



Caldwell's Nurseries Project

Oral history

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

Peter Acton interviewed by Janet Horne

Peter Acton worked at Caldwell's Nurseries from 1961- 1991.

Duration:	01:12:00
Recording date:	10.09.2013
Recording Location:	Peter Acton's home
Access restrictions:	None
Recording equipment:	Zoom H4N
Recording notes:	-
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Interview summary

00.00.00	Peter Acton was born in Mobberley in 1945.
00.00.30	Joined Caldwell's in June 1961. Describes previous employment at a market garden in Peover, making compost and delivering to Caldwell's
00.02.30	Peter applied for a job at Caldwell's and Bill Caldwell called at his house with job offer. He worked at the main nursery, helping Sid Taylor with tree work. Recalls the old stove from a laundry in Knutsford.
00.05.00	Working at Tatton and then Barnshaw Fruit Nursery which was bought by Bill Caldwell in the late 1950's.
00.06.30	Names of people working at Barnshaw, the rose nursery at Ollerton and Arthur Caldwell's land adjacent to it by the Dunn Cow.
00.08.05	<p>Supplying councils</p> <p>"It was just at the time that Councils were buying like there's no tomorrow. They sold thousands upon thousands of trees to Sheffield, Ealing Council in London, one in Lanarkshire, Wigan Council (a terrific amount went there), Dudley, Lancaster and many other places they sold to as well.</p> <p>By that time, the mid to late 60s, Clibrans had closed, which was the big nursery at Altrincham. They were one of the main nurseries around here I suppose. There are other ones. They used to buy a lot from some of the wholesalers, Boultons of Moddershall; they've gone now (actually they seem to be still there) and Matthews, Morreys.</p> <p>Then we used to buy a lot from down south from Sopox(?) in Woking, Waterer's in Woking; Waterer's might still be going; Exbury Estate in Hampshire, which was</p>

	<p>owned by the Rothschilds and a lot of others. A firm called Fromos(?) in Kent and several other nurseries. So they didn't grow them all themselves. They used to buy from Holland. There used to be wagons coming in every week with massive containers, they were taken off and then sent over to the Councils.</p> <p>Then about the mid 1980s the Councils started to feel the pinch, so that business had slowed down a bit and by then garden centres were becoming more popular, though I think the first garden centre started in the mid 60s.</p> <p>Originally there was no planting in plastic pots when I first started there. Plastic pots didn't come in until the mid to late 60s and that meant the garden centres could sell all year round. Originally everything was moved from the end of September till the end of April, and then that was it. You couldn't move anything for the rest of the year."</p>
00.10.44	<p>Characters at Caldwell's</p> <p>"There were some quite unusual characters there. On the greenhouse side there was a chap called Harry England, who used to run it. He and his wife didn't seem to connect very well, because he used to go on his holidays on his own. What he used to do, he had a very set routine. Every Saturday he'd go and see his mother at Lymm.</p> <p>Then every year he'd go on his own on holiday to Blackpool for a week. He had a set routine. On a Sunday (in those days there were no shows on a Sunday) he'd get a coach which went round the back of Blackpool into the countryside. Then all the rest of the week he would find a show to go to, the three piers, the opera house. Every morning he'd walk from Blackpool to Fleetwood before he had breakfast.</p> <p>There was another chap there called Sam Ollier. He'd been in the First World War. He had a season ticket for Manchester United he told me, from 1910 to 1970. When he went into the army, he'd worked at Caldwell's till just about the time of WWI. Then he went and had a coal round. The in his late fifties he had back problems. That's when he came back to Caldwell's. He worked there until he was probably in his early 70s. But he said he had this season ticket from Manchester united from 1910. Then when he went in the army in WWI he'd already bought his season ticket, but they obviously reimbursed him when he came out in 1918.</p> <p>There was another chap there called Bill Wilson. He'd been in WWI, but he'd gone in before he was called up. He was 17 I think and if you volunteered they didn't bother looking at your birth details. If you said you were 18 you were in. He got frostbite in the trenches and he always used to have bad feet walking. He worked there all his life and he did the transport and looked after the orders, getting these sorted out from October till the end of April."</p>
00.14.10	<p>In the 50's and 60's plants were put in tins and biscuit boxes as there were no plastic pots. George Hulme was at Caldwell's but left to go to Tatton Hall. Bill Scott became foreman and Peter worked with him until 1978, after which time Peter took over the outside work.</p>
00.15.15	<p>Outside work</p> <p>"Then in 1978 the bloke who did the outside work and advising people, he got cancer and had to give up work. Mr Caldwell said to me "Would you like to take it on?" So I did. I went out there to advise people and also, if they wanted planting doing, me and another chap used to go out and do the planting.</p> <p>We went to various places, mainly around Altrincham, Wilmslow, Alderley, and obviously Knutsford. But, we went once or twice further afield. We went once up to</p>

