

FROM 
HARDWARE
SHOP 
TO **GARDEN**
CENTRE 

By
MRS. F. M. HARTLEY

Edited by Alan J. Hartley

About The Author

Mrs Hartley is 84 and having retired some 11 or 12 years ago she spends a little while knitting in the afternoons and evenings. All this knitting is put to good use with a constant supply of sweaters for the family and cuddly toys for the youngsters. For the last few years she has also presented the local nursery/playgroup with a couple of boxes of cuddly toys every Christmas. She often makes up her own patterns or alters existing ones. It is from the creation of these patterns that her first book was put together entitled "Knitting Patterns For Beginners."

Mrs Hartley also enjoys gardening although she does not cut the grass very often now! As you will see from this book she has always been a keen gardener and has written several articles for local news papers on gardening. She has just been asked to write some articles on gardening for the local blind newspaper as surprisingly she is registered partially sighted, which, makes this book and her hobbies, all the more remarkable. Her refusal to give up her hobbies as her sight has deteriorated is an inspiration to us all.

Unlike many people her age her hands are as slim and as agile as they were when she was 20 years old. Mrs Hartley's doctor puts this manual dexterity down to her regular knitting and says that she is unlikely to ever suffer from Arthritis in her hands. Neither does she suffer from arthritis in her legs even though she had a hip replacement over ten years ago after a bad fall and she still enjoys going out for walks around the village where she now lives regardless of whether it is summer or mid-winter. It is to be hoped that she is just as able when she is in her 90's and as her father still went out for brisk walks until he died at the age of 98 it is quite possible!

Foreword

The book opens with a few words about Mrs Hartley's family background and then picks up where her story was left off in the book entitled, "Two Tales Of War." This was an earlier publication that she collaborated on with her son Alan. The story of that book is of her early life during the Second World War and how she met her husband. "From Hardware Shop To Garden Centre," chronicles the years following up to her retirement about 12 years ago.

After the opening lines her story is taken up with the purchase of a run down hardware shop in Birmingham. Trade was built up by selling almost anything that they could buy and customers had requested, from unlikely things such as ladies nightdresses to shoes and watches. It was an old fashioned corner shop and house without even a bathroom. A couple of years later a second shop was opened selling curtain material and then a carpet shop. By this time Mrs Hartley was looking after a growing family and dealing with the mischief that young boys can get into. The family moved to a new estate and better housing while the business flourished. As Mrs Hartley was not working she took up a new hobby and did a correspondence course on gardening.

Several moves later and a change in the fortunes of the business led to the purchase of a large old house with an acre of derelict ground. A plant nursery was started and from very small beginnings it grew with many funny and unusual incidents occurring along the way. The business employed Mrs Hartley's husband, her middle son and her youngest son as well as numerous YTS trainees, some of whom stayed after their training and others that did not.

Gradually the nursery changed into a garden centre selling a wide range of gardening products including fish ponds and all the accessories. Eventually the whole acre of land was utilised by the business in one way or another until Mrs Hartley and her husband reached their seventies, decided to sell up and retire. A buyer was found who later bulldozed the site and built bungalows on it. As Mrs Hartley herself says it was a sad ending for an enterprise that took decades to build but is the way many garden centres go when owners sell up.

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Our First House

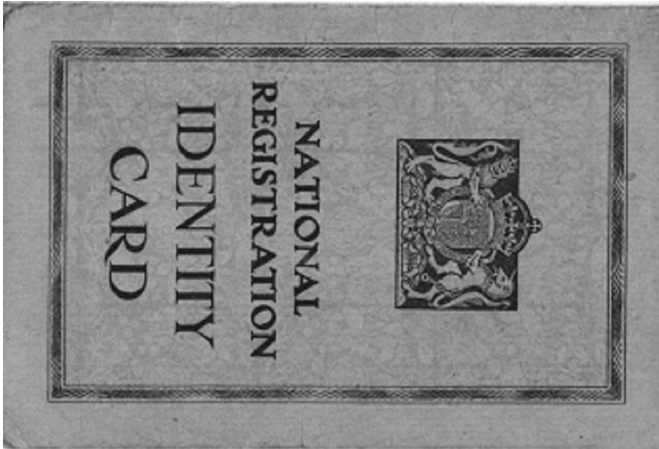
Until I was 11 years old my family that consisted of my mother, my father and my younger sister lived in a council house in an row of new houses. We were nearly at the top of a hill and had about a 20 minute walk to school.

My parents were quite frugal and they saved up enough to put a deposit on a house that was a bit older but was also a bit bigger. Both houses were in a nice part of Small Heath, Birmingham as it was in those days.

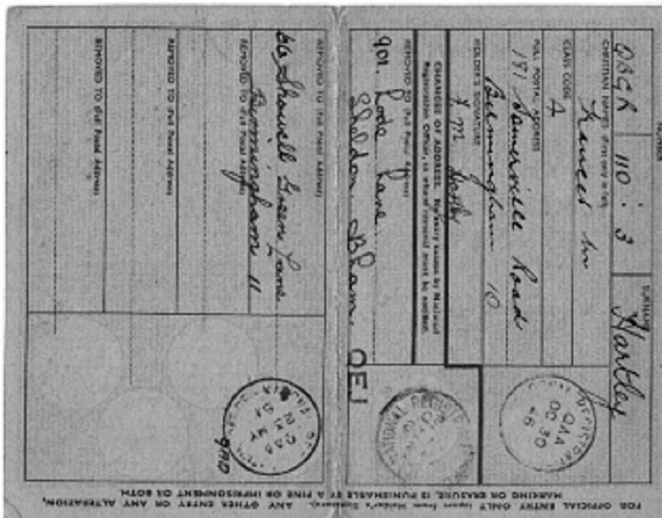
My father worked at the B.S.A. factory where they made bicycles and motor bikes. When the war came the factory turned most of its work over to the production of munitions.

After leaving school at the age of 14 I started work in a confectionary shop. In the April of 1946 (the year after the war was over) I was managing a confectionery shop on the Coventry Road in Small Heath when one morning a little sports car pulled up outside. The driver was to be my husband. After chatting and one or two more meetings we started to date as it would be termed today. After 5 months we decided to get married but both sets of parents were against the marriage with my parents saying that we had not known each other long enough. Also his parents were against the marriage as they said that "Town's people and

Country folk don't mix, because I was brought up in Birmingham and Jack was born and bred in the country. However we knew our own minds and felt that 5 months from when we first met was long enough to get to know each other and be sure. At this time Jack was 27 and I was 24 years old.



National ID cards were still in use at this time and everybody had to carry them.



In 1947 we finally moved into our own house after living at my parents house since we got married in 1946. Meat was still rationed along with many other things, so we bought 6 hens for eggs and 30 small cockerels to fatten up for meat. We made a wooden hen house in the small back garden and put a tall wire fence with a top on round it leaving them a fair space to scratch in. They were fed on boiled kitchen scraps and peelings mixed with corn from the corn merchants. We lived at this house for about 4 years before moving on.

In 1951 when our two sons were toddlers my husband said he would love to run his own business so we looked around and found a hardware shop nearby in Showell Green Lane, Sparkhill. The shop was only small as it was in a little row of terraced shops. Trade was very poor as the owner had lost interest and let it go. We made an offer for it, sold our own house and moved in. There were 2 bedrooms, a stock room, kitchen come living room and no bathroom. Nor was there any hot water or central heating. The two boys aged 3 years and 1½ years thought it was great having a bath in front of an open fire in a large zinc bath together. It was a good job it was a tiled floor that could be mopped easily with all the water getting slopped everywhere at bath time by two excitable youngsters.

I ran the shop and we fitted a low gate between the living room and the shop so I could keep an eye on the boys. My husband kept his job in a furniture shop earning £5 a week while I tried to build the business up to support us. We sold screws and nails loose and whitening by the pound. This

was a powder that was mixed with water for painting ceilings etc to make them white again as the name suggests. There was no emulsion paint then. When people wanted to buy paraffin they brought their own containers as it was sold loose as was creosote. This was all new to me but I muddled along. We sold buckets, mops, zinc baths and general hardware. Shops like that are rarely seen now. There was a wide pavement outside the shop that gave us a fairly big area on which we could display various items just as you have seen in "Open All Hours." Before my husband went off to work in the morning he used to help me put out an assortment of the larger items like steps and zinc baths. Mops and brooms were hung on hooks on the corner of the window by the doorway. Although we put a lot of things outside nothing was ever stolen or vandalised in those days.

The shop was open from 8am till 6pm so when Jack got home from work he used to help me pack everything back into the shop for the night then we had our dinner. The boys had eaten a proper cooked meal at lunchtime although I had the shop to look after as well, so they only had a light snack before bed. We would settle them down with a bit of play or read to them and then I would get some baking done as this was the only time that I had to do it. I never bought any cakes and often made jam if there was any fruit available in season. While I was busy doing all this and the ironing Jack would go through the stock to see what needed ordering and get the books up to date. We had no car or telephone and had to use the phone box down the road to phone orders through to our suppliers.

