



Caldwell's Nurseries Project

Oral history

<http://www.caldwellarchives.org.uk/>

Frank Passant interviewed by Barbara Moth

Frank Passant started work at Caldwell's Nurseries in 1946. Frank became Company Secretary and retired in 1990.

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Interview summary

00. 00.22	<p>Early years</p> <p>"I was born in Wilmslow in 1932.... My father was the head gardener at Styche Hall in Staffordshire, Clive's place, Clive of India. At the beginning of the war we had relations around the Wilmslow area, so we moved back into this area because obviously my father was going to get called up, which he did do in 1940. I didn't see my father for 3 years. He was in the Middle East. All my young years were spent round here just with my mother, as my father was away for 5 years till the end of the war.... I was an only child, spoilt to death by my mother. My father knew old Mr Caldwell so that was how I got in at Caldwell's in 1946, straight from school, aged 14."</p> <p>Frank was always interested in gardens.</p>
00.03.18	<p>Frank cycled to work from Mere. They lived in one of the lodges at Mere Golf Club.</p>
00.04.00	<p>Korean War/return to Caldwell's</p> <p>"When I got to 18, I'd just got a bit of promotion at Caldwell's. I'd been put in charge of seed packeting; we used to packet all our own seeds in those days. And then I got the calling up papers. Old Mr Caldwell said he could get me off through horticulture, but I said no, I didn't want to; I wanted to go, because I felt everyone should do national service. There were three of us started at virtually the same time. He got the other two off, but I said no, I want to go. So, he said, don't come back here for a job then.</p> <p>So, I got my calling up papers and did my training at Catterick and got moved to Germany, with the 7th Hussars, then got changed to the 5th Dragoon Guards and I was en route for the Korean War (1950-1953). I spent all my latter 2 years in the Korean War. I then sailed home. I'd been in contact with quite a lot of the staff at Caldwell's, but not the Caldwell's themselves. A lot of the staff at Caldwell's sent me</p>

	<p>food parcels and woolly socks. When I eventually came home I was very late being demobbed, we docked on 22nd December and then I got home on 23rd December. On 24th December, who should arrive on my doorstep but Bill Caldwell and his son. He said he was sorry that he'd said what he did at the time. I thought to myself his need was greater than mine, but I hadn't got a job. I thought I'd stop here for 6 months and then find another job. I went back and it was mid January when old Mr Caldwell died and young Bill said I'd like you to stop with me. I said I'd think about it and that's how I came to stay there. I was there all my life."</p>
00.08.09	<p>Earliest memories of Caldwell's "It was very old fashioned, the desks in the office were those great high desks that you saw in solicitors' offices. Everything was very labour intensive. It was a very happy atmosphere, everybody seemed to get on very well. I don't think people go into horticulture for the money, but for the love of horticulture. But, in those days we had a horse and cart, all tilling was done by plough, there weren't any tractors after the war. Everything was taken by horse and cart, though we had 2 lorries for deliveries."</p>
00.09.40	<p>Caldwell's had 2 reps on the road, one was Mr Ford.</p>
00.10.25	<p>Sometimes staff went to help at the florists shop because if there was a big funeral they would work the night through making 100 wreaths.</p>
00.11.40	<p>For 12 months Frank's job was to packet seeds. They had a great big wall with seed drawers.</p>
00.12.10	<p>Customers "We had some very good customers. All the local councils used to deal with us in those days; we used to go up as far as Lancaster Council and quite a lot of mental institutions, such as Brockhole Hospital and Lancaster War Hospital. They were big customers of seeds. They used to get the staff to grow them, therapy for them. All the big firms with grounds and gardens, such as Mather and Platt, and Ferranti and Henbury Hall; all the big halls used to deal with us. There were only 2 big nurseries in the Cheshire area – Caldwell's and Clibrans Nursery at Altrincham (<i>it became Yates garden Centre and was then bought by the Wyevale Group, now the Garden Centre Group</i>). So, most of the big estates used to deal with us in those days. We used to deliver all over the place, even down south. It was very busy and very complex in those days, for a little Cheshire nursery. It was surprising how much trade we did."</p>
00.14.54	<p>After Frank returned from the war all his work was inside. Autumn was taken up with seed packeting. Very few customers came in; they gave their orders by 'phone and letter. Frank remembers Dutchmen coming over and making orders.</p>
00.16.53	<p>Everything was done by hand including the unloading.</p>
00.17.07	<p>When Don came into the firm, Frank did all the bulbs, chemicals and stoneware. Don dealt with the shrubs. Frank provided cover in the shop but didn't really have anything to do with the nursery.</p>
00.18.00	<p>Frank would help with unloading and from that he learnt to identify plants without their leaves on. He recalled Sid Taylor, Arthur Chapman and Cyril Jones.</p>
00. 20.57	<p>Automation/containers "They didn't really get automated at all. We didn't have a fork lift right up to Crosby's taking us over. Everything used to come in on pallets. It was no fun</p>

