

## THE HISTORY OF HALL'S OF HEDDON

By Stan Hall

My Father, William Nicholson Hall, was born at Bowes House Farm, Chester-le-Street, in the County of Durham in 1879. He started work at the age of twelve and a half, at a wage of eight pence (3p) per day, as a garden boy and later with William Younger (Breweries), firstly as a jobbing gardener, then drayman's assistant and finally becoming involved with the actual brewing process. During this time he also acted as gardener to the Manager. He was married to Barbara Anne Clifford in 1909 (both were teachers at the Sunday School they attended) and by the commencement of the First World War their son, Will, and daughter, Rita, had arrived, followed in 1915 by second son Tom. It was about this time that Dad joined the 6th Btn Northumberland Fusiliers, and within a short space of time he was serving in Flanders as a stretcher bearer. One can only try to imagine conditions in France - on one occasion, in the course of his duties at Ypres, Dad was blown out of one shell hole into another. The result was that he was completely blinded for three days and, in addition, he had innumerable minute pieces of shrapnel embedded in his skin up to 40 years later. He was taken prisoner at Pashiondale and whilst a prisoner contacted Nephritis, a disease of the kidney. At the end of the War Dad was repatriated, discharged from the Army and was awarded a partial disability pension of ten shillings (50p) per week. Dad took on his old job at the brewery, but because of his disability he was unable to stand the extremes of heat and cold and after some spells of illness his doctor advised him to try to obtain outdoor employment.

It was now 1920 and my sister Edna was born. In 1921, a two acre garden attached to Heddon House, Heddon on the Wall, was offered to rent and (conveniently) only half a mile away an unoccupied two bedroom farm cottage was available. So, in April 1921, the family (which now numbered six) moved the 17 miles from Chester-le-Street to Heddon on the Wall, eight miles west of Newcastle. The garden consisted of five almost derelict glasshouses with an aged heating system and two acres of much neglected orchard overgrown with nettles, thistles, Docks and couch grass. The clearing of this was hardly the outdoor employment that the doctor had envisaged! The daunting task of clearing the area was greatly eased by my Uncle Tot, who, on his day off from his job on the railway travelled 17 miles by bus and on foot, to clear this or that area and build a bonfire that would stay alight for a week, until his next visit. The business started as a general nursery and the first list, printed in 1923 makes interesting reading - Bedding plants from 6d (2.5p) or 1/- (5p) per dozen, according to type Dahlias 6d (2.5p) each: 5/- (25p) per dozen.

By now Will and Rita were helping out at nights after school and at weekends. There was another mouth to feed in 1924 when I came along, which could hardly have helped matters, especially as the great depression of the late 1920's was creeping upon us. A time when essentials in clothing and shoes, etc., had to be purchased (unless they were hand-me-downs, which they invariably were) in late Spring or Summer as there was certainly no money available at any other time of the year.

During this time Dad 'hawked' around the neighbouring villages, first with a pony and trap and later with a second hand van christened 'Dinah') selling vegetables and produce from the Nursery - Apples at 6d(2.5p) a stone, and jam which Mother had made (as well as looking after the seven of us) About this time, Dad had his arm broken while trying to start 'Dinah'. This did not stop activities, it only made things more difficult, such as picking apples out of 18ft trees with his arm in a sling, and driving 'Dinah' on his round. As the Nursery was completely surrounded by agricultural land it was necessary for survival to widen the clientele. This was done by opening a plant-cum-produce stall in St. Andrew's Street in Newcastle. These consisted of trestle tables about 6ft x 4ft, rented to local growers at something like 1/6d a day (Saturdays only). As sites were offered on a first come, first served basis, to get a good site you had to be prepared to leave home very early in the morning - they were long days. Even from such precarious beginnings it was gratifying to notice that a regular, though small, clientele was being built up.

In 1932 Newcastle Corporation opened a purpose built Plant and Produce Market where stalls were permanent and were under cover! From here on, business started to improve as we were able to put on displays of various flowers to take orders, as well as having a continuous selection of plants, depending on the season, on offer. Additionally, since sons Will and Tom had joined Dad, some specialisation took place and a modest mail order business was established. Specialities in 1935 were Pansies and Violas (95 varieties), Dahlias (115) varieties) and Chrysanthemums (169 varieties). The Pansy enterprise was terminated rather dramatically by the unwelcome efforts of a hungry blackbird. This bird got trapped inside a frame holding several thousands of pansy and viola cuttings in the process of rooting and, in search of worms and snails, it pulled out every cutting and label. Exit pansy enterprise.