One day a man brought in a large glass container called a carboy for paraffin. I asked him if the container had been in the frost and he assured me it had not. So he paid me and I measured out 5 gallons of paraffin into his container. I went to pick it up to take to him and the bottom fell clean away. I showed him what had happened he was very surprised saying that someone must have put it outside without him knowing. He couldn't buy a new can from me as he had no more money with him. So I mopped the floor up. The paraffin tank was in a corner of the shop, no health and safety regulations then. The wooden floor was in a terrible mess and everywhere stank of paraffin for a long time afterwards. I had to go and change my skirt, stockings and shoes where the paraffin had spilled all over me. When my two little boys saw the paraffin all over me they howled with laughter at mummy getting wet. My shoes were sued and never looked the same again but I still had to wear them as money was tight.

I also had to learn how to change the wicks in customers paraffin heaters that had frequently not been emptied. This was another messy job but had to be done. On the subject of messy, smelly jobs we had one lady customer that used to come in for 1 pint of creosote occasionally. I asked her once what it was for because I thought that it would not go far on a fence. She replied quite casually "I paint down the stairs with it. It brings it up nice." I thought the paraffin smell was bad in the shop but that must have been awful.

While working in the shop one day I thought that the boys were being very quiet so I went into the back room to see what they were up to. The oldest one said "We found the dusters and have polished the sideboard for you."

It was lovely and shiney so I asked, "Where did you get the polish from?"

The reply came back "Out of the little cupboard."

I knew that there was no polish in that cupboard so I wondered what they had used and then it struck me when I saw the discarded wrapper. They had used best butter which like a lot of things was still rationed and had been our whole weeks ration. I could have cried but I couldn't really scold them because they thought that they were helping. Sometimes it was difficult keeping them occupied while I was in the shop but the large cardboard boxes that a lot of stock came in made excellent playthings for them. The bigger ones became tents, houses, boats and many other things in their imaginations. They loved playing with them and they used to keep them quiet for hours. Sometimes they got torn up and there was a mess to clean up afterwards but it was worth it as it fed their active brains. There were still not many toys to be had and those that were in the shops were very expensive, no mass production or cheap imports from China then. Neither did we have a television or even a radio to sit them in front of. Most of the time they were not really naughty, but just a little mischievous as young boys can be. However, there was another occasion when they really caused me some trouble.

The two boys wanted something to do to help me so I told them that they could help me bring some tins of paint down into the shop from the stock room upstairs. I told them to carry one tin at a time, to be careful with them and hold on to the handrail on the side of the stairs. It was alright for a little while and then I had a customer in the shop so I had to leave them to it. All was quiet for a time and then I heard giggles and a clatter. I finished serving the customer and went to see what was going on. I saw one of the boys standing at the top of the stairs looking down at the paint that was on most of the steps. The boys had decided it was too slow carrying the tins down one at a time so they had tried rolling them down the stairs. Needless to say one of them had burst open spilling its contents everywhere. Fortunately we did not have any carpet on the stairs so I told them to stay where they were and quickly fetched a bucket of soil from the back yard and put it on the paint. It did a good job of drying it up and left little mess but of course the stair was no longer bare wood but was now painted like a modern art picture with spatters of colour everywhere. The two boys were scolded and I told them that was the last time they could help me. They played quietly for the rest of the day and went to bed in silence that night.

Life went quietly for a while with trade gradually increasing and I was learning more about tools like hand drills as there were no electric ones then. Trade slowly improved till we were taking enough for my husband to leave his job and come into the shop with me. As it got nearer to bonfire night people started asking about

fireworks but we did not want to stock them as a special licence was needed to sell them and we felt it better not to have them on the premises with two small children about. When it came to bonfire night, about an hour after we had closed there was a knock on the back door. My husband opened it and a man asked if we could let him have a gallon of paraffin. He was told sorry no as we were not allowed to serve after hours. The man said I won't tell anybody and it's dark so no one will see, but my husband said no. The man said well I am a policeman and live in a police house opposite your back gate and the children's bonfire won't light. He pleaded and my husband finally relented and served him. We did not hear any more about it but it amused us. We also used to sell pot menders as saucepans and aluminium kettles were still in short supply. Someone had invented a pot mender and if I remember correctly it consisted of two metal discs, a small screw and a washer. One disc went over the hole in the pan or kettle on the inside and the other disc and washer went on the outside. These were fixed together with the screw. Sometimes a customer would ask me to fix their kettle for them which I had to learn to do. We also sold broom heads and stales separately which I had to put together. It was a do it yourself time and was a part of the job but added variety to life.

Selling The Plates From Our Table

We started getting asked for floor covering which was called linoleum abbreviated to lino. We had to have a special rule stamped by the board of trade as it was sold by the yard. Sometimes people wanted it delivered so my husband would deliver within about 20 minutes walk by carrying it on his shoulders as we still had no car. Some people fetched things in wheelbarrows or even old prams. It was easier than carrying heavy or awkward things and often caused a few laughs.

One day someone asked if we sold crockery so I told them not really but asked what it was that they wanted. The lady told me that she wanted a few plates and was not really fussy about their design. We had just bought half a dozen for ourselves as we had only had odd ones until then. So I told her that we had a few things in the back that were new in and not priced up yet. The customer said that she was going to the little wool shop next door and would be back in ten minutes. After she had left I went into the back of the shop where the children were eating their lunch at the table and hurried them up. Then I quickly washed and dried the plates, priced them up and took them into the shop.



Our First Car With The Two Young children.

The lady came back after a few minutes, saw them, said that they would do fine, bought them and thanked me very much for finding them for her. When my husband got home the boys greeted him with "Daddy, Mommy has sold our new plates so we have got to use the old ones again." After all it was the first time that we had used them so they were still new really, anyway we all had a good laugh about it! After that we started to stock and sell a few more crocks. We started to get asked for all sorts of unusual items that people could not buy elsewhere.

A man came in later and asked if we could get him a cheap watch, which we did. Then one day a very small lady came into the shop and asked if we sold shoes. She explained that she was a nurse and wanted a simple pair of smart but plain shoes for work and because she was so small she could not get any shoes to fit her other than children's shoes. She took a size 2 and proper shoe shops did not want to be bothered trying to order her a special pair. We said that we did not sell shoes but just for her we would see what we could do. Believe it or not we found a suitable pair for her in our usual suppliers warehouse that seemed to sell everything. She was delighted and after that our reputation seemed to grow and a little while later a man came in looking sheepish saying that he wanted a ladies nightdress for his wife's birthday. He said that he could not face going into a ladies clothing shop in the town to buy one for her so could we help him. I know most men wouldn't think twice these days about such a purchase but things were different then and most men would have been terrified of being seen buying ladies clothes. My husband

did not fancy buying one from the warehouse on his own so I had to go with him on our half day closing taking the two boys with us. We managed to get one that was fairly plain and wholly suitable for him. Yet another happy customer!

In about 1955 a representative came into the shop to demonstrate and sell ironing boards. These had a metal frame with a flat metal board that had a cover on it. The ironing boards folded up when not in use and were a big improvement to ironing on a table top. The place where the iron stood had an asbestos mat to protect it from the heat. My husband was there and he said to the rep "We will have that one for ourselves and you can order another one for us to sell."

The rep replied "This is my sample, you cannot have it." So my husband ever forceful and determined said "Right cancel the order then." So the rep eventually decided to let us have it. (In fact I still have the same ironing board today some 50 years later, minus the asbestos mat of course!)

When the two boys were aged about 7 years and 5 1/2 we stopped living at the shop and bought a new house on a new estate that was being built in Henley Crescent, Solihull. The house was far better than where we had been living over the shop. It had 3 bedrooms and a box-room as well as a proper bathroom. The boys loved it as they had a bedroom each and there was a big garden for them to play in. We all thought that it was wonderful. A few months earlier my husband had bought an old second hand car so travelling to work or the warehouse was not a problem.

The boys went to a new school of course but they did not mind that as they soon made friends with many of the children on the estate that housed mostly young families. The school was much bigger than their previous one that had been in the local park. That school had open fires with big guards round them in the classrooms to heat them. There were no radiators or any other form of heating in the school then. The toilets were outside across the playground and the caretaker made a good job of keeping them clean as there was little vandalism in those days. Also there seemed to be very little absenteeism from school and what little there was, was dealt with very quickly by a school board man who used to check up regularly. The new school was fairly modern with heating and indoor toilets that were a big improvement.

The school was a good 20 minutes walk away from home so I used to go with them especially as there was a fairly busy road to cross. A school dinner service had been started then and the boys were happy to stay at school for lunch but of course I went to school to bring them home in an afternoon. The children were allowed to take a couple of plain biscuits to have with their milk at break time but no crisps or chocolate. Children did not seem to be obese then as they often are now perhaps because they usually walked to school instead of being taken in the car as they are now. Also they used to play games outside instead of playing on their computers and watching television.

By this time I had stopped working in the shop leaving my husband to carry on, on his own. About two years later I

became pregnant again and in 1957 we had another little boy. Before he was born the two older lads said that they wanted a little brother and not a sister because a girl could not play football. By this time trade at the shop was going quite nicely and we had taken over another small shop in the same block. This sold curtain material that went very well because the war was still in peoples memories with the heavy black out curtains etc and people wanted to brighten up their homes. Although we had a manager in the shop it was still a success and it was not long before we decided that a carpet shop would be a good idea.