	unloading pallets. A lot of the drivers didn't like it, it was holding them up. So, it was never very mechanised at all really. Even in the nursery, all hoeing was done by hand. So it was always a bit of the old-fashioned type of business, as opposed to getting things in an automated fashion. I can't remember when we first started getting things in containers. I know we bought a whole pile of marmalade pots from somebody in Trafford Park and potted them up in these to start with, before the plastic bags came. At one time it was plastic bags, then it went into plastic pots, but in those early days there were old jam containers from somewhere and we gradually got into the garden centre business."
00.23.00	" I remember going to a conference in Syon Park when the first garden centres were coming in and starting making tracks into the market Garden Centre Association with a conference every year. Frank was Chair of the NW group for four and a half years.
00.24.24	Caldwell's were involved in the Liverpool and Stoke Garden Festivals. "You learn what everyone else is doing". He picked up so many little things. Every month there was a meeting (of the Garden Centre Association) at a different garden centre. The most valuable thing I learnt at a garden centre was to put in a wants book. There were no bar codes in those days. The wants book meant that you were never out of stock. It saved a lot of trouble.
00.27.40	Garden Centre had a stand at the Liverpool Festival. Gerry Williams was going to the Stoke Festival but had a puncture on the motorway and was killed.
00.29.04	Caldwell's never hosted a meeting because they were not really in the Association.
00.31.35	Caldwell's had the rose nursery at Ollerton and the main nursery and a place at Boots Green. Used to look after all those and do the ordering. There was never a meeting to discuss. They discussed beds when setting out. Each just got on. Not the most talkative. Both of them had been in the war. Bill was quite a shy man. They had an AGM each year, a game of golf, didn't socialise as such. Had 2 accountants each had different golf places where they played. The 2 accountants, Don, Bill and Frank attended the AGM. Frank became Company Secretary when Mr Neal retired. Mr Neal used to write minutes, did accounts and was in charge of the office. Frank looked after all the banking. Mr Wilson looked after the shop. He did the sheets for the drivers and then George Sanderson took over these.
00.36.10	Frank did all the wages, even before he was in the army. Mr Keane was supposed to show him how to do it but he put it off so Frank was thrown in at the deep end. Frank did the wages, insurance, tax; he quite enjoyed it, he had always been interested in finance. He just picked it up. He enjoyed the business side of horticulture.
00. 40.18	Catalogues "A very big part of the business in those early days was the catalogues. We used to print 4 catalogues a year. These all had to be compiled, all had to be printed. A firm called Blake and Mackenzies at Liverpool used to print them, until we got a small printer and did the little bedding and the bulb catalogues ourselves. Also, in those early days, all the seed packets were done at Liverpool. Then the catalogues all had to be sent out; we had a franking machine. It was always a rush to get the catalogues out in those days; we had to work many an evening filling envelopes and sending them out..... Bill and Don did the nursery catalogue. I did all the seeds and sundries etc. In fact I

