

Chapter 8

After 1945 — Ripples of Change

When the war ended the strictures on agriculture and horticulture were slowly relaxed and the plantings of bulbs gradually increased. The expansion was particularly slow because food rationing continued until after 1953. Food production at home was still of prime importance until world production got back to normal and shipping and trade centres were re-organised for their peace time tasks.

All requisites, including fertilisers, were slow in becoming freely available and bulb stocks which multiply more slowly than stocks of seed potatoes or grain varieties simply were not available in quantity for rapid replanting. Gradually the small stocks held at the end of the war by growers in the U.K. and in the Netherlands were built up with an increase of between 100 and 150 per cent each year. Then tonnages of mainly daffodils and tulips were sold off to other growers and the trade.

In England there were limited plantings of iris and gladioli for cut flowers but the main expansion was in daffodils and tulips, building up to a peak in the 1970's.

New techniques of husbandry were introduced. Mechanisation of planting became easier when both daffodils and tulips were planted in ridges like potatoes instead of in furrows in beds of five or six rows. By 1950 ridge planting had taken over from bed planting. Today's generation of bulb growers have not seen six row beds and the only nursery where the old Dutch method of planting and lifting bulbs in beds can still be seen is at Parigo, Little London, Spalding, where freesias are hand planted and lifted in beds in the greenhouses, using special wide cutting trowels for exposing each row of bulbs.

Growing in ridges permitted the use of inter-row cultivators by tractors using potato equipment and soon potato equipment was used for harvesting. At first the elevator digger replaced the plough and the wider use of complete harvesters in the 1960's soon saw them being adapted with narrower webs for lifting bulbs into bulk bins and trailers. The

daffodil responded well to handling in this way and today our daffodil growers are the most mechanised in the world, handling their stock in bulk in bins or palletised from lifting to store, through drying and sterilising processes, back to the planter again. Some growers on strong or cloddy soils or with many small stocks to keep separate, may prefer to use the elevator digger and pick by hand, but they have the choice.

Tulips, on the other hand, are more subject to bruising and splitting of the bulb clusters. Attempts to mechanise the lifting by a complete harvester system have not always been successful except on the lightest of soils and with careful operators under good conditions. To lift tulips before splitting occurs, they have to be harvested immature, fairly white, and the slightest bruise will lead to chalking of the scales in storage.

New techniques of pest and disease control were introduced. Hot water treatment for eelworm in daffodils had been introduced in the thirties. Now more efficient fungicides became available to control tulip fire (*botritis tulipae*) and farm sprayers to apply the materials at the right time were on hand.

Weeds had always been a problem in bulb growing and large gangs of workers were needed to hoe and hand weed the fields. After a good deal of experimentation, herbicides were introduced to control weed growth during the spring period. C.I.P.C. applied during the winter was found to control most weeds for the next sixteen weeks or so when the crop was most vulnerable to competition. This has now been superceded by more complicated chemical programmes which give control of most weeds throughout the two year period of daffodil planting. Fusarium, which causes base rot in daffodils and sour in tulips, has been checked by the use of fungicide dips and better controlled environments in storage but still evades complete control.

The aspect of mechanisation which has changed the nature of the work most of all is bulk handling and palletisation. Between growing in the field and replanting or sale, the bulb has to go through many operations of drying, grading, temperature treatment, cold storing and dipping. In my youth this meant days and weeks of man-handling boxes and bags in hot, dusty conditions many times. We still have a lot of dust, but one man with a pallet truck can whistle and sing while he moves tons of bulbs in or out of store, at the touch of a lever.

These changes in husbandry methods attracted several arable farmers with ample equipment into bulb growing as an alternative crop in their rotation. Energetic salesmen sold them stocks, dare one say "gold bricks", advised them how to treat their fields and promised to buy back the progeny. By the seventies the plantings had increased and demand was high, while considerable tonnages were being diverted to these

growers. But after building up stocks for four or six years, they began to turn some of the harvest into cash and for a few years more bulbs were on offer than could be absorbed because new markets had not been developed. Bulbs bought at £120 per ton a year or two earlier would not realise more than £50 on a saturated market.

