



Caldwell's Nurseries Project

Oral history

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

Walter Worth interviewed by Barbara Moth

Walter Worth, former Head Gardener at Chester Zoo, 1976 - 1985, customer of Caldwell's

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Interview summary

00. 00.18	<p>Early years/first job</p> <p>"I was born in Macclesfield. I was a bit of a nuisance when I was born, because it so happened to be on Christmas Day 1920. So, every year there's a bit of a problem over presents and all that. I grew up in the parish of Nether Alderley, next to Alderley Edge. I went to Nether Alderley School, which is still a school. In those days it was a bit different. We left school at 14, unless of course your parents could afford to keep you going to school. But I had to leave school at 14.</p> <p>So I had been working Saturday mornings at Lord Stanley of Alderley's Estate – that's what we were living on. When I left school I went to work there full time. Today it's no longer Lord Stanley's estate. It's all gone. It was sold in 1938. Today there are some good people there – AstraZeneca – who are doing a wonderful job.</p> <p>But, it's so changed. However, I started there when it was gardens, red walls. I often say to people I started my working life within four red walls. My father worked on the estate with private people – he worked as a gardener.</p> <p>It was a good experience working there. The head gardener there – Mr Thomas Arthur Summerfield – he was really good. He could see how things were with me, that I shouldn't just stay working there. By the way, it was 1st January 1935 when I started work. So, he pushed me on. In fact he used to give me little lessons to do, to learn at night. He used to get me to do little essays. He was an ex Kew man.</p> <p>However, I went on working there. In those days those kind of estates, with lords, dukes and earls, they were self-sufficient in vegetables, fruit and flowers. When I was there it was going down and they'd gone quite a lot commercial. They wanted a bit of money made out of the garden so they were growing a lot of flowers for sale. A man used to come – he had a stall in Macclesfield market – he used to take the</p>
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	<p>flowers.</p> <p>It's worth mentioning here, there were 3 varieties of early flowering chrysanthemums (I don't think you'd get them now). One was Phil Page, which was red. One was Herbert Sutcliffe, which was yellow, and another one was Masons Bronze. We used to grow them, disbud them for cut flowers.</p> <p>He put me in charge of a group of glasshouses – a lean-to against the tall red walls and in them would be vines and peaches. By the way the hours we worked were so different (and they didn't do me any harm). 7 o' clock in the morning you started. Half an hour from 9 to half past for a sort of breakfast. Then you'd have an hour for lunch. Then you finished at 5.30. And we worked every Saturday morning till 1pm. My wages at the beginning when I left school were 12 shillings. I'd go home and my mother would take 10 shillings and I had two shillings for 'spends'."</p>
00.05.42	The Head Gardener encouraged him to move on, travel a bit and he left in 1938 to take a job at Sansaw Hall, near Wem, for the Campbells, their business was the Bibby shipping line.
00.06.28	<p>War experience</p> <p>"War broke out. I thought I'm going to join up anyway. So I joined up into the RAF on 12th September 1939 and there I was for 6 1/2 years in the RAF. I was with a squadron, it happened to be 22 squadron and I was in England and Scotland for about 2 1/2 years and we weren't sent overseas. I was overseas for 4 years, just went and that was it; I didn't come back till after 4 years.</p> <p>But that was my start, perhaps of travelling round. South Africa, I had a month there at Durban which was very pleasant. Then up to Egypt, the squadron was operating from Egypt. Then with the Japanese war, the squadron was moved to Asia. And I had a couple of years with the squadron in Sri Lanka. Then we were put on the Burma Front, operating against the Japanese . So, that was 4 years travelling. I travelled over most of India.</p> <p>We went on from there. I came home, the war was over, flying home from Karachi in a converted bomber, quite a way. You didn't fly straight, you had a night in Israel, a night in North Africa. Finally I got home"</p>
00.08.38	He was demobbed, living at Nether Alderley and applied to Manchester Parks for a job. He was interviewed and taken on to work at Carrington Moss where the department had glasshouses and did a lot of propagation for bedding out. Walter needed lodgings near work but at that time no one wanted lodgers due to rationing. He got lodgings at 36 Barkers Lane, Sale, with the Hamiltons. Late he was transferred to work in the glasshouses at Wythenshawe Park.
00.10.23	In 1949 a position came up at Wigan. Walter had just got married to a girl from Alderley. The job, situated at Haigh Hall came with a house. The hall had belonged to Lord Crawford who had a lot of properties and decided to give this one to Wigan with its grounds because of coal mining and nationalisation. Walter was there for 5 years.
00. 11.50	<p>Becoming head gardener at Chester Zoo</p> <p>"Then I saw this job. We used to get every week, The 'Gardener's Chronicle' and at the back of that was advertised any vacancies going at various places up and down the country (I kept some and have a complete set of the weekly 'Gardener's Chronicle'). The job was at Chester Zoo, so I applied. They wanted to see where I was working so the head gardener at the time, Philip Gallup and the Director</p>

