

**GIANT DAHLIAS**

**by**

**TOM BEBBINGTON**

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# Foreword

## **FIRM FRIENDS BY DAVE SPENCER.**

It seems a lifetime ago since I first met Tom Bebbington at the Midlands Dahlia show in 1974. At that time we were both relatively new dahlia exhibitors at county or national level, having both graduated from the local horticultural show scene, in our own areas. In those days, dahlia shows and indeed horticultural shows in general were much better supported than they are today. When I arrived at the Midlands show venue in the early hours of the morning in 1974, it was absolutely heaving with exhibitors setting up their blooms. Free staging space was non-existent, so my only course of action was to try to share a table with another exhibitor. It probably went down like a lead balloon when I approached Tom to take over part of his staging space, but he obligingly agreed. Within a short while we were chattering away as if we had known each other for a lifetime. This chance encounter was to cement a friendship that has seen many ups and downs over the last four decades, and although we have always lived 150 miles apart, have stayed firm friends for all of that time.

As I read through the text of Tom's book, it brings back so many memories of our various adventures and help that we have given to each other over the years. For those of us that are dedicated dahlia growers, reading through this book will remind us just how much effort and desire it takes to become a national champion. Right from the time Tom became a specialist dahlia lover, it was always the giant flowered types that were his favourite and in particular, those with decorative formation. In this book you will find many wonderful pictures of both individual giant blooms and also superb Multi-bloom exhibits, but if you have never seen these spectacular flowers in the flesh, it is a sight you will never forget. The average giant decorative bloom measures 12" in diameter and 9" in depth. With the record being held by a bloom of the American variety EMORY PAUL which measured 22" in diameter and is the largest ever recorded.

They say a person's life turns in a full circle in the fullness of time. In Tom's case this would apply to the fact that he is returning to the challenge of becoming a leading giant grower once again in 2011. Having more money than sense I have gambled a bottle of good Scotch whisky that he can't put together an exhibit good enough to win an award in the A. T. Barnes trophy class for twelve different varieties of giant decorative at our National show, over the next few years. Knowing Tom, he is single minded and determined enough to achieve, but I will make sure I am there to help him consume the amber nectar, when he does.

# **GIANT DAHLIAS by TOM BEBBINGTON**

I believe that I was destined to be a grower, born a Taurean and the son of an ex-miner. My father was a keen gardener who produced food for the family table. My first memory of this was when, at only five years old, living in an estate village named Kingston on Soar in Nottinghamshire. I used to play in the gardens at Kingston Hall where there was a large walled garden in which dahlias were grown, an area of fruit trees and a beautiful Italian garden where I was allowed to roam at will. The gardens were kept immaculately by a head gardener and under-gardeners. These gardens possibly influenced me as to what I wanted to do in later life. My next memory was a move from Kingston to Tissington in Derbyshire. This lovely village has not changed during my life time. The hall is four hundred years old and is still in the Fitzherbert family. The village has a Norman church and with its well dressings in May to celebrate Ascension Day makes this picture postcard village a popular tourist attraction. The next move was to Whyston in Derbyshire and finally back to the Castle Donington area in Netherfield Lane where the house, situated out in the country, had a large garden. Part of this garden was laid out with neat rows of early flowering chrysanthemums which my elder brother Wilf tended. The main garden was worked by my father for the production of vegetables for the family. At the age of nine I was given a small area which I looked after and grew flowering plants and vegetables. Wilf and his chrysanthemums were a big influence on my future in horticulture.

## **MOVING AROUND**

Forced with another house move, of which we had many in my early years, we eventually ended up in Castle Donington. We occupied three different houses and at the second of these I took over the growing of the chrysanthemums as Wilf married and left home. On his Wedding Day I was on the way to the church with my mother and father when I saw the Oakworth greenhouse delivery lorry with my first ten by six feet greenhouse on it. I wanted to return to the house to supervise the delivery. I was told we had to get to the wedding on time so I had to give the driver instructions where to leave it and then proceeded to the church. By this time I was seventeen and an apprentice in the engineering trade. The greenhouse was erected and glazed using putty with my brother Roy's help. During the first year in the greenhouse I grew tomatoes in the summer and then pots of late chrysanthemums that flowered in November. I was already growing early flowering chrysanthemums in the garden as well as dahlias which I had acquired from a local nursery. My only dahlia varieties were Doris Day a small dark red semi-cactus, Edinburgh a small bicoloured decorative, Nantenan a yellow large semi-cactus and Lavengro a pink giant decorative. The latter I was able to keep and grow from this early time through to when I ceased growing dahlias. It was included in many of my exhibits in

London along with the giant decorative Holland Festival that tended to be very flat and clock-faced. The early chrysanthemum varieties grown were Evelyn Bush and Ermine, both white and incurved along with some reflex varieties, Tracy Waller and its sports but found that these were hard to prepare for the shows as you had to dress each bloom.

### **FIRST SHOW**

My first show was at Thulston Village Hall where money prizes were awarded. These amounted to one pound for the first prize, ten shillings for the second prize, which is equal to 50p in decimal money and five shillings for the third prize which is equal to 25p. I was successful in winning a number of prizes, the prize money accumulating to more than I could earn at my work in a week. This was then followed by many more local shows including one in Diseworth Village Hall. Years later I had my own nursery in the same village. I also entered the Loughborough Town Hall Show and came away with five first prizes, a silver medal, two cups and won the overall show on points, as well as over a week's wages in prize money. This was my first show under National Dahlia Society Rules and judged by N.D.S. judges as it was an affiliated society show. I also exhibited at Kingston Agricultural and Horticultural show which was their 65<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition on Monday 30<sup>th</sup> August 1965. I staged a stand of dahlias, no more than fifteen feet in length, and was awarded a first prize and prize money of £25. Sadly this was the last Kingston Show because of the damage to the ground and essential recovery in time for autumn grazing of cattle. The government, at this time, had decided that Bank Holiday Monday should be moved from the first Monday to the last Monday in August. I was able to exhibit at this show because it enabled the dahlias to flower in time.

### **TOOL ROOM SHOW**

I exhibited at the early and late Shepshed Chrysanthemum and Dahlia Shows without much success until I moved to live in Shepshed. I also entered the Slack and Parr Horticultural Show having been influenced by the man who I worked under as an apprentice. He increased my knowledge of propagating and growing techniques. Each Friday lunch-time in the tool room there was also a single bloom show. This was great fun and keenly contested by the workers. Friday was also the day I took bunches of dahlias, chrysanthemums and tomatoes, which I sold to supplement my costs and this proved to be very profitable. This continued for a couple of years. I moved house in Castle Donington to Hilltop where there was a large plot of land plus a large garden. This enabled more produce to be grown and the dahlias increased from fifty to three hundred and then to four hundred plants. With the success at local shows other local growers were eager to buy plants from me. From the sale of plants in the spring and produce through the summer and autumn I only opened my wage-pocket to check that it was correct and

lived off what I earned from the plants. I became friends with two growers in Castle Donington who had a small nursery and grew dahlias and chrysanthemums. They had old greenhouses and I helped them with their renovation. Using the timber off-cuts I spent one winter building my second greenhouse. This was thirteen by eight feet and made in four sections with the roof being put on afterwards. This gave me more production space for tomatoes in the summer. In 1967 I got married and returned to live in Shepshed. My two greenhouses took quite a long time to take down and re-erect. I carried sixty centimetre square slabs in the back of my Morris 1000 car with the result that the rear springs came through the floor so this was curtailed until a friend who had a van helped to get all the slabs and greenhouse footings to Shepshed.

### **NEW BEGINNING**

In many ways this was a new beginning as my father who had always helped me to do the donkey work i.e. digging and hoeing gave me a spade for my wedding present. The rear and front gardens at Oakley Road, Shepshed, were all lawn but the front garden was surrounded by flower borders. I immediately found a local farmer who supplied me with well-rotted manure. Two large loads were delivered onto the drive which did not amuse my wife or neighbours. I then set about double digging the rear garden and wheel barrowed the manure into the trenches as the digging progressed. The garden was seventy by thirty feet and I left a small lawn at the top of the garden of eight by twenty feet. The first two years at Oakley Road were mainly spent erecting greenhouses and six feet fence panels as I soon realised that it was a very exposed spot, the wind coming from the west in the autumn. I did not attend any shows for two years but still enjoyed growing the dahlias and chrysanthemums. I also had the painting and decorating to do on the property. By coincidence I was in Loughborough shopping on a Saturday afternoon when I noticed a big banner at the Town Hall announcing that the Loughborough Chrysanthemum and Dahlia Show was on that day. I decided to go and have a look round and was greeted by a couple of their members, Denis Percival and John Bramley. They enquired as to where I had been in the last two years and persuaded me (which did not take a lot) to join the Loughborough Society. Denis worked in Holland and at this time was where most of the new dahlias were coming from so he had lots of new varieties. I was introduced to the Leicestershire Dahlia Society which we visited once a month during the winter for lectures and talks on dahlias. This chance meeting was to change my life.

## **TALKATIVE BERT**

At the first meeting of the Leicestershire Dahlia Society I attended I met a young man about the same age as myself, which was strange as most dahlia growers were older. His name was Paul Hassell from Hinckley and over the next few years we became good friends, not only looking after each other's dahlias when we were on holiday but also sharing a vehicle together to travel to the shows which helped to keep the costs down. At Leicester I met the president of the National Dahlia Society, Derek Hewlett, who at the time seemed very aloof. I was a virtual novice and he was the National Champion. I also met Bert Wiseman – he never stopped talking and over the years I found that I could never get a word in. He was a very knowledgeable person especially on the growing and judging of dahlias and we eventually became good friends. I made another friend at Leicester, Terry Dayman, one of the founder members of the Leicestershire Dahlia Society. He also served on the National Dahlia Society Council and encouraged me to attend their show. Terry and I became partners in a garden centre business for a year. I exhibited the following year and for many years afterwards at the Leicestershire Dahlia Society Shows with varying success, not having it all my own way as I had done at the Loughborough Shows. I continued to exhibit at the Town Hall in Loughborough and while waiting to collect my trophies I overheard a person say, "He wins it every year". With that I thought it was time to let someone else have a chance at their local show. I continued to support the society over the coming years and exhibited at other affiliated shows around the country.

## **HERBERT BROWN CLASS**

At the Annual General Meeting of the Leicestershire Dahlia Society there was a discussion regarding the Herbert Brown class exhibit. At this time I was not actually aware of what the Herbert Brown exhibit was all about but was soon to find out at this meeting. Apparently the society had entered into the class which was for societies to compete against each other at the National show in London. Terry Dayman had grown dahlias and organised this exhibit for as long as the Leicestershire Society had been in existence but he was quite happy to stand down and let someone else have a go. A committee of four, chaired by Don Thorne, was agreed and the three other members were, Paul Hassle, Tony Pickering and me. During the winter of 1972/73 we met and discussed plans on how we were going to win the Herbert Brown, as we meant to be successful. We discussed the varieties and made arrangements to acquire the stocks needed to propagate all the plants that were required to obtain the blooms for the exhibit. In early July the entry form was sent off to Philip Damp the General Secretary of the National Dahlia Society. We notified all members in the society that we were taking part and a visit to all their gardens would take place. This was done fortnightly until the week before the show, and it gave us a chance to give advice on growing and the number of blooms to be left on each plant. This arrangement did not go down very well with one or two of the members as they thought us an elite bunch. The four of us were

totally dedicated to the task. The week prior to the show a limited number of gardens were revisited to select blooms which we considered would be good exhibition quality and these were to be cut the day before the National Show. We had all agreed that any blooms grown by the committee of four would be given to the society before we put our own exhibits up at the show. With all the blooms cut and loaded into a van Don Thorne and Tony Pickering drove down to London during the night as Paul Hassle and I both had vans for our own exhibits. If any of our blooms were required they would be passed on to the society. The year was 1973 and in those days the National Show in London occupied both the R.H.S. Old and New Halls where it was always a scramble for vases as there was never enough to go round. Over 40 exhibits were staged in the class and when the bell went at 8.30 am we thought a good job had been done. Leaving the hall we all went round to the local café for breakfast which became a tradition.

### **MY BIGGEST FAN**

My biggest fan at the time was my father and at 73 he decided he would like to go to London, to see the show, as he had not been there since 1910. His health was not good as he had suffered from silicosis for years but said he would like to see London again. We walked from the RHS Halls down to the Houses of Parliament, along the Embankment to Tower Bridge, and the Tower of London, then back along the Embankment and sat and had a coffee, two cups costing five pounds. What a rip-off! We continued to Buckingham Palace and the Mall before returning to Vincent Square and waited in a queue for the doors to open to see the result of our work. There was great jubilation as we had won by half a point. The half point came about because in those days before judging of the blooms commenced each exhibit was judged for staging, i.e. appearance and neatness. Ours was not the best staged exhibit but I think we came in the first three. When the blooms were judged two societies were on the same number of points. The staging points were taken into account so we won by half a point. We returned triumphant to Leicestershire with the Herbert Brown Trophy and the Silver Medal. It was agreed to share the trophy for three months each during the year and that the society should have the Silver Medal. We had achieved our objective on our first attempt and it proved to be our last as Paul Hassle and I had similar objectives at the London Show. We both wanted to win the A. T. Barnes Trophy which is for twelve giant decorative dahlias in twelve varieties, exhibited by a single member. This class had been dominated by Derek Hewlett who had actually won it over twelve times during the years that it was held in the RHS Halls in London. At this show, in the early morning, you could see why Derek had won it so many times. He occupied the steps to the dais with his rows of giant decorative dahlias, one in each vase, cut down to the exact same height, possibly up to eighty blooms from which to choose his final twelve. He also had several helpers fetching vases, carrying blooms into the show and giving their advice. This of course was all legal because Derek was the grower and these were just helpers. In the early years his helpers



were Dick Greenaby, John Poleski (known as Jam Roll) and Kenny Hext along with advice given by Joe Batten and encouragement from his young son Andrew (who was also destined to become a National Champion).

