

BERKHAMSTED'S FAMOUS NURSERIES

by 'BEORCHAM'

Unless you are middle-aged or elderly, it is unlikely that you have ever heard of H. Lane and Son's Nurseries. What was once one of the district's largest businesses, founded in 1777 and owned by the same family for generations, gradually declined and ceased to exist some 30 years ago.

Having known a few members of the Lane family, I was delighted to read a recent article in the *Gardeners' Chronicle*, headed 'Praising the Famous', in which 'Woodsman' recalled nurseries of the past and described Lane's as 'one of the greatest of them all.'

EXPORTING VINES

The story has often been told of the world-famous apple, Lane's Prince Albert. Less familiar is *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Lanei', the best of the golden conifers according to 'Woodsman', who goes on to say that Lane's chief speciality was vines, grown on the site of a medieval hospital, now occupied by the Post Office.

Henry Lane rented a cottage and started cultivating the site nearly 200 years ago. At first he

specialised in hedging plants, carrying samples under his arm as he walked from market to market to take orders. In every sense it was a growing business, employing an ever increasing labour force and offering customers an enormous selection. At a fairly early date vines were added to the firm's specialities, and by 1840 Mr. Lane was exporting grapevines to Belgium, France and Germany. 'Talk about taking coals to Newcastle!' an old employee once remarked to me.

It was Mr. Lane's great knowledge of marketing which brought international fame to what was really Thomas Squire's apple. Mr. Squire was constantly experimenting with seeds and cuttings, and on the day Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort called at the King's Arms Inn for a change of horses (July 26th, 1841), he planted out an apple seedling aptly labelled 'Victoria and Albert.'

IN GREAT VARIETY

The tree bore excellent and unusual fruit—so unusual that Mr. Lane took cuttings and eventually renamed the apple 'Lane's Prince Albert', honouring himself as well as the Prince Consort. The original tree was cut down in 1958, when Mr. Squire's house (The Homestead) and an adjoining house were demolished and replaced by the shops facing the Outspan building.

By Victorian times Lane and Son were issuing elaborate catalogues, some in hardback editions. I have a copy dated September, 1862, part of which

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was printed by William Cooper, of Berkhamsted, though a more substantial portion bears the imprint of Henry Smith, of Cambridge. Under the heading 'Apples' (102 varieties) appear 'Pippin, Ashridge pine-apple' and 'Cornish Gilliflower', described as 'first-rate, but rather shy bearer.' Another apple was called 'Gooseberry', and in the list of 62 real gooseberries the rustic name of 'Ploughboy' is balanced by a more industrial variety called 'Jolly Printer'. With grapes in 48 varieties and twelve closely printed pages of roses, one may wonder where such enormous stocks were kept.

HERE AND THERE

The answer is provided by a map of 1878. In addition to the original site, nurseries had been established on the west side of St. John's Well Lane, the west side of Park Street, the south side of what later became Shrublands Road, the west side of Cross Oak Road (Oaklands), and between Park View Road (which did not exist then) and Boxwell Road. There was also a large outpost of empire at Potten End, Balshaw Nursery. A spectacular reminder of Lane's long association with Potten End is the tall monkey-puzzle tree in Vicarage Road.

Periodically an old nursery was abandoned and a new one started elsewhere. At one time Lane's cultivated what is now Anglefield Road, and on Canal Field a nursery devoted largely to roses was familiar to all who travelled by train. To quote a writer of 1917, who vaguely estimated the extent of the Home, Balshaw and Broadway nurseries at 'from 150 to 200 acres', no one could pass through Berkhamsted by road or rail without being aware that Lane's Nurseries were 'a principal feature of the town.'

FRUIT—AND DRINK

Loosley's Directory for 1892 says that the Lane family employed nearly 100 men, plus 100 fruit-pickers in summer. At one period most of the men of Potten End worked in the nurseries, and many a housewife grumbled about husbands who returned too much of their hard-earned money to Lane's, who also owned the Red Lion public-house. Incidentally, at one time Lane's had a small brewery on the Post Office site and supplied ale to the King's Arms.

Until the 1939-45 War, the glasshouses which lined St. John's Well Lane were a familiar sight. Also familiar, and not so greatly appreciated, was the whiff of Lane's patent manure, called 'Phedall.' Free delivery within 15 miles of the town spread the odour far beyond the offices and packing sheds at Park View Road corner.

During their long association with the town, members of the Lane family were active in church and civic life. For several years, in the 1840s, Henry Lane was a churchwarden of St. Peter's. Frederick Quincey Lane, with an appropriately fruity name, was an early member of the Urban District Council, and his wife edited the short-lived *Hertfordshire Constitutional Magazine*, which first appeared in 1888. Bertram H. Lane also served on the Council

and for a time was captain of the fire brigade.

'One strong, straight Lane for 200 years—and still going strong' was a once-familiar advertisement. But the firm would not have attained its 200th anniversary until 1977, and barely outlived the second World War. But there are still many trees bearing good crops of Lane's Prince Albert Apples, and I have no doubt that a number of *Review* readers have trees and shrubs which came from those strong, straight Lanes. And who will ever forget those magnificent roses and rhododendrons?

CITIZENS' ADVICE

The Citizens' Advice Bureau will be open to help you at the 'Gable' in Prince Edward Street on Tuesday, Thursdays and Fridays from 10 a.m. to 12.30 p.m. The telephone number is Berkhamsted 6930.



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