Gradually new markets came along, the disenchanted grower without a real interest in the crop dropped out and the seventies saw production come into balance with demand after a serious hiccup for a couple of years. In fact today there is scope for increasing our export of best narcissus by at least half as much again with prices reaching £350 and £400 per ton for top varieties.

The tulip crop has not fared so well and while this crop has not been mechanised as much as the daffodil, we have seen labour costs on a very labour demanding crop increase dramatically while the value of the bulbs has changed little in ten years. The demand for tulip, as a cut flower, has also declined with so much variety of flowers available from all over the world on our markets, so that prices of tulip flowers are not encouraging new growers to begin nor old growers to continue. Over the last ten years our tulip acreage has declined to about one thousand acres (448 hectares in 1980) and about 800 acres will be large enough to supply both the cut flower market and the garden trade.

This period saw changes in marketing the bulbs and flowers. Trading had been effected by the growers and nurserymen selling their own produce themselves or selling through bulb merchants who were in a better position to bulk up orders, offer a catalogue, extend their range with Dutch bulbs and cater for large orders from seed houses and parks superintendants.

Bulb Auctions

At no time had there been a large grower's bulb auction like the Hobaho in Holland. At the Spalding market, fruit and vegetables were available for sale but it was only attended by local farmers, their wives and local buyers. The Spalding auctioneers, now young men back from the war, were quick to see an opportunity and in 1948 George Kingston journeyed over to Evesham to see the growers' vegetable and fruit auction.

Plans were drawn up and the Spalding Bulb and Produce Auction was founded to attract buyers from Midland towns and cities. Supplies of vegetables, fruit, bulbs and flowers were organised from local growers and in 1948 the S.P.B.A. commenced operations in the first of the sale halls on the King's Road cattle auction site.



Tulips growing under dutch lights — The Nell Brothers

Photo: John Nell

Tulip heading machine

Photo: John Nell



The founders were R. Longstaff & Co., S. & G. Kingston, Tateson and Shearer and White, Sons & Lumby. This produce auction has run successfully since its inception, holding sales of large volumes of produce on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays with sales of bulbs on Tuesdays and Fridays during the season.

Soon buyers were coming with vans and lorries from a wide catchment area and additional halls were built to accommodate different types of produce. Peter Rhodes was appointed to manage the day to day affairs, supervise collections of produce and organise the supply and return of empty crates. He is still there, which is praise enough. Selling was done by the director auctioneers in turn and the ungainly "farm sale" system of walking along a row of lots for sale was improved over the years by a movable dais, an electronic indicator board, and in the case of bulbs, by displaying the lots in a hall for inspection and selling by catalogue in a more comfortable seated sales room.

The clock auction system used in the Dutch auctions was seriously considered at one stage but the idea was dropped. S.B.P.A. can accommodate hundreds of buyers from the big account to the small. The clock system is best suited to a more limited field of merchants and shippers whose buyers sit by their telephones every day and learn to punch the clock button with split second timing.

The office has to cope with large numbers of accounts of many lots and is popular with growers because it can pay out cash immediately after the sale. Accounts are now computerised.

Bulbs sold on the auction are from local growers but its scope has widened to include entries from Cornwall, Scotland and Ireland and a range of miscellaneous bulbs from the Netherlands.

Spalding is the acknowledged centre of the bulb industry in Great Britain but it has had its challengers for the title.

Several leading bulb firms were established at Wisbech where the fertile silt soils suited many types of horticultural production. Attempts have been made to encourage bulb trading at the fen town of Wisbech and a bulb auction was started by auctioneers Clifford Cross. Bulbs and bulb flowers are handled still at the auction but rather as an adjunct to the vegetable and fruit sections for the benefit of buyers making up mixed loads.

The main claim to fame of Wisbech "Queen of the Fens" is its fruit production, both top fruit and soft fruit, with the largest concentration of strawberries in Great Britain lying within a few miles. For the visitor the highlight of the year is the ride through the acres of fruit blossom in the spring.

The Spalding Bulb and Produce Auction was an innovation in the distribution system because buyers were coming to the growing area instead of all produce being consigned to commission agents selling at the city markets giving a possible saving in costs and fresher produce in the shops.