## **GROUND IMPROVEMENT**

I carried on developing and improving the ground at Shepshed and in 1970 started to erect supports in order to cover the dahlias during flowering. Most top growers were now covering their dahlia blooms. I began to specialise in giant semi-cactus dahlias as well as growing a few giant decoratives but I soon realised that the ground did not suit the giant cactus and semi-cactus varieties as the petal formations were more decorative. The stock of these varieties was kept and grown at Kegworth on my allotment. I also had a garden at Kegworth that belonged to a friend so I took the decision in 1972 just to grow giant decorative dahlias. At Shepshed I grew around one hundred and seventy plants with another hundred in Kegworth and eighteen plants in Castle Donington at my father's bungalow to give him some interest in the dahlias. He also grew six hundred seedlings for me each year with others being grown at various friends' gardens.

## **FIRST SEEDLING**

It was at Castle Donington in 1972 that I selected my first seedling to grow on for a second year and named it Charnwood Beauty. This was a giant semi-cactus variety and the only parent known was the seed bearer Respectable, which was the top giant semi-cactus at that time. The covers I had made were eight by six feet wooden frames covered by 500 gauge polythene. These were erected a week before the first show and were wired down to the metal framework as Oakley Road garden was an exposed spot. The sides, not protected by fencing, were covered in Rokolene netting. By this time I had learnt how to control the flowering time of the dahlias. I will go into it in more detail in the technical section on growing dahlias. Mulching with straw was done in the first week in July each year using around twenty five bales on the garden at Oakley Road. I had electricity and mains water taken down to both greenhouses and installed a mist-propagation system in the home-made greenhouse, an automatic device, which would work when I was away from the house. This arrangement gave faster rooting and a far better finished plant. With all this equipment in place I was on a par with the top growers in the country but, of course, it all cost money. In 1973 I eagerly awaited the plants of Charnwood Beauty to flower to see if it came true to the type it was the previous year and it did. This variety would provide me with some useful capital when sold. I exhibited one bloom at the Leicester Mini-Show and exhibitors raved about it. By the time I got to the Midlands Dahlia Show at the Pump Room Gardens in Leamington Spa, exhibitors there were asking whether I was going to exhibit it that year at their show. I was unable to do this as I only had five plants and this was not sufficient to get three good blooms to take to

the Midlands Show but I did exhibit nine giant decorative dahlias in the Philip Damp Trophy class and won. It was also awarded best exhibit in show. Two weeks later in the Garden News there was an article by Philip Damp which quoted, 'Tom Beats the champion', with Derek Hewlett runner-up at the Midlands Show. I exhibited in London five days after the Midlands show with no success and a week later at Harrogate Show with the same result but it had been my best year showing at national level. In the autumn I acquired more stock of giant decoratives taking my varieties to about twenty four different ones. All the best varieties available were included.

### **COMPANY FUTURE**

During the summer of 1974 I decided to market Charnwood Beauty myself and formed a company called Charnwood Dahlias. I produced a catalogue in which the novelty Charnwood Beauty and some thirty other varieties were offered for sale. This was the beginning of my semi-professional career but it did not stop me exhibiting at the national shows. Throughout the show season I distributed catalogues and took orders which successfully kept me busy the following spring producing rooted cuttings and sending them out by post to customers in the UK. I was very fortunate to get small cardboard boxes from Slack & Parr which were normally destroyed. The cuttings were wrapped in wood-wool and then rolled in greaseproof paper with elastic bands securing each variety separately. This method was used throughout my professional dahlia career and proved to be a very successful way of transporting plants by first class post. In 1975 I exhibited in London and Harrogate and in London received a second prize in the Maurice Lord Challenge Cup with nine blooms of giant decoratives. I was awarded first prize in Harrogate with Charnwood Beauty in the seedling class. Charnwood Beauty was awarded a Highly Commended at the Wisley Trials and I was presented with a certificate. In the autumn trips were taken to Leigh-on-Sea to collect dahlia stock from Peter Cleaver, of two new Giants – Fairway Pilot and Fairway Don which I released the following year. I also collected stock from Norman Flint of L'Ancrese, a ball type, which I also released the following year. By now I had an annual trip to Dave Spencer who gave me stock to help build up the business and increase my varieties. In 1976 I received my first prize in London for three giant decorative dahlias and my first prize in Harrogate for a single giant decorative dahlia. During the autumn of 1976 I had an enquiry regarding dahlias from America by a grower in Seattle whose name was Phil Traff. He was not only interested in acquiring stock from me but wished to communicate regularly. We carried on a corresponding for a number of years with the aid of Peter Cleaver. This sounds strange, but Peter Cleaver worked for British Telecom on evening shift in London. At this time I was working early and late shifts at Slack and Parr and when I was on the late shift Peter would ring me about eleven in the evening and if everything was clear would put me through to Phil Traff in the States at no charge. Peter and I became good friends and over the next few years I would collect stock from him and go for lunch. Peter raised quite a few giant decorative dahlias but the one I did not

release for him and the best and most successful was of course, Sir Alf Ramsey. (Peter was a big Tottenham supporter) In 1976 I was also awarded a silver medal and best exhibit of giant and large blooms in Division 'B' at the NDS Show, Westminster (variety not known).

### **NATIONAL DAHLIA SHOW - RHS HALLS, WESTMINSTER, LONDON**

I have many fond memories of my trips to Vincent Square, in London, where the National Shows were held and it was a very sad day when the decision was made to move out of London. It was once called the Annual Floral Meeting of the National Dahlia Society and regarded by many as the world's finest dahlia show, so to exhibit here you were regarded as the best. On my early visits the show was held in both the old and new halls and was always a hive of activity with hundreds of exhibitors. The photograph shows a view from the dais of the show in the late seventies. This in later years was reduced down to just the one hall due to a reduction of exhibitors. It was a place to meet old friends and to discuss the merits of new dahlias as seen on the following page, the new small decorative Lady Linda raised by Norman Lewis, being assessed by Jack Kinns, a retired nurseryman and Dave Spencer, one of Britain's leading dahlia growers at the time. The show had changed over the years as, in the early fifties, all the side wall space would have been taken up by nurserymen but this was now down to one or two. When I turned professional there were only myself and Ian Butterfield flying the flag for the professional dahliamen. I have memories of Derek Hewlett wearing a straw boater, occupying the steps of the dais with, at times, one hundred blooms in vases making a spectacular display which gave me inspiration to grow giant decoratives. I had some interesting journeys down to London especially in the early years. On my first visit I accompanied Paul Hassle who was to be guided down by another Leicester showman by the name of Stan Barry. We started off in good time, around seven in the evening, arriving at the end of the motorway a couple of hours later but at midnight found us at Tilbury Docks which was nowhere near the City of Westminster. It was about two o'clock in the morning by the time we arrived there and this was the last journey with Stan. Paul and I decided to travel together in the following years with me guiding him into the centre of London. I was successful except for one particular year when the road at Hyde Park Corner was closed due to road works. Following the diversions we became lost and slowly picked our way through London when a car stopped in front of the van. Unbeknown to me there was one on my inside and one on my outside and within seconds the van door was opened and I was taken from the cab, hands on the side of the cab and legs apart being frisked by what we can only explain as 'Special Branch'. Looking back at Paul he was in the same position. We were then questioned and told to open the back of the vehicle and to their amazement it was full of giant decorative dahlias. We were eventually booked for loitering and some weeks later received a letter from the Chief of Police saying no further action would be taken. These operations were apparently taken because of the IRA bombings. A few years later travelling on my own, approaching Victoria Station, I took another wrong turning and ended

up going round the Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace. On the way round I noticed another vehicle parked on the side of the road so I carried on round again pulling up behind the vehicle and was greeted by a grower from Lincolnshire who was also a giant grower and was pleased to see me as he was lost. I had realized where I had made my mistake so in convoy we proceeded down Vauxhall Bridge Road and turned left at the toilets where the road led to Vincent Square. He was grateful for my assistance. All of these visits would not have been possible in the fifties as to travel to London in those days could take over a day and it was only when the M1 was built that it enabled us to get to London in around three hours. This like most of the book is now all history and only memories.

### **GLORY YEARS**

1977 was the start of the glory years. Improved growing conditions and the balance in fertilisers applied to the plots made growing giant dahlias much easier. With all the knowledge I had acquired over the past ten years first and second prizes came thick and fast with Best Bloom Awards in the shows in London and Harrogate over the next five years. I had not realised but it had actually started the previous year as I have already mentioned with Best Giant at Westminster in Division B, and continued in 1977 at Harrogate when I came second in the twelve bloom class and was awarded the Best Giant in Show, the Harry Stredwick Perpetual Memorial trophy with the variety Hamari Girl. The stock came from Dave Spencer who had the best and runner-up in London the previous year with it.

### **POTENTIAL GIANT**

I was still growing a large number of seedlings i.e. a seedling is a dahlia grown from seed taken from my exhibition plants (this creates a new variety). You have to take cuttings to keep the variety true or divide the tubers. On one of my visits to my father's garden he was delighted to take me down and show me a dahlia that he thought had potential. It had giant decorative form but was only of a medium size. We decided that we would grow it in the following year. The tuber, labelled seedling number one, was brought into growth the following spring and six cuttings were taken and grown on as a giant, which it turned out to be. The variety became Leycett which was considered by many to be an unusual name but it was named after a Staffordshire village where my father went down the pit when he was ten years old. It was to become one of my banker varieties in the coming years. Leycett was a seedling from Kidds Climax which was cross pollinated by the bees. Kidds Climax was probably one of the best dahlias I ever grew as it could have excellent form. My third variety was William B, another giant decorative and was a seedling from Hamari Girl which was raised in the United Kingdom by Pi Ensum. The colour was buff with the reverse side of the petal

being Hamari Girl pink. This variety was a real giant and had to be grown four up to get a good quality bloom. It was first shown at the 1980 Harrogate Great Autumn Show in the Valley Gardens.

### **TOM BEBBINGTON DAHLIAS**

Due to family problems I did not enter any of the 1978 season of shows. I visited the shows as usual and did not stage any giant dahlias but was given lots of encouragement by dahlia friends to continue growing dahlias and produce plants for sale in the following year. I ceased trading under Charnwood Dahlias and became Tom Bebbington Dahlias and to my amazement the following season the orders doubled in quantity as people had not realised that I was Charnwood Dahlias. I realised that this success was going to cause me a problem in the spring as I would need a lot more heated greenhouse space to produce the plants for the increased orders. Having measured up I decided that if possible I would replace the small greenhouse which was ten by six feet and have a new greenhouse ten by twenty five feet which I could get in at the bottom of the garden and still retain the existing electricity supply.

### **FINANCE A PROBLEM**

I had had an account at the Midland Bank for about ten years so I decided to make an appointment to see the bank manager regarding a short-term loan. I was working shifts but I got permission from work to have an hour off for this appointment. My request for a loan of five hundred pounds from the bank was refused as the manager thought that I would not be able to repay the loan.

On returning to work my friend and tool-room manager, John Jones, asked me whether I had been successful. I told him what the bank manager had said and he was very surprised. Nothing more was said and I carried on working the rest of my shift. John went home for his lunch and in the early afternoon he came to see me and asked me into his office. My initial thought was what had I done wrong now? On entering the office normally you would stand and wait for whatever was coming but John said, "Pull up a chair and sit down". He gave me a pen and a sheet of paper and I was told to read and sign it. This was basically a five hundred pound loan and the signature was proof that I owed him this money. Once I had signed he then gave me the cheque. I am happy to say that within three months I was able to repay the loan and I will always be grateful to John. This started me on the road to being a professional dahlia grower.

An order was placed with Alton Greenhouses Limited for a Dutch light type construction, i.e. panes of glass down to the ground for maximum light. On delivery of the greenhouse it was erected during the autumn and in full production the following spring.

With double the growing capacity it meant that hundreds more tubers could be grown for the production of cuttings making it easier to fulfil my orders and for the first time keep selected plants of giants for my own use. Having lost space at the bottom of the garden the lawn at the top of the garden was dug up and replaced with two concrete sided frames in which dahlia plants were placed in the spring protecting them from frost and enabling the separation of my own stock. Plants were also grown in the frames during the summer which meant that the plant numbers in the garden were the same as before the new greenhouse was erected.

Production of dahlias carried on as usual in the spring of 1979 with the intention of showing at both London and Harrogate. I was now living on my own so had more time to dedicate to the dahlias. Holiday time was booked to coincide with the show dates in anticipation of exhibiting there and a transit van was booked for the two weeks. In early August it was obvious the timing of the plants was correct and I had secured most of the buds that would flower in time for the shows. On the eve of the National Dahlia Show I was able to cut some 40 blooms from both Oakley Road and the Kegworth garden. On arriving in London my blooms were arranged in vases. I intended to stage 12 blooms in the A.T. Barnes class for the first time but this was short lived as by early morning I realised there was only going to be one winner in this class and that was Derek Hewlett. I had got two weak blooms so the exhibit was removed and instead nine blooms put in the class for the Maurice Lord Challenge Cup which called for nine different varieties. I was much happier with this situation as there was a better prospect of success. I also exhibited in Class 35 with six giant decoratives and Class 36 for three giant decoratives. After the judging I was pleased to find that I had won the Maurice Lord Challenge Cup but was surprised to find that I had won Classes 35 and 36 and the best giant in show with a Kidds Climax. This turned out to be the best London Show for me and my thoughts now turned to Harrogate. I was on cloud nine when I returned home with the trophies and was pursued later on in the week by reporters and photographers from the local newspaper.

### **HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR HARROGATE**

The Harrogate Show was scheduled ten days after the London Show and with many blooms to choose from I had high expectations for a successful show. I had an uneventful drive north to Harrogate with yet another van load of giants. After I had staged my exhibit for the Mawson Trophy I still thought that I would win it that year. On returning to the show, after judging had taken place, I found that I had been placed second and that John Newton from Denton, Manchester, had won it by a very narrow margin. Looking on the bright side a bloom of Hamari Girl in my exhibit was awarded the Harry Streadwick Trophy for the best giant decorative in the show even though it had been subjected to a couple of 'blow-waves' in the night with a hair-dryer which took place in the gents toilets as this was the only place that had an electricity supply. This experiment turned out to be very successful so always remember to take your hair-dryer with you to the shows.

