

The Daffodil Society - A Potted History

Jan Dalton

I am grateful to all the contributors to this book, on the history of the daffodil and the Society during the last 100 years. In particular, to those authors whose articles make mention of flowers and personalities that would otherwise necessitate their inclusion in this item, making it unnecessarily long, and possibly, boring. Historical documentation, by its very nature, can become an anathema or, in contrast, a short, interesting and surprising revelation of facts. With that in mind, I do hope that in this brief essay I err on the side of the latter, without missing too much of the detail required by the reader or avid historian.

Any historical detail or information concerning the Society, not published in this volume, can be readily obtained in the future through the Society's archives. Details of this service to members will be published in the Society's other literature in future.

Briefly then, the Society was first formed at a meeting that took place in July 1898 in Birmingham. The idea to form a 'Daffodil Society' of some description is credited to Prof. William Hillhouse, Secretary of the Birmingham Botanical and Horticultural Society. This organisation had for several years, staged a Daffodil Show in the Botanical Gardens, Edgbaston, Birmingham from 1893. Professor Hillhouse's suggestion had been addressed to Mr. Robert Sydenham, a supporter of the show and a prominent local businessman in the Sydenham family's wholesale jewellery firm and his own Bulb and Seed firm.

It was due to the determination, social standing and financial backing of Robert Sydenham and a select band of supporters that the new Society first appeared on the scene as the Midland Daffodil Society. The Society very quickly became established with Professor Hillhouse as Chairman, Robert Sydenham (not un-naturally) as Treasurer and Herbert Smith (one of Sydenham's employees) as joint Secretary along with Rev. Joseph Jacob (later, author of *Daffodils* circa 1910). Among the Society's first supporters and patrons were the following, as listed in the first annual report dated 1899:-

THE MIDLAND DAFFODIL SOCIETY

UNDER THE SUPPORT OF THE PRINCIPAL AMATEUR AND TRADE
GROWERS IN THE KINGDOM.

PRESIDENT—

THE RIGHT REV. THE LORD BISHOP OF WORCESTER.

VICE PRESIDENTS—

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JOSEPH CHAMBERLAIN, M.P.

THE RIGHT HON. THE LORD MAYOR OF BIRMINGHAM, C. G. BEALE, ESQ., MA.

JOHN BENNETT POE, ESQ. (*Chairman of the Narcissus Committee of the
Royal Horticultural Society.*)

THE REV. WM. WILKS, M.A. (*Secretary, Royal Horticultural Society.*)

R. O. BACKHOUSE, ESQ., Sutton Court, Hereford.

W. A. MILNER, ESQ., Totley Hall, Sheffield.

J. C. WILLIAMS, ESQ., Caerhays Castle, Cornwall.

MRS. NETTLEFOLD, Hallfield, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

MISS WILLMOTT, Great Warley, Essex.

TREASURER—

MR. ROBERT SYDENHAM, Tenby Street, Birmingham.

HONORARY SECRETARIES—

THE REV. JOSEPH JACOB, M.A., Whitewell Rectory, Whitechurch, Salop.
MR. HERBERT SMITH, Tenby Street, Birmingham.

COMMITTEE—

Chairman—PROFESSOR W. HILLHOUSE, M.A., F.L.S.
BARR, P. RUDOLPH, King Street, Covent Garden, London.
BICK, CHARLES R., The Gardens, Harborne Hall, Birmingham.
CARTWRIGHT, R. CHATWIN, Selly Park, near Birmingham.
CRYER, A., The Gardens, Berrow Court, Edgbaston, Birmingham.
ENGLEHEART, REV. G. H., M.A., Appleshaw Rectory, Andover.
GRANT, W. J., Highfield, Bassaleg, Newport, Mon.
HERBERT, C. H., Sparkhill Nurseries, Birmingham.
HUXLEY, J. C., M.D., 19, Harborne Road, Birmingham.
LATHAM, W. B., Edgbaston Botanical Gardens, Birmingham.
PEARSON, J. D., The Nurseries, Chilwell, Notts.
POPE, JOHN, King's Norton Nurseries, near Birmingham.
REUTHE, G. (T. S. Ware Ltd.,) Hale Farm Nurseries, Tottenham
SIMPSON, F. W., 5, Victoria Road, Harborne, Birmingham.
SPINKS, WM., Solihull Nurseries, near Birmingham.

