

April heralds the beginning of Spring, and thoughts turn to gardening for the coming year. It also brings back memories of Merton Nurseries. This lay opposite the Four Crosses garage on land now occupied by The Brethren Meeting Room and, since it closed 16 years ago, new residents in the community may not be aware of its existence. It was first and foremost not a 'garden centre' but a 'nursery', the likes of which are rare today.

The business began in the 1960s when Herbert Lewis and family moved back to Bicton, after he managed to transfer his work from COD Donnington to the Army Careers Office in Mardol. He spent all his early life in Bicton as a schoolboy before becoming an apprentice grocer with Morris & Co in Frankwell, progressing to the flagship store on Pride Hill (now occupied by WH Smith). He subsequently moved to Newport and served during wartime in the Royal Armoured Corps at Sandhurst, before working at the COD Donnington. The bungalow, known as Merton, was built by brother Alan Lewis on land owned by brother Walter Lewis, both of whom lived in the family home at Milnsbridge.

Herbert always had a lifelong interest in gardening as did his father Ernest before him. Together with brother Alan he developed the then nursery in the field around the bungalow, where they first grew cut flowers such as Dahlias and Chrysanthemums for sale at the roadside and erected their first wooden greenhouse which enabled them to begin growing summer bedding plants. Herbert, meanwhile, as well as working, started to develop his own garden, mowing the grass of the field with a scythe. The current lawn in front of the bungalow is still turf from the original meadow, which has been mown and treated over the years and still shows signs of original ploughing from earlier times. He also began planting many varieties of cultivated varieties of conifers which have their origins around the globe and they became the backbone of the garden.

In 1970 he took early retirement from the civil service at 60 and then began expanding the nursery in earnest. Local employees from the village came to work growing bedding plants and Mary Fowles, for instance, continued to work there for the next 30 years. June Hughes, the gardening correspondent of Bicton Village News was also an employee.

The nursery reached its peak in 1991, just as the new Shrewsbury By-Pass was opening. Passing trade at that time had brought personalities such as Virginia Mckenna, Lady Isobel Barnett and Richard Baker (newsreader) as customers, but now the new road was undermining it. Later, Chris Beardshaw came with BBC Gardeners World to film both the garden and the hosta collection amassed by daughter Jessica. Herbert, over the years, had further developed his own private garden and it was designated as a fundraiser for the Severn Hospice and the National Garden Scheme. Mayors of Shrewsbury together with the Multiple Sclerosis local group held garden parties here on the lawn.

In the early days, trays for bedding plants made of wood were assembled on site and plants grown on outside in cold frames. A further three wooden greenhouses, erected and made by Alan, who was a former carpenter, were heated by coal fired stoves heating water in cast iron pipes. One greenhouse had to be demolished when an elderly lady driving an automatic car drove straight into it causing much broken glass. She remarkably emerged unscathed but was forbidden by her son to drive again! Two more aluminium frame greenhouses were subsequently erected in place of the timber greenhouses.

Materials such as potting compost and lawn sand were hand mixed and bagged on the premises. Every 4 weeks, spent mushroom compost came in bulk from a local mushroom farm and also had to be bagged for sale. Such was the demand customers would bag their own and a load could disappear in a matter of a few hours.

Potatoes grown in the field were lifted by hand to supply 'new potatoes' in the summertime after which wallflowers were hand planted to be lifted in the Autumn and taken away in large plastic sacks, recycled and sold to us by local farmers.

The nursery gained a reputation for selling things loose and weighed on site, not in pre-packs as today. The customer could select their own seed potatoes by hand from some 50 varieties. Customers came from far and wide and it was after the nursery closed that the 'Potato Days' started at Montford Village hall.

The nursery shop grew steadily and was managed by the late Margaret Owen. Jim Francis, local carpenter, extended it over a number of years.

Garden centres were beginning to emerge offering year-round shopping with catering and franchises selling a much wider range of goods not garden-related whilst supermarkets too entered the competition. Traditional nurseries, unless they developed a specialism in growing one type of plant and operating at plant fairs and shows could not survive the revolution in shopping habits. Even the larger nurseries such as Bayley's and Percy Thrower's succumbed to purchase by Dobbies and Wyevale respectively, both national chains.

Plants formerly grown by nurseries are often now supplied by large concerns from Holland and by wholesale growers.

The nursery closed in 2001. After protracted arguments with planners, the land was purchased by The Brethren for their meeting room, being non-residential. Herbert died when he was 96. His garden and home are still maintained by daughter Jessica and husband David Pannett.

Over the years the nursery catered for a wide area of Shrewsbury and over the border into Welshpool and beyond. Herbert Lewis was a mine of information and many gardeners sought his advice, whether on growing vegetables, flowers, trees, shrubs etc.

He is fondly remembered by many older persons and the family are proud that his memory lives on with the naming of Lewis Way in Shepherds lane, adjacent to the 'nursery'.



Herbert Lewis