### **VOLCANIC ERUPTION IN U.S.A.**

In 1980 a trip was planned to the U.S.A. to attend the Pacific North West Dahlia Conference in Seattle. This was to take place between the London Show and the Harrogate Show which was going to cause problems getting an exhibit to the Harrogate Show. The decision was made to time the blooms hopefully for a good cut for the London Show and I was quite confident in doing so.

Events which took place on Sunday, May 18th 1980 at 8.32 am when Mount St. Helens erupted not only took lives and destroyed the landscape but within 24 hours the fall-out from the volcano had gone round the world which, at the time, I did not realise what effect it would have on the timing of the dahlias. The ash from Mount St. Helen's not only caused 48 hours of darkness in the State of Washington, U.S.A. but when a new dawn came it left an eight inch layer of ash across the State which dahlia growers over there had to remove before they could plant out. The fall-out, unknown to me at the time, affected our weather conditions and consequently we had a very poor summer which slowed the growth of the dahlias and put all the timing out by around ten days. This meant that at the time of the London Show I had a garden of buds just about to break. All the preparations had been made for the visit to Seattle and with no blooms to show in London I travelled down to Dave Spencer's to help him prepare for the London Show. I had taken the decision before leaving home not to erect the covers and

abandon exhibiting for this year as I was to be away in the States for ten days. I was of some assistance to Dave but it seemed very strange not exhibiting in London. Dave had his usual amount of success at the show and we left Higham the next morning for the U.S.A.

### **MISSED FLIGHT**

Before proceeding to Heathrow we made a detour to Gravesend so that Dave could get cash for while we were away. Whilst he was in the bank I was left in the car parked on double yellow lines keeping an eye out for traffic wardens. We did not incur any problems. On arrival at the airport we went to the Pan-American Airlines check-in desk and handed over our tickets which had been purchased in Seattle. The check-in assistant said, "Sorry Sir the gate is closed and the aircraft is on the taxi-way. "We informed him that it was not scheduled to take off for another three hours but in the conversation between us it was stated that the time on our tickets was incorrect. We were advised to go to the main Pan-Am desk and explain our situation. Our tickets were well scrutinized as to their validity. The outcome of this was that we were sent to the British Airlines Office as there was a British Airways flight to Seattle six hours later. I enquired as to whether there were any spare seats on this flight. After negotiating for about an hour our tickets were transferred to British Airways and our flight to Seattle was secured. We then had to contact Phil Traff to inform him of our delay as he had arranged to meet us in Seattle. This delay meant we had time to spare and enabled us to have a few drinks and a meal. We had an uneventful flight on a jumbo jet into Seattle except for the final approach when the aircraft ended up bouncing down the runway with cabin crew looking very anxious. Apparently it was what they called a heavy landing. We were relieved to be met by Phil Traff and were driven out to his home. With the six hour delay it was now dark and after a light meal we were grateful for a comfortable bed for the night. We awoke next morning to very foggy conditions in the valley where Phil lived. This apparent weather condition was normal for the time of year and would not do the dahlias any good as it caused the backs of the blooms to be damp. The Hair dryer could have come in handy.



## **FIRST SIGHT OF BONAVENTURE**

With a mug of coffee in our hands we wandered out to find Phil in his dahlia garden. This was a 4-acre plot which included dahlias, 'glads' (which are gladioli) and sunflowers. As you can imagine this was quite a sight. We found Phil Traff filling corned-beef tins with a wet type of oasis in which the dahlia blooms were going to be exhibited. This we had not come across before but we had heard about it. These were used instead of vases. This was being carried out at the rear of a building which was more like a bunker and there was no sign of any greenhouses. I asked Phil, "Where do you grow your dahlias?" We were promptly taken into the bunker where there were three tiers of benching with three tiers of gro-lights and that is where the plants were produced until the time of planting out. The reason for there being no greenhouse was there could be two to three feet of snow in the winter and this would make them collapse. Phil also explained that he planted a lot of divided tubers which did very well in these conditions as their summers were a lot warmer than ours in England. Phil then gave us an escorted tour of the dahlia beds, which probably covered two acres and were in full bloom. On walking round I noticed a big giant decorative, bronze/orange in colour and about fifteen inches in diameter. With my interest in giants I was drawn to these plants and then asked Phil, "What's the name of this one?". He informed me that it was Bonaventure obtained from his friend Bob Simon. This was to be voted by Dave and I 'Dahlia of the Year'. Additional interest to me and of course to Dave was the stock that I had sent to him the previous spring, Alva's Supreme, White Alva's and Reggie Keene with its two sports whose stock I had acquired from Dave. All the varieties had done extremely well. The specimen blooms had been totally covered by umbrellas which Phil acquired from the Lost Property Department of the Greyhound buses. One other really outstanding dahlia which we had in the UK and had been imported from the USA was Edna C and I had never seen the quality of bloom that was produced in Phil's garden until now. Having drunk numerous mugs of coffee and wandered around the dahlia garden till lunchtime we were joined by a number of members from the Seattle Dahlia Society. We were taken to the local Denny's Restaurant for lunch. The talk was mainly on dahlias but eventually turned to the subject of mountains as Seattle is in the middle of the Cascades Range. I entered into conversation with a young couple who were interested in walking. They both turned out to be doctors and had a young family. When they found out I was interested in mountains, walking and the great outdoors they suggested that the next day they would take us out to Paradise Ridge on Mount Rainier and an arrangement was made to collect us from our hotel the next day. We were also invited to go the following evening to Pattie and Louis Eckhoff's for an Indian-styled meal, which was Native American Indian and the food was to be cooked outdoors. The meal and conversation went on until the middle of the afternoon. We were then taken to our hotel in the University District where we were given time to settle in and had a little free time to ourselves before being taken out in the evening for a meal in downtown Seattle. We were grateful for a reasonably early evening to catch up on our sleep.

## **VISIT TO MOUNT RAINIER**

Next morning we went down for our first American breakfast. There was a choice of eggs, sunnyside up or easy-over, rashers of bacon and pancakes with maple syrup on the side, a combination we had not come across before. This was washed down with mugs of coffee. We were called to the lobby as Dr. Christine Robertson, husband and two children were waiting to take us to Mount Rainier for a day's experience in the mountains. From what I can remember the journey took us a couple of hours and as we approached the mountains we stopped at the check-point before entering the Mount Rainer National Park whose approach is covered in pine trees. We were heading for Paradise Ridge where there is a large hotel with picnic areas and outstanding views of Mount Rainier, which is a two-day climb from Paradise Ridge to the summit. Climbing to the summit is normally done during the night because when the sun is on the mountain there is a high risk of avalanches and the snow conditions deteriorate. There was no climbing for us that day, just a gentle wander around the surrounding hills with lots of wildlife, chipmunks, ground squirrels, marmots and jays who robbed our table at lunchtime. The trails were signed in a very unique way as the information was carved on to large logs and gave information not only of distance but also time to the next destination. Walking in the National Park is restricted to a certain number of people entering, to prevent erosion of popular routes. The Robertsons had organised a picnic lunch which was enjoyed in warm summer conditions. At this altitude in the winter the amount of snow can be up to the height of the eaves of the hotel roof with drifts up to twenty to thirty feet in height. Whilst at Paradise Ridge I took a large number of photographs of Mount Rainier and the surrounding area. I also acquired some slides of the four seasons of Mount Rainier which showed the flora and the spring, summer, autumn colours and the harsh winter weather. We returned to Seattle in late afternoon having had a fantastic day with the Robertson family. They dropped us off at the Eckhoff's where we were to have an evening barbecue with Louis and Pattie Eckhoff, who are of Indian origin, and the meal was to be cooked on a spit as their ancestors had cooked in the past. This was sock-eye salmon and very delicious. The hospitality was typically American and very warm, especially to the English, but it was also very apparent that these people were not rich Americans and were struggling to make a living. Their children went to downtown Seattle with tubs of dahlias to sell thus helping with the family finances every day. At midnight we had to make a quick visit to a photographer with Martin Kral, a member of the Society, to collect slides which we had taken at the National Show and which he had developed for us.

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EMERALD STATE**

Breakfast next morning was taken at a leisurely pace. This consisted of corned-beef hash with two eggs sunny-side up which, even with our big appetites, we were unable to do justice. Throughout the morning more overseas visitors arrived at the hotel for the conference. A lecture had been organised for the afternoon which was to give us an insight into the Emerald State of Washington. There were around five hundred people seated in the hall and it soon became apparent that they were having problems with the projector. Dave and I were seated towards the rear of the hall with Phil Traff who had fallen asleep due to the hours working on his plot and the organisation of the conference. He was woken up to sort out the problem with the projector. Unfortunately this was unsuccessful. Dave and I informed him that we could do a talk for an hour to substitute for the slide presentation. We were thrown in at the deep end. Dave decided that the best thing we could do was to give a talk on how to grow giant decorative dahlias and exhibiting at the National Show in London. This was the first time I had done any public speaking and I was very nervous but it went down very well with the audience. The only problem was that I had delivered the talk I intended to give the following day at the show so I had to rethink which lecture I was going to give the next day. We were then taken out for an evening meal by the Puget Sound Dahlia Society and their members and afterwards we were invited by one of their lady members to accompany her on a tour of the sights of Seattle by night. We accepted with slight apprehension as to where this would end. It turned out that she had a campervan which she was using while in Seattle and as we approached it she informed us that she had a dog, a German Wolfhound, by the name of Killer. She advised us to let her restrain the dog before we approached the vehicle. When the dog was safely put into the back I climbed into the front passenger seat and Dave got into the back seat. The only problem was that Killer was able to breathe down Dave's neck and must have sensed that he was terrified. With a command from the front of, "Get down Killer" the dog settled down in the back and we were given the tour of the sights of Seattle. We returned to the hotel after midnight. We then set about sorting slides out for the next day's lecture. This was helped by half a bottle of Southern Comfort. It was 3.30 am by the time we put our heads down and had not realised that we were to be up for a five o'clock breakfast with George and Margaret Klahn of the Port Angeles Dahlia Association, pen friends of Dave Spencer's, who had brought blooms to show that day. A traditional American breakfast was consumed and afterwards we set off for the Scottish Rite Temple where the show that day was being held.

Exhibitors were already busy setting up their exhibits just like our National Show in London but with one big difference. They were using corned-beef tins with mainly a single bloom whereas we use vases which hold up to five blooms. On arrival we were offered coffee and cakes.

These were available all day. We were able to wander around and talk to the exhibitors before the bell went for them to clear the hall so that judging could commence. We were surprised to be invited to judge at the show and listened intently to the chairman of judging regarding the standards required and the acceptance of scorching to the foliage that had been caused by recent eruptions of Mount St. Helens which was noticeable when we were judging classes during the show. We were first asked to judge the seedling classes followed by the variety most likely to succeed in the United Kingdom. The award went to Bonaventure. I think we made the correct decision since it is still being grown and shown some thirty years later and winning at the National Shows. We then judged three classes for different levels of grower for a single bloom of Hamari Katrina. In total there were around one hundred and fifty single blooms. We had to give first, second and third in this section and subsequently one was awarded Queen of the Show which was the outright winner. Judging with our fellow Americans ended by us deciding the outright winner for the whole show. This ended up being a bloom of Hamari Katrina exhibited by Louis Bloom and all five judges agreed. We spent the rest of the day giving talks on various aspects of growing dahlias including the assessment of seedlings which was done with the use of varieties that had all been awarded prizes in the show.

The hospitality was very high with lots of tea, coffee and cakes during the day. There was another late evening with strict instructions from Dave not to accept any adventures with Killer. We retired to our room for a well-earned rest. Next morning we again breakfasted with George and Margaret Klahn, Dave's pen-friends who were returning home to Port Angeles that morning. We returned, late morning to the Scottish Rite Temple to give yet more talks and to indulge in more cakes. During the afternoon we assisted in presenting awards to the winners of the show. These American Trophies were more modern compared with ours being made of wood and stainless steel. The outright winners were presented with framed pictures by Martin Kral of landscapes and seascapes. It was very nice when they presented Dave and I with one each. We assisted with helping to close the show down before leaving for the Seattle Waterfront for drinks and a meal in an Indian Restaurant with Totem Poles, canoes hanging from the ceiling and sculptures of Indian Chiefs. The meal was wholly of seafood, starting with Clam Chowder followed by Sock-eye Salmon and Pacific Crabs. This was in the company of the Puget Sound members and overseas guests. It was well past midnight before we retired to our beds.

## **GARDENS VISIT**

We had a quiet breakfast on our own and then were collected by Phil Traff and the organisers to take us by coach to visit various gardens around the Seattle District. This included a visit to Phil Traff's garden, Les Connell's acres of dahlias and to the Trial Gardens at Seattle Tacoma where the variety Bonaventure, raised by Bob Simons, was on display. During the day we assessed dahlias as a group and I did a demonstration on how to split cane a bloom and how to correct the angle by the use of a cotton bud and split without removing the head. It was a day of making friendships with people we would keep in contact with for many years especially Gordon Laroux who went on to raise many varieties all called Kenora. In late afternoon we spent our remaining hours drinking cold lager and talking about dahlias in a hotel bar.