When our youngest son was about 2 years old we managed to buy our first fridge. When it was delivered it caused a lot of excitement because the children wanted to make iced lollies that they could do in the ice compartment. There was a lot of demand in the shops for iced lolly makers because domestic fridges were a completely new invention. Fridges were being sold by the thousand as until then meat, butter, bacon, cheese etc had been kept in a small cupboard with metal gauze on the front which in turn had been stored in a pantry. This was a room that had a stone floor to keep it cold and a small window that was usually kept open with gauze over it to keep the flies out.

I still had my gas boiler for washing but had an electric wringer that fitted onto the edge of the boiler so there was no more turning heavy handles to wring the clothes out. Full washing machines came in years later.

An Interest In Gardening

When our youngest son was about 4 years old I became quite friendly with a neighbour who had a boy about the same age who used to play well with him. The lady was a keen gardener and got me interested. Up until then we had not done a lot with the garden, only put down a lawn for the boys to play on and a few shrubs here and there. We had made a rose garden in the front but that was the limit of our gardening experience as we had only had a yard at the shop before. One day my husband came home and said "I have ordered a greenhouse for you." When it came we put it up with a lot of effort and although I did not know much about plants I got it filled with young plants for the garden. My husband then ordered another small greenhouse and said "I have seen a correspondence course for gardening advertised in the paper that costs £200." This was in October 1961 and so it was a lot of money then but he sent off for the details anyway. Eventually papers and books came. The course involved reading and studying so much and then answering a test paper that had to be sent off to be marked, graded and then returned. There was a test on each section.

After a lot of studying I completed the course that involved the make up of soil, seed sowing, propagation (ie;- stem cuttings, root cuttings, grafting and division) garden

planning and all sorts of other things. After finishing the course an exam could be sat to gain a Royal Horticultural award as it was an R.H.S. course. Unfortunately I could not take the exam because it would have meant staying in London for 3 days and my husband could not take time off to look after the three growing boys.

I continued with the gardening and my two greenhouses soon filled up so Jack, my husband, said "I will build you a melon house." He started digging a long oblong hole which must have got the neighbours thinking because when they saw me they asked me if everything was alright. All was made clear to them when the top half of the greenhouse arrived. A melon house is a low greenhouse with a sunken walkway access. Unfortunately when it rained the water all drained into the walkway flooding it in several inches of water. But with Wellingtons on we managed to put it to good use. We grew some lovely melons and long cucumbers in it. Of course then melons were only occasionally available from some shops and were expensive to buy anyway. In fact this was the first time that I had ever tasted a melon in my life.

In early 1964 we had very deep snow, not just a few centimetres but knee deep. However it did not stop people from going to work as in those days a lot of vehicles had chains that could be fitted to the wheels to help with traction. No shops or schools were closed and life went on just as normal. My husband went to work each day although he had quite a bit of driving to do. By this time we had opened several carpet shops that he had to visit

regularly. The snow lay on the road round our estate for about 6 weeks.



Even the lakes in the park were frozen over and had skaters on when it was suitable.

At about this time I had an Austin Mini so that I could take the lads out for little trips. Usually the eldest two wanted to go out on their bikes on their own so I often took the youngest lad with his pal and his mother out.

Later that year we moved to a house in Dorridge that was very quiet and which had a smaller garden. The garden was already laid out so there was only room for one small greenhouse.

After we had lived there for a short while I found out that there was a gardening club that met once a week. Jack said

that I should join it if I liked so I did. It was quite good as we often had a speaker but one week I had a phone call from the secretary who told me that the speaker she had booked had just let her know that he couldn't come. She said "You seem quite good at gardening, can you give us a talk?" I was flabbergasted and said "I can't do that. I have never done anything like it before." After much persuasion I said alright I would give it a try. I went round my garden with plastic bags and collected various cuttings and also took some off my house plants. Next I gathered up some compost and silver sand. The silver sand was to be mixed with the compost to help the cuttings to root. Then I did a quick read through my course papers and made a few notes.

That evening I went off with my box of bits and pieces with some trepidation but it all went quite well and I managed to answer a few questions afterwards. They thanked me very much and we all had a chat before I went home breathing a sigh of relief.

The house in Dorridge was not so convenient for school for the children nor was it so handy for Jack's travelling so after only two years we moved again to a much bigger house in Sutton Coldfield.

The garden was enormous so I was able to have three greenhouses which Jack had custom built for me. There were no garden centres until the early 1960s. There were of course florists and hardware shops but people would swap plants with neighbours and friends. This worked



quite well with everybody helping each other. There was one well known shop fairly near to us that sold corn for fowl, animal feeds and various types of seed. The shop also sold a few plants that were mainly vegetable seedlings so I often bought the odd plant from them.

There were by now big seed firms selling a vast range of different varieties. Gradually as the years passed a few garden centres started opening selling mainly plants and seeds. They did not sell gifts, pottery, clothes or have cafes and tools were bought from hardware shops. Garden centres quickly became more popular and started selling bags of compost, peat, fertilizers and weedkillers. After that clay pots became more decorative and troughs followed made out of concrete. Gradually plastic products appeared and garden centres evolved to what they are

today. Little did I realise then what an important part they would come to play in my later life.



Two Views Of The Back Garden At Streetly.

The Start Of Something Big

While at Streetly the eldest son took and passed his driving test so he was given my car and I had a new one which the next son had later on. After a short while one of Jacks supervisors approached him with the idea of becoming a partner in the shops that were expanding in number rapidly. It seemed like a good idea at the time as he did much of the office work enabling Jack to get out more which he enjoyed. Things started to go wrong and the problems snowballed resulting in the whole business getting into trouble and forcing a sale.

The firm that bought the shops kept Jack on for a while on a much reduced salary so we were forced to look for a cheaper house. One day when we were out looking at houses we came across a fairly large one that had an acre of neglected garden. Jack said "You could make a nice plant nursery here. What do you think about the idea because I think my job will go soon?"

I said I would have a go so we bought the house. When we moved in it was a bit of a come down from the previous one that had been very posh although not very modern. This house had open fires for heating and an old fashioned range in the kitchen for cooking but I had taken my electric cooker as well.

There were two small tatty little greenhouses at the bottom of the garden left by the previous owner. They had a few broken panes that we did our best to fix up and I started to grow a small collection of plants. Some were grown from cuttings and some from seed. In August I potted some bulbs to grow on for Xmas. The house had quite a big cellar so I thought that it would be ideal to start the bulbs off in the dark and damp. After about a month I went down to look at them to see if they were shooting well and had a surprise. Mice had got in and had a good feed on my bulbs leaving holes in the pots where they had been. I had to start over again but this time I put them in the greenhouses under the staging and covered them with plastic covers.

The next year I got some seed trays and grew some bedding plants which encouraged some customers to start coming in. As the greenhouses were at the bottom of the garden the customers had to walk down a track to them but they did not seem to mind. About 1972 we erected a much larger 50 foot greenhouse nearer to the car parking space. This was ideal and was quickly filled with plants for sale.

Until my husband joined me in the nursery and before I had any youngsters on the Y.T.S. I used to have to catch an early bus into the nearest small town that was about 3 miles away to do my shopping twice a week. I also went to my bank whose nearest branch was there and then would return to the nursery and be ready to open up the nursery at 10am. Opening at 10am also gave me a little chance to get some housework such as washing and tidying up done on those days that I did not go shopping. The rest of the day was

spent potting up young plants, pricking out seedlings and generally trying to increase the stock in the cheapest way possible. Also of course I had to do ordinary shop type duties such as cleaning the staging and pricing the various things that we had for sale.



Watering was another very important job that had to be done religiously, especially in hot weather. Not only did the indoor plants need watering, but so did all the outdoor plants including shrubs, roses and trees. People often do not realise that plants in pots outside need watering even though they get rain on them. In the summer watering used to take up a large part of the day and when we had youngsters join us in the business it very often took the whole day for one of them to water the outside plants properly on a hot day.

After a few years one of my sons installed an irrigation system that used an enormous electric pump and had pipes buried all over the nursery connected to more upright pipes with sprinkler heads attached. We had a large hole that was originally intended to be made into a swimming pool, but, was concreted and used as a water reservoir for the sprinkler system. With the pump running on a hot day the water level would go down by about 2 feet in just over an hour. Then over night, when the mains water pressure was at its best, we would run a hose into the pool to top it up again ready for the next day. Very occasionally the grand children would have a dip in the pool on a hot day when they visited but the bottom and sides were always green and slimy so it was not ideal for swimming. The pool was about 30 feet long, 15 feet wide and some 6 feet deep at the deep end. It looked like a swimming pool but was not as posh. The pool was slabbed all round but the garden around it was always a little neglected. It was ideal for keeping fish in and that is what my youngest son eventually did. This led to a new career for him and a dramatic new range of products for the garden centre for many years, but more of that later.

In February of 1974 we had a bad gale in the night that did a lot of damage breaking many panes of glass in the greenhouse. It was a Friday night so the youngest son was not at school the next day and he helped with the mess. One of his friends came down and between the two of them they put in what spare panes of glass we had got. He had passed his driving test not long before so he was able to go

out in the car and fetch some more glass to complete the job. My husband could not help as he had just had a big eye operation and was not allowed to bend or look downwards. A lady that lived a little way off heard about our troubles and came to see if she could help. Between us we managed to clear up all the broken glass and trays of pots and seedlings that had got blown about.