Mail Order

However, during this period other changes were taking place in distribution and retailing systems.

In horticultural produce and garden requisites the nursery sales on the fringe of towns underwent a major change in the development of sophisticated garden centres offering in an attractive way everything from spades and fertilisers to flowers, bulbs, shrubs and trees. The rapid introduction of container growing gave an extended selling and planting season even during the summer and the ultra-conservative ways of gardening began to think of new expressions — impulse buying, instant gardens.

The ubiquitous motor car enabled the customer to choose and take home bulkier loads of garden plants and soon a good garden centre site had to be planned for motor car access with good parking near a busy road, rather than conveniently in or near the town. The development of motor car shopping saw the introduction of farm shop sales for fruit, vegetables, potatoes and meat and poultry products and by the seventies a logical extension of this idea saw the spread of pick your own establishments on farms for vegetables and fruit. This sort of marketing was not suitable for bulbs because they are a seasonal product and need preparation and grading into sizes before sale.

Mail order sales had been a large feature of the bulb trade before 1939 with many firms offering catalogues and booking orders from trippers visiting their fields during the spring. This trade is very laborious, involving the collection, packing and dispatch of thousands of small packages. From a business point of view, it is attractive because apart from the high capital investment in printing and posting a good coloured catalogue, the trading risks are low through cash with order and stock purchases can be matched to the volume of orders.

Sales by mail order petered out during the war years and some specialist firms disappeared. After the war re-growth soon got under way and big mail order businesses were built up by Spalding Bulb Company, Groom Bros., Lowland Bulb Co. (Alf LeSage), and soon the energetic Peter Buschman trading in wholesale bulbs, chemicals and contract bulb growing, built up Hortico which had a large mail order department.

Several smaller growers offered a mail order list and a name noteworthy among the newcomers was Paul Hart. A fighter pilot, badly burned in a war-time crash, he settled in Pennygate and began bulb growing. A major cost in establishing mail order business is in advertising and building up or purchasing an address list of potential customers. Paul was interviewed by Wilfred Pickles on a popular B.B.C. programme and Wilfred broke all the B.B.C. rules about no advertising by inviting all viewers to send off to Paul Hart for their garden bulbs. Paul is such a well liked personality that not even his keenest competitors begrudged him that stroke of good fortune and free advertising.

Among the other marketing changes the major development has been in frozen foods which took a great slice of the canning industry volume and began to create distribution networks of refrigerated stores, transport and retail freezer cabinets. This innovation did not affect bulbs and bulb flowers but as a result of the new equipment, we are now able to transport both bulbs and flowers over longer distances at any period of year, in conditions of controlled temperature during transit.

The Bulb Exchange

A feature of the Dutch marketing system which everyone had heard of and many tourists have visited is the clock auctions. There is also at Hillegom a bulb exchange where growers, merchants and exporters meet regularly to buy and sell, offer forward contracts or hedge against forward commitments. It is a meeting place for business and for gleaning information rather like the old corn exchanges here with regular stand holders having their own places and tables. An interesting section of the halls gives growers and breeders space to set out growing pots of new varieties.

A few growers and merchants felt that an English bulb exchange would be a useful aid to business, where growers and merchants could meet and exchange lists of varieties and quantities available or required, and provide a centre for the exchange of information concerning crop prospects and the trading situation.

In 1961 the Spalding Bulb Exchange was constituted under the chairmanship of a prominent grower Len Braybrooks with a duly elected committee of growers and merchants and a secretary/treasurer, J.A.W. Jarvis. A rule book was duly prepared with the assistance of the N.F.U. and subscriptions were fixed at one guinea for growers per year and three guineas for merchants. The meeting place was the White Hart market room and about 50 members were enrolled. The choice of the White Hart echoed a previous meeting place for bulb growers when a generation



