

40 years on

Clive Lane

Unfortunately, for the first time ever, Clive was unable to attend this year's AGM, held on 5th June. However, his speech was read out, and for those of you also unable to be there, we've reproduced here.

I've been asked as a founding member of The Cottage Garden Society - 40 years ago - to recall some of the highs and lows since the Society emerged in response to the changing garden fashion at the time – hard landscaping and easy maintenance gardens. Cottage gardens and cottage garden plants were about as fashionable as an outside privy and the older species and varieties of cottage garden plants were about to disappear as cottage gardens were 'ripped' up and replaced with heather and conifers, the 'buzz' plants of the time.

The founder members specified as our aims:

Firstly: to encourage and promote interest in cottage gardens, both past and present.

Secondly: to further the use of those plants associated with cottage gardens, with particular emphasis on the species (rather than new large-bloomed cultivars).

Thirdly: to assist those wishing to create or maintain a cottage garden.

Enthusiastic endorsements from an up-and-coming gardener who wrote a column in *Practical Gardening* and whose name was Geoff Hamilton, and gardening journalist Pat Collison, who wrote favourably about the society in her gardening diary for *Popular Gardening* confirmed our gut instinct that there were many like us who were horrified at the demise of cottage gardens, and by the time of our first AGM on the 25th September 1982, the membership had risen to 233.

At that AGM, Pat Collison was elected as CGS President and remained so for the next 13 years. We were delighted when, in 1995, Geoff Hamilton, who had always shown an interest in the Society, agreed to take over from Pat Collison as our President and mortified at his untimely death in 1996. Geoff's contribution to the success of The Cottage Garden Society cannot be under-estimated, and his unexpected death was a great loss to his many friends and admirers in the Society.

On joining The Cottage Garden Society, Rosemary Verey wrote that it was a red-letter day for her. And it was indeed a red-letter day for all of us as we were introduced to some very special cottage gardens, hidden gems with knowledgeable and generous owners, most of them and their gardens now gone. However, some of you may remember Oak Cottage in Shropshire, owned by Ruth Thompson, venue of our first National CGS visit and Herbert Exton's enchanting cottage garden in Lincolnshire, one of the gardens featured in Rosemary Verey's book *Secret Gardens*.

We recommended Leslie Holmes's Camp Cottage in Gloucestershire to Geoff Hamilton who thought it was the best cottage garden he had seen, and he featured it on *Gardeners World*. We feasted our eyes and emptied our pockets at Bell Cottage in Bicester, where Susan Farquhar grew rare pinks. At Belmont House, in the grounds of Tynesfield House, still privately owned at the time, we were invited to view a magnificent collection of perennial Asters and Michaelmas daisies, built up over many years by the Misses Allen and Huish, legendary growers whose catalogue listed 240 cultivars.

Then there was East Lambrook Manor, Margery Fish's garden in Somerset, where we spent an idyllic summers day, with the local W.I. on hand to provide a sumptuous lunch of freshly cooked roast turkey and roast beef with

seasonal vegetables, and later cream teas. These are just a few of the many visits that will always remain in the memory and most of the cottage garden plants purchased from the various nurseries will still be grown in our gardens today.

As well as rescuing old named pinks, double flowered primroses, double flowered wallflowers and many other endangered plants, which were distributed through our Plant Bank during the 1980s, we introduced two completely new plants to the gardening world. At our first national CGS plant sale in Betley, Cheshire, in 1988, three plants of *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing' a beautiful black-leaved cow parsley, were donated for sale by Anne Hamblin, a Derbyshire member. The plant had been discovered in a hedgerow near Reading by Dr. John Richards and this was Ravenswing's first public appearance. As the plant comes easily from seed it was quickly distributed to members and is now available world-wide.

In 1992 at our CGS plant sale in Taunton, Somerset, a white-flowered form of the wildflower *Centaurea scabiosa* with finely cut, lacy, chalky white flowers and a reddish-purple centre was introduced by a Dorset member, Mrs. Janet Johnson. This plant too, was found in a hedgerow, actually a lay-by, and was named by Janet as *Centaurea scabiosa alba* 'Cottage Garden'.

A huge leap in membership came in 1986 as a result of the Stoke Garden Festival. Two years earlier, the Society had been approached by the National Garden Festival Committee to create a cottage garden for this, the second National

Garden Festival. We expected to be asked to provide a bed or a border of cottage garden plantings, but, instead, the brief was to create a complete cottage garden surrounding a thatched cottage to be sponsored by Women's Weekly magazine. Without ever having any experience of staging an exhibition garden, and with no idea of the enormous undertaking we were signing up to, we accepted the challenge. Fortunately for us, one of our members, Stephen Crisp, at the time head gardener at Leeds Castle in Kent, now the head gardener at Winfield House, the American Ambassador's residence in London, undertook the design of the garden and commuted regularly from Kent to Stoke-on-Trent to supervise the work. I organised all aspects of the project and members volunteered their services.

A whiff of dung announced the arrival of Cliff and Sadie Halsall with a trailer load of manure from North Wales. Cliff, who was in charge of the vegetable patch, had us all painting the unappealing red-brick walls surrounding the cottage with a mixture of manure and milk. We all smelt a bit 'whiffy' that day. Anne Hamblin grew all the bulbs in pots and the rest of us planted and weeded on a weekly rota. It was hard work, but we had a 'lotta' laughs.