At the time there was nobody else selling plants anywhere near to us then so trade started to pick up as we got more selection. The two little greenhouses down at the bottom of the property were falling to pieces by this time so we put up another 50 foot greenhouse which soon filled up and then another later on. The old wooden garage was converted to a shop to display plastic pots, trays and a few more sundries.

Lots Of Publicity

One day a member of the local gardening club came and asked me if I would have an open evening so that they could come and look round when no other customers were about. This was arranged and about 8 or 10 people turned up. We had time to explain and chat about some of the unusual plants growing. They only bought a few things but it was still quite a good evening.

Another time I was asked by the local infants school if they could bring some of the little ones round. I was a bit dubious about this idea and said that they could come if they would promise that the children would not run round because of the glass greenhouses. They promised so I agreed. Two adults came with about 10 little ones. The children were very good and some of them seemed very interested with one or two asking some good questions. They also wanted to see how plants were potted. Then I showed them some oranges and lemon plants that I had grown from pips. I told them that they would take about 6 or 7 years before they had any fruit on. Also I showed them some date palms grown from stones and some monkey nut seedlings. They were fascinated when I told them that when the monkey nut plants have flowered, the stems with the new nuts on turn down into the soil where the nuts

ripen. That is why they are sometimes called ground nuts. It was an interesting hour showing the children round and some of their little faces were a picture. The following year the school came again. I hope it may have encouraged some of them, in the years that followed, to take an interest in plants.

In April 1976 the Rugeley Post newspaper telephoned me and asked if they could come and see me as they wanted to do an article about how the nursery got started. I said they could come in an evening after we were closed, so a date and time were arranged. An interviewer and a photographer came. They did a very nice piece about how the nursery was started and took photographs inside the large glass greenhouse. Pictures were taken of some of the more unusual plants such as banana, orange and lemon which I had grown from seed. Several customers came in afterwards and said they had seen the write up in the paper. We had some customers come in and say they did not know of the place before reading about it in the paper so it was a good advert for us.

Then in February of the next year The Rugeley Times rang up and said that they wanted to do a similar thing so I agreed. It was all good advertising for us. One lady came in and said she had seen the paper and read that I had grown some unusual plants. She had a café and wanted a large plant but something different. I showed her a mimosa, about 6 feet tall that was about to flower. The scent of the exotic flowers is beautiful and the attractive leaves are feathery and light green. She said it would train across the

beams in her café and was very pleased with it. She paid me for it and said her husband would collect it later in his estate car. When he came we just managed to fit the plant in by putting the pot in the front and feeding the rest of the plant into the back.

We had an extremely hot, dry summer in 1976 with no rain for weeks which left all the lawns and grass everywhere, shrivelled up and brown. Two doors away was a petrol station with a car repair business in the workshops behind it. A fire started next to the paint spray-shop that spread to a pile of old tyres. It was going well and they had called the fire brigade but they were struggling to control it. There was only two very dry gardens and a grassy pathway to a field between us and them so we got out the hoses and laid them out where the fire would come across if it spread. Eventually the fire engine managed to get the fire under control and we could breathe again. Life settled down after that for a while with watering now a full time job. We had increased our stock of plants and shrubs by buying in small rooted cuttings and potting them on and my husband used to help on a Sunday.

In 1977 when it was the Queens Silver Jubilee we were growing a lot of bedding plants of our own. People kept asking for red, white and blue plants that they could grow that were all the same height as these are the colours of the Union Jack. Everything that year was being planted with the same colour scheme whether it was borders, tubs, window boxes or even hanging baskets. We always did sell a lot of blue Lobelia and White Alysumn but not much red.

I had grown some red Lobelia previously but it had not proved so popular and there were red Salvias, but of course they were taller and not really suitable for small borders. So, realising that people would have to buy the Lobelia I quickly put more seed in but they are rather slow to germinate and grow. However we managed to buy 2 trays of seedlings from a local wholesale grower. It was my job then for the next day to prick out the seedlings into seed trays to grow on for sale. I had to do them because lobelia seedlings are so tiny and everybody else claimed that their fingers were too big to handle them. There were an enormous number of tiny plants in a tray and when pricked out they filled about 20 trays with 60 plants per tray. To speed things up a little bit the boys filled trays and wrote all the labels for me.

Commercially grown bedding plants are produced on what amounts to a factory line. The seed trays are filled by a machine on a conveyor belt that moves them along the track to the next machine containing the seed that is dropped into tiny holes also made by machine and then the trays are dusted with a fine coating of compost. Next they are labelled and moved into a warm shed where they are left to germinate. They are of course watered as well, but as they grow they are again moved but this time into the light and cooled off ready to go to the garden centres and shops. In this mass production method there is no tedious pricking out needed at all.

When we first started having peat and compost in stock my husband was still at work and I was on my own. We did

not have the very big 300 litre bags of peat but we did have 80 litre bags of compost which are quite heavy. One day a lorry came and the driver asked "Who's unloading?" I said, "I am." At which he was very surprised. We had no fork lift truck so it all had to be unloaded by hand and carried on the shoulder. The driver said, "You are not carrying this lot. You get up on the lorry and walk them across to me. I will do the carrying." It was a struggle to climb on the lorry but I managed it in the end. I did not wear trousers as they were not very popular in those days. The lorry was near the main road and it was a bit windy that day so the traffic going past had a good view of what was going on. A few drivers pipped as they went by. The lorry driver was very good so after we had finished unloading I made him a cup of coffee and found him some biscuits which he appreciated. After my experiences high up on the lorry I bought myself some trousers as soon as I could. I found out that not all the lorry drivers were as helpful as that first man had been and often had to do all the carrying myself until my husband joined me.

The firm my husband worked for had been closing shops and cutting staff and my husband believed that he was next in line to go, so in about 1978 he took a small redundancy and with that we erected a 3 bay glass greenhouse. First of all we had to concrete the floor. No small task when it measured some 30 feet by 40 feet. Then we made our own benches to put in it and even I got involved. I had learnt to use a hammer and did my fair share of knocking nails in!! After making the benches we covered them with polythene sheeting and put fibrous matting on top of that so that it

would keep the plants placed on top of it moist all day and provide a humid atmosphere around them.



An Aerial View Of The Garden Centre With The New Glass Greenhouses.

We heated the new greenhouse with two very large paraffin heaters that had the paraffin piped in from a 500 gallon tank outside the greenhouse. It was a bit unsightly but was easier than fetching 5 gallon drums from the petrol station a few hundred yards down the road. The older, smaller greenhouses, had been heated by small heaters that had to be topped up every day from a drum and I was always the one that had to fill them. A 5 gallon drum of paraffin weighs over half a hundredweight but I managed!!!

Some Exotic Plants

I raised more and more plants from seed including houseplants and conservatory plants. I found one firm that did a very good range of unusual and exotic seeds and even raised some Strelitzia or Bird Of Paradise. They took about 7 years to flower from seed. I also grew lemon and orange plants from pips and after about 8 years these too fruited. Nowadays the lemon and orange plants sold by garden centres are grown from cuttings for quicker fruiting. Experience taught me that if the leaves started to go pale or yellow it was a good idea to water them with a teaspoon of Epsom salts dissolved in a pint of water. Another unusual plant that I loved to grow was the Acacia Dealbata or Mimosa. This has a lovely scent and makes a good conservatory plant but would need protection outside.

We grew other unusual plants that all went quite well. On one occasion I tried to grow some cotton plants from seeds but they did not germinate very well, probably because it was not hot enough. However I got a few plants going and one of them produced a pod that opened up to reveal a small ball of fluff which was of course raw cotton. Where it is grown commercially it would be collected and spun into cotton ready for making clothes. A lady came into the nursery, saw it and asked if she could buy it. I had put a notice by it saying that it was not for sale and was for show only so that more people could see it. The woman went on

to say that she was a teacher and her class had been talking about cotton plantations at school. I commented that the cotton was beginning to fall out, but she said she would put a spot of glue on it to hold it in place. As it was for a school I decided to let her have the plant and found her a small box to put it in to keep it safe. She went off delighted with her find.

My son liked to eat pomegranates so, one day when he was eating one, I pinched a little clump of fruit containing some seed and put them into my propagator. I managed to germinate one or two seeds. *Punica Granatum* is the Latin name for the pomegranate. After a while the young plants made some flowers that were quite pretty and looked a bit like a fuchsia. The plants did produce small fruits, pomegranates, and caused a lot of interest. I tried growing all sorts of seeds and berries that I found or bought and another unusual one that I had success with that most people have not heard of, is the *Loquat* or Chinese peach. When we sold the garden centre I took a small plant with me to the new house and now, ten years later, it is a huge shrub that stands up to the winters quite well with only one or two leaves occasionally getting burnt by the frost.

One man used to come in and wander around looking for plants that he could make into Bonsai. He was very interested and pleased to find a small Olive tree that I had grown from seed. The man said that if I ever had anything unusual like that again could I save it for him. At the time there were not so many plants being imported and were certainly less uncommon varieties about. A long time

afterwards the same man came back in and said that the Olive had made a lovely Bonsai tree and he was really pleased with it.