Production now concentrated on Chrysanthemums and Dahlias assisted, no doubt, by the annual catalogue, which in 1935 for the first time included illustrations. At the same time the range of Hardy Border Plants and Alpines was being expanded for sale in the Nursery and in Newcastle. In 1937, 197 varieties of Dahlia were on offer, including several imports from the continent - Angleterre, Goldfasan, Altmark and Zauberflote come to mind.

#### FRESH FIELDS

The Nurseries at West Heddon were now proving too small to cope with the expanding mail order trade and for the production of other horticultural crops, so in the Spring of 1937 a 10 acre field with a pleasant southerly aspect was purchased at Ovington (some five miles west of Heddon). The following year two x 60ft x 12ft propagating houses and two 60ft x 20ft growing houses were erected, which Tom was pleased to take over and manage, especially in view of the run-down state of the original glasshouses at Heddon.

#### EXHIBITING

We had been putting up trade stands at various shows on Tyneside in the 30's but the most important result was being awarded the Henderson Trophy for the Best Trade Exhibit at the Newcastle Horticultural Society Show in November, 1938. This was against several firms of national repute, including Woolmans of Birmingham and Dobbies of Edinburgh. With better growing facilities we were bold enough to foray to London (also in 1938) when at the National Chrysanthemum Society Early Flowering Show our exhibit received a Large Silver Medal. The following year at the RHS Autumn Show our group of Chrysanthemums was awarded a Silver Banksian Medal. To describe the setting up of an adequate water supply at Ovington would require a book in itself. Suffice to say that after a water diviner had promised an ample supply of water at about 50ft, drilling commenced and continued - and continued but to no avail. Funds were running low and there was the question 'Do we go ahead and drill deeper or do we abandon the effort?' Because of the expense already incurred it was decided that we must go ahead and at 325ft depth and after considerably more expense, a sustainable water supply was secured. The 2" diameter borehole had cost almost as much as the land and would have been sufficient to build another four 60ft glasshouses!! This was in 1939 and the beginning of the Second World War. Brother Will having already joined the RAF VR (Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve) was very quickly away in training whilst Dad and Tom joined the local Home Guard Platoon which used the Nursery workshop as a base. The emphasis now, of course, was on vegetable production and it was an extremely difficult job securing stocks of approximately 300 varieties of chrysanthemum and about 180 varieties of dahlia for the future. Non-food crops could only be grown providing they were grown between the rows of vegetables and the space available allowed that only 4 or 5 plants of each variety could be grown. It was inevitable, therefore, that by the end of hostilities in 1945 many varieties had been lost.

#### WAR TAKES ITS TOLL

Brother Will progressed quickly in the RAF VR and by 1940 was flying Blenheim's with a Photographic Reconnaissance Unit. On 14th April 1941, his plane was shot down over Holland on his last tour of duty before he was to be transferred to Wick in the North of Scotland on a training assignment. Will had been the mainstay in setting up the mail order business in chrysanthemums and dahlias and had actually started hybridising with some success. I shall never forget the discussion we had on his last leave at Christmas, 1940. We were looking at the depleted stocks, he said, "Wait 'till this (the war) is over, we'll show them how to grow them.' I do not know exactly who he meant by 'them' but it certainly had a great effect on me, I being only 15 years old at the time, and was the newest addition to the family business. At the end of the war in 1945 we were all keen to get back to growing the flowers that during the years of austerity were banned. Hosts of new dahlias were coming onto the scene. Unfortunately, many of indifferent quality and questionable health. So it was that in 1945 an association of commercial dahlia growers was founded. The British Dahlia Growers Association was formed with the motto "Honest Endeavour towards better and healthier dahlias". To this end it ran trials of seedlings for members using a