*The Bulb Exchange, White Hart, Spalding, Lincs.
A group of notables including L.K. Braybrooks (Chairman), Gerard Nell, John Nell, H.K. Braybrooks, H. Howard, H. Stevenson, D. Peck, F. Root, A. Mather, P. Buschman, D. Gale, R. Heath.*
Photo: Courtesy Lincs Free Press

previously bulb growers had met at the White Swan in New Road. Meetings continued for a few years with varying attendances. In 1965 D. Nieuwenhuis took over as secretary and treasurer, and the exchange had the support as vice-chairman of J. Oldnall Page, a Ministry of Agriculture officer, highly respected in the potato and the bulb growing businesses. Attendances continued to fluctuate, despite attempts to change the hours of meetings from afternoon to early evening at busy periods. Despite technical talks organised by Don Horton, the Ministry of Agriculture advisor on bulbs and despite the chairman's attempts to put on display vases of flowers of new varieties, interest and attendances continued to wane. The exchange was finally wound up in the winter of 1968.

Prepacking

While these changes were taking place in the wholesale and distribution fields, major upheavals were occurring in retailing. By 1950 the development of the supermarket was well tried and tested in the United States. The pattern of huge chains of superstores like Safeway and A. & P. had spread from coast to coast and provided shopping for a wide range of commodities under one roof with easy access and ample car parking. Alongside the superstores had grown up similar self service stores on the high street.

This new form of retailing was soon copied here and steadily led to the closure of many single purpose high street and corner shops as the supermarkets added other lines to their business. From grocery they moved into butchery, bakery and dry goods, then into beverages and green-grocery items. Pot plants, flowers and bulbs were slower to come into the orbit of supermarket trading but appreciating the growth of the leisure market most chains are now making a real effort to increase their horticultural and garden requisite trading.

Dry bulbs with a long shelf life, easy pre-pricing and good usage of shelf space in relation to turnover were a suitable item to start retailing. This soon created a change in presentation and quickly bulb merchants began offering bulbs in attractive packs of small counts for display with planting instructions and a bright colourful card on each pack showing the flower to come next spring.

The packs make an eye-catching display, help induce impulse buying and one has to admit, with a gay picture on the front they are a much more marketable article than a plain brown bulb. Packs vary in design and cost, from simple polythene bags and netlon mesh sacks stapled to a picture card, to shaped cardboard boxes and see through rigid blister packs.

This prepack business is now a sizeable portion of total bulb sales and accounts for at least 10% of sales by volume and more by value because it is a value-added operation. To this prepack volume has to be added the range of display packages and easy to carry bags.

These changes in distribution and retailing have brought about the disappearance of many of the smaller seedsmen's shops but their place has been taken to some extent by the hardware trade where there has been some diversification into handling bulbs and seeds alongside garden hardware.

Through all the comings and goings on the high street, one class of trader seems to be going as strong as ever. This is the one-man market trader or stall-holder.

These fellows move far more flowers and bulbs and other produce than many people are aware. They do a good job and being personally involved they have far more at stake in satisfying the customer than an impersonal shop shelf. Many of the stall-holders do take pains over the quality of the bulbs they offer and if there is an opportunity to pick up a cheap lot at end of season sales, they can react quicker than the supermarkets' prepared sales programme and offer their customers a genuine bargain.

Production Expands — Exports

The steady growth of acreage after 1945 was slow to build up enough stocks to supply both the dry bulb trade and the demand for bulbs for forcing for winter flowers. Trade remained buoyant because the bulb increases at a slow rate. However, by the sixties, home markets for both bulbs and flowers were becoming well supplied though not glutted except for short periods. During this period of restocking some of the more enterprising bulb traders began to interest arable farmers in Lincolnshire, Yorkshire, Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and further afield into diversifying into bulbs.

Considerable tonnages were planted down from a buoyant trade which of course kept business booming a year or two longer. However, when the produce from these extra acres began to come onto the market for dry bulbs, it soon became evident that the balance of supply and demand was delicate and extra markets for the extra few hundred tons had not been created. Bulb prices halved in a season.

Energetic efforts were made to publicise and promote the sales of British bulbs but progress was slow and it was obvious that home sales would be a long time absorbing current production and would be unlikely ever to cope with the expanding volume in the pipeline.

A solution lay in exports. Before 1939 bulbs had been shipped to the continent and in 1941 large quantities of Lincolnshire bulbs had been sent to America to help pay for war supplies. In 1963 five hundred thousand daffodils were sent to Germany and from those small beginnings trade was steadily developed. Several growers and merchants began exporting trial loads.