Another time a man came in and said he had bought an orchid from Chelsea Flower Show and it needed potting on but he could not get any of the special compost that was needed for the plant. At that time orchids were not very common and few were sold so I looked it up in my books and found out the necessary details on how to make some compost for it. Then I told him to come back the next day and I would have some compost made for him. The next day came as did he and he was delighted with the small bag I had ready for him. He paid up and went off a happy man. Each year after that he came in and ordered more as he liked it fresh each time he used it. He always said that it was good stuff as his orchids were flowering and growing well on it. When he found out that we were leaving some years later he asked for a big bag to be made up and he also asked me if I would tell him how to make it. I did of course because it was no secret, but nowadays the special orchid compost is sold in a lot of the bigger garden centres as large quantities of orchids of all types are sold as flowering house plants and for presents.

By this time we were selling peat, compost, fertilizers and many other sundries as well. As the business started to grow we decided that we needed some help and found out about the youth training scheme or YTS as it was known. With this scheme we could have a youngster at a very low rate of pay subsidised by the government for a few months.

Then if they proved suitable we had to take them on at normal rates. Some were absolutely hopeless but some proved to be quite good workers. Over the years we had numerous youngsters on the YTS and they often caused us to laugh with the things that they did. We had one lad in particular who if not watched all the time would go into the field next door, climb into the tree and sit there listening to his radio. In the end I had to complain about him and he was taken off the scheme.

Another lad we had was a very good worker who was well built and able to handle the big bales of peat and stone tubs but he had one failing. His jeans that he always wore were badly in need of repair and revealed rather more than was decent. Eventually my husband had to have a word with him because they got so bad. He stayed with us for some time but eventually left when I think his parents moved.

At one time we had a young lad and girl working together who were alright but they kept disappearing for long periods of the day. Eventually we found out that they were having a kiss and cuddle amongst the trees at the bottom of the nursery. I had to ring the YTS headquarters and explain to them. We kept the lad for a number of years afterwards but they moved the girl. Later on we had another girl who this time proved to be a good worker and she was very strong which meant she could handle the compost, bales of peat and big bags of fertilizer. This meant that I did not have to do so much heavy mauling.

The lad and girl were generally good and fairly reliable workers except one day when I gave them some seedlings that were growing strongly. The two youngsters asked what they were and I told them that they were young trees grown from the acorns that we had planted some time ago. I told them which pots to put them in and said to be careful and write a label for each one and then left them to it while I was working in the greenhouse. When they had done them they came to ask what their next job was. I went to check up on them and was amazed when I saw the labels were written very carefully but were all written as acorn trees. I asked them what was the name of the tree that acorns grow on. They did not know even though they were young adults of 17 and 18 years old!!! I made them clean all the labels with wire wool and re-write them as Oak trees. After this little incident I used to test them with the names of trees and shrubs around the nursery.

Whilst on the subject of trees we had two lovely big Copper Beech trees in the grounds of the garden centre in a grassed area next to where the cars parked. The trees produced lots of nuts each year and we often collected the nuts, but always found the shells empty. However, every year we used to look in the grass round the trees and find self set seedlings that were carefully dug up and potted to be sold as cheap hedging plants, for specimen trees or even to be sold to people for õBonsaiingö. Copper Beech trees rarely come true from seed and you may get only one plant in a dozen that is copper and the rest are all green. That is why copper beech trees are dearer to buy than plain green ones. For best results they can be grown from cuttings, but

are not easy and will take anything from 12 to 18 months to root.

A representative came into the garden centre one day to show us a new product that had just come out and was only being sold to growers at that time. The product was water retaining granules which are added to compost to help cut down on watering. We thought that they were a good idea as it is a time consuming and tedious job in hot weather. We were told how much to add when mixing the compost so we ordered a quantity as we were due to receive all the bare root roses which had to be potted. The granules arrived and instructions followed carefully. We mixed the compost which consisted of peat, grit sand, lime, base fertilizer and the granules which looked like sugar but expanded when wet. We potted about 1,000 roses, labelled them, watered them and stood them on the beds in batches. The next morning when I opened up I got such a surprise as the concrete path down the nursery was covered with what looked like sago or large frogspawn. The pots were overflowing with it and it was all over the beds between the pots of roses. The whole scene was like something from a sci fi movie and had a surreal quality. There was only one thing for it so we mixed up a lot more compost, shovelled most of the jelly up and re-potted all the roses. The lad, girl and myself were out there all day clearing up the mess. The conclusion was that the rep had given us the wrong quantities to use so my husband rang the firm who apologised saying they would adjust the instructions. Nowadays the same product is supplied to garden centres etc in packets of small quantities for sale to the public. It is

very good stuff if used in hanging baskets and tubs but it is not a feed so it is no good being generous with it. If the instructions are followed carefully it really does make a big difference with the watering but if not you will have an attack by the ðkiller frogspawn!ö

A New Fish Department

My youngest son Alan had recently gone through a nervous breakdown and whilst he was not really over it Jack and I thought it would be good for him to get back to work again. It was suggested by my husband that he work for us at the Garden Centre. My son's response was that he would but only if he could do something to show that he was contributing to the business. As has been mentioned earlier Alan had started keeping some goldfish and Koi carp in the irrigation reservoir on the Garden Centre and his brother suggested selling goldfish.

We all thought about it and it seemed the ideal solution although my husband felt that there was not much potential. The Garden Centre had tried selling the odd pond pump and a few bits and pieces unsuccessfully before. As Spring came we located some wholesalers and bought 6 fibreglass tanks for holding fish stocks and Alan built a small cupboard, which could be locked up, on the back of an old garage. We filled the cupboard with stock and stored spare stock in a large brick potting shed at the bottom of the garden centre. Alan bought in aquatic plants bare root and potted them up. This was a policy that was generally adopted in all departments of the garden centre and enabled

us to be very competitive on prices. The range of goods and choice of fish we offered was very limited but at this time there were few aquatic outlets nearby and the trade increased rapidly.

The first year we did several thousand pounds on the new aquatic department which both surprised and pleased my husband so we expanded the show of goods and stock.

The sales site was moved onto some waste ground which Alan levelled and tidied up. Another 12 tanks were added with a bigger filter and a 12 x 8 greenhouse was erected as a sales shop. The second year trade doubled which impressed everybody and the third year we added another 50 per cent to the turnover.



The New Fish department Under Construction.



By this time my husband was paying Alan agricultural wages, which, although not high, enabled him to start saving quite a lot because he was living at home with no car to run. As the third season was drawing to a close my husband suggested covering the whole of the tank and fish display, which had been outside, with a large greenhouse and taking the 12 x 8 down for use elsewhere.

That winter Alan designed and built a 30 x 20 brick, timber and glass greenhouse installing all the electrics and water pipes as well himself even though this was probably illegal as electrics are supposed to be fitted to certain safety standards of which he was completely ignorant. When the greenhouse was complete Alan designed and built an aquarium room within it containing 56 aquariums for tropical fish. This new aspect of the fish department never really proved successful but trade went up yet again that

year with the new building. Incidentally because of where the greenhouse was built it was not built square. In fact it had no parallel sides at all. This meant that putting a sloping roof with an apex and valley in the middle was a work of art but it was successfully achieved.

After this 4th year trade fluctuated up and down with some good years and some bad but it never really grew any more. However the fish department remained an important part of the Garden Centre and when trade diminished in the rest of the centre, due to new competition, the fish department remained more or less constant.

The regular customers came to refer to Alan as the fish man but few new his name. Alan slept a lot during the week, because of his medication, when it was quiet and customers would come into the Garden Centre and ask if the fish man was around to serve them. Alan would then be summoned from the house while they waited and then would serve them. They never seemed to mind the constant waiting and seemed to think that they were getting special attention. Weekends were busy so Alan had to be in the fish department all the time but he took to taking a deck chair in to doze on between serving customers.

The second year we had a burglary so Alan fitted a silent alarm which rang in the house and we had many false alarms from birds and mice setting it off. We also had several attempted burglaries which were fooled by the alarm.

On one occasion my husband and myself had gone on holiday for a few days and Alan had gone down to the pub for the evening as usual to play darts. On returning home he locked up the house and went to bed only to hear the alarm ring about 15 minutes later.

We had so many false alarms that he thought nothing of it and got out of bed, got dressed and went out to reset the alarm. When he got to the greenhouse he found the padlock off and assumed that he had not locked it. Alan entered and switched the lights on only to find a young lad of about 20 or so hiding behind some of the shelving. Somewhat bemused Alan called out " Its a bit late for Xmas shopping isn't it?" He sheepishly came out from behind the shelves and said that he had not had time to get in earlier and was looking for a filter. He begged Alan not to call the police and quietly edged towards the open door.

They carried on talking and when he got near enough he made a bolt for it. It had not occurred to Alan to grab him and because he was on his own it would not have done any good anyway as he could not have phoned for the police and held the burglar at the same time. Needless to say he got away and Alan called the police who arrived a few minutes later. The first thing that they did was to check up on his personal record and when they found out that he was a schizophrenic they started questioning him totally disbelieving that anything had happened. Eventually when Alan showed them the would be thief's large bag that he had left behind they believed him but did nothing else and did not catch the burglar.

