



Donovan Caldwell Leaman interviewed by Barbara Moth

Don Leaman was an employee and then director of Caldwell's Nurseries.

Duration:	01.59.35
Recording date:	12.10.2011
Recording Location:	Mr Leaman's home (living room table)
Access restrictions:	None
Recording equipment:	Zoom H4N
Recording notes:	Don considered his responses carefully so the recording includes some pauses.
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Interview summary

00.00.00	<p>Don was born at Haslington near Crewe in 1934.</p> <p>“At that time my father was a Vicar of Haslington. My mother was a housewife. And Father moved from Haslington to Gatley in 1936, to be Vicar of Gatley, and then in 1947 he moved from Gatley to Alderley Edge, which was the pinnacle of his career really, Alderley Edge being a, well in those days a plum parish I think, and then he went back down the scale to what is now called Little Bollington near Altrincham and he was there for 6 years before retiring altogether. And in all those years my mother was the housewife and took good care of us.”</p>
00.01.33	<p>Don was the youngest in the family. He has two older sisters; Pat is the eldest, five years older than Don and Ann is three years older than Don.</p>
00.02.10	<p><i>And what was the home and neighbourhood like, if you remember when you were small?</i></p> <p>“Well my earliest memories of being alive - well I don't remember Haslington at all - certainly Gatley, I would have been two when we moved to Gatley. Gatley in those days was really quite a rural parish, it's now I suppose been subsumed by Manchester, really very happy days and obviously wartime was wartime, and in hindsight at that age one has no idea of the enormity of the strains that one is under when World War II is actually taking place. I don't think any attempt was made to shelter us from the truth, but at that age we were unaware of, well quite how serious things really were. I remember going into Manchester before Christmas 1940, and to buy, or to have bought for me, what turned out to be a cowboy suit, and my parents remarked in later years that they could never forget in driving home to Gatley with this excited child who had been given a Christmas present early because we didn't know if we would be alive at Christmas, totally unaware of the smoking ruins round us but there is me with my cowboy suit, oh boy you know, that was, that was it.</p> <p>Then in 1943 I was sent away to boarding school, and again in hindsight I think that was probably to free my parents to attend more to parochial matters they got one child out of the way and with war casualties and all that sort of thing, although the blitz was long gone, it was a very stressful time for the priesthood, and if I was safely out of the way - all well and good, and I loved it.”</p>

00.14.12	<p><i>Did you like boarding school?</i></p> <p>“Oh yes, from that day, it was May 1943 I never shed a tear at leaving home although I was given a fortnight’s notice I think of going away and from that time I lived at school, that was where my life principally was, and, I think whatever I am now has been formed by my schooling. Holidays were fine but I lived at school with my friends and I think it made me very independent whether that is good or bad I don’t know.”</p>
00.06.00	<p><i>Where was the school?</i></p> <p>“It was a little prep school called Smallwood Manor, near Uttoxeter, known as Ug, they used to say it was named after Ug the ox beater, but I think that’s mythological. But I was there at Smallwood from 1943 - 1947 and then Smallwood was preparatory school for Denston Colege which was the other side of Uttoxeter and Denstone is , still is, part of the Woodhead Corporation Foundation founded by Canon Woodhead really not solely for the sons of clergy but distinctly Christian based, which no doubt Church of England, as indeed father was. He was the only one of the family of thirteen children, he was the only one who wasn’t a Methodist. And I left Denston in 1953”</p>
00.07.24	<p><i>And what did you do after school?</i></p> <p>“My headmaster thought I was going to be a doctor, probably two year before I left, no it must have been longer than that because I started off reading classics at school but I hadn’t been many weeks at Denston in September of 1947 when of my own accord I change from studying the Greek to sciences. I still had Latin which was part of the necessary curriculum then but having dropped Greek I then was in to botany, zoology, biology, chemistry, physics and that was really the preparation for going into a science based job later on but when I left Denston in 53, I went to work for Caldwell and Sons for a year for practical experience before going to Reading University to read horticulture. And there was really no prospect of me joining Caldwell’s at that stage, so I went to work for my cousin Bill for the year which took me to autumn 1954 when I went up to Reading. But I used to go back and work for Caldwell’s during the vacations, really for monetary reasons. And then having graduated in 1957 I joined what was at that time the National Agricultural Advisory Service on the horticultural side and I went to work for an experimental station in Hampshire, Efford by name, Efford experimental horticulture station and I worked there from beginning of November until June the following year.”</p>
00.10.35	<p>“In 1958 I came up from Hampshire to my sister Pat’s wedding, on the 19th April I think, and my cousin Bill was at the reception and I can still see him at the Bowdon Assembly rooms, I can still see Bill coming across the floor to offer me a job. And his words were - I bought an orchard two days ago; I wonder if you’d like you to come and manage it for me. My reply was - well Bill I’ve got a good job down in Hampshire and I don’t really don’t think it’s on would you, would you like me to try and find somebody else who might take it on? - and he said - yes, maybe. The next day, the Sunday, I said to my father, he was living at it must have been Bollington then, Little Bollington, I said - would you excuse me from church this morning, you know, I’ll give it a miss. He said ‘what’s doing’; I think I’ll go and look at this orchard where Bill’s offered me a job and it was a lovely April morning when I Bill and I wandered through the orchard and I , I think, I’m not sure about this, this maybe rose tinted spectacles, whether the apple were coming into flower or what I knew straight away that this was me so I had to go back down to Hampshire and tell them that after about six months or something I was going to change jobs. And they fetched the head honcho down from London to try and persuade me not to leave. But it was Chorlton, who was our principal driver at the time, came down with Caldwell’s wagon and picked me up from my flat in Lymington and my few bits and pieces and we drove back to the job at Barnshaw, Orchard Farm Barnshaw near Goostrey,</p>