## **GREYHOUND BUS TO PORT ANGELES**

Having said our grand-farewells to the society members Phil drove us to the Greyhound bus station. We had no sooner got on the coach when it drove on to a ferry in the Seattle harbour. The ferry proceeded to Bainbridge Island. We were able to leave the coach for sightseeing and coffee and just before docking at Bainbridge Island a siren on the ferry blew and this meant we must return to the Greyhound coach. We then crossed Bainbridge Island to yet another ferry which was to take us back to the mainland and then we proceeded to Port Angeles in late afternoon. Port Angeles was a small logging town and the main street was more like a western movie with rails to tie up horses but with big logging lorries passing through all the time. We were eagerly met by George and Margaret Klahn who were to be our hosts for a week. During the week we were guests of honour at a dahlia dinner organised by the Port Angeles Association which was mainly made up of ladies and the only greenhouse that I saw during my visit was at the Klahn's and it had very steep sides covered in heavy gauge polythene over the glass. This helped to keep the snow off in the winter. George took us on many excursions during the week, all memorable, but for me the hike to Seven-Lakes basin in the Hoh Rainforest where I walked so far ahead of George and Dave that I sat at the lakes for over an hour waiting for them and did not give any thought of the dangers that could be around i.e. the bears. We had a trip to Hurricane Ridge in the Olympic Mountains at over ten thousand feet where we were able to watch the marmots and a memorable visit to Victoria and the Bchart Gardens, where in late afternoon whilst waiting for the ferry to return to Port Angeles we sat drinking Mai-Tai Cocktails. You can imagine such an eventful holiday was soon over. We checked in at a local, small, airfield and our flight from Port Angeles to Seattle was in an eight-seater aircraft. The only problem was that there were nine people to get on the aircraft and Dave was left standing on the tarmac. He was then invited by the captain

to join him and sit in the co-pilot's seat. Thankfully he was not needed during the flight and we landed safely at Seattle International Airport. This was a very small aircraft amongst jumbo jets. Our luggage had been sent straight on to London Heathrow from Port Angeles so we only had to carry our hand luggage on to our Pan Am flight back to the UK. With time to kill before our departure for London we had our last ice-cold beers and were able to buy some souvenirs. On the flight home our conversation at dinner that evening returned to the British dahlia scene as it was to be the Harrogate Show three days after arriving home. Dave jokingly (or probably seriously) said I would have hundreds of blooms in flower back home but they would be weather beaten with canes through the blooms and most of them bent over because of the unsupported weight. I commented that I had given up exhibiting for the year.

We said our goodbyes at Heathrow as I returned to the Midlands and Dave to Higham in Kent. My arrival home at Oakley Road, Shepshed, was in the late evening. Leaving the bags in the kitchen I switched on the lights and went round to the back garden to look at all the dahlias. Dave was right about the majority of the blooms and at that time I did not think about any possibility of exhibiting at Harrogate. I had booked some holiday for the Harrogate Show weekend but had to go in to work the next morning just for one day. I was awakened next morning by the alarm clock but did not feel very well and was suffering from jet-lag. During my lunch break I visited my other dahlia garden in Kegworth. Having time to look round I noticed there were half-a dozen blooms good enough to exhibit. On finishing my day's work I returned home to find a possible eighteen blooms which could be taken to Harrogate. None of these had been covered. All of them required split caning and not all of them were at a perfect angle but I decided to ring the van hire company in the village to book a van for the next day. It was early to bed for a very early start next morning but unlike other years it did not take long to cut the eighteen blooms which I had earmarked the night before. With them all safely in deep water in the garage it was over to Kegworth to pick the other half-dozen blooms and I split caned them as I cut them. Then on to Castle Donington to my third dahlia garden at my parent's house as they had not seen or heard of me for the past two weeks. After that I returned home to catch up on some sleep before the evening drive to Harrogate. Once again the show was in the Valley Gardens but instead of being in the Colonnades it was in a marquee. I had only half the number of blooms that I usually took to shows and with very little choice of variety, down to nine varieties. This did not give me much of a selection of blooms as the twelve in Harrogate called for a minimum of nine varieties, plus three that could be doubled up. With the exhibit staged, named and exhibit card placed with them I retired to the sleeping bag in the back of the van. A cold wash in the gents' toilets in the Colonnades and a change of clothing before attending the judging briefing and allocation of classes to be judged. As usual I was on the team to assess the society exhibits, which normally takes most

of the morning. During this time Dave appeared and offered congratulations on my having won the class for twelve giant decoratives and being awarded the Mawson Trophy, more by luck than judgement. Dave also said jokingly, "You'll have to go to America every year."

On completion of my judging duties Dave and I, with a number of friends, enjoyed a couple of beers. This could not be done in excess as we both had to drive home that day. Leaving Harrogate in the mid-afternoon of a very warm autumn day my route normally took me through Wetherby on to the A1 and then on to the M1. I decided to stop at the services on the M1 for something to eat and a pot of tea. On returning to the van it was still hot so I decided to have a break for half-an-hour. Some six hours later I woke up. It was dark and I was still in the services car-park. The van was due back at six o'clock in the evening which was impossible as it was now ten o'clock with at least an hour's drive before getting home. On arriving home I unloaded the van and drove it back to the garage, parked it on their forecourt, locked it all up and put the keys through their letterbox. It was past midnight by the time I walked home but at least I had won my first big championship at a National Show.

### **ANOTHER NEW SEASON TO LOOK FORWARD TO**

I only exhibited at one show in 1980 but my thoughts already turned to exhibiting in the Centenary year of 1981, especially with yet another new giant seedling of my own named William B and the new giant decorative which I found in America called Bonaventure. This would give me a head start on most giant exhibitors. However, I realised there would be lots of work to be done during the autumn and the spring to fulfil orders and produce five hundred plants of giants for myself to grow. This was double the number which I had normally grown for exhibition and the extra plants were to be grown at Kegworth, I also had an expedition organised to the Himalayas over Christmas and the New Year for four weeks. With all the tubers lifted, dried off, trimmed and stored in boxes of dry compost they were all stacked in the office at Oakley Road. This was to ensure that they were totally free from frost.

## **A NEW DAHLIA FAN**

The experience gained from the trip to America encouraged me to socialise more and during this autumn I met a new dahlia fan in Mary and with my pending expedition she offered to look after my house, dahlias and reply to all the orders. This proved to be a full time job often visiting Shepshed in the late evening. That winter was a very hard one with more snow than I had seen in the Himalayas. On my return to the UK I was dropped off in Leicester at around four in the morning and had to walk through deep snow (about a foot in depth). The climbing gear was ideal for the weather conditions but I did not need the use of the ice-axe. I rang Mary's doorbell at around five o'clock in the morning and she was surprised to see me standing in the doorway but relieved to see me back safely. Over an early morning cup of tea we exchanged stories regarding the weather in the UK which had made travel very difficult at times and my experiences in Nepal.

During the coming season Mary became my biggest dahlia fan and was introduced to friends in the dahlia world who thought how lucky I was to find such a person. She was amazed at the dahlias when she eventually saw them in flower the following autumn. I returned to Shepshed to find the dahlias all in good health and lots of orders for the spring.

## **CENTENARY YEAR**

I had a later than normal start so it was imperative that I got all the tubers set up and brought into growth as soon as possible. The new greenhouse I purchased last year was a particular help as it gave me extra space to grow a lot more tubers. The new varieties were grown under a bank of gro-lights. Even with this late start I was taking cuttings at the end of February and by the end of March I was taking thousands of cuttings per week which ensured that I had stock selected for my own use and to fulfil my orders. The first week in May saw five hundred giant decorative plants potted into five-inch pots and placed in frames to protect them from frost. The open ground at Oakley Road was now treated as normal with Vitax Q4 with probably an extra handful for Centenary Year. This was done early in May as I had planned to plant out a dozen each of Lula Pattie, twelve each of Alva's Supreme and White Alva's. These were planted out around the 15th May and covered each evening to protect them from any frost. The other four hundred-plus plants were planted the first week in June and stopped according to my records of each variety. In the first week of July, as always, the bales of straw arrived and the dahlia plants were put to bed, as the straw virtually covered them. By the end of July buds were beginning to appear and de-branching commenced to leave the selected breaks on each plant. Using the knowledge of the past ten years, I could not have got the timing of the dahlias any better for this Centenary Year. The show season was getting closer and the covers were erected. For the first time in seven years I was able to exhibit in the Midlands



Dahlia Show. This was held during the Bank Holiday weekend as the National Show was on the following Wednesday. I was able to cut around fifteen quality blooms and enter the Philip Damp Trophy Class for nine giants which I had won in 1973. On leaving the exhibit I was in no doubt that there would be only one winner - being myself. On returning to the show after judging I was met at the entrance to the marquee by my good friend Eddie Durant who was full of apologies and said that I had not won and not even won a prize except for the best giant in show and runner-up for best giant in show and if there was an award for third-best giant in show. The problem was a huge bloom of Alva's Supreme which had a couple of petals drop out of the back so for some reason the judges came down very hard. I was extremely disappointed in the quality of the judging as was Eddie. My inspection of the winning exhibit revealed that most of the backs of the nine blooms had collapsed and odd ones were totally rotting. How the judges had come to this decision I will never know but the judge's decision was final and there was nothing I could do about it.

### **LONDON CENTENARY SHOW - 1981**

The result at the Midlands Show was very disappointing but I was spurred on to look ahead to the National Show on the following Wednesday knowing that I was going to have a very good cut (meaning I would have a lot of blooms for the show). On returning home and having a week's holiday due to me I worked tirelessly on the dahlias. All the normal arrangements made for a vehicle to transport the blooms it was only left for me to cut as normal early on the Tuesday morning. After I had been to Kegworth and Castle Donington all the blooms were placed either in the garage or in the office so I had time to take stock of the varieties and the number of blooms that I had. With our bags packed Mary was to accompany me to London and spend some nights at Dave Spencer's who lived in Stratford. In the late afternoon I started to load the vehicle with the blooms but it was around nine o'clock in the evening when we eventually left Oakley Road for London slowly negotiating the potholes on the way to the M1. Once on the M1 we reached 65 to 70 miles per hour all the way to London, with a detour round to Stratford (in London). It was after midnight when I arrived at Vincent Square where the show was being held. I was unable to find a parking spot so pulled as close to the side doors of the hall as possible and started to unload. After having taken the first crate into the hall, I returned to the vehicle and was asked to move it on. This was done reluctantly and when I started the engine the vehicle lurched forward violently as I had left it in gear. When I eventually found a parking spot and opened the back doors of the van my worst fears were realised as all the large blooms had shattered. Left with virtually only the back-up blooms I despondently carried them into the hall and endeavored to set them up. It was soon obvious that I was not going to win the twelve and removed my exhibit putting the best nine into the Maurice Lord Trophy Class for nine giant decoratives. I thought at one time that I had a chance in this class but it was not to be. I came runner-up in the nine, six class and three class

for giant decoratives but did manage to show three blooms of William B in the seedling classes which was awarded the Jesscot Perpetual Challenge Cup for the best British Seedling and the Jaldec Trophy for the best giant or large seedling and was awarded the Brother Simplicious Memorial Award presented by the Leicester Dahlia Society. These three blooms enabled me to win two Challenge Trophies, two silver medals, two glass tankards and the pewter tankard, which at the time, was a great achievement. Further reward was to follow as in the next three to four months I took orders for my new variety, William B for three thousand plants.

### **LONDON CELEBRATIONS**

Around lunch-time Mary and Carmen (Dave Spencer's wife) joined Dave and I at the show where we met some old friends from Seattle and other dahlia growers from around the world. This was to be the last time that the dahlia show occupied both the Old and the New Halls with various special classes for Centenary Year of which one was for one hundred blooms and prize money of £100 for first prize.

Three outstanding exhibits are shown in the book, one in an unusual arrangement which spelt out 100 and which came third. The winner was Don Hill with his one hundred exhibition dahlias which would probably have won in the Terry Clarke Championship class as it covered lots of types of dahlia, poms, collarettes, ball dahlias, medium decoratives, small cactus, large cactus and even four giant decoratives which enhanced this stunning exhibit. A worthy runner-up was my good friend Dave Spencer whose exhibit would have enhanced many a championship class in the show. The dedication from these people having to bring two van loads to the show was a tribute to them as two trips to London in one night must have been a daunting task. The London Show was probably the finest dahlia show ever staged. In the evening we made our way to the Cafe Royale for a Banquet and Centenary Celebrations. Mary, Carmen, Dave and I joined dahlia growers and exhibitors from all round the world to celebrate the dahlia with excellent food and drink. At the bottom of the invitation it read 'Carriages for one o'clock' and in 1881, when the Dahlia Society was formed, they would have been horse drawn carriages but we made do with a London taxi. We also carried on celebrating on arrival at Dave's house. It was late morning when we eventually hit the M1 and headed north for Shepshed. The year was not turning out as I had planned it, or how it should have been, as I had the best blooms which were good enough to win both the Midlands and London Shows. However, things do not always go to plan and there was still the provincial show at Harrogate in the Valley Gardens just a week away, when I was still on holiday, but Mary had to go back to work until the Thursday evening.

## **PREPARATIONS FOR HARROGATE**

The next few days were spent tending the giant dahlias and ensuring everything was split-caned and tied in case of bad weather. Two dozen washing-up bowls had been purchased from a hardware shop and the comments from the shop keeper was, "Had I got a lot of washing up to do?" He could not understand why I wanted to cover a dahlia with a washing-up bowl. These were placed over the dark coloured varieties and blooms which were showing potential when half-out and supported by three canes. I also used wooden tomato trays which are now unobtainable as they are made out of cardboard.

On our return from London the whole garden was wet and the only way to walk round the dahlias was in wellington boots. It was more like a bog than a garden. There was not only water but hundreds of cans of feed which was given to each plant. There was only one downside and this was due to the fact that I lived on the top of a hill and the back garden of the house in the next street joined onto mine and consisted of lawns and borders. The neighbour complained that he had to cut his grass every other day which did not please him as my cat had also eaten his goldfish.

## **AND SO TO HARROGATE**

The Northern National Dahlia Show in conjunction with the Great Autumn Show at one time was held in the Valley Gardens at Harrogate. This splendid setting provided an ideal place to hold a flower show. The use of the colonnades and marquees normally gave enough space for the exhibits. The only downside to this was the possibility of frost during the night this far north but in Centenary Year it was blessed with autumn sunshine, no storms or high winds.