The first show of the Midland Daffodil Society was held in 1899 at the Botanical Gardens, Edgbaston and the following is a copy of the first annual report relating to that show:-

FIRST ANNUAL REPORT, 1899.

THE First Annual Exhibition of the Society was held at the Edgbaston Botanical Gardens on Thursday and Friday, April the 13th and 14th, and brought together a collection of flowers which was the surprise and admiration of all who visited the Exhibition, and was acknowledged to be the largest and most representative collection of flowers and growers that has ever gathered together in the United Kingdom. The trade exhibitors from all parts were well represented, Messrs. Barr and Son, of London; T. S. Ware, Ltd., London; Bath, Ltd., of Wisbech; Hogg and Robertson, Dublin; Dicksons, Ltd, Chester; Mauger and Son, Guernsey; Simpson and Son, Birmingham; Hewitt and Co., Solihull; John Pope, Birmingham; Robert Sydenham, Birmingham; J. W. Cunningham, Spalding; R. O. Backhouse, Hereford; Van der Schoot, Holland; R. Dean, Ealing; Mrs. Woodley, Aghinagh, &c.

The amateur growers were also well represented, coming from various parts of the Kingdom, and included:—Honble. Mrs. Corbet, of Hankelow; Mrs. M. B. Crawford, of Ardlamont, N.B.; Miss Willmott, of Great Warley; Miss F. Currey, of Lismore, Ireland; The Revds. G. H. Engleheart, of Andover; S. E. Bourne, of

Lincoln; C. Wolley Dod, of Malpas; and J. Jacob, of Whitchurch; Messrs. F. W. Burbidge, of Dublin; I. Cooke, Shrewsbury; W. J. Grant, Newport; J. Mallender, Worksop; R. F. Mills, Chesterfield; J. T. White, Spalding; J. C. Williams and P. D. Williams, of Cornwall; H. B. Young, of Lincoln; Birmingham being represented by Mrs. Whitmore and Miss E. C. Swinden; Messrs. C. R. Bick, A. F. Bird, R. Chatwin Cartwright, A. W. Hulse, J. A. Kenrick, C. Knight, Lawley Parker, Pope and Son, E. M. Sharp, and Robert Sydenham.

Messrs. R. Van der Schoot & Son, of Holland, sent what would have been a very interesting box of Seedlings, but unfortunately not being well packed they arrived in bad condition; Messrs. Mauger & Son, of Guernsey, sent two boxes of cut bloom containing several varieties, these came beautifully packed and as fresh as though they had just been cut; a special certificate was awarded. A Class is now introduced (see Class 26) for the best packed box, with the hope of encouraging good and careful packing for market purposes.

The weather unfortunately was not what could have been desired. On the first day, just as the Show opened, there was a heavy storm of rain, which materially affected the attendance, but in spite of these adverse circumstances, the hall was filled to almost an uncomfortable extent during the first afternoon. The second day was unfortunately one continuous rain from morning to evening, which had a most disastrous effect upon the attendance, although there were more present than could have been expected.

The handsome Challenge Cup, offered by Messrs. Barr & Sons, of London, did not bring a very strong competition, there being only one exhibitor, the Rev. J. Jacob, Whitewell Rectory, Whitchurch, Salop, but the Judges considered that although his collection was not quite up to the usual competitive standard for a prize of this sort, it had been carefully staged, and the flowers, considering the season, were very representative, and therefore awarded it the Cup.

A Luncheon was provided in a tent in the grounds on the first day of the Show, but through some misunderstanding as to the probable number attending, it was not so comfortable or satisfactory as could have been wished. This to a great extent was owing to the visitors not replying to a circular asking them to say whether they would be present. Afternoon tea was provided in the grounds, but owing to the very unfortunate weather, was not patronised or enjoyed as it would have been had the weather been fine.