	because Goostrey in those days was Goostrey cum Barnshaw, or Barnshaw cum Goostrey, I think it was probably Goostrey cum Barnshaw.”
00.14.11	<p>“I moved into Orchard Farm which was a delightful little bungalow but one of a pair built in the middle of nowhere really. And I was there, I married first in 1964, and my first wife and I were probably there I think four years, I’m not just too sure about that before we moved into Knutsford, into Legh Road. We had two children then and then we adopted Matthew in 1970 and in 1971 we adopted Susannah so we had four and then..... Emma died very suddenly in 1972 and I married in 1973, the children’s nanny, Carol, and we remained in Legh Road until about 1987 I think, when we moved to Gough’s Lane into Maplecroft. And we stayed there until 1992. At this point I should say that, personally speaking, I named Maplecroft after a maple that I had discovered in 1976, and I named that Maple William Caldwell after my cousin Bill. So when we moved I took a plant with and we called what had been ‘Druid’s Wood’ and there now three in that garden. So Bill’s now over in America and that was Maplecroft until 1992.”</p>
00.18.00	<p>Closure of Caldwell’s</p> <p>“Caldwell’s, well the story of Caldwell’s closure, well I don’t know whether it comes into this story or not, you can sort this out at a later date. I’m not sure which year cousin David Bill’s son having emigrated to Australia, it was quite plain that David was not coming back and Bill got to an age when he wanted to retire and the normal times David would have taken over but it was not going to happen. And I could not afford to buy out David’s share. I had become a director in 1983 in fact having served five years. I suppose I’d been a director before 1963 but it was confirmed in 1963 that I was a director. Any way David having gone and Bill wanting to retire and me not being able to buy him out. Caldwell’s nursery in Knutsford had become prime building land like £6m of land and to cut a long story short, Bill and I sold.”</p> <p>Bill moved to Great Budworth, Don took over as MD and the site was bought by James Crosby, a property developer and builder. Bill and Don were pleased that the firm was going to carry on and that the men’s jobs were intact. Crosby’s were anxious for it to succeed.</p> <p>Before they sold they had a letter of approval for plans to move but the plans were thrown out. The residents (of Ollerton) got together. The fact that Caldwell’s had been there for years counted for nothing.</p> <p>“Crosby was bought out by Berkeley Group, Weybridge in Surrey, a very go ahead company. The site of the shop was being developed and they moved to the opposite side of the road and the customer base dwindled away. In my years there I had seen grandparents, fathers and their children, generation s coming, having started in 1953. I had seen all these families.”</p> <p>Berkeley Group looked at the books, the business was haemorrhaging. They wer business men. Twenty eight men were to be out of work. Don stayed behind in Knutsford until the closure in January 31st 1992, and then moved to North Yorkshire in July 1992, safe in the knowledge that the men who wanted to work had found jobs and he was free to go. It was a very traumatic period. Personally Don felt very bitter about the whole business, perhaps because he was teh last member ofthe family adn it was a family business.</p>
00.28.10	<p>There was a mighty big bust up in the family before WWII. Grandfather died in 1939, a senior partner. At the funeral grandmother told mother she was going to be bought out. There was a total breakdown between Don’s mother and Don’s uncle Bill. At some stage in the war Bill went missing in the desert so Don’s mother decided to visit Auntie Madge, Bill’s mother. Madge went down with severe arthritis, probably shock. There was a slight rapprochement. “I remember going to see Auntie Madge. Uncle Billy died 1951/2. Then mother felt free to go over anytime. Had he been alive in 1953 I could not have worked for Caldwell’s. Bill was a totally different</p>