Special Requests

A customer came in to the garden centre one day and said, "I am disgusted, I have been to a garden centre and asked for a quote for a plan to be done of a new garden bed. We have just had the grass taken off the top and I was told the standard charge was £200 for a small garden."

I asked if she and her husband would be doing the planting.

"Yes," she replied, "We only wanted to know what plants to put in for all round colour."

I said that if she liked to bring me a rough sketch and size of the plot, whether the soil was lime or acid and which way it faced, I could give them some ideas as I had done a bit of garden planning in the course I had done some years ago. I sold her a cheap soil tester and she went away a happy lady. In a few days the lady and her husband came back with all the information required plus a photo of the house and garden. We were quiet at the time so I went through suggested plants with them which we stood in a spare patch that had just been cleared and marked them out on the sketch. I left them to think about it for a while and when I got back to them they said they liked what they had. I had also shown them pictures of what the plants would look like when mature of course. The next question was what was I going to charge them for the information. I said there would be no charge, so they loaded the car up with the plants, a bag of general fertilizer and a large bag of compost to put in the planting holes. About a year later

they came back and said how pleased they were with their garden. They had been so pleased that they had sent a friend who wanted some advice on her garden. It is always nice to help someone out and gives one a lot of satisfaction.

After this more and more customers seemed to come in wanting help with their planting and it is surprising how many people have no idea what their soil is like when asked. Customers would come in and say, "I want some plants for a particular place in my garden, what can you suggest?"

I would reply, "What is your soil like?"

Very often the reply would be, "The soil is dark."

If I asked, "Is it in the shade or sun? Is it acid or lime?" the answer would invariably be, "I don't know."

I would say to people, "It is a good idea to look at neighbours gardens to see what is growing round about as this indicates what will grow in your garden." However, so many people were coming in that did not have a clue what they wanted I decided to do something about it to make it easier to answer their questions. I got a fairly large stiff cover book, made several columns on its pages, then made lists of plants, trees and shrubs according to their requirements. There were acid lovers such as heathers, azaleas and rhododendrons. Another column was for plants that like limey soil and then there were shade loving plants. Other columns were for plants that like the sun, some that like damp wet conditions, some for dry sites and even one column for a few plants that will tolerate just about any condition. Also considered was the height and spread, as

plants that might be small when you buy them, can often grow to be quite large after a few years.

It took me two whole evenings to complete the listing of plants for the book but it saved a lot of time with customers. The customers really appreciated it, because, if we were too busy to spend a lot of time with them they could borrow the book and go round the nursery looking to see what they wanted. If they had any more questions then they could ask us. We often had people collecting a few plants themselves and then they would ask if we thought they looked all right together. We were basically a nursery so all staff had to learn a bit about the plants they were selling. With this in mind I encouraged the youngsters that we employed to study my plant lists and also to read other books on plants and gardening.

As the years went by we continued to change the site and add new bits. Eventually the old garage started to get into a bad state and we decided that we wanted more space undercover. So, we decided to remove it and erect a large poly-tunnel in its place. It would have been in the late 1980s when we took the old garage down and we hired a skip for all the wood and rubbish etc. The wood could not be burned because it had been well creosoted over the years and there were also several layers of roofing felt on the roof which had to be disposed of. It was quite a large garage and if the rubbish from it had been burnt it would have made a terrible smell and made lots of black smoke which would have been a traffic hazard on the nearby main road. While filling the skip we saw a car back up a bit and

come into the nursery, then the lady driver got out and opened the back of her car which she had parked near to the skip. My husband went over to her thinking that she needed some bags of peat or compost that were stacked nearby, but she said, she was going past and saw the skip and thought it would save her going to the tip. My husband told her, "Sorry, but the skip is for own use and we will need all the space in it for ourselves." He stood chatting to her for a while and she seemed alright about it. Now of course with all the re-cycling a lot of the big Garden Centres have waste containers for different things for the public to use. We did fill the skip and found room in it as well for a lot of cardboard and packaging from pots and tubs that had been ordered and stored in a big brick built shed. This gave us some valuable space for more stock.

A New Sales Shop



The poly-tunnel we erected was in other words a large polythene greenhouse. It was three bays wide and about 50 feet across. The length was also about 50 feet and the height was approximately 12 feet in the middle of each bay. Deep holes had to be dug and filled with concrete to set the supporting poles in. We all helped with this and I did my fare share of digging!!! There was one enormous sheet of heavy duty polythene to cover each bay and fortunately when it came time to put these on we had a calm day with no wind. It would be impossible in a strong wind to put on the covers as they would become giant kites and would easily lift several people off the ground. Each

sheet of polythene had to be fastened down to the metal frame by bolting wooden batons, wrapped in the edge of the sheet, onto the framework. The ends of the sheets were attached to wooden frames and then doors fitted onto the frames to enclose the end of the tunnel.

When the huge Poly Tunnel was finished we had a lot more room to display bigger items for sale, so among the things we ordered, was a stand that held rolls of bubble polythene, netting and horticultural fleece. These were all sold by the metre so we used to keep a measuring stick or yardstick as it was usually called, although it was actually a metre in length and a pair of extra stout scissors, by the stand to cut the rolls. As might have been expected some kind soul decided that they wanted a pair of strong scissors for themselves so the disappeared. After that they were always kept behind the desk. We used to sell a lot of the bubble polythene as the large bubble is especially good for lining greenhouses against the winter cold. The smaller bubble also sold for greenhouses and is easier to handle but a lot was sold for wrapping china and pictures when people were moving house. The fleece is a very good insulator and is ideal for covering plants that need a little more protection from the cold in a cold greenhouse or even for wrapping slightly tender plants outside to keep the wind off them. The plants can breathe through the material and also water can penetrate so they don't sweat as they would under polythene. We found good sales of the plastic clips used to fasten the polythene in metal greenhouses. For wooden greenhouse people just used drawing pins. Cutting the plastic mesh that was used to support climbing plants,

was very hard on your fingers, but folding it up into a tidy bundle afterwards used to cause all sorts of problems.

The government weights and measures inspector used to come round regularly to check that the weights and scales we used to weigh things for sale were correct. He used to stamp each weight after checking every year with a little government symbol. When he was told that we used a metal yardstick to measure the rolls of polythene etc he started checking that the length had not been altered each time he came and then he stamped this as well. We said that we could hardly make it longer so what was the point but he pointed out that if it was banged on the end it could become a little shorter each time it was hit. My son asked how we should measure the loose fish food pellets that we also sold and he told us that whatever we used it had to be approved. So Alan managed to buy a pint beer glass that had a mark on saying that it was exactly a pint. He then used this to measure a pint of fish pellets that could then be tipped into a plastic bag, sealed and priced ready for sale. We thought it was a strange measure for fish food which is normally sold by weight, but our scales were not sensitive enough to weigh such a light item and after all, we said maggots are sold by the pint for fisherman. When the measures man came back the next time we showed him the glass we used for the fish food and he murmured his approval until he realised that he could not stamp the glass to say that he had checked it!

We used to get a lot of waste from the nursery in the form of annual weeds, (not docks, nettles or dandelions) which

we used to rot down and compost. Any old compost from excess bedding plants that had died off or other spent compost from weeding the pots of shrubs was added to the pile. Grass cuttings and vegetable peelings were also included along with a sprinkle of lime between the layers. The whole lot rotted down in about 6 months in a small fenced off area that we kept covered. Then the resultant compost was bagged up in 80 litre bags and customers were only too glad to pay a small amount for each bag. Most used the bags as a soil enricher in their gardens and borders. This was re-cycling with a small profit. It was very beneficial to us because we would have had to hire skips to remove all of the excess soil. As it was people were paying us to take it away for us!! If more people did this type of recycling of garden waste there would be no need for the council to collect green waste now as some councils do.

The Trouble With Bullocks

We had one or two eventful times with the local farmers bullocks. On one occasion I had just got dressed one Sunday morning when I looked through the bedroom window that faced the field with the main road next to it. I saw 4 of the bullocks going through the field gate and start heading down the road. Some foolish person had left the gate open. I quickly put my coat and shoes on and could see the farmer was not about, so, I thought it better to go out and try and put them in rather than phone the farmer who would probably be quite a while coming. It was a busy main road but I managed to get one of the bullocks to turn round and go back to the field. Luckily the others started following him. A police car drove past and as they went by one officer opened his window and called, "Morning, you're doing a good job there," and with that, much to my amazement they drove on. Eventually I got all the bullocks back in the field and shut the gate behind them. Then I phoned the farmer and he thanked me, but, I did notice that there was a padlock put on the gate afterwards. I suppose it was interfering on my part as they were nothing to do with me but I was afraid they might cause an accident with the traffic.