A Conference was held on the second day of the Show, presided over by the Rev. G. H. Engleheart, and many good and desirable ideas were brought forward and duly discussed, the principal of which were:—

“Should we have separate classes for local exhibitors?”

“Should the Society be re-named ‘The National Daffodil Society?’”

“Would not the Narcissi in pots look better and be more useful for decorative purposes if grown in pots not exceeding 6in. instead of 8½in. as at present?”

- “A class for a group of Spring flowering plants in pots arranged on the floor would have a charming effect.”
- “To form a class for beginners (those who have never taken a prize at any Daffodil show).”
- “To ask the Royal Horticultural Society to send a deputation to our next exhibition.”
- “Have premier prizes for the best bloom in each of the different sections of Narcissi”
- “Have a separate class for the Poeticus section.”
- “Exhibitors should persuade their friends to become growers, &c.”

Mr. Sydenham hospitably entertained the majority of visitors and exhibitors at the Midland Hotel on the first evening of the Show, and amongst others present were:—Miss F. Currey, of Lismore, Ireland; the Revs. G. H. Engleheart, M.A., and S. E. Bourne; Messrs. F. W. Burbidge, M.A., of Dublin; P. R. Barr, London; C. R. Bick, Birmingham; I. Cooke, Shrewsbury; J. W. Cunnington, Spalding; Richard Dean, London; W. J. Deans (Messrs. Pope and Son), Birmingham; H. H. Doe (*Gazette*), Birmingham; W. J. Grant, Newport, Mon.; W. Gardiner (*Journal of Horticulture*), Harborne; C. H. Herbert (Messrs. Thomson and Co.), Birmingham; W. Logan (Messrs. Barr and Son), London; J. Mallender, Worksop; J. D. Pearson, Chilwell; John Pope, King's Norton; F. W. Simpson, Birmingham; A. Stiles, Spalding; J. A. Sayers (*Edgbastonia*), Birmingham; W. Spinks (Messrs. Hewitt and Co.), Solihull; T. W. Sorby, Sheffield; J. T. White, Spalding; and H. B. Young, of Lincoln.

Some interesting speeches were made, and it was suggested, amongst other things, by the Rev. S. E. Bourne, that a monthly or quarterly paper generally appertaining to Narcissi should be published; but this, owing to no one feeling disposed at present to take upon himself the responsibility of Editorship, did not meet with a very sympathetic reception.

The Committee have great pleasure in stating that the number of growers who have responded to the invitation to become members has been satisfactory, and in spite of many disadvantages in weather, the peculiar season, &c., the Society are able to begin next year with a very creditable balance. They have also promises of many new members and new subscribers, so that they look forward to the next year's Exhibition with very great hopes.

They also take this opportunity of asking all who have the cultivation of the Narcissus at heart, to do anything and everything they can to induce friends to join the Society, feeling sure that these Bulbs might and should be as well or better grown at home, than they can be abroad, and that thereby might be encouraged an industry which in some parts of the country might be and is being developed to a marked degree of success.

SIGNED ON BEHALF OF THE COMMITTEE,

W. HILLHOUSE,

Chairman.



One end of the Show.—The large group is that staged by Barr and Sons and the gentleman in the chair is Mr. Mudge, who is in charge of it. On either side of the central gangway there are the classes for new seedlings. From it one gets an idea of the way flowers are staged in England.

From this report and the previous list of supporters/patrons, it can be seen that the new Society had the attention and support of most of the prominent members of the daffodil world at that time. This undoubtedly laid the foundation of a Society that was to withstand the vagaries of two World Wars and other setbacks that most societies are prone to suffering from time to time.

From the outset, the Society continued to attract new members, supporters and exhibitors from all corners of the British Isles and appropriately, visitors from all over the world came to view the annual shows. As early as 1901, only the third show of the Society, a deputation was sent by The Royal Horticultural Society, consisting of Rev. Wm. Wilks (Secretary), Mr. John T. Bennett Poë (Chairman of the RHS Narcissus Committee), The Hon. John Boscawen, the Rev. S. E. Bourne and Mr. F. W. Burbidge M.A. of Dublin. This deputation made a number of RHS awards to trade stands and assisted the Midland Daffodil Society Committee in making awards of FCC's and AM's to individual cultivars. The Society was, indeed, honoured by their visit and considered it a compliment to their newly found status.