	<p>George Mottershead, they came over to see what I was doing, where I was working. Perhaps they couldn't believe, when I put my references in, what I was doing. However, they came and it was obvious I was successful in getting the job as Assistant Head gardener at Chester Zoo. And I came to start here on 12th February 1960.</p> <p>So, Chester Zoo was very much developing then. They didn't have the area that they do now. So, I worked there and stayed there. We were quite happy. We had a house which belonged to the zoo. I had two girls then. One had just started at school, the other was three.</p> <p>It was a lovely job. I enjoyed it. In 1976 the head gardener Philip Gallup, he retired. I applied and I was successful in becoming head gardener. I started on April Fools Day and went on till I retired on 31st December 1985. I did enjoy that job. I followed on from my predecessor in buying roses, shrubs and trees from Caldwell's in Knutsford. They were always very good plants."</p>
00.15.55	Walter bought a camera for £10 and took lots of slides of Chester Zoo which he still has and used to give over 200 talks, all over Cheshire. In retirement he has never been bored.
00.18.02	His first wife died in 1994. He met another lovely lady, two years older than him, and eventually they married and had 10 years together. She died in 2006.
00.18.46	In 1987 his daughter applied for a teaching exchange in Australia and migrated there in 1990. Walter has been there many times.
00.20.18	Walter and his predecessor made out the plant orders, costed them and took them to the Director for approval. Once approved the orders went to accounts and then the order was sent on for delivery. The Head Gardener was responsible for ordering seed, any gardening materials, peat - used to get bales of peat in those days and make their own compost, using John Innis fertilizer, composted turves, peat and sharp sand.
00.23.11	<p>Contact with Caldwell's while head gardener at Chester Zoo</p> <p>"When Philip Gallup was head gardener, I think it was Mr Caldwell used to come to the zoo to see that everything was all right. When I was head gardener it was Mr Leaman who would come and see, just to have a talk. I believe that at one time the parks Superintendent at Wigan, Jack Ashton, when he retired he used to do a little bit of running around for Caldwell's, just to see and keep up the friendship with Caldwell's. He was the one who took me on at Wigan Parks."</p>
00.24.24	They didn't order seed from Caldwell's but from Colgraves
00.24.56	<p>Buying roses from Caldwell's</p> <p>"I would go to the nursery (Caldwell's). The best time, thinking of roses, was July, to see all the roses in colour and just to see what kind of rose bush the variety is and you'd know what you were ordering. We had, in my day, about 100 different varieties of roses in the zoo. It probably stretched to about 7,000-8,000 rose bushes throughout the zoo, all from Caldwell's."</p> <p><i>Was that the rose nursery at Ollerton that you went to?</i></p> <p>"Yes. In my young days I used to do a lot of cycling and I travelled along that road between Macclesfield and Knutsford and used to see the roses there. What I remember is The Dun Cow Pub. I went along there the other day and the Dun Cow</p>

