity, with a watchful eye on authority and a leavening of humour, they are the embodiment of enduring values rooted in the character, the will and the spirit of our people. The Society is the repository of these values and qualities. It is a rich heritage.

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