



Caldwell's Nurseries Project

Oral history

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

Sam Youd interviewed by Christine Wilcox-Baker

Sam Youd Propagator/Garden manager/head gardener at Tatton Park 1979 – 2012 and customer of Caldwell's

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Interview summary

00.00.21	Sam Youd introduces himself as the Gardens Manager at Tatton Park. He started at Tatton in 1979 and when he first came he dealt a lot with Caldwell's Nurseries.
00.00.49	Sam has been gardening since he was 8. His father had been a keen amateur gardener in Liverpool. Sam took up an apprenticeship in the Parks Department in Liverpool, was there for 6 years studying all aspects of horticulture but trained as a propagator. When he was 21 he went into private service for 4 years and then went back and took up a post as training instructor, then technical advisor. He then felt that he had become so divorced from gardening that he decided to move away. He had interviews in Scotland, Anglesey and Tatton Park. He took the job at Tatton.
00.02.30	He was born in Huyton in Liverpool in 1947. He came to Tatton as a propagator his idea being to move on in about 3 years, but that didn't happen for various reasons. As propagator he dealt with Caldwell's a lot and Tatton had had dealt with them for years and years.
00.03.48	Historical records of transactions between Caldwell's and Tatton Park "No, obviously I wasn't around in 1700, but the day books cover that particular period 17/1800. And it's interesting really to look at these; they're just copies of pages from the day books. How it worked, you went to the nursery, you got what you'd ordered, it was entered in the day book, and it went to the office and then Tatton would be invoiced, that's how it worked. So, the day books were, literally, things that went every day from the nursery to different places, other great estates as well. So, it's quite interesting to look at these day books and find that one day they sent out 8,000 larch trees to Tatton Park. You

	<p>know it's incredible when you start to think about the amount of material. And, the other great thing about it is, because we didn't have any information, there's very little information about gardens, nobody keeps information about gardens, because you didn't then, nobody was interested. Provided there was food on the table, they didn't worry too much, but it's interesting to look through the day books, because they are what they are.</p> <p>Because, you can see they also sent 3 packets of whatever seed it was. So, you've got great lists of seeds, not just pretty things. They've lists of vegetables, varieties of peas and beans, so these sort of things are really fascinating to me as a propagator, to look back and think, wow, they were growing cabbage Greyhound in 1700 and we're still growing it because it's still a good cabbage. So, we're into the days of F1 hybrids, but to be perfectly honest there's a lot of the bread and butter stuff that was grown then and was introduced then. They probably raved about greyhound cabbage then. We still think it's a great cabbage now; we haven't found anything better.</p> <p>I think that's the great thing about looking at all those old records. It's fascinating. There are other fascinating things as well of plant material that's disappeared altogether. So, now we find it extremely difficult to find seed of Veitch's self-folding cauliflower. That was bred because people didn't like yellow curds on cauliflowers. I suppose it was an idea about a labour-saving device. Nowadays we have to and we have to fold the leaf over when the curd is reaching maturity, so we can keep it white. Well Veitch introduced a cauliflower that actually folded itself over when it got to the stage of going over and still being white. We've still got seed of it, but it's extremely difficult to get hold of the seed now, so that's something that's fascinating. I think of other things like the cabbage that doesn't smell when you cook it, which is Couve Tronchuda. It's Portuguese in origin."</p>
00.07.37	<p>Caldwell's bred plants themselves. A lot of them were chance introductions. Acer campestre 'William Caldwell' was one of the last. It was found as a chance seedling and Bill Caldwell gave Sam 3 or 4 which are now in the garden at Tatton. He gave them to people he thought would look after them. In the boxes of seedlings he noticed one that was better than the others. It has fantastic autumn colour. It is a very compact small tree, a very good tree, very underrated.</p>
00.09.29	<p>Being nearby, it was very easy to pop into the nursery. They still had the old seed cabinets and measured out into a packet the seed required. They were proper seed merchants. Sometimes Sam gave orders for collection. Caldwell's had quite a lot of unusual stuff. Sam went in about once a fortnight, maybe more, depending on the season. It was a sad day when it closed.</p>
00.10.54	<p>Caldwell's wanted to move to another site at Ollerton but they didn't get planning permission. It was tragic because some of the key guys in horticulture went as well. John Prince came to Tatton. He had been an outside foreman, good on fruit. When Caldwell's were closing they got in touch and asked if Tatton could take anyone on. Sam was looking for a tractor driver and as John Prince could drive a tractor, they took him on, but then John went on to look after the nursery at Tatton.</p>
00. 13.40	<p>Caldwell's shop and nursery "I think that Frank Passant ran the shop (?). It was all high quality tools, things like that, apart from the seeds and plants. It wasn't massive, but it was big enough and they could always get you something that you wanted. In those days there were plenty of horticultural suppliers, so things like Bulldog Tools, people like that, who could supply you with stuff fairly quickly if you wanted it. It was Knutsford so they only sold high quality stuff."</p>