strict pointing system. A spectacular variety could gain a Blue Riband Award, although this was rarely given. Achievement Awards were given to other varieties which had secured over 80% of points. These trials pinpointed the better varieties that were appearing and had the effect of raising standards all round. Another remit of the BDGA was working with the Plant Health people to find means of reducing the incidence of virus disease in dahlias. I was appointed Secretary of the Northern Region (BDGA) in 1950 and had an amazing 87 members - all commercial dahlia growers! Wherever did they all go? I became Chairman in 1970 and remained so until the number of specialist dahlia growers fell to the point beyond which it was impossible to carry on the trials and conferences which had been its life-blood over the years. During the 50's we exhibited at about 10 shows annually, publicising the dahlia, with groups of various sizes which collectively, would have amounted to somewhere in the region of 4,000ft. Our first exhibiting visits to the National Dahlia Society Shows in London commencing in 1951 when we entered the six vase classes for both Small Decorative and Small Cactus Dahlias and during the period from 1951 to 1957 we were awarded First Prize and Silver Trophy for Small Decorative on four occasions and First Prize for Small Cactus five times. Present day exhibitors may be interested to learn that the six vase classes in those days called for 9 blooms of one variety per vase - green earthenware vases about 10" tall and extremely 'narrow waisted'. You would be lucky to get three stems down to the bottom of the vase, the remaining six blooms had to have their stems chamfered to fit those stems already placed. There was no such thing as 'Oasis' Blooms were carried dry, packed in large cardboard cases on a layer of woodwool, lined with tissue paper with pillows (a roll of tissue paper filled with wood-wool) to take pressure off the flowers. The journey was by rail (excess luggage) and taxi or railway van across London to the RHS Halls. The first job on arrival was to unpack the blooms, cutting off about an inch of stem before putting into buckets to recover. One of our Trophy Winning Classes of Small Decorative (probably in 1954) seemed to stand out head and shoulders over the other entries in the class, and were probably as much an advertisement to Dobbies of Edinburgh as to ourselves because three of the varieties, namely, Brill, Edinburgh and Excel, were their introductions. The other three were Buttermere (Barwise), Kendal Pride (Webb) and Gerrie Hoek (Hoek). Looking back to the '50's I seemed to be spending more and more time with Dahlias, attending Regional Meetings and General Meetings of the BDGA. Judging trials at Hartlepool, Cardiff and Harrogate. Judging Dahlias in the immediate area, and, of course, maintaining our own planting stock of approximately 5,000 plants. Even so, I did meet, and in 1953 was married to Evelyn Blair. She soon discovered that my job was not the usual '8 till 5' and she was never really happy when I had to spend nights away from home. I owe Evelyn a great debt of gratitude, as not only has she looked after me well over the years, and raised two fine children, but has been in charge of the Packing Department for more years than I care to remember. If any job was delayed, or a person was off, Evelyn was always there to fill in.

TUBERS

Although dahlia tubers were not offered to mainland customers until 1962 the first sales of tubers were to Canada and New Zealand in 1955. In fact, it was interest from overseas, due to advertisements in the NDS Annuals that induced us to start experimenting into tuber production, so from a modest beginning we now regularly supply customers in eleven countries. To enable us to export dahlias, we are obliged to submit our Nursery and stock to the following inspections -

PESS: Pre-Export Soil Sampling, to ensure that Potato Root Eelworm (*Ditylenchus destructor*) is not present.

GSI: Growing Season Inspection, to ensure that the stocks in the field are visually free from Dahlia Mosaic, Cucumber Mosaic and Tomato Spotted Wilt (Viruses) and pests and diseases.

PEC: Pre Export Certification, issued only after the inspector has satisfied himself that every trace of soil has been removed from the tubers and that there is no evidence of 'foreign' bodies. It goes without saying that these regular visits and inspections from the Plant Health Department, not only ensured that stock going overseas was of a high standard, but had the effect of raising quality throughout the entire stock.

Note: Since the introduction of Plant Passports in 1993, exports to countries within the European Community do not require pre-export certification, however, the regulations still apply to all other countries. On 22nd June, 1960, my Father passed away, after a short illness at the age of 81. It shows something of the tenacity of the man that with the set-backs of poor health after the First World War, and extremely difficult conditions during the depression of the late 20's and early 30's he was still able to establish and build up a respectable horticultural business. My son, David, was born on 14th April, 1961, co-incidentally, exactly 20 years to the day from when my brother, Will, died in World War II. David, after showing an early interest in gardening, did a three-year sandwich course in Commercial Horticulture at Writtle College in Chelmsford, doing his sandwich year at Blooms of Bressingham, after which he joined the family business. He is now doing the combined job of Nursery Manager and Financial Director. This situation allows me to spend more time with the dahlias. Daughter, Judith, was born 13th September, 1964, and on leaving school started work at the Nursery, in the office. She is now married and is in overall charge of the Mail Order part of this chrysanthemum and dahlia enterprise.