	kettle of fish from his father.”
00.32.25	<p>Starting at Caldwell’s</p> <p>“So when I first went to work in 1953 I went to the rose nursery, and my first memories of the rose nursery would have been about 1935 I think, walking down. I would be about four. I can still remember holding onto grandpa’s hand walking down the roses as far as you could get where we used tip all the rubbish and compost and this and that and the other, and a bit of a lily pond.”</p> <p>There were fruit trees and shrubs, and seven sisters nursery on the corner.</p> <p>“I began with a month’s hoeing, and if you can stand a month’s hoeing you can stand all the nursery throws at you. For part of the winter I went to work in the Florists on King Street.”</p>
00.34.43	<p>Prisoners of war</p> <p>(In the early 1950s, while a student Don worked part time at the nursery)</p> <p>“In January I went back into the rose nursery because it was planting time. There was only one other Englishman working at the rose nursery, Stanley Batty. All the rest were DPs, displaced persons, ex prisoners of war. There was a Latvian who was the foreman Willy Amanis (?) and 2 Ukrainians, John Kenetski (?) and Ted (?). They’d all served in the SS. They’d lived. The tales they could tell. I grew to more than manhood in that year, rubbing shoulders with those who had experienced the very, very rough end of life.....displaced they could not go back to their own countries”</p>
00.36.42	<p>In September 1954 Don went off to university. When he came back in the holidays he was put anywhere he was needed, principally in the rose nursery. From his mid teens he had taken an interest in fruit growing. When he joined Caldwell’s he set about revolutionising this. Don had a rose named after him in 1938. His grandpa Arthur Caldwell was a noted rosarian.</p> <p>When he returned there was no shadow of his uncle Billy. In many ways he really enjoyed getting his hands dirty - ‘never judge a person by the soil under his finger nails’. He gloried in physical work. his university knowledge came into play as well.</p>
00.39.41 - 00.41.29	<p>“When I came back to work at the fruit nursery in 1958 I was given a foreman to work under me. He was a Latvian, one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. He stayed with me for about 5 years, then went to work at Courtaulds, because he couldn’t stand outside work any longer through the winter... He had married a German lady and had a son. He used to send money regularly to his ex wife. I don’t know if he ever got divorced. At the end of the war when he knew he couldn’t go back to Latvia and was sent over here as a prisoner of war, that was goodbye to his wife and son. How he coped I don’t know, but he was a remarkable fellow. He married in Preston again. She was another German lady and they had a little girl.”</p>
00.42.09	<p>When Don moved into Legh Road he had a car right from the start. “It was my job to turn what had been a very small commercial fruit farm into a nursery. It was 25 acres, half of it fruit trees. In terms of being economically viable it was not on. You can only grow so much fruit on 25 acres. If you were a one man band it might provide enough to buy a loaf of bread. I exaggerate. But, even in those days they used to reckon a farm to be viable had to be 200 acres to achieve a reasonable profit. With 12 acres of fruit something had to be done to raise output and income. Eventually the orchard went and it went down to nursery, but that was my job.”</p>