I started my preparations on Wednesday prior to the show on the Friday by selecting blooms and placing a small length of wool on each one. Then to my usual ritual of ensuring that all carrying containers were spotlessly clean. On the Wednesday afternoon I took time off work to visit the gardens in Kegworth and to my parents in Castle Donington to check on the dahlias. On leaving Castle Donington my father gave me a

pen-knife which he had possessed for a long time so that I could use it to cut the dahlias. This pen-knife became my good luck charm. Thursday morning before the show on the Friday saw me out on the plot before daylight cutting blooms for the show. This process was also repeated at Kegworth and Castle Donington where I received mugs of coffee and breakfast from my parents. Then it was back to Shepshed with the blooms which were kept in the dark during the day. I managed to catch a couple of hours sleep in the afternoon.

### **PANIC**

Mary arrived early in the evening to bring me a welcome meal. Since knowing Mary she has done all my secretarial work as she was an Executive Secretary. Before she had got through the door I asked whether she could remember where I had put the entry form for the Harrogate Show, which actually drew a blank. We then proceeded to turn the office over only to find the entry form that had not been sent. PANIC! I immediately telephoned Mrs. Olga Gratrix, the Northern Show secretary and was greeted with, "We were waiting for you to contact us because we have put an entry in for you which we expect you to pay on your arrival in Harrogate". They had entered me in all the giant classes. I am afraid if it had been the National Show in London our General Secretary would not have done the same thing. The panic over and as I was no longer hungry the task of loading the dahlias into the milk crates and placing them on a carpet-covered floor in the transit van commenced. Bricks were placed in the milk crates to stop them moving and tipping over. This ensured that if you brake hard they do not move.

### **BIGGER BLOOMS**

Starting with the best blooms I began to load and quickly realised that I was not going to get the usual forty blooms into the van. I thought that something must be different. It was either they were much bigger than usual or had I given them more space. It was the former so with thirty blooms in the back of the van the doors were closed. The suitcase and bags were placed in the cab between us and around eight thirty in the evening we left for Harrogate.

The beginning and end of each journey is where you normally get poor road conditions and dreaded potholes. It is alright locally because you know where they all are and when you get onto the M1 you have very little to worry about as the road conditions are smooth. On this occasion just above Chesterfield where there had been mining subsidence they had built a short stretch of road, like a little hill, to negotiate on the hard shoulder. We carried on to Wetherby where we left the A1(M). Progress from here was slow with headlights on trying to avoid the potholes on the way to Harrogate. I grumbled all the way complaining that they ought to re-surface this road. We were pleased to arrive in Harrogate and hoped that all was intact in the back of the van. It was just before midnight when we parked on the road outside the Valley Gardens, a spot where the van could be left for the next two days. Having had the problem in London when I had to move the vehicle and made a mistake by switching on the ignition with the vehicle in gear which shook it violently and destroyed half my blooms I took the keys out of the ignition and no-one was going to ask me to move the van that night. Having travelled for about three hours we had a walk into the gardens to find the Secretary's Office to pay my entry fees before it was too late and picked up my exhibit cards.

### **COMMENCE STAGING**

I found a nice quiet spot and a table on which I could stage my dahlias. I left Mary to guard it while I unloaded the van and carried the blooms into the marquee. I collected thirty vases which were supplied by the society and proceeded to set one bloom in each vase in the usual manner. The class for twelve giant decorative dahlias was then found. The allotted space was marked out with tape and I started to set up next to the exhibit of Ian Hill. By the time I had put the twelve vases up Ian had moved to a different space so this left a space for my good friend Derek Hewlett. Neither of them really liked what they could see as my blooms were some two inches larger than theirs. Unlike London it was my competitors who were moving vases around to the lower classes. All that was left to do was to name all the varieties, label them and place my exhibit card with the exhibit. I found homes for the remainder of the blooms in other classes. Needless to say I did not leave the exhibit until all exhibitors were asked to leave the marquee and a last check was made to ensure that the blooms were all intact. As the clearance bell was rung there was also the usual call for judges, who had been invited by the society, to gather for a briefing by the show Chairman. I was to join two other judges to assess the society exhibit which was always one of the hardest classes to judge and would take longer than other classes. Two thirds of the way through our task Dave Spencer came up to me, as he had been judging another class, and had overheard that the specials were being judged by the top team and were deciding between his exhibit in the individual championship and my exhibit in the twelve giants and that there was a special prize of a Robinson greenhouse for the winner. At this time I had been growing dahlia

plants for Dave as he only had facilities to grow them on his allotment and nowhere to propagate them. Dave said it would not matter who wins it as I would end up with it. I still had a judging job to do so we agreed to have a coffee together when I had finished. I had some difficulty keeping my concentration on the judging as I realised that I had won the twelve and possibly the Robinson greenhouse. This was confirmed in a very short time with congratulations and a handshake from the President of the society, Derek Hewlett. Judging was finished so I was able to join Dave and a number of leading society members for that welcome cup of coffee. I was then informed that I had won the Robinson Greenhouse Award for the most meritorious exhibit in the show but this turned out to be a silver gallery tray and not a greenhouse. The twelve blooms that day were the finest exhibit I had ever produced. It was also the second time that I had won the class. It was a very special occasion as it included four blooms, two of each of my seedlings, Leycett and William B. Before finishing my coffee the Garden News Reporter, Jack Wood, accompanied by a photographer was waiting to interview me. They were the first of many interviews done that day with lots of photographs, some of which can be seen in this book..

### **CELEBRATIONS AT THE CAIRNS HOTEL**

We were still on a 'high' when we arrived at the Cairns Hotel for the Centenary Celebration Dinner. The highlight of the evening for me was being presented with the Mawson Challenge Cup for the winning twelve decorative dahlias, the Norman Gratrix Perpetual Challenge Trophy for the most meritorious exhibit by a member and the Robinson Silver Gallery Tray for best exhibit in show. It was also a good night for Dave Spencer who picked up a couple of trophies, one being for the Neville Weeks Individual Championship Class. This was the exhibit that ran close to me for the best exhibit in show. Dave was pleased for me because I had been producing his plants for years and this had enabled him to compete nationally. After a splendid dinner and several drinks we eventually retired to our rooms in the early morning. At breakfast the next morning we received congratulations from members of the society and visitors from around the world including Phil Traff who had come over especially for the Centenary Shows. On returning to Shepshed I was pursued by the local newspapers and Radio Leicester who asked me to appear on the Tony Wadsworth Show and when I returned to work the owner of the company I worked for came to the toolroom and congratulated me on my achievements. I also appeared in the Slack & Parr works newspaper. It was hard to think that I was ever going to repeat this in the future but with the autumn over it was back to the mundane jobs that had to be done with the dahlias. Extra orders were coming in for dahlia plants, especially for William B, which meant that the next six months were going to be a busy time. I was well into taking

cuttings before my thoughts turned to the pending season. It was probably more luck than judgment that in May I ended up with some decent giant dahlia plants for myself.

### **ANOTHER DAHLIA YEAR**

Progress was made throughout the season and it was not long before I was selecting the buds for another show season. The aim this particular year was to enter the two National shows in London and Harrogate. As the show season approached it became apparent that I had got the timing of the dahlias correct and had an excellent cut for the London Show. Having confirmed that I had entered the two shows I left late afternoon to ensure a parking spot in London so as not to have the disaster of the previous year with the van.

With some twenty different varieties of giant decoratives I was able to enter the twelve, nine, six and three classes for giant dahlias. The best blooms were entered in the A. T. Barnes class which after I had staged I was pleased with and had my fingers crossed for a good result. The nine blooms staged for the Maurice Lord Trophy were well in contention even though other exhibitors were pulling out of the twelve class so it made it harder to win the nine. With entries in every class for giant decorative dahlias I was quite relieved when I left the hall to have our usual breakfast. I returned just before judging to check on all my exhibits. As usual I had been invited to judge at the National Show but of course you did not judge classes in which you had entered. After a talk by the Chairman of judging, Ken Letts, I joined the judging team to which I had been allocated and commenced to judge the society exhibits for the Herbert Brown Trophy. This class was always popular and took a long time to judge and like Harrogate the previous year judging ceased for a moment as I was congratulated on winning the A. T. Barnes Trophy and coming runner-up in the Maurice Lord Trophy with a number of red cards on other exhibits all of which received awards. With judging completed I was able to go and admire my A. T. Barnes exhibit which was the pinnacle of my dahlia career. It had taken me some twelve years to achieve my goal. It again was good to be pursued by the gardening press and to be on the front page of the Garden News the following week. At the time I did not think it could get any better and returned home to Shepshed with the prestigious A. T. Barnes Trophy.

## **HARROGATE SHOW 1982**

Due to interviews and photo-shoots life was hectic prior to the build-up of the Harrogate Show, which I eagerly awaited, as the majority of blooms were at their peak for this show and it was with great expectations that I entered yet another Harrogate Show at the Valley Gardens which sadly was to be the last one held there, which for me, made it a special occasion. Entries in every class were available to giants and I was able to fulfil them all. On completion of judging I became National Champion overall, winning the Mawson Trophy for the third time in as many years and doing the double with London and Harrogate. It was red all the way not only winning the twelve, six, three and a number of colour classes giving me a clean sweep of giants in the show topped by an Alva's Supreme being awarded the Harry Stredwick Perpetual Memorial Trophy for best giant in show. This was the second time that I had won this trophy. Some of the comments that I had from fellow exhibitors took me back to my early days at Loughborough when people commented, "He wins it every year." The question being asked at Harrogate was, "When are you going to retire?" which I had no intention of doing at the time. It is a great feeling when you keep winning but like many people before me I suppose it is very difficult to be motivated year after year so over the past years I have admired growers like Derek Hewlett who went on to win the A T Barnes Trophy eighteen times and Dave Spencer who has exhibited nationally for forty years.

## **JUDGING**

I passed my National Dahlia Society Judging Examination in 1976 in a hall in Windsor on a lovely sunny autumn afternoon. I was in the company of Fred Hedley of the Leicester Dahlia Society who also passed and both of us had been coached by Terry Dayman who gave us hints on how to pass the exam and the major pitfalls that can occur. I served my apprenticeship judging local shows around the Midlands which required a National Dahlia Society judge and my name was included in the judges' list in the Classified Directory. I was first invited to judge at the National Dahlia Society show in London in 1979 and continued judging for two decades and had the honour in London to judge the Herbert Brown and the A.T. Barnes Trophy. I was included in the special team to judge for Best Bloom in Show on a number of occasions. I also judged at Harrogate in the equivalent classes and in one year was privileged to be Team Leader and Senior Judge in team one which judged The Neville Weekes' Championship and all the special awards in the show. Other judging highlights included being asked to judge in Seattle USA



which I have already mentioned earlier and to be invited by the Scottish National Dahlia Society to be Chairman of judging at the Glasgow Garden Festival. I was given responsibility of awarding not only the National Dahlia Society Silver Medals but also two Festival Gold Medals. As Chairman of judging I had to brief the judging teams on the protocol which was required at the Glasgow Garden Festival and found this a daunting task. I also had to adjudicate on any problems that arose. Fortunately there were not many of these. The Glasgow Garden Festival experience started with flashing blue lights at Glasgow Airport as I was met by the local police of which a number of them were dahlia growers led by Dougie Semple. I was not arrested as possibly hundreds of onlookers thought I was going to be but was escorted to the Festival Grounds together with a large consignment of dahlias. On arrival at the Festival Grounds I was greeted by Tom Robbie, as usual, dressed in a kilt and was offered a wee dram, a taste of Scotland (Whisky), which was the first of many consumed during my stay in Glasgow. I was also introduced to the haggis which was accompanied by Drambuie. The hospitality during my stay in Scotland was unbelievable and it was the early hours of the morning before I retired to bed. An outstanding highlight was a visit to the Burrell Collection which is a famous Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow, thanks to Dougie Semple. I returned to Stirling, in Scotland, on a number of occasions to judge the Scottish National Show which was always memorable. I judged at many dahlia shows around England and in the later years was honoured to judge at the Midlands Dahlia Show, which is my own society. I was a council member for a couple of years and enjoyed sitting on Information panels the society organised 'question and answer' sessions for other dahlia societies. I was honoured by the Midlands Dahlia Society when Mary and I were Guests of Honour at one of their annual dinners. This was a truly memorable occasion.

### **THE HISTORY OF THE GIANT DECORATIVE DAHLIA**

The evolution of the dahlia has been well documented over the years since its discovery in Mexican woodlands and is probably where, by chance, the first cross-pollination took place as the evolution of the dahlia continued without the help of man. Botanical reference books give dahlia pinnate variables or dahlia variables and are given the rank of a species but more likely to be an actual hybrid of unknown parentage as many a new dahlia today is only known by the seed bearer. With the exception of a small number of dedicated raisers round the world which use controlled cross-pollination and are probably following in the foot-steps of the Aztecs who were highly skilled in the art of horticulture. As far back as 1570 double dahlias were grown in the gardens of the Aztecs. The dahlia was known to them as acocotli and cocochitl meaning 'hollow pipes or water tubs' because the hollow stems of dahlia imperialis often called 'the tree dahlia' which could grow to the height of six metres and was used for water pipes by the Aztecs and linked the dahlia with the sun and the blooms used in religious ritual of human

sacrifice. Traders crossing the Atlantic brought tubers and seed to Europe and eventually to Madrid in Spain where they were received by Abbe Cavanilles the Curator of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Madrid where they were grown experimentally with little success as they were to lose the first consignment to frosts during the winter. More stock was imported into Spain and thus Cavanilles assisted by Andreas Dahl, a Swedish botanist were successful in the development of the species. The two were very good friends as Abbe Cavanilles gave away the right to a specie to bear his name to his friend Andreas Dahl, which then later became the dahlia. Seed and tubers were sent from Spain all over Europe where the dahlia was not only grown for its flowers which were single with an open centre.

