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ALUMNI OFFICE



# Where have all the flowers gone?

*A short history of the horticultural nursery which once occupied the University site*

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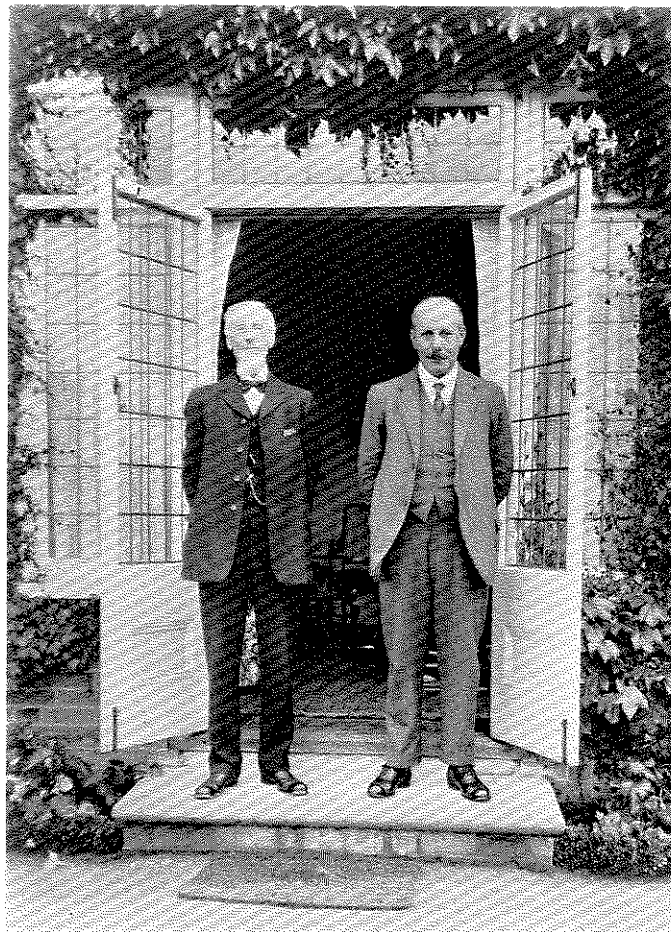
On 25 April 1934 H.M. Queen Mary arrived in Kingston Lane to visit the site of Brunel University. It was her interest in horticulture which prompted the visit, for on the campus in those days stood one of the largest cut-flower nurseries in England. Accompanied by the young Princess Elizabeth, now our present Queen, she came to tour the Lowe and Shawyer nursery and see the acres of flowers growing both in the open and under glass.

The story of the nursery begins in 1864 when Joseph Lowe, a 21-year-old jobbing gardener living in Uxbridge Moor, began growing plants for his customers in a 6-ft by 4-ft frame. In a short while he added a greenhouse and twelve other frames, growing mainly geraniums and calceolarias. By 1868 Mr Lowe was seeking a larger site for his expanding trade, and in that year he rented two acres of land in Kingston Lane and moved his business there. The house on the site became his home, and is nowadays a School of Music and Dancing. The nursery continued to expand in its new setting, and greenhouses were erected in quick succession. Joseph Lowe decided to specialize in roses and chrysanthemums for the cut-flower market, and his name soon became well known. He employed several men by this time, and was able to purchase the freehold of the Kingston Lane land.

In 1897 Mr Lowe's health broke down, and he was faced with the advisability of giving up his nursery. He had, however, been visited by a young man named George Shawyer, who often cycled over from Cranford to seek his advice on cultivation. Impressed with the young man's enthusiasm and ability, Mr Lowe suggested partnership. Shawyer accepted, and joined Lowe in 1897.

The business was still small, and the early years of the partnership were difficult, but problems were solved by hard work and loyal co-operation. By the time a private company was formed in 1906 there were about 100 employees, and land had been bought on the west side of Kingston Lane increasing the nursery area to 26 acres. Rapid expansion continued with the purchase of adjoining fields and meadows, so that by 1914 Lowe and Shawyer owned 71 acres and employed 300 people. The firm was by now the largest employer of labour in the district. This era was notable for the production by the firm of a series of new rose varieties, and in 1910 their chief rose-grower, Edwin Alford, was awarded the Gold Medal of the National Rose Society for the seedling rose *Lady Hillingdon*, an orange rambler still to be found in some local gardens.

With the onset of the 1914-18 war the firm had to switch largely to the growing of vegetables and tomatoes, and women workers were employed for the first time. The post-



*Mr Joseph Lowe (left) and Mr George Shawyer in 1922*

war years saw a return to flower production, and the local unemployment problem following demobilization was partly solved when gangs of men were employed to straighten the course of the River Pinn through the nursery. Pre-war maps reveal the once meandering course of the river, at one time the nursery's only source of water.

By 1925, when a party of American growers visited the site, it was described as 'Britain's biggest greenhouse range'. The acreage was now over 120, there were some 500 employees, and the Americans had to admit that 'at present we have nothing at all to compare with it'. By then carnation-growing was developing quickly, along with sweet peas, gladioli, irises, daffodils and tulips. From the packing-shed flowed a steady stream of flowers throughout the year, and horse-drawn wagons (soon to be replaced by motor lorries) travelled through the night piled high with boxes of flowers to reach the London market at dawn. By rail the firm's

products reached markets as far afield as Bristol, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool.

Following Mr Lowe's death in 1929 the management passed into the hands of George Shawyer. About this time it was decided to give up rose-growing, but the nursery continued to increase in size with the development of the land between Cleveland Road and Cowley Road, and the acquisition of part of Manor Farm, Cowley, to the south of Cowley Church. By the mid-1930s the acreage was 200, and the labour force approached 1,000. Fourteen boiler-houses, consuming 6,000 tons of fuel per year, were needed to heat the 35 acres of greenhouses. Artesian wells were bored (just west of the present refectory building) to boost the water supply. In 1938, with a labour force of 1,400 in the peak month of August, the record total of 4,205,273 dozen blooms were sold.

This total was almost reached again in 1939, but the outbreak of war meant that cultivation of vegetables and tomatoes was introduced once again. Some sugar-beet was also grown during the war years. Mr Shawyer died in 1943, aged 79. He was undoubtedly the leader of the cut-flower industry in this country and, like his partner Mr Lowe, had been awarded the Victoria Medal of Honour in Horticulture, the highest award of the Royal Horticultural Society.

Post-war problems proved insurmountable. Not least was a shortage of labour, for agricultural wages fell short of those which could be obtained in other trades, and the thought of

working long hours amongst cold, dripping plants and being called out on frosty nights was a further deterrent. In the flower markets there was greater competition from foreign growers, now able to fly in their blooms from warmer climes. The nursery kept going until 1958, when the decision was taken to go into voluntary liquidation. The greenhouses and effects were sold, and the site cleared.

This large area was destined eventually to become the home of Brunel University, and many local people still remember with pleasure the colourful beauty of vast stretches of magnificent flowers.

*Workers in one of the chrysanthemum houses, c. 1925*



*Aerial view of part of the Lowe and Shawyer Nurseries in 1929  
Cleveland Road and the former railway line run across the centre of the photograph*