	<p><i>What was the shop itself like?</i></p> <p>“The shop itself was more like a summer house. It was very light and airy and very well organised, because that was the front of house bit, so it was kind of a reception area. So, they’d give advice on plants, whatever you wanted to do, whatever you were planning in your garden. And the nursery was nicely laid out. It wasn’t like a tip. It was always vey tidy, it was always a pleasure to go in there.</p> <p>The car park I remember was tiny. I suppose they delivered a lot of the stuff in those days so people didn’t actually go to the nursery, they probably phoned up and had the stuff delivered. A lot of the stuff was bare root.</p> <p>They had the rose nursery at Ollerton. They had other nurseries as well. They had a big area of trees opposite the Dun Cow, which is all still there, strangely enough. There are some really rare varieties of trees there on that plot of land opposite the Dun Cow, which was never ever moved. They’re still in the nursery rows.</p> <p>So they had a lot of places around Knutsford. So, if you wanted roses you couldn’t just go to Caldwell’s in Knutsford to get roses. You’d have to go to the Ollerton nursery to do that. They only planted stuff and packed it and sent it out. So, you might go there when the roses were in flower, but you wouldn’t go there for any other reason. You’d order it through the shop.</p> <p>So, a lot of the stuff was bare root. It was only when they were under pressure in the latter days for plants in containers, but generally it was all bare root. So, you had to wait till October/November or even later when they lifted the stuff to order. So, you’d order it in the summer but you knew you weren’t going to get it till autumn. That’s the way it worked.”</p>
00.16.40	Caldwell’s did annuals in season, bedding and packets of seed, but their ‘bread and butter’ trade was trees and shrubs which they grew themselves, budding their own roses and doing a lot of fruit trees. Now people have got to go further, only Morreys grown their own. Caldwell’s did all the apple varieties. They were nurserymen, not garden centres just handling stuff from someone else. They would take orders and grow stuff for you.
00.18.19	They supplied all over the country, they were well known. They supplied the massive estates round Knutsford - Arley , Tabley and Toft, and ones that have disappeared. They had domestic customers as well but many of these had big gardens. Caldwell’s did contracting, they would plant gardens. They had a lot of staff.
00.20.57	The logo came from the bottled water company at the back of Brook Street where the river runs through, Gidmans. Sam didn’t know how the logo came to be adopted by Caldwell’s.
00.21.43	Historic tree orders from the order book - these could have been planted anywhere in the parkland at that time, beeches, hornbeam.
00.23.22	Used to be a board at Ollerton for many years. The trees are still there, far too large to move now.
00.25.15	Plants were well labelled. The shop and sales areas were tidy and clean, made you want to go there. The people were very knowledgeable, could advise, always had time, it was always nice to go.
00.26.28	Staff wore tradition aprons, blue denim. There was a hierarchy of aprons with journeymen wearing green. Caldwell’s looked after their staff. Bill Caldwell was there

	around the shop and one could always pick up the 'phone and talk to him. There was Don Leaman, John Prince and Frank. The cottages are still there on the road.
00.30.55	They probably bought in seed. At that time there was Carter's in Manchester - amazing catalogue, Bees in Chester, plenty of seed merchants and suppliers. If you wanted something that Caldwell's didn't have they would graft it and you had to wait for the plant to grow. Had to wait till autumn for plants to be lifted.
00. 33.39	<p>New varieties (also separate extract about Acer campestre 'William Caldwell')</p> <p>"Some of the plants that we grow in our gardens are chance seedlings. It's hard to imagine that a lot of these plants, like the acer, come from one plant. So, if you think about Corylus contorta, "Harry Lauder's walking stick", twisted hazel, all of that came from one plant, a chance find, down with some old lady walking the lanes of Devon. She noticed that the hazel in the hedgerows was different to the others, so she took it home and all these hazels that we've got now, this Corylus contorta, all came from that one plant that she found. She probably didn't get paid for it either. So, we buy it in from Holland as grafted plants, but the original came from here, from one plant. Again, lots of chance seedlings.</p> <p>So, people in those days, in the heyday of Caldwell's they'd be looking for things like that, because they were growing their own stuff. They'd see a batch of seedlings and think that's an odd one. It's not unusual to take one out and say, that looks different, it's got a different leaf, different size, different colour, or it's got a bit of variation in it. It might be all sorts of reasons. They'd take it out and grow it on. And think, it's grown out or reverted to type.</p> <p>These nurserymen they were plants people, plantsmen or plantswomen, they would be looking for things different, unusual. A lot of plants, varieties, were often just chance seedlings. Not introduced from other parts of the world."</p>
00.36.48	Chance seedlings were something that nurserymen looked for them, had to be something that would be constant, variability was no good. These were nurserymen, close to the earth.
00.38.51	Everything was written down by hand, a month later one would receive a hand written invoice. Later they got a typewriter. They used to produce a series of catalogues. They would sell to the big houses. Advertising was limited to what was happening currently e.g. the seed potatoes are in. They would advertise in the Tatton Garden Society magazine with a membership of 2,500 keen gardeners.
00.42.16	Caldwell's would visit and advise and clients who probably left the planting to Caldwell's. There was probably kudos in having Caldwell's do it. Caldwell's had an advantage in being at the end of Legh Road, local for the Legh Road gardeners who did not drive miles in those days. They would grow plants for people who would wait for them, not the rush, people had time.
00. 47.48	<p>Packing</p> <p>"So, the wagon would turn up, it would all be rootballed and done properly.</p> <p>If it were bare root stuff it would probably be packed in straw, cardboard boxes, that's how it would normally arrive, bundled up and tied up in straw. Because they'd be lifting in winter of course, they'd need to make sure that they were at the packing shed. They were lifted and put in the packing shed. So, they would need protection, particularly if there were frosty nights, so they usually used straw and cardboard boxes, sometimes hessian, very traditional"</p>

00.49.27	Caldwell's sold knives, secateurs, all of the best quality.
00.51.29	Sam's last memory is of a conversation about the planning permission. He tended not to go at the end because they were selling everything off and it was very sad. Bill brought the Acer campestre 'William Caldwell' over to Tatton himself and came to see them when they were planted.
00.55.30	The Caldwell records in the Archives in Chester are a very important record of what people grew in Cheshire and their usefulness as a living record will grow as there are more and more plant diseases and it is important to know what was grown.



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