Experiments with the tubers for food were not agreeable to the French palate and were fed to cattle. This was also quickly abandoned as the dahlia tuber is not palatable. In 1798 the first parcel of seed was sent to England and was received by Lady Bute. These were treated as greenhouse plants and consequently died in their first year. A nurseryman in Sloane Square in London imported seed in 1802 and a Lady in Holland sent seed from Madrid to Holland House, Kensington in London, where seedlings were grown and again the plants were lost in the winter. However, new varieties emerged and in 1814 the first record of a small formal decorative was grown in the gardens of Count Lelieur on the outskirts of Paris. This was a fully double flowered variety. In England the first ball-type dahlia was being grown by a nurseryman in Hammersmith by the name of J. Lee and in 1820 he introduced a deep crimson variety with a rough petalled formation unlike the formal types which were to follow in the 1830s. In 1832 the work of an English hybridist became apparent when inwards Spring Revival made its first appearance on the show bench as this marked the birth of the show and fancy dahlia. This was a perfect ball dahlia and the petals were described as being cupped. This was the first dahlia to have incurving tubular florets. By 1835 the popularity of the show and fancy dahlias meant that they fetched a guinea a plant for new varieties. There were over seven hundred varieties in Nurserymen's catalogues and were classified according to the colour. In 1836 they were officially given the name of double show and fancy dahlias by the National Dahlia Society, but this was short-lived as they became known as 'globe dahlias' but again reverted back to 'Show and Fancy'. This title persisted until the 1950s which then became the ball dahlia. In 1887 the first records appear of the cactus dahlia when J. T. West, an English raiser, introduced a variety named 'Beauty of Brentwood' which received a First Class Certificate. Interest in other species of dahlia was created including the Lilliput or Pom-pom and fully-double peony varieties, of which some were grown to giant size, that they called monstrosities, which awakened little interest. However, interest in a peony-flowered dahlia named Geisha was raised by Mr. Hornsveld of Baarn in Holland. The variety had good stems and a well-placed flower head unlike earlier varieties which were unable to hold the blooms. Raisers in Germany from 1890

started to develop these new types and are credited with the evolution and introduction of the fully double giant peony flowered dahlia. It was some years later when the term 'decorative' was applied. This came about with the introduction of a deep yellow formal dahlia of unknown origin. However in a list of 1900 the yellow giant with the name of Yellow Colossus was to be found. The Germans raised a number of these and sold the stock to the Dutch Dahlia Growers who introduced them as being raised in Holland. From this stock the Dutch raised many more varieties and were responsible for their distribution world-wide, which created global interest with growers in England, including Harry Stredwick who successfully raised a number of varieties, one of which was 'Mabel Lawrence' and in the late 1940's he raised Queen Elizabeth. Harry Stredwick was awarded the National Dahlia Society Gold Medal in 1953 for his dedication to the dahlia.

From 1900 interest in the giant dahlia, which at that time was called a large dahlia, gathered momentum in the breeding of this type with a great number of new varieties being introduced into the UK, of which some were still being grown when I was exhibiting in the 70's and 80's. One outstanding variety was Liberator raised by Mr. Harris in 1941 and Lavengro raised by Bertie Barnes in 1953. The two outstanding dahlias of my era were Kidds Climax, raised in New Zealand in 1940 by Ted Kidd, and is probably one of the finest giant decorative dahlias introduced, along with Alva's Supreme, raised by Mr Frost also of New Zealand in 1956. They are still being grown some six decades later. Closer to home Pi Ensum raised Hamari Girl in 1960 and Hamari Gold in 1984, which I released for him. The other raiser at this time in the UK was Peter Cleaver who raised Fairway Pilot and Fairway Don in 1979, with Fairway Spur in 1996, and Sir Alf Ramsey in 1999, made him one of the most successful breeders of our time. To bring us up to the present time we have Kenny Shaw with the variety Jean Shaw, taking the Gold Certificate and the Harry Howarth Memorial Medal at the Leeds Trials in 2009. All of this interest stems from an original seed of which I grew thousands to produce three new varieties. To put this in the same context is like winning first prize in the lottery.

## THE A.T.BARNES CHALLENGE TROPHY WINNERS

1949	G. DRAYSON	1974	T. CARTER	1999	A. G. KINGDON
1950	G. DRAYSON	1975	D. HEWLETT	2000	A. G. KINGDON
1951	G. DRAYSON	1976	P. J. HASSALL	2001	D. MOSLEY
1952	G. DRAYSON	1977	P. CLEAVER	2002	A. G. KINGDON
1953	L. C. PHILBRICK	1978	D. HEWLETT	2003	A. G. KINGDON
1954	W. ENSUM	1979	D. HEWLETT	2004	A. G. KINGDON
1955	W. ENSUM	1980	D. HEWLETT	2005	A. G. KINGDON
1956	W. ENSUM	1981	D. HEWLETT	2006	D. MOSLEY
1957	W. ENSUM	1982	T. BEBBINGTON	2007	D. MOSLEY
1958	W. ENSUM	1983	D. HEWLETT	2008	A. G. KINGDON
1959	Mrs N. EVENS	1984	D. HEWLETT	2009	A. G. KINGDON
1960	Mrs N. EVENS	1985	D. HEWLETT	2010	J. JACK
1961	Mrs N. EVENS	1986	D. HEWLETT		
1962	D. HEWLETT	1987	D. HEWLETT		
1963	L. E. MASON	1988	D. HEWLETT		
1964	Mrs C. M. RITCHIE	1989	D. HEWLETT		
1965	D. HEWLETT	1990	G. C. ARMSTRONG		
1966	R. C. PERRETT	1991	A. G. KINGDON		
1967	D. WATSON	1992	I. HILL		
1968	M. WOODFIELD	1993	D. HEWLETT		
1969	D. HEWLETT	1994	A. G. KINGDON		
1970	P. CLEAVER	1995	D. MOSLEY		
1971	D. HEWLETT	1996	J. JACK		
1972	D. HEWLETT	1997	NO SHOW		
1973	P. CLEAVER	1998	P. CLEAVER		

### THE T.W. MAWSON CHALLENGE CUP WINNER - HARROGATE

1967	J.GOODMAN	1991	G. TOMLINSON
1968	W.BURTON	1992	T. W. HAYNES
1969	J. GOODMAN	1993	J. JACK
1970	J.GOODMAN	1994	J. JACK
1971	D. HEWLETT	1995	D. MOSLEY
1972	G.TOMLINSON	1996	R. S. THOMAS
1973	T. DAYMAN	1997	A. P. EDEN
1974	D. HEWLETT	1998	D. MOSLEY
1975	A. WRIGHT	1999	D.MOSLEY
1976	G.TOMLINSON	2000	D. MOSLEY
1977	G.TOMLINSON	2001	J. JACK
1978	P.CLEAVER	2002	D.MOSLEY
1979	J. NEWTON	2003	D. MOSLEY
1980	T. BEBBINGTON	2004	J. JACK
1981	T. BEBBINGTON	2005	J. JACK
1982	T. BEBBINGTON	2006	D. MOSLEY
1983	D. HEWLETT	2007	D. MOSLEY
1984	I. HILL	2008	D.MOSLEY
1985	D.HEWLETT	2009	D.MOSLEY
1986	G. TOMLINSON	2010	D. MOSLEY
1987	G. TOMLINSON		
1988	D. HEWLETT		
1989	I.HILL		
1990	T. W. HAYES		

## **CHRISTMAS – 1982**

After a lot of thought and having won the London and Harrogate Shows in the autumn I decided to become a professional dahlia grower as the part-time business was difficult to maintain as well as my full-time engineering job. Having made the decision I needed a lot more ground and after making enquiries located one and a half acres, in a nearby village, on which I was able to grow some 8,000 dahlias. I also attended land auctions with the hope of buying land so that I would be able to live on site. Having had a couple of disappointments I re-visited the Bank Manager to discuss a three acre plot which was in a prime position. This was part of an estate that was being broken up into separate lots. He was familiar with this sale and thought I would get the land for about £20,000 but not to go above this amount as the bank had agreed to lend that amount of capital. There was yet another disappointment as the plot went for over £30,000, bought by people speculating to build, so the search continued. The spring came and I produced plants at Oakley Road but I had turned it into a factory with every bit of ground covered to protect all the plants which were needed to be planted in the field and of course complete all my orders. In the autumn I did a small trade stand at the Harrogate Autumn Show and was awarded a Gold Medal. The dahlias in the end bloomed quite well in the field even though there was insufficient water to meet my needs. On lifting the tubers I was very pleased with the size and quality of them. They had not been over fed and had made nice small hard tubers which kept very well. Mary and I decided the best solution was to sell our respective properties and join forces in buying a property between us with sufficient land to run a nursery. This now opened up a new area for exploration and we spent time visiting numerous properties around Leicestershire. Having looked at an established nursery in Gotham we decided that it would have to be a property with land to make a fresh start. We eventually found an ideal property in the spring of 1984. This was a detached house with one acre of land in Diseworth which became known as Lady Gate Nursery. We eventually moved in on the 5th June which actually was an ideal time as all the dahlia plants had been planted on the rented land and 2,000 had been kept back to be planted in the nursery when the ground had been prepared. At the time of the purchase it was a paddock and needed to be cultivated. This was difficult because we were still clearing the garden at Oakley Road which actually took a month to complete to leave it as a normal garden with just one greenhouse. We now had to erect the new Alton greenhouse which I had moved from Oakley Road and was twenty five feet in length. We decided to double the length at a cost of one thousand pounds, double the amount which I had paid for the original one four years earlier. On completion it made a very good propagating house as we had built three feet high walls for it to sit on giving a lot more head room. Eventually the dahlias were planted and did very well mainly due to having a good water supply. During that year the orchard which was beyond the new greenhouse was

demolished and the ground levelled. In the autumn we exhibited a trade stand at the City of Leicester Show and Harrogate Show and at both I was awarded large Gold Medals. Having had a horticultural magazine, for the past 2 years, I noticed that there was an advert for greenhouses for sale. These were on a soft-fruit farm in West Sussex so I went down to have a look at them. They ranged from one hundred feet in length by forty feet wide up to one hundred feet in length by eighty feet wide and were on tram-lines so that they could be moved along the field as the fruit ripened. It was decided to purchase the one hundred feet by forty feet at a cost of one thousand two hundred pounds but the purchaser had to dismantle and remove the greenhouse from the site. With the help of Dave Spencer and Sonny Schembri, who was a builder by trade and proved to be invaluable, the greenhouse was dismantled in one week-end and stacked ready for collection. We then had to search for a carrier who needed a return load from the south back to the Midlands. This reduced our charges but this took five to six weeks before we were successful. I had to return to West Sussex to supervise the loading onto an articulated lorry. We had a slight problem as the sections of the greenhouse were in ten feet lengths which meant that if put on crossways they overhung the vehicle by one foot each side and the driver said it was illegal so it was loaded lengthways and then the height of the load became another problem as he was hoping to come through the Blackwall Tunnel on a direct route to the M1. The load was too high to go through the tunnel so a detour was made and eventually the trailer was parked on the nursery outside the back door of the house. Before erecting the greenhouse it was fully restored to its original condition. Each panel had to be cleaned and then coated with Cuprinol. For this task I employed a friend for forty hours a week for six months until it was totally renovated and then erected it with the help of my brother, Roy. When erected it was just as if it had been brand new. We now had sufficient greenhouse space to grow as many dahlias as we wished.

## **GROUND IMPROVEMENT**

It took take a couple of years to get the ground in Diseworth into good condition as it had been a paddock and at some time in the past had been a ridge and furrow field. With the help of Tom McLelland I spread many a load of well rotted manure on the land before having it deep ploughed. We eventually grew good blooms in the nursery which we used for trade stands and were viewed by visitors at flowering time. We maintained the field in Hathern where one and a half acres of dahlias were grown and I acquired a field in Diseworth where plants were also grown and made excellent keeping tubers. At this time we were only growing dahlias and were probably the only ones in the country who had not diversified. We had a propagating capacity in the Alton greenhouse of up to fifty thousand cuttings at any one time, fully automated. I

was helped in the spring by Tom McLelland and when things became hectic in April the ever reliable Mr. Spencer would appear for a few days to take cuttings. I had stopped showing as an amateur but immediately started to do trade stands. Our first was at Harrogate and this became a yearly event. We did three years at the Leicester Show in Abbey Park and Shrewsbury Flower Show, which was organised by Percy Thrower, where we were given special awards on a number of occasions. This included Gold Medals for our trade stands. We ventured to the north west to their Premier Show at Southport where for three years I was awarded Best Dahlia Stand and in the second year with a new initiative to incorporate wrought iron and blue silk drapes I was awarded Premier Trade Stand in the show. This had been previously won by Robinsons for ten years. As I was putting the last touches to my stand, around midnight, I wondered why Mr Robinson was taking an interest in it. He had probably realised I would win the Gold Trophy that year. I had one other visitor that evening, the celebrity Ken Dodd, who was relaxing after his performance on stage. I was always accompanied at these shows by Tom McLelland and I employed two young ladies to take the orders as Mary was involved with running the nursery. On the day of setting up the stand Tom would normally take the young ladies to a restaurant for a meal in the evening and then find a fish and chip shop to provide me with my evening meal. On one occasion he arrived with my fish and chips and some for himself. I enquired as to why this was and he said he would not eat at MacDonald's but the two young ladies wished to eat there.

### **INVASION BY THE TARTAN ARMY**

There were many visitors from home and abroad to the nursery at flowering time. The new dahlias created interest, not only exhibitors but also from the garden journalists and their photographers who needed material for their publications. The leading writer at the time for the Garden News on dahlias was Philip Damp who was a regular visitor. His visit usually coincided with the members of the Midlands Dahlia Society. Another journalist who wrote for the Amateur Gardener was Ernie Pitt, from Bedford. In the mid-eighties we had a coach-load of enthusiasts from Glasgow, who were all members of the Monklands Dahlia Society. They came down for the week-end and we arranged accommodation for them at a local pub in the nearby village of Belton. They were a very enthusiastic bunch and not always easy to understand as they all had very broad Glaswegian accents, and everything ended in 'jimmy'. This was not the first time I had come across this problem as I had travelled to Glasgow previously to give a dahlia lecture and had difficulty understanding their broad accents. During their stay they visited dahlia shows in the Midlands to see the quality of the dahlias being shown. I had not realised at the time that these members were going to make such a big impact on the dahlia world. They were definitely very enthusiastic and were eager for any information on



growing of dahlias. It was the start of a long friendship with many of these members, especially Dougie Semple and his son Andrew and with John Jack who I encouraged to grow giants, with more success than I ever had at the National Shows.