Another incident with the farmers bullocks happened a little while afterwards. On the field side of the Garden Centre we built some long sunken cold frames to stand trays of cuttings and young plants in. Behind the frames was a wire fence and hedge between us and the field next door. One morning I went to open up and was surprised to find a young bullock walking round the nursery. He had jumped over the hedge from the field and walked along the frame breaking some of the glass and he was just strolling round. Fortunately he had not done too much damage and we managed to rescue most of the plants. It was lucky that he had not got into the greenhouse because we have all heard about bulls in china shops and I think he would have done as much damage in a greenhouse! I rang the farmer and he came and put the bullock back into the field. He said he was sorry and to prevent the occurrence again he put some more posts in with barbed wire strung on top. The bullocks did not come over again

One day we discovered a slit in the polythene at the end of the tunnel. The slit was quickly taped up with a special repair tape. The next day a very strong wind got up and the repair tape did not hold. The tear gave way and up went the sheet of polythene. The noise of the polythene flapping about in the wind was terrific and sounded very much like thunder. The pots in the tunnel started blowing about and everyone had to rush round and move the things that would spoil. There was nothing else that we could do until the wind dropped. It was a three bay tunnel and each section was bolted onto the cross bar but fortunately the other two sections held, so things were stacked in the remaining two

sections. Fertilizers were moved as far away as possible from the open space and pots and tubs were emptied of the bits and pieces they held so they could be stacked more easily. We had some books on a table which were all wet. We wiped them dry but of course they were all damaged so they had to be reduced. Some were sold but we gave the worst to the lad and girl to look through and take home if they wanted. One or two of the books were about plants and were used as reference books that customers could look through. A new section of polythene was ordered which arrived a few days later. We hoped for a calm day so that we could put the new cover on with as little trouble as possible. While we were waiting for the weather to change the metal framework was prepared with all the old bolts removed and all the wooden batons that secured the polythene were cut to length. Eventually a suitable day occurred and then it was all systems go to put on the new cover and secure it properly in one day. For weeks afterwards the customers wanted to know all about it and talked of nothing else.

In about 1990 I had an idea for making the frames for holly wreaths. I had been asked for wreaths the previous year and had made a few. I had no frames so I bent wire coat hangers into a rough circle. The shape did not look too bad when plenty of holly was wired onto them and the customers seemed very pleased with them. We had plenty of holly with lots of berries on it as there was a very large male tree that pollinated the two female trees in our grounds.

The holly rings had been made during the day and were left on the desk overnight. In the morning on opening the door I got such a surprise as all the berries on the rings had disappeared. We realised that mice had got in and eaten them all! So the boys had to cut some more holly and we had to redo the wreaths.

Talking about the holly trees, around Christmas time we used to get a few customers come in that new we had the trees and they would buy armfuls of cut holly for decoration. One lady in particular used to come in every year and say, "I have emptied the boot of my car, could I have my usual greenery please." She loved the freshly cut holly covered in berries and also had a pile of small yew branches cut with it from the two lovely big, old trees that were by the side of the house. Her house must have looked really picturesque decorated with all that bright glistening greenery, almost like an indoor garden. Unfortunately we did not get a preservation order placed on the Yew trees when we moved some years later and they have been felled as have some of the holly trees. It is a shame because they grow so slowly and they must have been hundreds of years old.

The next year I decided that we could make some better frames using pieces of wire netting. We had some sheets of strong wire mesh about 3 x 2 feet in size. These were cut with wire cutters into thin strips that were formed into sausages and made into a ring. They were filled with sphagnum moss and then tied with wire to keep their shape and hold the moss in. They looked quite good and were an

improvement on the previous years efforts so I set to with the lads. The lads were not very keen on the job as they said it was rough on their fingers but I told them that if I could do it so could they. They worked slowly but were keen enough to climb the holly tree to cut down the holly. Eventually we got quite a few made. We could have bought the frames I suppose but they were expensive then although like so many things I suppose that they have come down in price now.

I used to make hanging baskets up, some to order and some for sale. The hanging baskets used to sell well and were cheaper than most peoples as we only charged for the goods and not the labour involved in planting them. I got the boys to put lengths of nylon rope on the bars of the polythene tunnel framework to hold about 50 baskets. All were labelled with the price and those that had been ordered had a second label on which had the customers name. We then only had to untie the ropes then when customers came for their baskets. I also planted some tubs up for sale and the boys helped with those.

One day a lady came into the garden centre with two wrought iron stands made in the shape of wheelbarrows. They were about the same size as an average light weight barrow. She asked if I could plant them up for her and if so she wanted four large baskets and two tubs doing as well. The baskets and wheelbarrows were to be lined with moss. I asked her when she wanted them for and the reply was, "In a weeks time." That gave me plenty of time to do them but I found lining the wheelbarrows with moss was not

easy because of the space between the bars. So, I threaded fine green wires between the bars to make a foundation for the moss after which I put in a lining of black polythene that had holes pierced in it for drainage. Next I added the compost with slow release fertilizer in it and then planted them up. Trailing plants went round the edges and there were plenty of things like Busy Lizzies added. The baskets and tubs were easy to do as I was used to doing so many each year. The boys then shuffled the stock round in the sales area so that the customers order could be put all together. We put some rope round the space with a label saying that it was an order and not for sale.

When the customer came for them she was pleased and came again the next year but the following year she came and said that she was disappointed she could not have them done as they had to move and she would be too far away. Her husband's works were moving so they had no choice. It was shame to lose such a big order every year but such is life.

One lady brought in two herb pots that she wanted planting up, not with herbs, but with alpine or rockery plants. I thought, "This is different." The tubs had holes in the sides and took about 18 plants in each. The compost had to be mixed separately from our usual mixes as it needed more grit in it. The finished tubs looked quite effective but were rather heavy to lift, so, the boys put them in the car for her. She said her neighbour would get them out for her the other end as she lived on her own.

Another time someone brought in 6 of her own tubs that she wanted planting up. She said that she wanted them to look especially nice straight away as she wanted them to stand outside her tent at the County Showground. Other people brought in bowls to be planted with indoor plants for presents.

Over the years we had all sorts of things brought in to be planted up including 2 or 3 glass carboys. For those that don't know what a carboy is it is a large glass bottle made in the shape of an upside down balloon. Traditionally they are over 18 inches across and have a narrow neck. They are very strong as they are made of thick glass and designed to hold corrosive chemicals such as acids for industrial use. Because of the neck and the shape they are very tricky to get the plants in. I found the easiest way was to fasten a teaspoon on to the end of a cane by tightly binding it with cellotape round the handle. When planting a carboy you should first pour in a layer of gravel and then add the compost on top. The compost should have small pieces of charcoal mixed into it to keep the soil sweet. After levelling this out the plants can carefully be added. Fern type plants are the best because they like the shady damp conditions that exist in planted bottles. Flowering plants should not be used because when the flowers drop they will go mouldy, rot and cause all the other plants to rot as well. After an initial watering there is little need to water as the moisture will be retained in the bottle for months. I planted one or two up for show and this encouraged customers to bring in all sorts of large bottles. One lady brought in a sweet jar and asked me to plant it up for her. I thought

about it and said, "I think the only way to plant it up is to lie it on its side and do it like a bottle with a ship in." She agreed and said she would come back in a couple of days. It was not easy but the customer was pleased with it.

The Edwardians made glass cases for housing small displays of plants in. They looked like miniature greenhouses and often had leaded lights. The glass cases were quite popular in their day and I suppose this was where the idea to plant bottles up with plants came from. In recent years the idea has been given a new lease of life with display cases made from plastic in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Over the years we had all sorts of things to plant up and they all made life interesting.

Another thing that customers started doing was bringing plants in and asking my advice on how to bring them back to health. Some just wanted re-potting into fresh compost to perk them up and on one occasion someone came in and said, "I have a large plant in the car that wants re-potting, but I am afraid of breaking it. Will you do it for me please?"

I said I would if she would trust me with it. She laughed and said, "I will leave it with you for a couple of days. If any bits do break off please feel free to use them for cuttings," She added.

She did not know what the plant was and I was wondering what I had let myself in for until I saw it in the car and realised it was a Hoya Carnosa or the Wax Flower Plant. The Hoya is a trailing plant and this one was wound round and round a ring of wire. I started to untangle it but it went

on and on. I could see I was going to need more space to do the job properly, so I cleared a space at the back of the poly tunnel and then one of the boys helped me to carry the trailing stems and pot over to it. The stems are fairly brittle on the Hoya so we had to be very careful unravelling the tangle. When we had it stretched out the stems were over 6 or 7 feet long. I put the roots of the plant into a larger pot with fresh compost and then inserted a bamboo ladder into the new pot. Two split green canes gave it more height and then wire was used to tie it all together and provide more support for the plant. Next we wound the Hoya stems back in and out and round the framework. Although it was a very fragile plant we did not break off many pieces, but the couple of bits that did break were used as cuttings as the customer had said we could. When the lady came back to collect the Hoya she was very happy and pleased with the result. She paid up for the pot, compost, etc and carefully took it home.

One day a gentleman came to the garden Centre with a dog in his car. It was quite a cool day so he thought it would be alright to leave his dog in the car. He closed all the windows and pushed the door to. We noticed he had left his keys in the car but he said it would be alright as he would not be long. He bought a bag of compost and walked back to the car, but as the dog saw him it got excited and jumped up at the window putting its paw onto the button on the door locking it. The man looked in to his car and scratched his head wondering what to do. His spare car keys were at home and his wife had gone out. He thought that he could go home by bus, but realised that his house

keys were on the key ring with his car keys inside the car so he couldn't get in his home anyway to get the spares. Then another man came up to him and said he could open the car for him if he liked. The man agreed and then the second man asked us for a piece of stiff, thin wire which we found for him. He said, "I shouldn't really be doing this so keep it to yourselves please."

