

THE SIGNAL

A Community Newsletter for

**BROBURY - BYFORD - KINNERSLEY - LETTON
MONNINGTON - MANSSELL GAMAGE - MOORHAMPTON
NORTON CANON - SARNESFIELD - STAUNTON-ON-WYE**

A Gardener's Story



One summer day in 1953 while on holiday, I noticed some cacti for sale in a shop window. At that time, succulent plants were a bit of a novelty, and their strange shapes interested me; so much so that I ended that holiday taking three plants and a 7½ new pence book back home. I can't explain why, but from the day I bought that first cactus I was fascinated by plants. I bought more books, even more cacti and joined (and later wrote for) the National Cactus & Succulent Society. The window-sills at home rapidly filled with plants, until at length my long-suffering parents bought me a greenhouse in which to keep my collection. That, I suppose, was the second watershed - once I had a greenhouse I became aware of the garden outside, and nothing short of digging the entire plot up and starting again would satisfy me. My initial construction was a raised lily bed, which I built from bricks borrowed from a house some two miles away - so you can see how keen I had become! New lawns followed and a shrubbery. I was hooked!

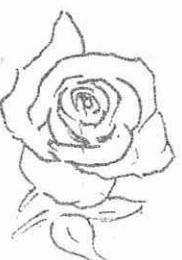
by Chris Greenway

Then came a national decision which changed the course of my life - the ending of a compulsory National Service. This meant that I was given the opportunity to engage in horticulture instead of a likely career following my Father in the Regular Army, I'm sure he thought that the Army would have offered much more (and perhaps he was right) but to his everlasting credit my father accompanied me to an interview with Northampton's Deputy Parks Director where, with a positive approach, I obtained my first job. During my time at Northampton I did my best in the many tasks that came my way - for instance stocking flower beds, propagating endless Geraniums, hand-mixing huge piles of compost and sweeping up millions of leaves! The apprentices were also encouraged to attend evening classes for two nights each week, where my knowledge of gardening practices was increased tremendously. Again I was lucky in that most of the men at the Corporation nurseries had formerly been employed in private service, and were willing to pass on their accumulated knowledge. The Head Gardener at the establishment next door was later to become Head of Regents Park in London!

After I had been there for two years my father retired from the Army and we moved back to Rugby; this meant that I had to cycle 20 miles each way and although I was very keen on cycling (and the roads weren't so busy then), 200 miles each week was a bit too much after a few months! I found a position in a Landscape firm closer to home and for the next two years enjoyed a wide variety of work, from mowing factory grounds to maintaining private gardens. Again I found it invaluable to learn from experienced craftsmen.

Both these jobs showed me how much there was to gardening, and how it was possible to specialize in one subject, which I did on my next move to Harry Wheatcroft's Rose nursery just outside Nottingham. This was outside my daily cycling range so I moved to a flat near Trent Bridge and immersed myself in roses. And how much there was to learn! Luckily Wheatcrofts were amongst the front runners in rose cultivation, many of their ideas were new and the staff mostly young, so we really had a great time especially as this period coincided with the emergence of the Beatles and the 'Swinging Sixties'. A spell at the Deeside, Chester, nursery of Bees Ltd. followed; again, there was much to absorb about rose packaging and people in general; the rose men there had come from all over the country and we spent many an evening discussing the merits of Aberdeen, Wisbech and Hitchin as rose growing centres! The job became an obsession, and I returned to Harry Wheatcroft's nursery with enthusiasm bursting out of me!

Shortly after we commenced a rose breeding programme to produce new varieties, and I am extremely proud that the rose which Harry chose to bear his name resulted from my own individual work. The cold storage facilities there were also my responsibility, and I cut a lot of the showblooms and propagating material there too. I was given charge of the large mobile greenhouse where the blooms for the Chelsea Shows were grown, so didn't have a lot of spare time! I found there, as I have since that many firms help you to learn,



especially when you are giving them a fair share of work in return. Never forget the world doesn't owe you a living; you have to go out and earn it.

My next move was again a change in direction - and the start of my life in Herefordshire. I took a Head Gardener's position and that really opened my eyes to many other facets of the trade. Vegetables, Fruit, Rhododendrens and Herbaceous plants all became part of my day, and how glad I am of the many colour slides I took with my camera at this time, both at work and relaxing by the Wye or tramping the many woodland paths. By this time I was confident of my ability and eventually moved up to North Yorkshire to do a lot of restoration work on a large estate there; how different the Yorkshiremen seemed, with their blunt manner, yet as successful as their counterparts in Herefordshire.

A long way further lies Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and it was there that I finally moved before returning here. Not Newcastle itself but the town of Washington, which had been the home of George Washington's forebears. I went there to run their shrub and tree nurseries and during the planting of the New Town was fortunate to meet and co-operate with many interesting people - Percy Thrower, Alan Titchmarsh and Geoffrey Smith to name but three. We had visits from the Queen, The American President Jimmy Carter, the Princess Royal and our Prime Minister James Callaghan, besides personalities like Muhammed Ali, and I shall never forget the day when neighbouring Sunderland won the F.A. Cup - there were people dancing in the street all night! What an exciting place Washington was, although the singers Alan Price and Brian Ferry who were born there didn't seem to think too much of our planting efforts!