

Chapter 4

Expansion and the Dutch connection

These developments in an area of fertile alluvial silt ideally suited to growing intensive crops had not gone unnoticed by Dutch rivals across the North Sea. Many came over to sell bulbs but some came to stay and add their skills to this new industry. Among the first was Cornelius Slooten whose family still trade at Cowbit Road. Homan established the British Horticultural Co., based at Peterborough with contract growing of tulips on a wide scale and D. v. Konynenburg built up the vast Spalding Bulb Company combining large scale farming with intensive bulb and flower production and a large greenhouse unit.

Dominicus van Konynenburg, who died in 1978, came to Spalding in 1922 from Noordwyk in Holland, sent by his parent company S.A. van Konynenburg and de Graaf Bros. Dominicus was sent to carve out a future in England which he did very successfully in daffodils and tulips, becoming the leading daffodil producer in the country and Jan de Graaf was sent to Oregon, U.S.A. to build up a daffodil business. This he did but soon developed an interest in lilies and built up the greatest specialist lily producing company in the States, if not the world.

Many Dutch families followed — Moerman, Nell, Lindhout, Buschman, but the most spectacular achievements came from the brothers John and Leonard van Geest who began their career selling on their bicycles and steadily built up a business empire.

They quickly took land to grow vegetables and bulbs, expanded over the years into prepacking and distribution, manufacturing requisites and equipment and having seen an opportunity in the banana market they organised production in the West Indies, shipping to ripening depots and distribution depots throughout the U.K. so that now they handle 50% of the U.K. banana trade.

This dynamic growth absorbed many local firms supplying goods and services and on the retirement of D. v. Konynenburg, the Spalding Bulb Co. was merged with Geest and sadly when Willis White had no family

ready to take over on his retirement, the pioneering firm of J.T. White & Son followed suit. The Geest family firm has now a tremendous output in horticultural production. Some five thousand acres are farmed, the tulip acreage at one time reached 750 acres and daffodils at 1,500 acres stretch from Lincolnshire to Cornwall; pot plant production alone covers 12 acres of glass but the central key to this growth has been the ability to foresee changes in marketing and set up a transport and distribution network which caters for the requirements of the wholesale markets and can meet the rigorous specifications of national supermarket chains.

Alongside the large scale growers, there grew up a vast number of smaller bulbgrowers. Many had a few acres or even a few roods of daffodils and tulips and some had plots of hyacinths, crocus and iris.

Until mechanisation of planting and lifting was developed, the whole of the bulb crop was planted and picked by hand. Planting was in the furrow bottom behind a small straight-breasted horseplough, six rows to a bed with the seventh furrow left unplanted to make a path for later weeding, flower picking and roguing. Harvesting was the reverse process of handpicking the bulbs from the seams of the furrows ploughed back by the same plough, often with the assistance of small hand rakes to break up the furrow. The ploughman and horses became very skilled at ploughing straight beds and a good horse would pull the length of the row without reins — just a word or two for guidance. The ploughs for this work were carefully maintained with small row markers bolted on the breast bottom; the favourite make for bulb work was the light wooden framed Cooke's one horse plough.

The equipment was simple and the labour requirement high so the crop was ideally suited to growing on small holdings with plenty of family labour. Apart from planting in the autumn, the other work came at slacker times of the year. Flowers, if picked, were ready before the spring weeding of other crops and the lifting and cleaning of the bulbs came before the brunt of the grain harvest. So bulbs fitted well as a crop for the utilisation of available labour and many farmers who built up large enterprises, owed their beginnings on the ladder to intensifying their production in their early days with a few acres of bulbs.

During the period between World Wars I and II all bulb work was done by hand and vast numbers of men and women were employed both as regular staff and seasonal gangs. The need for food production in 1939-45 brought a cut back in the acreage permitted for bulbs and growers were only allowed to maintain a nucleus of basic stocks.

After 1945 restrictions were slowly relaxed and the acreage began to increase again, especially on the alluvial silts around Spalding with trial planting venturing further afield in the marsh lands, the fens and later



Pioneer J. T. White and son Willis

Cutting from Richard Blackbourn

into many other counties; Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire and even Kent, Worcestershire and Somerset.

The build up in acreage was slow because stocks multiply slowly; new stock from Holland was expensive and supplies had to be consumed to develop an increasing market for English bulbs. The peak in acreage did not come until the 1970's when total acreage in the U.K. reached 16,000 acres.

By the 1950's a degree of mechanisation had come along. Special planters often Dutch built, could plant beds of five or six rows of bulbs behind a tractor and soon various mechanical lifters were tried. Most of the Dutch equipment was designed to operate on the pure sandy soils around Hillegom and did not perform well on the sharper silts and clays in England.

In fact the tulip crop has not responded to mechanised handling too well as it is very susceptible to damage except on the lightest of soils and with the most gentle of machines. During the sixties the new Darwin hybrids, Apeldoorn and its sisters boosted the acreage of tulips. Darwin hybrids were a group of varieties bred by D.W. Lefeber from a single crossing which proved to be very strong growers with a large boldly coloured flower. They were good multipliers, produced a large attractively bright skinned bulb for the dry bulb trade, and most varieties would force in winter. Soon forty per cent of the tulips planted were hybrids. This made available a lot of bulbs, at a cheap price at a time when the market was fairly static and now that central heating in homes has become almost universal, the tulip as a cut flower is losing ground. This last year or two has seen a cut back in the amount of tulips grown and the acreage is likely to remain steady unless consumption can be increased and mechanisation can reduce the heavy labour costs of production.

The daffodil is less liable to suffer serious mechanical damage and with this crop great strides have been made. Growers were quick to adapt potato machinery for planting and lifting daffodils. By growing daffodils in ridges instead of beds, a wide variety of machines could be adapted to suit both the large or small scale grower. Now in 1983 two row planters filled by fork lifts from bulk bins take the backache out of planting. Chemical control of weeds by herbicides gives freedom of growth from competition and harvesting can be mechanised by efficient single or two row machines which deliver the crop into bulk bins or bulk carts for transport to the drying and grading sheds.

The modernisation of the growing systems, the use of the climatic advantage of a long growing season, the selection of the most suitable soils and the wholesale application of the economies of scale have

enabled English growers to use their advantage to the full and develop a branch of the bulb industry which is now a force to be reckoned with. They not only supply the whole of the U.K. market with daffodils; they now export to countries all over Europe and even to the U.S.A.

These daffodils are now available in many interesting new improved varieties. While the yellow trumpet King Alfred, beloved of our grandfathers, has been superceded by Golden Harvest, Rembrandt, Unsurpassable and other fine trumpet varieties, large quantities of beautiful new short cups and double flowered varieties are also on offer.