In just a few moments he had got the door unlocked and let the other man in to his car. The car owner was a very happy man, especially as no damage had been done. He thanked the man who had unlocked the car for him and asked him what he could give him as thanks. The other man just replied, "Nothing thank you, just forget what I did" and then he left.

A Storm To Remember

One afternoon at about 5-15pm it started raining heavily. Then suddenly without warning there must have been a cloudburst because the rain came down really heavy and you could hardly see through it. The garden centre was lower than the main road and the ground sloped down from the pavement slightly. The rain was so heavy that the drains in the road could not take the water away fast enough so it just poured over the pavement, down the drive, into our car park and on into the polythene tunnel. We had to move fast but with the two boys helping I moved as much as we could off the floor. We put some pallets on top of each other and then stacked the half-hundredweight bags of fertilizer on them. Smaller bags were piled on the desk. All the goods on the bottom shelves of the fixtures had to be quickly moved upwards onto higher shelves which were already packed tight. When it had started to rain I had managed to dash up to the house and put on my knee length Wellingtons but in the end it was a waste of time because as I moved round the water was so deep that it was washing over the tops of them and filling up the insides.

One of the lads only lived 5-10 minutes walk away so when home time came he was able to get home without too

much trouble but the other lad lived about 3 miles away and had come on his bike. It would have been impossible for him to ride it in that weather so my youngest son offered to take him in the car. They managed to get the bike in the car and while it was still pouring set off. Little did we know that a lot of the local roads were closed due to flooding and they had to make several detours both there and back. With the long circuitous route they took it was about 1 ½ hours later before Alan got home although the journey was only about 3 miles normally each way by main roads.

After the rain had stopped the water in the tunnel soon drained away but we closed a little earlier than usual anyway. When I took off my Wellingtons I literally poured the water out and then stuffed them with newspaper which helped to dry them. The next morning all signs of the water had gone so we swept the floor, put everything back into its place and life continued as before.

After the flooding of the drive and polytunnel we decided to dig a large drainage sump in the car park near to the tunnel. We knew that under the whole site was a layer of almost pure sand and if you dug down a couple of foot it could easily be reached. The lads dug a hole about 5 feet long, a couple of feet wide and about 3 feet deep. Then they lined the sides with paving slabs and carefully placed two more 3 X 2 feet slabs on top to cover it. The idea was that the water would run into the hole from the drive in heavy rain and because the bottom was almost pure sand it would drain away very quickly. The sump worked fine and

prevented any further flooding but did cause problems for one lorry driver.

Concrete paving slabs are plenty strong enough to walk on but not meant for heavy lorries to drive over, specially unsupported slabs. One day a lorry was delivering to the garden centre and wanted extra space to turn his vehicle on. We warned him about the drainage sump under the slabs but he would not listen. Foolishly he drove onto them and of course they broke under the weight. He tried reversing out of the hole but the front wheel was in too far and he was afraid of ripping off the whole wheel assembly. So we unloaded the lorry where it was and suggested that he jack up the axle before reversing. The problem is how do you jack up the front of a lorry in a 3 foot deep hole? Someone had the bright idea of asking the local vehicle repair garage to see if they could help. Fortunately they had a suitable large jack and some time later with a bit of a struggle the driver managed to extricate his lorry and he drove off after a lot of bad tempered words were said.

Garden Centres had traditionally always traded for 7 days a week although according to the 1950 Shops Act this was illegal and shortly before we put the garden centre up for sale some of the councils decided to prosecute shops for trading on a Sunday. A number of people, some religious and others who weren't, formed a group called "Keep Sunday Special" and it was their aim to pressurise the Government into action on the law. Until the law was clarified we could only sell plants and fish. We put notices up informing the customers but a lot of people came in

asking for things like compost and often caused a scene when we said that we couldn't sell it to them on a Sunday. Eventually in 1994 a new act was passed legalising Sunday trading but with certain restrictions. Shops under 280 square metres could open all day under the new law but larger shops could only trade for 6 hours and then only between the hours of 10am and 6pm. This meant that we could open the fish department longer but not the rest of the Garden centre. As this was impossible to do because you had to walk through part of the garden Centre to get to the fish we decided to open both together at 10 am. Another drawback to the new law was that it banned all trading on an Easter Sunday to appease the religious groups. As this was normally the busiest day of the year we were not very happy about it but the fine for illegal trading was up to £50,000 so we took no chances.

Growing Opposition

When we first started the nursery, as we always called it, there was no local opposition in the form of other garden centres at all, but as the years went by they sprang up all over. I think the first to open was in a small town, Rugeley, about 3 miles from us. If I remember correctly one of the owners had a hardware shop in the town before buying a small piece of land by a roundabout at the top of the town to build the garden centre on. It was a small modern purpose built garden centre but it did not last long and was soon closed. Some years later after standing derelict a petrol station and fast food establishment were built on the site. Another very tiny garden shop was set up in a small factory unit on one of the industrial estates in Brereton at about the same time but that only lasted a few months before closing. Also a large factory unit at the other side of Brereton was made into a DIY and garden centre and this too did not last long before closing.

A nursery some miles away bought a piece of land at the other end of the little group of villages where we lived and after a struggle was given planning permission to set up a garden centre there. This, although small, was more successful and is still trading today. We always felt that even though it was only about 2 miles from us they never

had any impact on our trade. 3 miles further still a farm set up a craft and garden centre which has been running for many years now. The garden centre is very much down market and has improved in recent times but the craft centre is immensely popular drawing huge crowds on a weekend or in holiday time.

The garden centre that had the most effect on us was a new Cramphorns garden centre that was built about half a mile away. It was and still is very smart and much more up market than we ever were although it is trading under a different name now. They had a centrally heated shop with carpeted floor, posh purpose made stands and prices to match. Although it was a garden centre they sold a lot of gift products and a lot of large pet items such as dog beds as well as bird tables etc. A café/restaurant was also housed in the same building. The people employed there were really sales/shop staff and most of them knew little about plants. Their shrubs were grown elsewhere and simply priced and displayed at the garden centre, whereas, a lot of ours were grown on site from cuttings or young plants by the people that were selling them. As a consequence our shrubs were very much cheaper on the whole. I always called our centre a nursery and not a garden centre so that people would understand that we were not like the big places, but before we sold up we were selling all sorts of things to do with gardening. I hasten to add we did not sell any gift products or fireworks, we did not have a huge display of Christmas decorations and we never installed a coffee shop. We did of course have the fish department but

that was really as far as we went towards being a garden centre.



An Aerial Picture Of The Garden Centre In Its Heyday.

When my husband and I eventually decided to retire we put the house and garden centre up for sale. I hoped that it would not be sold to a builder as so many are, but that whoever had it would continue to trade. If someone younger bought it perhaps they would have more energy than us and with some alterations and different stock they could bring some more trade back in. We were both in our seventies then and had lost some of our drive.

The house had been neglected and needed doing up with things such as central heating and double-glazed windows needing to be added. It also had some cracks in the walls and damp in places. The garden centre trade was decreasing as the local competition increased so this became a less important feature of the sale although there was a lot of stock.

After many fruitless months with an estate agent we had a visit out of the blue by a young man in his thirties who had a young family. He was told about the problems with the house and he said, "That's no problem, I'm a builder. My father will enjoy looking after the plants, it will be a nice little job for him." He told us that he had no money to pay for the stock but had just built a new house in a nearby village. He suggested a straight swap for the houses and he would borrow a little to pay for the business.

The house was a fair exchange but we wanted a lot more than he offered for the stock. However we went to see his house and were very taken with it so eventually accepted

his cash offer on the condition that Alan should retain all the stock in the fish department.

Also it was decided that Alan should continue trading in the existing fish department and simply pay him rent for the greenhouse. The exchange went through smoothly enough but a couple of weeks afterwards after we had moved out of the house the young man who had bought the site said to Alan that he wanted him out of the fish department so he could knock it down and rebuild. We were annoyed that he had gone back on his word but there was little point in trying to do anything so Alan decided to hire a van and move his aquatic shop to another garden centre.

I don't think that the young man or his father knew much about gardening or plant culture as when we called one day for some peat we saw some Bay Trees being potted into compost that contained lime. Bay trees don't like lime and should be potted into lime free compost or 'Ericaceous compost' as it is called. If plants such as these aren't put in the right compost they don't grow very well and indeed some of them may even die. Putting plants into the right compost is important for customers to avoid disappointment and money being wasted, but it is even more important for a business as their profits rely on growing and selling healthy plants. I personally think that the young man had no real interest in the trade and always intended to use his building skills on the site to develop it for housing and did not intend to keep running it as a Garden Centre. A few years later he claimed that he could

not compete with the opposition and got planning permission to build some holiday chalets on the site.

This was some years after we had left but I was sad to see the garden centre that I had built up over many years get knocked down and go for building. Recently a number of garden centres that we know of have gone the same way.