00.44.03	<p>Cars He had an old Ford Pop to get around, registration 164. Later he had a Morris mini traveller, then a Hillman estate and eventually a Volvo estate. Estate cars could get any number of trees and rhododendrons in the back. They were selling to parks corporations, mental hospitals, advising private clients on gardens, garden planning; it was a pretty wide ranging job.</p>
00.46.22	<p>When his daughter Victoria was born in 1965 he was still propagating and doing skilled work in the nursery; then he was office based and going round the different nurseries.</p>
00.48.18	<p>Premises layout The office and stables faced onto the road. In Don's time the stables were turned into a furniture showroom in the old shop Bill Wilson held sway. There were just two directors with a private office, with the main office at the back of the shop where Mr and Mrs Nield typed out the bills and the records were kept. Bill Wilson was really the despatch manager with his own office. Frank Passant was finance manager.</p>
00.51.36	<p>A typical working day "The whole nursery business... something that's growing, not a matter of stopping at 5. Office staff came in at 8.30; 7.45 was the starting point for the outdoor men. Bill and I were there at 7.45. Bill would open up and come through the private office. I'd go to Barnshaw nursery.....I'd probably come back via the rose nursery." Don bought Uncle Arthur's land - Holly House. In 1935 or 1938 they still had the Tatton nursery next door to the cricket club, only rented. Bill might have gone straight to the Tatton Nursery. Many miles of shoe leather. Have to know the ground you are working on.</p>
00.55.40	<p>Stock Trees basically - poplars, maples - the full range. When he bought Uncle Arthur's land that became a tree nursery. Not sure when the Tatton nursery went. When stopped Caldwell's were growing trees down the bottom of the rose nursery. "With a bit of effort I can still recall the scent of roses.....In my time they set up the plant patent system of royalties. Until then there had been no money in it for rose raisers of new varieties." 1953 a new rose, a sport, named after previous foreman Mr Russell. May have had a Polish foreman before him. At some stage Caldwell's produced Azalea Caldwellii, not going to set the work on fire, maybe a trifle miserable by comparison. Plant patent business complicated. Takes a long time to get money back. Acer William Caldwell - Don has not benefited by a penny.</p>
01.02.19	<p>Deliveries "We had (in 1953) a main wagon, a delivery wagon, driven by Arthur Chorlton, Frank Passant's father-in-law. Frank married Mary who was one of Arthur's daughters. That wagon would travel all over the country; down to London delivering trees. One of the sources of justifiable pride for me was that we grew a particular variety of rowan for the benefit of Ealing Borough that I grafted at the Barnshaw nursery. It's a rowan that grows upright like a Lombardy poplar. It gave me pleasure to know that something I grafted in Cheshire was going down to line the streets of Ealing." They went all over the country. If buying from other nurseries, Arthur collected. For local pick- ups there was an enclosed van as well, for the florists business.</p>

01.04.48	<p>Travelling salesmen</p> <p>“In 1958 we also had two travellers who would be on the road most of the week really, going out and selling and consulting and advising. In some circumstances they probably had a small estate car and if they could fit some shrubs in they’d take them with them. I now know that one of the travellers, Jack Ford, who was an Irishman, who knew me over the 4 year period I was a student there, it was he who told Bill (Caldwell) – “get him on the payroll”</p> <p>Jack Ford and Fred Halliburton, I think they had learned their knowledge probably as private gardeners for big estates. We did have another traveller later on, Freddy Trill who had been Director of Parks at Prestwich.....They had the knowledge to plan a garden for somebody...They as travellers would also be superintending our ‘outside business’, working in private gardens, planting up the planting schemes and delivering the outside teams to do these jobs...in Lancashire, Cheshire, Derbyshire and sometimes Yorkshire.”</p> <p>They used to travel to Sheffield selling trees and Wigan was another great sales area. they would get to know the different directors of parks quite well, occasionally one with vision, but not all were like that.</p>
01.11.09	<p>Celebrating 200 years</p> <p>In 1980 they had a couple of dinners to celebrate 200 years in business. The first was for business contacts, lots of parks directors, held in a marquee at the back of Bill and Mavis’s garden. The first week in June, an almighty hail storm that almost broke the marquee. The second night was for the men and their families. Maybe 30 staff, might have been as many as 5 in the main office with Frank Passant for many years responsible for the wages.</p>
01.13.30	<p>Affect of weather</p> <p>“The winter of 1962/63 when we couldn’t get a spade in the ground. In those days you didn’t have all these plants available 12 months of the year in a container. I don’t know what percentage of the annual turnover was concerned with the end of October through till April. In those months you would work like mad with a spade to lift the trees out. I think Bill (Caldwell) had reason for great pride and satisfaction that as far as I know in that winter we didn’t lay any man off. I think in those days conditions of employment were that you could quite easily do it; there were probably no redundancy payments or anything of that sort, but we didn’t. Admittedly that winter I probably pruned our apple orchard twice over to make sure we didn’t miss anything but somehow we found things to do; the nurseries must have been well and truly tidied up and what bits of woodland we owned were probably trimmed and such like. A lot of things were killed by the winter. Certain plants which are not native, perhaps from New Zealand, such as hebes, would have been completely wiped out that winter. “</p> <p>Hilliers Manual graded trees and shrubs for hardiness. Miles of privet were killed to ground level; cypresses were not proof against the long chill. The 1976 drought tested the watering facilities available.</p>
00.01.18	<p>“At some stage David Caldwell did work for the firm for a while before he went to OZ. He initiated a search for water at Ollerton part way down the rose nursery, sinking a borehole searching for water on a permanent basis. He found water but it was gone within two days and that was the end of it. Whether the disappointment had anything to do with David’s decision to go I don’t know.....”</p>