	<p>used to take the photographs and do the front of the catalogues. I used to put tools and peat and compost together, take a photograph and send it to Liverpool and say right, that's what I want on the front of the catalogue."</p> <p>There were so many facets to it, Frank was never bored, He loved the job.</p>
00.43.30	<p>Frank didn't see the customers. Caldwell's had reps who went out. Frank went to a few companies to see the best things to use. He looked after the shop staff but had nothing to do with the nursery staff.</p>
00. 45.13	<p>The new shop</p> <p>"We just hadn't got enough room in the old shop, something had to be done. People were developing state of the art garden centres and we were just a pokey little shop which was no good. So, I kept saying we had to do something, which we had really, but we hadn't a lot of space to build a shop, that was the trouble, and we hadn't a lot of room for a car-park either. So, eventually I managed to persuade him (Bill Caldwell) that we ought to build a shop and we did do, and very successful it was too.</p> <p>There was nothing to come in for in the old shop, there was nothing to display, no tools or anything in the early stages. It was all done by post and over the telephone. Nothing was displayed up to the late 50s, early 60s.....It was late 60s, or possibly early 70s when the garden centre was built. It made a tremendous difference to trade. It really bought in a lot of trade, passing trade, because there was no passing trade in the early days. If you saw half a dozen people in the shop in a day that was about it. Then all of a sudden you saw a few 100; on a busy weekend you might even see a 1,000 people (I might be exaggerating). Round Easter you couldn't get them all in the car-park; it would never have developed into a first class, state of the art garden centre, because we didn't have the room at Knutsford, possibly only 20/30 cars. It was a shame but it was never a big enough site."</p>
00.48.40	<p>Frank retired in 1990. Bill was out of it when Crosby homes took over. They had it for 6 years while the nursery was running down and they started to build on the site. The idea was to build another garden centre on the rose nursery at Ollerton. Planning permission was turned down. Frank had nothing to do with the meetings and no financial interest in the company of which Bill, Mavis and Don were the Directors.</p>
00.52.09	<p>Frank recalled the winter of 1962/3 when the ground was like permafrost and they never sent a plant out for 3 months. They found the staff things to do and never put them on short time. The winter, from late November to March, killed a lot of things including rhododendrons. The frost was so deep that they couldn't get any moisture. Although they looked dead, many started shooting afterwards.</p>
00.55.09	<p>Most of the displaced Europeans were at the rose nursery, a Latvian and a Ukrainian. Frank took the wage packets if Bill was away. It was quite a little community, some were quite well educated. They were excellent workers and hardly ever off ill.</p>
00.57.47	<p>Frank recalled the 200th anniversary with the big marquee set up on Bill's lawn; the two parties, one for staff and one for Bill's friends and business associates. The Bank Manager arranged for them to be picked up for lunch and they finished up with Barclays Directors in Manchester who presented Bill with a silver salve.</p>
00.01.09	<p>Frank recalled an ICI promotion for Pathclear when they held a competition to write a ditty for the packet. Frank entered and won a car, presented in London! His wife went with him to the venue near Shepperton Studios. They received the car but on</p>

	driving away realised that they had no tax disc or insurance. They went back to the hotel and ICI sorted it out.
01.05.30	When customers came the border was very handy for showing people ideas, bulbs and shrubs. In the early days a lot were grown from cuttings.
01.09.23	Shows “We used to do all the shows in those days and many years back we bought a caravan to tow behind the landrover and for about 10 years we did all the big shows – Southport, Manchester, Liverpool. George Sanderson and I would stay the night in the caravan. I’d take the lorry and 2/3 staff and set up the display. Then George and I would stay overnight in the caravan for the rest of the show, usually three days. We’d cook for ourselves, because we had a stove and calor gas. It bought in quite a bit of trade actually. Then the garden centre side started to develop too much, so that went and we sold the caravan. It was a big display caravan, probably 30 ft long, a great, massive thing. We used to do all the shows, used to take garden ornaments, we’d do a water garden. We’d do it in a day just about; it was often late at night when the lorries went back. When the aluminium greenhouses came in we used to take a greenhouse with us as well. That took a bit of glazing in a day but we used to manage it.”
01.11.12	They would take a bit of everything for the shows. The final shows were very interesting. Hozelock had just come on the market. They used to sell from the stand. They had to stay otherwise things got pinched. They stayed in the caravan sleeping on the floor in sleeping bags. Then the Caldwell’s lorry came and took everything back.
01.15.20	When Frank left Caldwell’s bought a fork lift.
01.16.20	No great accidents, everything went at a sedate pace.
01.17.26	Frank recalled the nursery bell at the greenhouses, rung in the morning at quarter to eight, at 12 o’clock lunchtime and at 5 o’clock by the greenhouse foreman. When Caldwell’s packed up someone from Bluebell Nurseries wanted the bell, but Frank had in his garage and eventually took it to an antique shop.
01.20.01	The only thing Frank had were the seed spoons that he had used packeting seed. Eventually they went for auction and Knutsford Heritage Centre bought them.
01.21.54	Frank recalled that there was a Stephanotis in the greenhouse whose blossom was used for bridal bouquets. All of a sudden they noticed a fruit coming. They watched it for months. It produced black seeds. He rang Thompson and Morgan to offer the 2lb weight of seed. They said they would have the seed and pay £80 - 90 for it but by the time the seed dried out it was only £70 worth, quite fascinating.
01.27.00	“I can tell every plant from seed.”
01.27.57	Frank didn’t have anything to do with the records and didn’t know what happened to them. In the general sale everything was sold including desks and chairs.