The next RHS deputation to visit the show came in 1909, co-incidentally the year in which the Society adopted the new RHS Classification of Daffodils as the basis for its schedule. Also in that year, the Society had the pleasure of the company of Peter Barr VMH ('The Daffodil King') and William Baylor Hartland of Co. Cork at the annual show and dinner. Sadly, in this year, we were to lose both Peter Barr and our recently retired Chairman, Professor Hillhouse. As is inevitable, the passage of time is punctuated by such sad events and so it was that in 1913 the Society also mourned the death of its Founder and great benefactor, Robert Sydenham.

The fact that the Society withstood the loss of such great supporters and was to carry the turmoil of the first World War, was a testament to the organisation that the likes of 'Uncle' Robert as he had become known, had helped to build. His dream had become a reality and now those that had followed him and drawn from his infectious enthusiasm were to carry on the work in his name. It was unanimously agreed that following his death, the visible memorial to his contribution would be the affixing of the words "Robert Sydenham, Founder" to the official title of the Society. This was carried out, but apparently ceased at some point prior to 1947. (Possibly during the war years when publications ceased for a short period). You will see from this volume, that I have fittingly restored that title to the current logo.

So many great daffodil names of the past were involved with the Society that it would not be possible to mention them all in this article. However, some of them are as much a part of the history of the daffodil as they are of the Society. Names that spring to mind like F. W. Burbidge of Dublin University, joint contributor to The Narcissus, its History and Culture (1875), who acted as a judge for many years from the first show of 1899; Peter Barr VMH ('The Daffodil King') whose firm Barr & Sons of Covent Garden supported the Society and presented wonderful, solid silver engraved trophies for competition each year; Mr. and Mrs. R. O. Backhouse of Sutton Court, Hereford and Henry Backhouse of Darlington, sons and daughter-in-law of pioneer daffodil hybridizer William Backhouse and great enthusiasts and hybridizers themselves; the cousins J. C. Williams and P. D. Williams of Cornwall mentioned later in Dan du Plessis' piece on that area; Rev. George Engleheart of Dinton, remembered and revered for his new raisings at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century; William Copeland (of pottery fame) of Stone in Staffs whose 'double' cultivars were generations ahead of others. These, and so many, many more dedicated followers, to whom we owe so much, will be remembered for their contribution to the daffodil world.

Herbert Smith, the Society's Secretary agreed to carry on in that job following the death of 'Uncle'



Photograph by kind permission of Birmingham Post and Mail

THE MIDLAND DAFFODIL SOCIETY'S SHOW, 1954
Messrs. J. M. de Navarro, J. S. B. Lea and C. R. Wootton

Robert and now, as managing director of the firm of Sydenhams (Bulbs and Seed Merchants), promised the Society his and the firms continued support in the future. The remarkable feature of this comment at the 1914 AGM of the Society was that Herbert Smith was to remain as Secretary until his own death in 1938! In so doing, he completed 40 years in that office, from the day the Society was first formed, a truly amazing act of dedication and loyalty to the Society and his late friend and employer Robert Sydenham.

Although with Herbert Smith's death, the long personal association with the Founder and his firm (Robert Sydenham Ltd) temporarily ended, the Society was to later be re-united by a strange quirk of destiny, to the Sydenham name. Sydenham Ltd. continued to support the Society by membership subscription until 1951. (Quite substantially, I should add) after which time, nothing further is recorded. However, in the 1970's and 80's the Society was to hold its show at the Sydenham Notcutts Garden Centre, Monkspath, Nr. Shirley, home of Robert Sydenham's Nursery in earlier times, and once more re-connecting the Society with its past.

In the intervening period of the first and second World Wars, Guy L. Wilson of Broughshane, N. Ireland and J. Lionel Richardson of Waterford, Eire both became involved with the Society and its shows. They were to dominate the show scene for 40 years in all and their keen, yet friendly, rivalry on the benches was to bring many fine flowers to the public's gaze. Without doubt, these two men were the most prolific daffodil hybridizers ever and both made significant contributions to the Society's literature and to its administration.