01.19.47	<p>Innovations</p> <p>“Possibly the biggest innovation was the advent of weedkillers, which enabled us to grow a decent crop without forever hoeing. At the rose nursery everything would be hoed certainly twice a year and there’s no doubt it is a laborious, back-breaking job. We worked in teams. We’d take 2 rows at a time, down one side with a hoe and back the other side. Then weedkillers came in and you could spray the whole lot and only the odd weed would be proof against it.”</p>
01.22.18	<p>Undercutting of trees and shrubs</p> <p>“Another innovation that came in my years would have been the undercutting of trees and shrubs. When I first started in 1953/54 we were digging out roses one at a time, with two men, a spade on one side, a spade on the other; up comes one rose, you’d go a bit further down the row, that’s a good one, spade in and plant out. When the principle of undercutting came in you would start with a tractor with an undercutting spade, starting at one end of a row, the undercutter goes into the soil, the tractor winch pulls it through, but doesn’t actually cut the roots, but cuts under them and loosens them. That is done for roses probably mid October, and as the undercutter goes along the plants are given just a little bit of a shake as it goes, then the undercutter on the tractor winch gets the other end and you move to the next row. This means of course that when you are getting your orders up you can put on a leather glove, a gauntlet and go along and say I like that rose (you might take a spade) and just ease it up with one hand, shake the soil off and that was it. And the same with trees.”</p>
01.24.30	<p>Mechanisation/use of chemicals</p> <p>“No doubt there are other innovations. Quite a lot of them would have been concerned with the tractor machinery, tractor mounted tools, making life easier, such as tree lifting equipment, not just an undercutter, but something like putting a spade down on four sides of a tree and lifting it out, and then you put it into a bag or something like that, keeping the soil ball together. So, the mechanisation has been quite important.</p> <p>It’s very easy to forget that I’ve been out of the business for 19 years and the use of chemicals has changed enormously – fungicides, insecticides, weedkillers – a lot of them have been banished from the shelves, but they had their place in my day, that’s all I can say. Of course it enabled one at the time to reduce your workforce, not always a good thing. But, I think we weren’t so much concerned with reducing the workforce as making life easier for them. We didn’t say, like a barrel of paraquat equates with getting rid of one man who’s not going to have to hoe all year. The other thing about weedkillers is that if you’re forever disturbing the soil with a hoe you may be doing damage to the roots of the plants that you’re trying to keep free of weeds.”</p>
00.27.17	<p>Don’t think that the Europeans came with horticultural skills but they might have come with an agricultural or horticultural mindset. They used to mock the English for stopping for a cup of tea at 10. They brought with them all the jargon of German fighting services. The men who worked on the nursery in 1953 already knew how to bud a rose, taught at Caldwell’s don’t know by whom.</p> <p>In the war there was limited nursery business. Grew potatoes. Must have been a residue of nursery workers who were too old to fight.</p>
01.30.16	<p>After WWI</p> <p>“My mother would have said that after the First World War, Caldwell’s was absolutely on its knees. Whether they’d lost staff fighting I don’t know, but I suppose every business in the country was on its uppers. My mother, who would have been working in the offices at the time, reported that her father said that if it wasn’t for</p>