	<p>the Lake District, planting at a place which was an old house that had been taken over by a firm from America. They sold them some roses and they complained that the roses had dried out when they got them, the gardener had. I think they'd not planted them and they blamed us. But Don Leaman kept saying it was their responsibility, but to appease them he said we'd supply the roses free, but we'll send one of our people to plant them.</p> <p>So, I went up there and planted them. There was a fantastic view from the house looking across the bay, near Carnforth, not far from Levens Hall, and there were fantastic views. It was early Spring and the woods were full of aconites and snowdrops. It was a firm from Houston called Mass-Transfer and I think they were to do with dispersing pollutants, especially oil on water. They had their base there.</p> <p>Then another job we did was when they pedestrianised Eastgate in Chester. They had these big planters about 4 feet across , 3-4 feet deep and about half a ton of compost; about 2hundredweight of stone in the bottom and about 8 hundredweight (which is about half a ton) of compost in each one. That was quite a nice job and we planted all these. I haven't been down Eastgate for years so whether they're still there or not I don't know.</p> <p>But planters were put there to make... more respectable, but it can also prevent traffic, well not totally, because I used to park there with the car and trailer. The bloke said, if you have any problem from traffic wardens just tell them you have permission. So this traffic warden came up and said, "You've got to move this, you can't leave it here". I said, "No, I've got permission". "No, you've got to move it". So I said "I've got permission from the Council", which probably she worked for. She probably checked up. I quite enjoyed that."</p>
00.22.30	Planting was done at flats in Manchester and Altrincham and work done in Buxton. Peter advised on tree planting at Flash, nr Buxton and planted a blue cedar in Knutsford (now in Aldi carpark). There was also planting work at Thalby in Yorkshire.
00.24.10	Detailed description of events and people involved in the closure of the business.
00.32.30	Following closure, what happened to the tools. Peter has tools he was given and tells of trees he has in his garden at Mobberley.
00.35.30	The fertiliser shed and Mrs. Caldwell's comments if it was put in view from her house. Mention of seeds in drawers and sold in pint measures. A story involving Peter's mother-in-law who worked at Caldwell's. As people were 'growing their own' the Nursery was selling large quantities of potatoes and fruit until the 80's when the market declined.
00.39.30	Work for Manchester Corporation involved planting an orchard in the hills. <u>Caldwell's was the best in the area.</u> Some buildings were demolished and a new shop built.
00.41.29	<p>Wages and hours</p> <p>"When I first started at Caldwell's it was £4 something. I was only 16 and the bloke from the office came over and he said, "Mr Caldwell doesn't know if you're 17 or 18". I said I'm 16. The bloke said, "You should have said 19". Because you got increases until you were 21 and then you got a full wage.</p> <p>But you actually worked 5 days a week. You started at 7.45 and worked till 5.30 with an hour for dinner and then on Saturday you worked 7.45 till 12.30. But then I</p>

	started working every other weekend because they needed someone in the garden centre. One bloke, the foreman, who came there, said "I don't want to be working every weekend, could you do alternate weekends, so I started working alternate weekends. But then it was all day Saturday, but on Sunday it was only open 2.30-5.30 (and not even that in the winter). But then it started opening at 10 till 5.30, until Sunday trading laws came in and then we had to close at 4pm."
00.44.00	A further description of Bill Wilson.
00.45.00	A description of the Latvian workers, including 'Big John'. Mention of a worker from Ukraine and Alan Sant who ran the rose nursery (with a description of his winch accident).
00.49.15	John Prince was at Barnshaw Nursery and moved into Don Leaman's house. Don Leaman had 60 varieties of fruit at his house on Legh Road and left a plan of them.
00.51.15	An Acer found by Don Leaman was named 'William Caldwell' (although it was nearly named 'Canute'). It was said to be one of Roy Lancaster's favourite trees and details are given of the difficulty of propagation, which is still carried out by Thornhayes Nursery in Devon.
00.56.00	Memories of Alan Lane, customer and landscaper, who had fantastic gardens at Crewe and a collection of cars. Also Morrey's Nursery which still has 100 acres and is run by Dave Morrey's daughter.
00.59.00	Incident when unloading berberis for Wigan and Lancaster Councils. A lot was sold to Wigan and Sheffield Councils.
01.00.30	Peter recalls the Christmas brought from Hereford to supply parks and factories. Mistletoe also came from Hereford where there was a Caldwell relation. Wreaths were made at the shop.
01.02.30	The story of when Joe Sunlight sued Caldwell's for cutting overhanging trees and holly on the long drive by Long Nursery and his house.
01.05.30	A description of Sam Ross, a craftsman who built summerhouses, birdhouses and peeled oak furniture. Bill Caldwell found him a building in which to work. His sister had a sweet shop in Knutsford.