Having lost two shows due to the first World War, the Society also suffered heavily in the second World War. No shows were held for 5 years between 1941 and 1945 incl. and Society membership fell markedly. Part of this was due to daffodil cultivation having to take a back seat to food production and it was during this period that many millions of bulbs were dumped or destroyed as the land was given over to aid the war effort. The Society's shows were re-commenced in 1946, though initially, not at the Botanical Gardens, Edgbaston as had always been the tradition in the past. Lack of finance dictated a change of venue and so it was that, for a period of three years, a joint show was held in the Conference Hall, Stratford on Avon with the local horticultural society. This included the Society's Golden Jubilee year in 1948. During the war years and for some time after, the Society had its first lady Secretary in Mrs. M. Wootton, wife of Reg, a prominent Committee member. Later Mrs. Wootton was to become Treasurer and Reg Wootton the Society's President in 1951-1952. Membership had fallen to an all time low of around 40 during the hostilities and the Society was in dire need of new support. Gradually, things started to pick up and by the time of Reg's Presidency the membership had more than doubled to just short of 100. In 1954, the Committee of the day, which included Sir William and Lady Norah Fitzherbert, Fred Board, Jose Maria de Navarro (Toty), J. L. Richardson, Guy Wilson, John Lea, Dennis Milne and Reg Wootton managed to stir up enthusiasm in the daffodil world. Toty de Navarro winning the Bourne Cup for 12 cultivars raised by the exhibitor on no less than 8 occasions (5 in succession in the 1950's) and later John Lea with 9 wins in the same class (6 in succession in the 1970's)

John Lea and Fred Board were to follow as Society President's in the late 1950's and early 1960's and it was in 1959 that one of the Society's other greatest servants, Jim Pearce, was to embark on his own journey of contribution, on becoming the Society's Secretary in that year. It was during Fred Board's Presidency and Jim's 25 years stint in office that the Society took on a new image and changed its name to The Daffodil Society in 1963. This era is enlarged upon later, in Jim's own article 'On Reflection', which captures the mood of the day.

What Jim's article does not do, of course, in keeping with his modest manner, is reflect the tremendous amount of work he put in himself and the importance of that contribution, during a difficult financial period for the Society. Not only Jim's effort and loyalty in *that* era, but later in the 1980's as the Society's President for some nine years and on retirement from that office in 1993, as an Honorary Life Member. Still, to this day, offering wise council at committee meetings, drawn from great experience stretching back 40 years. In celebrating our Centenary and honouring such great men as our Founder, Robert Sydenham and our very first Secretary Herbert Smith for his 40 years service, let us also applaud Jim Pearce, to whom this book is dedicated, who equally, has dedicated himself to the daffodil and this Society.

It was in the late 1970's that the Society was also to encourage the formation of its Regional Groups, to co-ordinate its work in various parts of the country. In similar fashion to the encouragement of Affiliated Societies in the 1960's, this also proved most beneficial in a number of ways. Initially two Groups were formed, one in the North and one in the South, and these achieved the goal of bringing the Society to a wider audience, albeit on a Regional basis. The exercise was successful in increasing the Society's individual membership and local society affiliations. It also proved financially beneficial to both the Groups and the parent body through the proceeds of the Group's Bulb Sales. Later these Regional Groups were to expand and spread to other Regions such as Wessex, South West, Scotland and Mid-Southern, etc.

Today, in its Centenary year, the Society enjoys the support of its largest ever membership, with some 700+ individual members and 220+ affiliated societies. Financially stable now, due to the income from the annual lottery, started in the mid 1980's, and the tremendous support that is given to that fund raising scheme by members of the trade and individuals - and of course those of you who purchase tickets, the Society is indeed grateful for that support.

With the new Millennium less than two years away and our next 100 years only just about to begin, the Society will require that same level of support in the future if it is to continue its role of promoting the knowledge, cultivation and improvement of the daffodil and its status as THE Daffodil Society.