#### TRADE EXHIBITS

The first trade exhibit we staged at the National Dahlia Society London Show was in 1961 (Silver Medal). This was followed in 1962 by the award of the Harry Stredwick Trophy and Gold Medal (Best Trade Exhibit under 25ft). Up to the 60's I think it is fair to say that the vast majority of Dahlias were being raised by Commercial growers such as Bollego, Moorse and Bruidegom in Holland and Dobbies of Edinburgh; Lister's of Rothsay and Barwise of Burnley, to mention just a few. About this time, however, there was evidence that many amateur growers were having success in hybridizing,

starting off with Bill Wilkins of Camberley in Surrey. He it was who raised the varieties with the "Minley" prefix. Minley Boy, Maid, Pride and Carol, and in 1960 "Hadrians Gold" (SD) which was the first variety that we had introduced to receive the Blue Riband of the British Dahlia Growers Association. In introducing these raisings of the late Bill Wilkins we had, albeit unwittingly at the time, initiated a service to amateur raisers and the dahlia growing public which has continued until the present time. Briefly, a gentleman's agreement is drawn up between the raiser and ourselves (the introducer) that ensures payment to the raiser of "Royalties" on all sales of tubers and plants of the stipulated variety during the year of introduction. During the intervening years we have introduced at least 120 varieties by this method, and Royalties have been paid based on sales. As you would expect, payments are linked directly with the popularity of the variety. Some payments have been as little as about £20.00 but these were in the minority. Many have been in the £50.00/£100.00 area. Several good exhibition varieties have earned the raiser many hundreds of pounds and at best one raiser got over £1,000 for his seedling. I could not possibly mention all raisers and the varieties they have bred over the years, but many have contributed greatly to the Dahlia and deserve recognition. In 1963 "Charlie" Aldred from Beccles raised "Valetta Wells" (MSD) and several more in later years. Jimmy Rooke (past member of the NDS Executive) raised "Betty Russell" (syn. Yellow Tempo). In our second "Harry Stredwick" Gold Medal winning group at the 1969 NDS Show (the first one was in 1962), we featured three varieties that had not been seen in London before, namely "Rothesay Robin" from Lister's "Trunkey" and "White Kerkrade" raised by John Manson in Edinburgh. The Royalty he subsequently received was to say the least quite beyond his expectations. My very good friend, the late Arthur Lashlie (Chester-le-Street) was a regular local and national exhibitor and he and I travelled to London together from the mid 50's for 20 out of 21 years. He was having some success at hybridizing and in 1973 we introduced "Carter Bar", his first of several notable raisings. Another extremely good personal friend was Alan Dunlop (Gosforth, Newcastle) who was an extremely able grower and exhibitor. He became interested in hybridizing in the mid 70's. Because he was restricted with space we had an arrangement, which worked extremely well until he tragically passed away in 1988. Alan saved the seed and we grew it on at West Heddon. During the flowering season Alan would come up, generally on a Sunday morning and we would go through the seedlings together, assessing, selecting and rejecting as we went. I will never forget those wonderful mornings. Alan had quite a large vocabulary, and I must say that I learned a few adjectives, which although unprintable, were extremely descriptive. Alan was extremely selective when assessing seedlings, consequently any varieties which he raised bearing his prefix "Davenport" (the road on which he lived) were of high quality. His first in 1976, Davenport Pride, securing an Award of Merit from the RHS. Then there was Davenport Sunlight (MSC) several more and then his last one introduced in 1989, Davenport Honey. He would have been quite 'chuffed' if he had known that 'Honey' was adjudged best vase in show at the Scottish National in Stirling in 1993. In 1977 we introduced the first seedling from Doug. Williams (Clwyd), Alltami Supreme (SB) and this was followed in succeeding years with quite a few varieties with the Alltami

prefix which had the effect of strengthening the sections to which they belonged. Then in 1979 Frank Docherty gave us Jill Doc (MD) which was the forerunner of a few useful varieties from Hartlepool.