When we started planting, our site was more bog than a garden plot. Several of us were digging a pit into which we were to lever a fully grown, gnarled old apple tree when Anne, who was a very big lady then, lost her balance, slid into the water-filled hole, and sank deep into the mud. It took some effort for us (and much hilarity) to pull her out, minus her boots which had filled with muddy water. The garden won a gold medal and best theme garden in the Show.

In 1990 we exhibited in the courtyard garden section at Chelsea and won a Silver Gilt Medal (I still have the rambler rose 'Seagull' used to cover an arch there, in my Betley garden). We exhibited in the Pavilion the following year and again, were awarded silver gilt.

World-wide interest in the Society resulted in an influx of overseas visitors. Several groups of members from the U.S.A and Australia visited CGS gardens in the UK, including my garden, and were given a warm welcome. CGS funds were for a time greatly increased by the popularity of cottage gardens amongst the Japanese for whom an English cottage garden was something of a status symbol. In 1994 we were asked by a large Japanese china manufacturer to sponsor a series of teapots and herb dishes which were to be sold in Japan at what seemed at the time to be a ridiculous high price. We enjoyed substantial royalties for some years from these products until an economic crisis hit Japan and sales plummeted and eventually the products were withdrawn from sale.

David & Charles, book publishers in Devon, asked us in 1990 to submit a proposal for a book on cottage gardening, I was to be the main writer and Pat Collison agreed to introduce each season with Pat Taylor as Editor. A photographic competition amongst members provided the pictures used in the book, and a photograph taken by the late Ruth Duthie won first prize and was used for the cover of the book.

The Cottage Gardeners Companion was an instant success and a 'best seller' for David & Charles in 1993. It eventually went out of print, but requests for copies of the book continued to pour in, and Jill Bennett, our magazine editor at the time, saw to it that we bought back the rights and supervised the reprinting of the book. There is still a demand for copies of 'The Cottage Gardeners Companion' which we hold in stock, and although its style may be perceived as a little out-dated in these days of lavish coffee table books, its content is as good as ever.

As a result of the success of the Companion, David & Charles commissioned me to write *Cottage Garden Annuals*, published in 1997, and 'Plants for Small Spaces' published in 2005.

By the time of our 10th anniversary in 1992, The Cottage Garden Society was 'on a roll' with many local groups springing up all over the country (currently 34 groups). Dina Penrose, who later became Chairman after Douglas Taylor retired, founded one of the first, the West Midlands Group, and took on the huge undertaking of organising our stands at major shows. Pat Mansey, a committee member for many years, who regularly contributed articles and drawings to the magazine and later became Vice-President of the Society, successfully founded and ran the large and flourishing Norfolk Group. Most of the groups founded at this time are still going strong, and interest in establishing local groups in other areas remains strong, which is most encouraging and welcomed.

Trevor Wall and Bob Windsor, members of the Derbyshire Group, made their mark by organising national CGS annual plant sales in different areas of the country. These plant sales were so successful that on two occasions, we were forced to contact the police to help control the traffic, which was creating havoc and blocking country lanes. Both Trevor and Bob joined the Committee, Trevor as Secretary before succeeding Dina Penrose as Chairman and Bob as secretary.

The Seed Exchange, ably run by stalwart, Margaret Mason, and the Specialist Groups - The Snowdrop Group (with its Members' Snowdrop Day and two informative snowdrop newsletters, one in November and one in January, organised by Pamela Lucas), the Aquilegia Group, the Garden Chat Group and 'The Talking Cottage Gardener' are all available for the benefit of CGS members. Use them or lose them, they need your support.

10 years ago, completely out of the blue, the Society received a very substantial legacy from the estate of Kenneth Black of North London, a long-time CGS member with a passionate interest in the old cottage garden plants. The Kenneth Black legacy is being used to fund CGS promotional activities, and recently, the complete refurbishment of the CGS database and website which Tracy Jones and Sue Clarke have overseen and helped to design.

Television appearances in 'Bloomin' Marvellous' - a West Country TV production - and the cottage garden episode in the 'The Great British Garden Revival' series brought in many new members. Repeats of the GBGR series, world-wide, continue to attract interest and new membership.

This is just a 'snapshot' of the progress of The Cottage Garden Society over the past 40 years from someone who has been there from day one. Each of the people mentioned have played a major part in the development of the Society, but there are many, many more of you who have contributed in different ways and whom it has not been possible to name today - I thank you all.

To reach 40 years is pretty amazing, but I have no doubt that we can look forward to our 50th anniversary with confidence, as a refreshed committee to be chaired by Sue Clarke, who is a long-time member of The Cottage Garden Society and a passionate cottage gardener, itching to steer the Society to a bright future in these changing gardening times, and Nick Hamilton our brilliant President at the helm.

Patricia retires from the Chair today, but not, I am pleased to say from the committee. The last few years have been challenging for The Cottage Garden Society. Changes which have been necessary to ensure the future of the Society have not always met with approval, and there have been some difficult and unpleasant encounters with several members over these. And then Covid - but perhaps the least said about that, the better!! Thanks to Patricia's unflappable approach to these difficulties, we kept our heads, and have pulled through; the future remains bright, and with our new website attracting members from across the world – New Zealand, Austria, U.S.A. Switzerland in the last few days – The Cottage Garden Society will survive.