Their hospitality and friendship made it a pleasure to be with them at the National Shows, where they have been very successful in recent years and at times took several of the trophies including the Herbert Brown back to Glasgow. This friendship with the guys from Scotland is typical in the dahlia world as we all have a common interest and love of the dahlia. The dahlia family for me stretched the length and breadth of the country from Scotland and Newcastle to Kent, Hayes to Bristol, the Midlands to the North West, where I did many lectures for Fred Curry in Kendal. The friendly greetings were always the same wherever I went, not forgetting the friends made in Seattle, USA.

### **DEREK HEWLETT - MBE**

The hobby of dahlia growing was not just growing dahlias for exhibition purposes but was also about friends met throughout the dahlia world of which Derek Hewlett was one of many I made growing dahlias. He became a very special friend and his friendship lasted some thirty years. As I had mentioned earlier I first met him at a meeting of the Leicester Dahlia Society where his enthusiasm for growing the giant decorative dahlia inspired me to grow these magnificent blooms. At the end of the meeting I was talking to him and he promised me a tuber of Lula Pattie. When he found out that I lived in Shepshed he said he would drop it off on Saturday on his way to a football match at Derby County. I was later to find out that he had a season ticket and had been a Derby County supporter since his early teens. During the seventies he would call in once a month during the winter for a cup of coffee or tea after the match and would bring me a stock of new varieties. If he was short of a certain variety I would provide him with it. We were always great rivals from the very beginning where we clashed at the Midlands Dahlia Show at Leamington Spa in 1973 and at the London and Harrogate Shows but we often dined together, especially at Harrogate, with great memories of 'The Taste of Yorkshire' with Yorkshire puddings for starter, main course and sweet. We were accompanied by his son Andrew, Kenny Hext and John Polliski (commonly known as the Jam Roll) and a number of dahlia exhibitors who were also in the restaurant. When I eventually moved to the nursery in Diseworth his visits increased and it was not very often that he missed visiting Mary and me whenever Derby County were playing at home. He was always eager to see how the nursery was developing and was as enthusiastic about it as we were. Over the years Mary and I were treated like family by the entire Hewlett family and enjoyed the celebratory occasions which occurred from time to time. I found it a great honour to be included in the company of Pi Ensum, Ken Letts, Joe Batten and Bert Wiseman at these events as

they were all leading officers of the National Dahlia Society. One specific event was when Derek received his MBE and we all celebrated at Hampton Court Palace. I will always remember him with his straw boater and wearing an apron whilst staging his blooms at the shows in London. The photograph opposite shows him with one of his favourite giants Night Editor from one of 19 winning A. T. Barnes exhibits. Sadly when he passed away we missed his visits to the nursery and the National Dahlia Society lost a great leader. We still keep in contact with his wife, Evelyn and the family, Andrew, Janet and Lesley.

### **DAHLIAS I HAVE INTRODUCED**

I have introduced a large number of dahlia varieties to the general public besides the three varieties I raised myself. These were mainly from UK raisers with a scattering of American varieties. As a semi-professional and as a professional dahlia grower I offered fifty per cent Royalties for one year only on each variety. My earliest introduction was for the raiser, Peter Cleaver, with the varieties Fairway Pilot and Fairway Don which were both giant decorative dahlias. Charnwood Beauty was also introduced followed by L'Ancrese, a miniature ball from Norman Flint. The Dana varieties, raised by Ralph Cook then followed. In the eighties I introduced the early Kenora varieties which included Kenora Canada and Kenora Fireball. These included the early raisings of the now famous Gordon Laroux and at the same time I introduced Bonaventure from Bob Simon in the USA.

### **AS A PROFESSIONAL**

I became more critical of the dahlias I was to introduce as a professional and was offered many dahlias but had to become more selective in the varieties I released. In the early eighties the most highly regarded raiser of giant dahlias in England offered me a joint release of his variety Hamari Gold to be shared with Terry Clarke who was moving away from the dahlia world. I was going in the opposite direction and at that time had a large share of the dahlia market in the UK so I was able to sell a greater number of this outstanding dahlia. My biggest scoop was to be offered a small cactus from Eddie Durrant from Coventry who was very successful with his prefix of Kiwi. This variety turned out to be difficult the first year that I grew it in the nursery as it flowered very late and in the autumn I discussed with Eddie the future of this variety. The problem was that Eddie did not want anybody to have the variety as he regarded it as the finest seedling he had raised and that I had asked him whether he would allow Dave Spencer to grow it the following year. I assured him that I would have all of the stock back from Dave Spencer at the end of the year as I was growing Dave's dahlia plants for him. Eventually we both agreed and I approached Dave Spencer about growing this variety. He reluctantly agreed as in the past when I had asked him to grow some varieties some did not live up to expectations. I

warned him about the lateness of the flowering of the variety and assured him that I would produce him some big plants in five inch pots enabling them to have a good start. The following spring when Dave collected his plants. There were eighteen Kiwi Gloria plants contained in five inch pots, which he was very pleased with. This was the first time the variety had been grown in the south of England and by the first week in August Dave contacted me and informed me he had it flowering and was going to cut the plants back to ensure that he would have blooms for the National Show. On the night of the National Show I found Dave setting his Terry Clarke exhibit up and he was very eager to show me the vase of Kiwi Gloria, which he was very pleased with, but still had a moan about the fact that I had informed him it was a late flowerer and that he had been trying to hold it back all the way through August. Of course, the outcome was that this vase became the best vase of cactus in show and is possibly one of the finest dahlias ever raised. This has gone on to win major awards around the world and was one of the best selling varieties I introduced.

### **THE LONDON SHOWS**

At the National Dahlia Show I had a trade stand each year on the end wall of the New Hall and was awarded the Bentley Trophy on a number of occasions which was always the most profitable and rewarding of all the shows. We also exhibited at the Great Autumn Show run by the RHS and were awarded a Silver Gilt Medal and two Gold Medals during this time.

### **GARDEN FESTIVAL - STOKE ON TRENT**

In the autumn of 1985 I was approached by the organisers of the Garden Festival at Stoke-on-Trent as to whether I would like to participate in the event. After some correspondence, a site meeting was arranged at the festival grounds to discuss possible sites for a display of dahlias. My good friend, Tom McLelland, accompanied me on this first visit. We were met on arrival by the show organiser who became known as 'H' to everyone. Before being allowed in we were given hard hats' and had to wear them at all times on the site.

The site resembled a builder's yard with work in progress everywhere. 'H' had an idea that the dahlias would look good on top of a hill near the entrance but having stood there for a while discussing the matter we convinced him that it was not the best site. From our vantage point, looking down on to the road which came from the main entrance, it was suggested that we grew them on the right-hand side opposite the old Wedgwood factory. The shape of the beds and the number was left to us. After measuring the area we decided on four kidney shaped beds

starting small and each one doubling in size. The area first offered was eventually to become the Welsh exhibit with concrete sheep on the hillside which could withstand the weather. We noted that the ground was of very poor quality and on returning to 'H's office discussed the finer details and what we would have to do. It was agreed that all landscaping would be done by the Festival workers and when this was completed a further visit would be arranged.

### **CONCERN**

On the way home Tom McLelland was very concerned about whether I could manage to look after the nursery and the exhibit at the Festival which I had been very enthusiastic about as it was an hour's drive away from the nursery. This, however, was resolved one evening when I had a phone call from a former National Dahlia Society grower Len Hollis. Having been told that I was to have this exhibit in Stoke he offered his services to help grow the plants as he no longer had a garden. He lived in nearby Trentham, ten minutes drive away from the festival grounds. I was delighted to accept his offer and along with his wife Pat they spent all their free time that summer working on the dahlias.

### **CO-OPERATION**

The co-operation between 'H', the Hollis's and myself meant that anything that needed doing, or arranged, was done immediately. This meant having a free cooked meal every time we visited the site.

The festival was due to be opened the first week in May and some weeks earlier an official invitation was received to be guests at the opening by the Queen. I was contacted by 'H' regarding when I was going to plant the dahlias. I told him the first week in June. He was hoping I could plant them before the opening event but with the fear of frost in May this was not possible. The beds were planted with pansies for the opening of the event. We were not introduced to the Queen but were within six feet of her when she walked round the festival gardens. When we attended a luncheon for all the exhibitors, I much preferred the canteen meals we had with the workers during the year.

### **PLANTING OUT**

We arranged with the Hollis's to plant the dahlias in the first week of June and to be carried out before any planting took place on the nursery. Seven hundred exhibition dahlias were loaded into our van and three hundred Lilliput dahlias were also taken to the festival for planting. The Lilliputs were acquired from Ian Butterfield as tubers during the winter and propagated in the usual way. They proved to be very successful.

Tom McLelland and I together with a friend, Reg Leon, met the Hollis's in Stoke and we planted out the 1,000 plants during the day. They were labelled and secured to the canes. That was the only time that I actually worked on the dahlias except at the end when they were dug up and the tubers returned to the nursery as Len and Pat did all the growing and tending. At flowering time Len had difficulty getting the work done as the visitors kept him busy with questions and taking orders for plants. By the time the National Dahlia Society had their special show on 26<sup>th</sup> August the dahlia beds were in full bloom and much appreciated by the visiting top dahlia growers in the country. It was at this time 'H' contacted me and said they had judged the display and it had been awarded a Large Gold Medal plus £500 prize money. I also had a trade stand in the N D S Show which was awarded a Large Gold Medal and £500 prize money as the best Trade Exhibit shown in the halls. An event was organised by the festival authorities where the trade presentations were made to the sponsors and all Gold Medal winners received a commemorative plate made in the Potteries.

### **ALWAYS GRATEFUL**

I will always be grateful for the work done by Len and Pat Hollis at the festival as without them there would not have been a dahlia garden, so admired by the general public. All that was left to do when the festival closed was to remove the tubers and clear the site. Needless to say we became good friends with 'H' the head of operations at the festival.

The outcome of our venture into the Garden Festival was that we realised there was a lot of interest in Lilliput dahlias by the general public, so we decided to approach the Royal Horticultural Society regarding a stand at the Chelsea Flower show in May, the following year. As a result we were awarded a small stand approx fifteen by twelve feet. This was our first hurdle to be overcome. It was helped by having won a Silver Gilt Medal and a Gold Medal at the two previous late autumn shows at Westminster. We now had to produce something special as most people probably know the dahlia flowers in the autumn when the day begins to get shorter. Discussions took place with our horticultural adviser, Andrew Eames, as to the amount of artificial lighting we should give them and when to start. We made a decision to set up the tubers of Lilliput dahlias immediately after returning from the festival in November and gave them extended daylight to fourteen hours per day. The tubers were grown in the normal way as if it was spring, likewise the cuttings. The cuttings were then potted up into four inch pots to be grown on under sodium lights in the big greenhouse and potted finally into seven inch ones in February. Five hundred of these were spaced in one bay of the large greenhouse, under lighting. They had already been 'stopped' in the smaller pots to make them branch out. A growing temperature of fifty five degrees was maintained twenty four hours a day. Despite one of the worst winters in the nursery with night-time temperatures down to minus fifteen degrees fahrenheit and a good twelve inches of snow the plants thrived in the indoor conditions and our

lighting programme. We were pleased when the spring conditions eventually arrived and gradually we reduced the lighting so that by the middle of April no artificial light was given. This was to bring the day length down to the shortest possible time under natural light. This induced the dahlias to come into bud but the question was, would they flower in time for Chelsea?

Positive preparations went ahead at all times because we were going to show at Chelsea. 'H' from the Stoke Festival was approached to stand in for me for a week to run the nursery while Mary and I were at Chelsea. This was a big responsibility as we had all the stock of our exhibition dahlias grown in the nursery and some four thousand mini-plants of the Lilliput dahlias that we hoped to get orders for at the Chelsea Show. A couple of days before our departure for Chelsea 'H' arrived so that he was familiar with the irrigation system and everything that needed to be done in the nursery. He also dressed all the plants that went to Chelsea by removing dead leaves, washing the pots, removing dead blooms and helping to load the vehicle on the Sunday previous to the show.

### **STAND PREPARATION**

The van was divided into two levels and plants placed close together on carpet in order that they would not move in transit. A hundred pots were transported to London together with bags of peat to cover the pots on the stand. Work on the stand went on through Sunday night and into Monday morning and with the help of Len and Pat Hollis, Don and June Davis, by lunchtime on Monday the stand was completed, fully labelled, and not a petal out of place.

This was the only time that I had worked on a trade stand in a smart suit as I had been warned that on the Monday everyone in the Chelsea showground should be well dressed, not in jeans or work clothes. In the early afternoon I took Mary back to the Hotel Windermere which was used when we were exhibiting in London so that she could be dressed up ready for the Queen's visit at five in the afternoon.

### **SURPRISE VISITOR**

On returning to the showground an unusual incident occurred. I was taken to one side by Don Davis who informed me that a young lady had been asking for me. He was worried by what could arise from this as the young woman had approached him and said, "You are not Tom Bebbington." She then had arranged with him to return at four o'clock which was rapidly approaching. I had no idea who it could be. It turned out to be my cousin Barbara, who I had not seen for twenty years, and I did not know she lived in London. After greeting each other with

surprise and admiring the stand she suggested taking us to a hotel for afternoon tea. I accompanied her as Mary was to be the one person left on the stand to be visited by the Royal party, only one person being allowed on each stand.

### **ROYAL PARTY**

Mary escorted the Queen and Prince Philip round the stand which was an island bed. They admired it and enquired how we managed to grow dahlias to flower in the spring instead of at their normal time. They were followed by the rest of the Royal family, film stars and personalities, pursued by television cameras and the media. This all happened while Barbara and I had afternoon tea at a big hotel in London, consisting of cucumber sandwiches and cake, whilst catching up on our lost twenty years. Later we arranged to meet back at the hotel and Barbara insisted she took us out for an evening meal. My normal venue for an evening meal was a Trattoria opposite the Victoria Apollo Theatre on Vauxhall Bridge Road where I had spent many an evening whilst showing in London both as an amateur and a professional. On one occasion I sat near to Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister at that time. It was also very reasonably priced. Having organised with the rest of my party for them to dine at the Trattoria, Barbara, Mary and I went to a restaurant recommended by Barbara near Victoria Station for a very late evening meal.