The British daffodil bulb had several advantages which helped to promote sales. It flowers earlier than a Dutch bulb. It is harder and the smaller bulbs contain a flower so that it is easier and cheaper for the continental prepacker. A ton of British bulbs contains more flowers than a ton of Dutch bulbs (British Golden Harvest produces about 24,000 flowers against the Dutch 16,000) so that the continental forcer or flower grower gets more for his money.

The phytosanitary requirements for export consignments are quite strict. Each country has its own plant health specifications and each lot of each variety has to have a plant health certificate to enter the country of destination.

Inspection by plant health officers has to start with the growing crop in the field. The soil has to be certified free of potato cyst eelworm and the dry bulbs have to be re-inspected after grading for freedom from soil particles and freedom from pests and diseases.

These rigorous procedures make it necessary to plan each consignment at least twelve months ahead with no certainty that the certificate will be granted at the end. It is difficult for even a large grower to be certain of delivering an agreed tonnage to his customer at harvest, so now most of the exporting is done by half a dozen larger firms which can set up the strict programme necessary. It does mean that British bulbs have a good reputation wherever they are sold abroad and good quality leads to repeat orders the following year.

The volume of exports is high enough to stabilise trading on the home market and this business is now a vital part of the bulb industry. In 1974 Lingarden exported 1,500 tons to the continent and by 1982 total exports of daffodils from the United Kingdom reached 5,000 tons from all exporters.

During this period between the wars, agricultural marketing was undergoing a quiet revolution. The buying pattern was changing drastically. The grain trade was dominated by five big buyers; the growth of the freezing and food processing industry and the demands of the supermarket chains for large quantities of standardised products meant that the function of the country merchant had changed and that the city market was being bypassed.

To meet this new challenge and to meet the new demands by offering longer runs of planned production, farmers and growers were beginning to form themselves into groups to cater for the specifications of the new spread of markets.

In Holland, Lincs. an ambitious concept to embrace the production and marketing of all types of vegetables, flowers and bulbs and glass-house crops in one umbrella organisation failed to win the support of all the sturdily independent growers in the county. It was a bold project, twenty years before its time.

However, it did stimulate thought and at the end of the day two groups were set up, East Lincolnshire Growers Organisation based at Kirton to handle vegetables and Selected Growers Ltd., at Spalding, to handle bulbs in the first instance.

In 1964 Selected Growers Ltd., was registered as a growers' co-operative with about 30 members. A board of nine directors was appointed with Francis B. Hanson as the first chairman. As an indication of the degree of integration with the Netherlands in the bulb industry the first general manager was a Dutchman, Kees Bot. Trading commenced with an office in the N.F.U. block at Springfields and business initially was between members purchasing, planting or forcing stocks and with the trade contacts of the original members.

Steadily the business grew, warehouses were hired for bulking up orders and prepacking to customers' requirements.

The volume of business soon became unmanageable in temporary premises and in 1968 ten acres of land was purchased at Weston for the erection of the first bay of warehousing and a snug wooden hut for office work.

By 1967 a new general manager had taken over, Bob Out, a young machinery salesman who had been selling fans for Isselmuiden at Gosberton. He was married to a local girl, Jenny Whiston, and began to consolidate the company at its new premises and explore new outlets. His interest in machinery inspired the incorporation of a machinery division specialising in bulb grading equipment for members and others.

Selected Growers was a non-profit making co-operative and had to be financed by its members' loans with the aid of some government grant for the formation costs. This type of business was quite new to the clearing banks and when I became chairman I had great difficulty in convincing the bank's managers and directors that we were not a bunch of rogues who would decamp with the few thousand pounds (a big sum in those days), which we wished to borrow to finance the annual sale period for the bulb crop. Unfortunately our Dutch competitors had set a style in the

business by supplying bulbs and collecting the money after the flowers had been sold.

