

Chapter 7

The War Years

The development of the bulb industry received a check in the 1914—18 war when the effect of submarine warfare began to cut off food and war material supplies from the rest of the world. Shipping was sunk on a calamitous scale and cargo space was required to transport armies and the munitions of war. The need for food production became paramount and labour, both man power and woman power, was diverted to the armies, the munition factories and food production on a scale never seen before.

The infant bulb and flower growing business underwent a period of eclipse until more settled times. By 1918 the acreage planted was severely restricted by edict. However, by 1920 the resurgence had begun and rapid expansion took place. By now field scale production of daffodils and tulips got under way again and as grain and meat shipments were flowing to Britain from all over the world in ships released from war duties, it seemed sensible to divert some of the local energy from food growing to bulb growing again.

Innovations had shown that the spring flower season could be advanced by growing some of the bulbs under heated glass and by 1920 some twenty acres of glasshouses were built to force flowers in winter.

This expansion continued during a golden age for the industry. Links were established with Dutch firms and many sizeable businesses were built up with English and Dutch partners. Alongside the original names we find many new ones, Stassen, Dekker, Lincoln Nursery (Dick Heath), British Horticultural Co. (G. Homan), Silbberard, Verdegaal, and perhaps the most dynamic of that era — Spalding Bulb Co., run by D. v. Konynenburg. Some of these firms have faded from the scene, some have been taken over and some still leave a faint trace like the Monks House Bulb Co., a business started by my father-in-law, C.E. Smith and his brother, Ben, in partnership with Groeneveld & Lindhout of Noordwyk, which still remains as a ghostly name in huge letters on our

barn wall, struggling through the paint which obliterated it. I ought to paint it out again but it is part of our history.

The 1939-45 war brought much severer checks to bulb growing. The lessons of 1914 had not been forgotten and quickly the machinery of government swung into action. County War Agricultural Executive Committees (War Ag's for short), were set up to organise food production. The War Ag's, hated by many of the independently minded farmers and growers, had to bring a disciplined approach to producing as much food as possible from limited resources. Acreages of crops required were planned and directions issued to individual farms and as far as possible, machinery, fertilisers and labour were allocated.

In this scene of austerity, there was little scope for a non-essential crop like flowers and the glasshouses had to be used for food crops, principally tomatoes. The fields used for bulbs were first class land and were soon scheduled for growing potatoes and vegetables.

It was quite clear that there was a valuable established industry and arrangements were made for growers to maintain a limited nucleus of stocks ready to restart their businesses after the war. Attempts were made by growers to plant the bulbs in the fields and sow a grain crop over the bulbs. After harvesting the grain the bulbs could then be ploughed out and picked. Not an entirely successful procedure but they were desperate days.

During this period bulbs were exported to America to help pay for munitions. Empty ships were crossing the Atlantic to fetch supplies and after careful washing and brushing to remove every trace of soil and potato nematode, many Lincolnshire tulip bulbs were dispatched and planted in America, which had been cut off from its Dutch suppliers. Surplus stock was never boiled into soup as happened in the Netherlands, but unlike the poisonous daffodil, the tulip bulb is nutritious and I have seen surplus stock fed to cattle and pigs.

During the war many smallholders and allotment holders also maintained small plots so that flowers were available to help brighten up the cities at a time when there were few luxuries. Transport to the markets was very difficult and a few boxes of flowers were sent by road on top of loads of vegetables and potatoes, but petrol rationing made no allowances for flower transport. Many ingenious arrangements were worked out whereby anyone with a petrol ration going near a city market would take a few flower boxes on the journey, even on the back of a car.

Eventually, a rationing system was introduced in which regular growers were allocated coupons for the few available rail wagons and a trickle of flowers managed to reach the main markets along with the fresh fruit and perishable vegetables.

During a period of national war effort, the bulb and flower industry can claim to have played its part. The young workers and young leaders were called up for the services, both British and Dutch, and the resources of land and greenhouses were switched to fresh vegetable and salad production, a particularly important deficiency in the diet being the vitamin C in those days, principally filled by the use of the greenhouses for tomato production. The change in direction of production was efficiently carried out by the horticultural skills of well trained management and labour force to whom these crops were not completely strange.