	<p>is still there. But I look to the right and a little bit further on to the left where there used to be trees. It's sad.</p> <p>I look now at rose varieties and many of them.... I've got a list of roses that we would be growing at the time but varieties come and go. I'll just say that when I first joined Chester Zoo on 2nd January 1950 (actually 12th February 1960) the month before they'd had a large lot of roses and made up a new rose bed. Among the varieties was Iceberg. What's interesting to me, at the RHS Show in 2012, Fryer's Nursery was there with a gorgeous lot of roses and Iceberg was still among them, about the only one from all those years ago. Chester Zoo probably bought it at the end of 1959 and it was introduced only a year before in 1958."</p> <p><i>They must have been very keen to have the latest roses</i></p> <p>"Yes, all that came along like Superstar, Queen Elizabeth, Grandpa Dickson, all good varieties."</p> <p><i>Did Caldwell's actually recommend any to you, did they say what they thought was best?</i></p> <p>"Yes, they would say, particularly when I once had to make up a large area with shrub roses. He (Don Leaman) did come along and he said, this is a good variety of shrub rose."</p>
00.29.02	Walter expressed concern that when they had planted some trees the planners would come along and take little notice.
00. 29.39	<p>Lime avenue</p> <p>"At the end of 1963 a number of lime trees were ordered to make an avenue in the zoo which runs alongside the monkey house. Those trees were planted in early 1964 and they're still there. They're growing well. They won't move those I don't think...They came from Caldwell's. I think there are about 34."</p> <p>There were other odd trees bought from Caldwell's too.</p>
00.31.06	Staff at the zoo did a lot of propagating of shrubs, which was good for young gardeners. There wasn't a very big herbaceous border, and some heathers.
00.32.12	They had Laburnum and scarlet Malus from Caldwell's, planted alternately. Walter recommends the combination for anyone who has the space.
00.33.00	The main thing they bought was roses, all bare root tied up in bundles. They could order a lot for a whole bed or just 2 or 3 as replacements and Caldwell's delivered them usually end November, beginning of December
00.33.51	If a rose bed went sick they would take them all out and remove about a foot of soil. Fortunately in the zoo there was fresh soil to be had. In the bottom they would put quite a good layer of manure. Walter has a list of the roses.
00.34.58	When Walter came, the same staff carried on, twenty-five, which some people might think 'well what did they all do?' but when you are growing everything yourself - 80,000 summer bedding and 80,000 spring bedding. They had a nursery where they grew all the pansies, polyanthus and wallflowers. To see all that colour, it was a fantastic sight.
00.36.55	Walter is still very friendly with the man who succeeded him who used Caldwell's but also bought from Morreys. He (the successor) had his staff cut. They have plants

	in the animal houses, the tropical house.
00.38.06	Walter knows Sam Youd and always has a chat with him at the shows
00.38.38	Walter was surprised at the nursery closing but knows another nursery on the Wirral where the owner has two sons but neither of them is the least interested in the business. The business has changed a lot since the 1960's with all the garden centres and the supermarkets 'getting on the bandwagon'.
00.40.03	Walter donated a packet of seed to the project. It came from his father-in-law when he worked at a big house in Alderley Edge and did all the seeds. The packet was a free gift of Lantana seed when he did the seed order. Walter also gave a catalogue.
00.41.17	Walter said that he didn't accept bribes but when Don Leaman visited around Christmas 'with along raincoat hanging down', he would come into the office and leave a bottle of sherry with him.
00.43.03	Walter expressed sadness that Caldwell's closed, but he has seen so many changes in his life.
00.43.37	Walter learnt from his father but learnt more from the Head Gardener where he started work. 'It was really good in those days'. These places cannot afford to keep staff on now.
00.44.15	Two years ago he visited Alderley Park with his brother. Security is vast. A lady took them round. It is very different now. Where there used to be vegetables and flowers is now grass. Walter's brother worked with him at the beginning but then left to get an apprenticeship as a plumber. His brother was 90 a few weeks ago.
00.45.41	In these gardens like Alderley Park there were a lot of pears and plums on the walls, and Morello cherries. There were 10 staff when Walter started there.
00.46.55	Walter acknowledged that the planting at the Zoo has changed. The Zoo is more into conservation now. There are some flower beds round the old house, Oakfield. They made a Roman Garden in 2000. Walter considered the gardens to have deteriorated.



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