As the years passed by, sales contracts and payment dates have been brought more in line with other trades and the banks have learned that group members are as honest as their other clients. After a few years track record of steady trading, the build up of financial reserves and frank discussion of all plans and forecasts, the bankers are as enthusiastic as the directors and would talk glibly in millions without turning a hair. I merely mention this phase because those exchanges with bankers did help to set the scene for many other marketing groups who now find the clearing banks keen to help — and it was my introduction to the serious side of banking. Instead of standing on the carpet in the branch manager's office, I had to state my case in the regional director's office, dining in state in his board dining room with wines and waiters in full fig — a far cry from a dusty sandwich and flask of coffee in the bulb field.

The task of any selling organisation is to produce what its customers want. So the growing crops of every member are inspected by a team led by John Walkers who advise the growers of any problems in the field and then later in the season inspect the graded bulbs on the nursery before delivery to the warehouse and allocate each batch to the appropriate use or customer. Good quality control at all stages is essential in the company's operation.

Having ensured a reliable product to sell, management was able to concentrate on changing the pattern of sales. The volume to be dealt with in an eight week dispatch period restricted the orders to wholesale size of over 5 cwt., so retailing and mail order were not examined. The range of bulbs available from many growers meant that a good selection could be offered to supermarket chains and the prepack department has grown to need extra warehouses added on to the original. Bob Out's command of languages and knowledge of the continent enabled him to make contacts and begin sales for export to Holland, Germany and Switzerland. This trade backed by professionalism in preparing the bulbs for dispatch has seen the export grow to 1,500 tons in 1974 to 2,500 tons in 1982 and extend to a range of a dozen countries on the continent from Italy in the South to Scandinavia in the North.

Three years ago shipments to the U.S.A. got under way and a substantial trade has been established there with the U.S.D.A. making special arrangements for plant health inspections at Weston. This achievement in export was marked in 1979 by the Queen's Award for Export.



Mechanical Planting, Moulton 1966

Photo: Courtesy Lincs Free Press

Trading abroad made it evident that the company name of Selected Growers was too cumbersome in many languages and the brand name, Lingarden, seemed both meaningful and pronounceable in most languages, so in 1974 it was decided to change the company name to Lingarden Ltd.

Meanwhile membership continued to grow. Today there are over ninety members spread over many counties from Yorkshire to Kent and Sussex in the north and south and to Lancashire, Worcestershire and Somerset in the west with a group of growers in the early districts of the southwest in Cornwall.

Bulb handling utilises warehousing and staff for a short period of the year and other commodities are handled to spread the costs. Onions are graded and prepacked for members up to about 5,000 tons and some other vegetables are marketed.

Spring bulbs occupy the early months of the year and the flower department packs and dispatches both flowers and plants all year round with a peak from Christmas until April when considerable quantities of daffodil cut flowers are exported in refrigerated transport from forcing houses and fields and flown by air freight across the Atlantic.

The servicing of continental customers has required an agent on the continent to look after deliveries on the spot. Recently a depot has been acquired at Andijk to help with distribution of English bulbs and to collect the hyacinth, crocus and begonia needed to complete the range offered by Lingarden.

In 1983 Lingarden confidently faces the future with younger members appearing on its board of directors, chaired by David Piccaver. The main thrust of policy is the marketing of members' bulbs and flowers but as the largest bulb growing consortium in the world, a close watch has to be kept on the overall international marketing situation in horticulture and advances in technology have to be put into practice as quickly as possible. For example, the company is closely involved with the development of virus-free clones of popular commercial varieties, is involved in the rapid multiplication of new varieties and with its members is the sole agent for the production and marketing of the new St. Piran anemone bred at Rosewarne.

For lilies a continuous programme of production of new virus free stocks has been set up, monitoring the health of the bulbs through from the laboratory to the customer.

There is another bulb growers' co-operative in Scotland, Grampian Growers, who operate on a different basis. The members work together to produce and market potatoes, soft fruit and bulbs but their bulb growing is a central operation managed by Dave Donald who organises

the growing, drying and grading as well as the marketing.

In Norfolk an expansion into bulb growing by a number of farmers led to the formation of Norfolk Bulb Producers led by John Kendal. However some of the Norfolk soils were not very suitable and several of the growers gave up the crop and formal trading has lapsed.