### **FIRST AWARD**

At six thirty on the Tuesday morning we had breakfast and then went to man the stand at Chelsea from eight am to eight pm and to see which award we had achieved. On being joined by Tom McLelland and Dave Spencer we were delighted to find we had won a Silver Medal, our first at Chelsea.

We took it in turns for two people to have two hours off during the day, leaving six on the stand at any one time, as the stand had to be manned at all times during the day. Len Hollis and Don Davis had great fun seeing who could fill one order book first and by late morning this was achieved by Len. It was helped by having a captive audience who could hardly move owing to the number of people in the marquee.

We remembered the box of goodies brought by Len and Pat from where they worked at Mr.Kipling's factory in Stoke. Everybody enjoyed the Cherry Bakewells and others. These were also enjoyed by the Woodfield Brothers who showed lupins and had a stand on the outside wall of the marquee which enabled them to have a space for tea-making facilities, which we shared. The whole day was very exhausting and the cups of tea were very welcome.

By mid-morning of the second day with around four hundred orders for the dahlias we had to inform Len and Don that we could not take any more orders and to close the books as we were getting near to our maximum production level. All our customers were guaranteed that they would receive their orders within ten days after the end of the show. On Thursday evening we celebrated in our usual restaurant and looked forward to that final bell on Friday afternoon and the big sell-off. It was a very successful show.

### **SHOCKED POSTMASTER**

On returning home it was straight into despatching the dahlia orders. This was achieved by a conveyor type system of flat-pack boxes being made up, lined with greaseproof type paper, and the plants wrapped in wood-wool which we bought by the bale. Mary had typed all the address labels which were attached to the invoices. The last job at the nursery was to stick the labels on to the box. The local Postmaster, a fellow Rotarian, arranged the mailing of these parcels and was quite happy to take them. We had no idea of numbers. He was quite shocked when we turned up with two hundred parcels which half filled our Luton Box van. I ended up having to stop at the Post Office to attach all the stamps. He was better organised for the second delivery of orders.

### **CHELSEA - 1988**

With a second Gold Medal won at the Great Autumn Show in London it was hoped this guaranteed us a place at Chelsea for a second year. I submitted a plan to the RHS organisers for our Chelsea exhibit and was eventually allocated a space in the marquee, a little larger than the previous year, but still not the size I really needed. A sponsorship deal was arranged with Bradstone and in early spring the stone for the walling was delivered to the nursery in readiness for the exhibit. A week before the show the right amount of walling was delivered to the Chelsea show ground. I met Don Hill, another dahlia grower and a jobbing builder, on site and organised with him to build the display, emphasising that it needed to look old. He phoned a couple of days later and said it had been completed and ready for me to take the dahlias down, which again was done on the Sunday prior to the opening of the show.

I was helped this year by brothers Sid and Don Mitchell who I had known for a long time. They accompanied me with two vans to London. On arrival at Chelsea I found the brick-work had been pointed as if it was a new house, which was not the style I was looking for. It was decided that we would wire-brush a mortar-mix in to give it a weathered look. This had to be done with the stone-work damp in order to stop dust settling on other people's exhibits. It was the middle of the night before we were able to put the dahlias and marigolds into the display. By



around six am Monday morning the exhibit was virtually complete and after breakfast Sid and Don left for home. I awaited the arrival of Mary, by train, as I had to return to the nursery on Monday night.

### **MARY IN CHARGE**

With the help of last year's recruits I planned to leave Mary in charge. On clearing the marquee for the arrival of the Royal Party, Mary again manned the stand. With all arrangements made I left for home. On Tuesday morning I had a phone call from Don Davis informing me that Mary had lost her voice and could not communicate and he thought I should return to London. With my good friend Tom McLelland left at the nursery I got the earliest train back to the show.

By this time Mary's voice was slightly better but not good enough to take orders, of which there were very few. This was because the RHS had tried to control the attendance numbers which ended up with a fifty per cent reduction of people through the gates. They also decided to charge exhibitors for more than four allotted tickets. This problem and the lack of customers ended up with very little profit at the show. Some companies sent their workers home because of the lack of business. Not one order book was filled during the five days at the show, unlike the previous year when we had to stop taking orders on the second day. This would be our last Chelsea.

### **THE SPENCER CONNECTION**

You will probably realise by now that Dave and Carmen Spencer are good friends of ours. I first met Dave at the Midlands Show in 1974. From the very beginning we got on very well together. Our common interest being the dahlia and in the early years of our friendship he helped me to build up a large stock of different dahlias for my catalogue. In later years I was able to repay him by growing his plants for some time. I have influenced his life as it was me who made the American connection and recommended Dave to give the lectures in Seattle. It also introduced him to writing articles and he still writes for the Puget Sound Magazine and he wrote for many years in Garden News. When I needed help with the greenhouse it was Dave who I turned to. He was glad to assist me ably supported by other Kent growers. For four decades he has been one of Britain's leading growers winning many championship classes around the country. He is now recognised as one of the best lecturers we have, supported at all times, by his wife Carmen. I have said before that I have made many friends in the dahlia world and would need another book to mention them all. They have all enriched my life one way or another over the years.

## **OUR FINAL STAND**

I was encouraged by the organisers of the Great Autumn Show at Harrogate to do an island stand as I had always had a stand, just inside the entrance, backing on to a wall. Nostell Priory Roses occupied the centre of the hall each year with an island stand and they had asked to be moved this particular year and were happy for me to change places. It turned out to be the first and last island stand that I ever did. It took two days to build and included three loads of dahlias. I was awarded a Large Gold Medal. It turned out to be the star attraction and was shown on television. Even with all this work it did not generate any more orders but caused unrest among other trade stands as they lacked publicity. I have already said this was my last trade stand at the Harrogate Show as the following year I was offered an eight by two feet space in a corridor opposite the toilets which was an insult after the previous year. The central premier spot was given to the Dutch Dahlia Association. I turned the offer down and for one year sat on the National Dahlia Society Bureau helping with information and to show that I still had a presence. This was short-lived due to industrial problems with the miners and the introduction of a phytosanitary document to export dahlias at £10 per order. Mrs. Thatcher made it difficult to make a living from growing dahlias.

## **A CHANGE IN DIRECTION**

In the spring of 1989 it was a sad day when we dispatched our last consignment of dahlia plants to our valued customers. It was the end of an era. The decline of the mining industry and a recession forced us to rethink our direction in growing for the future. We decided to go into plug production of bedding plants for the spring and autumn which would give us all year round work and hopefully a more steady income which was desperately needed as Mary and I both worked full time on the nursery. We purchased two machines, the first being a Hamilton Seeder which sowed trays of 750 modules every 40 seconds. The second one filled the trays with compost at about 200 trays an hour at the correct density. This was successful for a number of years but with big changes in horticulture and plants being imported from around the world this also became unprofitable and the decision was made to sell the nursery and retire.

## **FULFILMENT**

From the age of 16 I had always wanted to be a nurseryman running my own business and this I had achieved. I was in business for twenty years with many ups and downs but it was always a pleasure to walk down the nursery and to do a day's work there. It was a sad day when we finally left.

## **NATIONAL SHOWS REVISITED – 2010**

Having spent the last two years writing 'about my life growing dahlias' I decided to visit the two National Shows in 2010. The big difference is that the National Dahlia show is no longer held in London but is held in conjunction with the National Garden Show in Shepton Mallet in Somerset. The change in venue in some ways has exaggerated the north/south divide, as looking back over the last two decades, one person has dominated the show in Shepton Mallet. This person is Tony Kingdon who only grows for the one show and has not travelled to Harrogate. Even the Harrogate show has moved to a different venue. It is still in Harrogate but is held on the Agricultural Showground and no longer in the beautiful Valley Gardens. Yet again this has been dominated by one person in recent years – Don Moseley. He has ventured south on a number of occasions and has been successful on four of his visits to Shepton Mallet. These two exhibitors have not had it all their own way as John Jack, from Scotland, has always been prepared to travel to both shows where he has been successful on a number of occasions. This can be seen in the history of the Barnes and Mawson Trophies earlier in the book. The autumn of 2010 turned out to be one of these years when the travelling Scotsman won the Barnes and the Maurice Lord trophies for 12 and 9 Giant Decorative Dahlias at the National Show in Shepton Mallet. He was unable to complete the double at Harrogate as Don Moseley again staged a superb exhibit to win the 12 Giants. One other grower who has been exhibiting since the early eighties is Ian Hill who staged fine exhibits at Harrogate against me and is still producing excellent blooms. He was successful this year at the Midlands Dahlia Show by winning the Philip Damp Trophy for 6 Giant Decoratives. I am sure that he will be successful again at the National Shows.

### **ASSESSMENT OF EXHIBITS**

Whilst at the shows the question was asked over and over again – were the dahlias as good now as when I was winning in the eighties? To be honest most modern exhibits lacked size with the exception of varieties like Sir Alf Ramsey and Bryn Terfel. Varieties which are still being grown 30 years later i.e. Alvas Supreme, and its two sports, have probably lost an inch and a half in diameter. This is probably due to deterioration of stock and not down to the exhibitor. Likewise with the two excellent varieties of my day, Hamari Girl and Kidds Climax no longer have the quality of my era. Sadly there is no room on the show bench for my two giants, Leycett and William B, which have long been superseded. I am sure that the dahlias I was growing in the eighties were bigger overall with the exception of the two I have already mentioned, Sir Alf Ramsey and Bryn Terfel, which have set the standard for the future.

### **MAJOR AWARDS AS AN AMATEUR**

- 1965 First prize for stand of dahlias at Kingston on Soar.
- 1973 The PHILIP DAMP Trophy for nine giant decorative dahlias - NDS silver medal for best exhibit in show and best giant with the variety Kiddy Climax - Midlands Dahlia Show
- 1976 Silver medal for best exhibit of giant/large blooms in division B - NDS Show London
- 1979 The HARRY STREDWICK Perpetual Memorial Trophy for the best giant decorative bloom with the variety Hamari Girl - NDS Show Harrogate
- 1979 The MAURICE LORD Challenge Cup for nine giant decorative blooms and the G.F.DRAYSON Memorial Challenge Trophy for best giant decorative with the variety Kiddy Climax - NDS Show London
- 1979 Silver medal for best exhibit of giant/large blooms in division B - NDS Show London
- 1980 The T.W.MAWSON Perpetual Challenge Cup for twelve blooms giant decorative - NDS Show Harrogate.
- 1980 The S. & M.BOWCOCK Perpetual Memorial Trophy for best new British seedling with variety Leycett - NDS Show Harrogate
- 1981 The JESCOT Perpetual Challenge Cup for the most meritorious seedling and the JALDEC Perpetual Challenge Trophy for the best giant/large British seedling also the BROTHER SIMPLICIOUS Memorial award with the variety William B - NDS Centenary Show London
- 1981 The T.W.MAWSON Perpetual Challenge Cup for twelve blooms giant decorative and the NORMAN GRATRIX Perpetual Challenge Trophy for the most meritorious exhibit by a member also the ROBINSON GREENHOUSE Centenary Trophy awarded for best exhibit in show - NDS Centenary Show Harrogate
- 1982 The A.T.BARNES Amateur Challenge Trophy for twelve varieties of giant decorative Dahlia - NDS Show London
- 1982 The T.W.MAWSON Perpetual Challenge Trophy for twelve giant decorative dahlias and the HARRY STREDWICK Perpetual Memorial Trophy for the best giant/large with the variety Alva's Supreme – NDS Show Harrogate

### **Awards as Nurseryman for Trade stands of Dahlias**

- 1983 GOLD MEDAL - North of England Horticultural Society Show, Harrogate
- 1984 GOLD MEDAL - City of Leicester Show
- 1984 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - North of England Show
- 1985 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - Southport Flower Show
- 1985 GOLD MEDAL - Shrewsbury Show
- 1985 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - City of Leicester Show
- 1985 The 'BENTLEY' Perpetual Challenge Trophy - NDS Show London
- 1985 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - North of England Show
- 1985 FLORA SILVER-GILT MEDAL - Royal Horticultural Society Autumn Show
- 1986 LARGE GOLD MEDAL .The 'MUSGRAVE-HOYLE' Trophy for best dahlia display in Show also the 'SALOPIAN' Trophy for the best floral exhibit in show and the most meritorious non competitive exhibit in the show at Southport
- 1986 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - NDS Show National Garden Festival at Stoke on Trent for a trade stand of dahlias
- 1986 The Festival's GOLD MEDAL for a Dahlia Garden - Stoke on Trent
- 1986 GOLD MEDAL and the 'BENTLEY' Perpetual Challenge Trophy - NDS Show London
- 1986 SILVER GILT MEDAL - City of Leicester Show
- 1986 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - North of England Show Harrogate
- 1986 GOLD MEDAL - Royal Horticultural Society Autumn Show London
- 1987 FLORA SILVER MEDAL - RHS Chelsea Show London
- 1987 LARGE GOLD MEDAL and the 'DINGLE' Perpetual Cup for best stand of dahlias - Shrewsbury Flower Show
- 1987 LARGE GOLD MEDAL the 'MUSGRAVE-HOYLE' Trophy for best dahlia display plus the A.HUXTABLE ESQ Trophy for artistic presentation and the SHROPSHIRE HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY's Perpetual Challenge Trophy - Southport Show
- 1987 GOLD MEDAL and the 'BENTLEY' Trophy - NDS Show London
- 1987 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - North of England Show Harrogate
- 1987 GOLD MEDAL - RHS Autumn Show London
- 1988 FLORA SILVER MEDAL - RHS Chelsea Show London for an exhibit of dahlias
- 1988 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - Shrewsbury Show, for stand of dahlias
- 1988 LARGE GOLD MEDAL - North of England Show Harrogate, an island stand and our last.