#### A MEMORABLE YEAR

1981 was a memorable year for several reasons. Firstly, it was the year in which we celebrated the firm's Diamond Jubilee and during which we had the honour of being awarded four Achievement Awards for dahlias introduced on behalf of raisers on Tyneside. 1981 was also the Centenary of the National Dahlia Society, during the celebrations for which we were delighted to welcome to our Nurseries amongst other overseas visitors, a coach load of dahlia fanciers from New Zealand and Australia. It was a real pleasure to meet personally several regular customers who previously had been only names and addresses in an order book. It was perhaps significant that exports increased a hundred fold from that year!!

During the 80's the third generation became involved in the business. Niece Maxine at the Ovington Branch in charge of Hardy Border Plants, and Bedding Plant production and son and daughter, David and Judith at Heddon. In 1984 we had the honour to introduce on behalf of Yorkshire's dahlia stalwart, Neville Weekes, the small semi cactus "Morley Lass". Sadly, he passed away last November. His contribution to the dahlia was legend. Since the 50's and 60's when we exhibited on average at ten shows a year, we have restricted our displays considerably. With the inauguration of the Harrogate Great Autumn Show in 1975, the brainchild of Alan Ravenscroft of the Northern Horticultural Society and Harrogate Parks Director. We have exhibited every year (except 1990 - Gateshead Festival Year) securing either a Gold or Large Gold Medal on every occasion. The fact that the leading dahlia exhibitors from England, Scotland and Wales attended Harrogate had some bearing on this decision. You could call it a central meeting point for all our customers. We welcomed the inauguration during 1985 of the NDS's exhibition trials at Bradford. This has proved to be a useful exercise and a great help to exhibitor members of the society. Together with the RHS/NDS trials at Wisley, all aspects of the dahlia are covered - except suitability for cut flowers. One of the first varieties to secure recognition at Bradford was 'Neal Gillson' (MD) raised by Joe Kidd (Darlington) Northern Committee Member. David Boyd, Newcastle upon Tyne) who will not be unknown to readers of this article, raised his first seedling in 1989 under the name of 'Cloverdale' (SD). David has, during the last eight/ten years, had remarkable success in exhibiting at the major shows in the country, winning several individual championships and innumerable other awards besides. Although 'Cloverdale' is the only seedling to his name at the moment, I fancy that there will soon be several more coming along, and you can be sure that they will have the form necessary to win.

#### GATESHEAD NATIONAL GARDEN

FESTIVAL - 1990

The year of the Gateshead National Garden Festival was a really exciting year for us for several reasons. As one of the outdoor displays, we planted and maintained a bed of dahlias covering a wide range of varieties and classifications under the title "The Colourful World of Dahlias". The display received the award of a Gold Medal for the Best Trade Bedding Display. In addition, our exhibit in the NDS/Festival Dahlia Show secured a Large Gold Medal and Premier Award. To commemorate the event we were pleased to be able to introduce "Gateshead Festival" raised by Roy Howes. Other awards included - a Gold Medal at the RHS/Festival Show for Hardy Border Plants and three Large Gold Medals at other shows at the Festival including the National Chrysanthemum Society/Festival Show and the Harvest Festival Show. During 1990 I had two hip replacement operations, one in March and the second in July. I recall with some amusement mixing "Chrysal"? into the water we were using to stage at the NDS/Festival Show using my crutch. The plan for the outdoor dahlia display was designed from the hospital bed. 1990 also saw the introduction of "Radfo"(SSC) raised by 80 year old Scotsman, Bert Fowler.

In 1987 we started a re-building programme which was intended to cover a period of eight years, at two year intervals, replace all the existing glasshouses at both nurseries, the first of which were built in 1938. As I write these notes, we are three quarters through the scheme, and enjoying the pleasure of working in modern, light glass with automatic environment control. A far cry from the broken down glasshouses Dad inherited in 1921.

In 1994, in addition to listed varieties in our catalogue we had stocks of 54 varieties which are on trial for possible inclusion in future catalogues. It is certain that many will never reach the dahlia growing public. It is equally certain that a few of them will make a name for themselves and carry the dahlia forward into the twenty first century.

Stan Hall.