	Lord Egerton at Tatton, who wanted to plant vast numbers of rhododendrons, Caldwell's would probably have gone to the wall. Apparently Lord Egerton said 'I'm going to fill half Tatton with rhododendrons. I don't care where you get them from; get them from China if you want, but I want rhododendrons'. So, Caldwell's went out and got them. So, I suppose, in a nutshell, Lord Egerton at this time, was responsible for keeping Caldwell's going."
01.33.32	Quarry Bank Mill an excellent customer. When renovating they asked if Caldwell's had any records of deals. Biddulph - asked if Caldwell's had seeds from the 1920's when they supplied them. In those days didn't get seed in packets, and any seed over was chucked at the end of the year and got fresh. Seed bins painted with turps as a general sterilizer. Seeds kept in little seed bins.
01.35.24	Caldwell's had a very good local customer base. They used to attend all local flower shows. Travellers used to take care of it. Southport, Chelsea - before don's time. the only time Don went was when he was showing Acer William Caldwell at the Liverpool Show. Cheshire Show too. Travellers used to go round different departments and request material for show, a lot of work, good fun.
01.37.50	Seed source? Wholesale seed growers principally in Essex. As many as 3 sources, veg and flowers, Frank may remember
01.39.10	Measuring seeds "A seed spoon is a long spoon with a handle at one end, a very narrow stem and a little (depending on the size of the seed) spoon on the end. You'd have something like a mortar (as in pestle and mortar), a wooden bowl, with a rod across it. You'd dip the seed spoon into the seed and draw it back under the bar so you'd end up with a level teaspoon of that particular seed. You'd open the packet, in it goes, lick it, seal it – that's the way the seeds are packeted. With big seeds like broad beans you'd get sacks of broad beans, sold by the quarter pint, half pint, pint and quart packets. You had something a bit like a beer tankard; you could dip this into the bag of seed, knock it across the top, into the big packet and seal."
01.40.04	Wholesale seed growers were principally in Essex. "one name that comes to mind is Kings at Coggershall. We probably used about three (growers)". Then gradually they stopped packeting and relied on Suttons. Don thought that they probably lost quite a bit of custom from the mental hospitals and larger gardens had bought vegetable seeds by the quart.
01.43.00	Don recalled plastic posts replacing terracotta, the terracotta ones probably bought from Sankeys in the Midlands, plastic pots being much lighter for carriage.
01.45.05	<i>What did you like best about working for the nursery?</i> "I don't think it falls to every man to feel the warmth of the soil in the spring. I think to me it was something of a revelation". Don recalls his first year at Orchard Farm growing potatoes and feeling that warmth, "something mystical". "The men that I worked with over the years, all very different. I had great affection and respect for the staff..... All men of the earth, the salt of the earth..... and the personal relationships are still something I value."
01.48.28	What didn't you like? Growing roses! The thorns though they did grow a thornless one. Don recalled meeting a great rosarian Charles Greg from Nottingham who said 'I hope to God I never see another rose'.

	<p>Once Bill retired and Don was the sole MD he “opened up the nursery the main office every day of the week and every other Sunday only after retirement did he realise “what a tyranny it had been, first person in in the morning and last person out at night. I didn’t realise it at the time.... working by man’s clock not nature’s clock in so many ways”.</p> <p>The bureaucracy of later years, health and safety.</p>
01.54.05	<p>Don recalled Bill Wilson “one of those people at the heart of everything, in the despatch department, the frontman in the shop... rows of seeds and cupboards behind.... gruff... all front... he was lovely, he ruled his department with a benevolent rod of iron. We used to pick him up in the morning from st John’s Road I think and take him back at night... he was a leading light of the Liberal Club.</p> <p>There was a time when Caldwell had staff called Keen, Frost and Snow.</p>



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