

Chapter 3

The Birth of an Industry

At the turn of the century selling and growing of bulbs began around Spalding. In 1885 Mrs. Elizabeth Quincey is listed as a Wholesale Fruiter & Bulbgrower and in 1889 Harry Knipe of Bourne is listed as a Bulbgrower and George Dickinson of Whaplode is described as a Bulb Merchant & Florist. Kelly's Directory of Lincolnshire 1896 lists three bulbgrowers in Spalding, Mrs. Elizabeth Quincey of Fulney, William Seeby, Park Road and J.T. White, Little London. J.T. White, warehouseman and marine engineer, had business contacts all over the country. He operated from the premises still under the name of J.T. White at the corner of the Sheep Market.

These growers purchased snowdrops, double daffodils and narcissus poeticus from local gardens and orchards and dispatched them to markets where they found a ready sale, some of the snowdrops being used for medicinal purposes. Soon they were growing plots of these bulbs and when the flowers appeared in the spring, J.T. White picked some and sent a trial lot to Covent Garden in an orange box. The experiment was successful and a new flower industry was started.

Other growers quickly followed suit. Dick Wellband fetched snow-drop bulbs from Coningsby and sent them to Covent Garden and Sam Culpin and son Fred were amongst the early pioneers.

Among these bulb pioneers, it is arguable as to who was the first. Three of the major characters of the time were J.T. White, Oscar D'Alcorn and R.D. (Dick) Wellband. Dick Wellband, champion cyclist on penny-farthing machines, nationally renowned pigeon fancier, grew up working on his father's nursery specialising in lilies. The extension into snowdrops, crocus and daffodils would follow easily and since Dick died in 1946 at the ripe old age of 86, he would have been involved as a keen youngster in the 1880's. He was one of the first Englishmen to study commercial bulb production in Holland and was renowned for his collection of new varieties.



Flower Culture in the Fens.
Gathering Narcissi Bloom at Spalding.

Old Print, c.1890

Courtesy J. Gregory

Old Print, Pre 1914

Courtesy J. Gregory



Despatching Bloom at Spalding

Fred Stagles, a grower in Pennygate, has records showing his grandfather purchased *Albus Plenus* in 1880 and sent daffodil flowers to Sheffield market in apple hampers.

Twenty miles away another pioneer in bulb growing at this period was W.T. Ware who originated from Inglescombe, near Bath. He was a nurseryman, who set up a business selling flowers, bulbs and plants in London and then began growing large quantities of bulbs with his son at Wisbech. The Wares introduced *Poeticus Ornatus* from France, built up stocks and sold surplus bulbs to other growers.

The introduction of Darwin tulips in 1905 gave an infusion of new possibilities. These long stemmed varieties gave both a crop of bulbs and a good cut flower to follow field grown daffodils. W.T. Ware planted Darwin tulips at Wisbech and in 1907 Samuel Culpin began sizeable plantings at Spalding. A wide range of varieties and colours were soon available, the best remembered being the beautiful pastel pink *Clara Butt*, the versatile *William Copland* and its pink sport *Rose Copland* in particular soon gained a sizeable acreage, because when forcing of flowers under glass got under way in 1920 these varieties became the main tulips used for forcing.

Rapid expansion took place between 1920 and 1939 and the roll of growers lengthened: F.H. Bowser, Eric Casson, G. Bateman, O.A. Taylor, the Braybrooks brothers, Matthew Dearnley, Fred D'Alcorn and Alf Cunnington.

By 1933 the number of bulb growers had increased to 150 and about 2,500 acres of bulbs were being grown in the Spalding and Wisbech districts.

Loadings of flowers during the season reached 100 tons a day with a total of six thousand tons shipped.

In spite of heavy gluts of flowers with low prices some years, expansion continued steadily to reach a peak of 7,500 acres in 1939.

The crop was ideally suited to small farms with family labour and during the lean years of the late twenties and thirties many smallholders joined the ranks, eking out a living by growing a few roods of bulbs and vegetables.

The varieties of narcissus grown in those early days have largely passed on, though a few can still be found in cottage gardens and a few in stocks held by the Daffodil Society.

W.T. Ware and Son introduced *Poeticus Ornatus*. J.T. White is remembered for his original stocks of double daffodils, *Telamonius Plenus*. Other names still remembered are *Emperor*, *Golden Spur*, *Sir Watkin*, *Empress*, *Poeticus Recurvus*, *Poeticus Plenus*, *Princeps* and *Barrii Conspicuus*.



Flower Pickers, c.1910

Photo: Courtesy Lincs Free Press

Flower Pickers. Fashions of 1920

Photo: Courtesy Lincs Free Press



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Later came improved varieties of better form and substance, better stem length and vigour of growth — Fortune, Carlton, King Alred and eventually Golden Harvest and Actaea. A variety used extensively in the early years of forcing was Helios — now completely disappeared.