



Caldwell's Nurseries Project

Oral history

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

Ken Roe interviewed by Sue Eldridge

Ken Roe worked at Caldwell's from 1946-1952

Duration:	02:27:24
Recording date:	03.08.2011
Recording Location:	Ken Roe's home
Access restrictions:	None
Recording equipment:	Zoom H4N
Recording notes:	Quite a bit of noise at the beginning and end.
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Interview summary

00.00.34	Describes early years in Timperley and then Poynton from age 8, during World War 2. Interest in Woodford Aerodrome nearby and developing interest in growing plants through holidays on farms/market gardens
00.03.35	Describes schooling at Poynton and Stockport (limited because of war and illness). Remembers father and straitened circumstances at the end of the war.
00.08.19	Early years in horticulture Left school at 14, wanted to go to Reaseheath College, but impossible because of finance. Describes working for Herbert Stott, market gardener, and other nurseries in Bramhall and developing an interest in botany/horticulture, particularly alpinists, through uncle
00.18.15	Describes his start at Caldwell's Nurseries in 1946, having to cycle 13 miles each way. Then buying a motorbike with help of neighbour, much to father's disgust (who didn't approve of horticulture or motorbikes)
00.22.00	Describes his 6 years work at Caldwell's Nursery as being very interesting, because of the range of plants grown, including rose nursery at Ollerton, fruit nursery, herbaceous and tree nurseries at Knutsford.
00.24.05	<i>So, that's where you started was it, on the rose nursery?</i> "So, I started tying up, the original job for lads. You had a bunch of raffia round your waist and you followed the budders who used the budding knife and inserted the buds into the rose stocks. My first job was planting the briars. In those days they used to buy them in; they were able to get them at the end of the war from Holland.

	I don't know what happened during the war. Well, I do know what happened during the war. You couldn't get stuff from Holland, of course. But, they got them before the war and, if you were a big importer from Holland in pre war days, you got preferential treatment for importing as soon as the war ended, because the Dutch wanted to start the business again and they imported those seedling briars which are Rosa canina, the dog rose. They use a lot of different stocks today; I'm out of date, but then the dog rose was the thing. We planted those seedling briars as and when we were digging the field. So, there was no tractor in sight when I first went there or any mechanical means at all, other than a spade. There was a whole line of men across a 3 acre field. We would dig a trench, put the plant in, then dig back. When we got so far we'd put another row in and it was all done by hand. So, it was hard work, very, very hard work." Describes his first job in the rose nursery, following the budder and tying up roses. Describes planting seedlings bought in from Holland, all work done by hand. Describes early rotivator (photo available), which was very heavy to handle and dangerous."
00.26.10	The Rowtrak "But, during the war they had acquired a machine from George Monroe, who were big suppliers of horticultural machinery, called a Rowtrak. That was a killer really, it broke two of my ribs at one stage. It was a very crude machine, which was very underpowered. It was just a plough with an engine on the front in place of the horses. A one horse plough with big heavy shafts in the front and you had to physically manhandle this thing round to start another row and you'd get cracked in the ribs with them, and it would suddenly jerk and spin. It was not an easy thing and you could break your arm starting the engine if you weren't careful. So, that was my introduction to horticultural machinery. The Rowtrak now would be quite a valuable antique, but it was cursed by all and sundry on the nursery in those days. That was all we had other than the spade. Of course, there wasn't the manpower then, because a lot of men were awaiting demobilisation or they'd got too old to work, they'd been working all through the war." (Ken broke 2 of his ribs).
00.28.17	Rose experts and introduction of "Peace" rose "George Wilding was one of the main budders who taught me to bud. I used to go with all the lads, we used to tie up the budding, tie up the stocks with raffia. We had to follow each man, which would be about 3/400 buds a day. There was a rose foreman, Percy Alcroft, he'd been head gardener for a family called Green, and the Greens were the owners of the Refuge Assurance building in Manchester. The Greens were a big family, Proctor Green; a lot of the family had big houses in Knutsford. They had to give up these gardeners because of the war effort. He then got a job back in his old firm of Caldwell's. He was there when I went. It was his job to cut the wood off the stock plants and give them to the budders to take eyes to put them in. And they got a certain amount of stock plants from different parts of the world each year. France was one of the leading places for the reintroduction of rose varieties. The Meilland family had big nurseries in France and they introduced the very famous rose called "Peace". I remember I was able to put some of the first buds in of that variety when it came in. I think it was sold at 7/6 a bush, whereas 5/- was the usual price for a rose tree in those days. It was quite good.

	It was very closely guarded, very secret. People could make money by stealing wood, which seems a bit silly today, but there weren't many people who could propagate that way."
00.31.33	Describes contretemps between William Caldwell (head of family) and Arthur Caldwell, who tried to set up a rival business.
00.33.22	Describes his move to other branches of Caldwell's – herbaceous nursery in Knutsford, dealing with large shrubs and how they were moved by horse drawn flat truck to local station. Describes providing big trees for local celebrities e.g. George Formby. Describes going out with landscape department.
00. 36.46	"In the main nursery, near the offices, where they dealt with those people, local customers, there was a very great upstairs/downstairs element there. Looking back at it now it's unbelievable how certain people would treat you most disrespectfully really and treat Mr Caldwell most disrespectfully." <i>Do you mean customers?</i> "Oh yes. There were a lot of big businesses, families, had moved out to Knutsford, Hale etc. A lot of them were what we would say today "very jumped up" really. I found in those days the very well established old aristocratic people who had money all their lives were charming to deal with, but some of those who made great wealth in a short length of time were absolutely impossible. I don't think people use Millers baking powder now, but it was a very famous thing like (?) flower and Bovril, that were famous in the old days. Mrs Miller would come down to the nursery, only a few hundred yards from where she lived, in a car. She had a chauffeur, but she would sometimes drive. You could tell by the sound of the car that she didn't know what she was doing. She'd pull up outside in Chelford road, right in the middle of the road, obstructing the road. I asked one of the men, why didn't the police move her on. "Oh they daren't, it's Mrs Miller". She'd walk up the nursery and call "Caldwell". This is how she'd address Mr Caldwell, our boss. She'd say "Boy!" and all that sort of thing. You wouldn't dare talk to a coloured person like that. It was a very, very disrespectful way of treating people. You were just less than dirt because you were in trade, a worker and there was a great contrast. What was so amazing really, old Mr Caldwell he was extremely subservient, he would bow and scrape to these people and pander to their wishes because that was his business."
00.40.46	Lord Egerton and the pruning knife "I'd gone into the shop to hold the fort until Mr. Caldwell came back. While I stood in the shop this colossal Rolls Royce pulled up. You could tell it was very old even by those standards, it was probably pre World War I. The bonnet went from here to the middle of next week. It certainly wasn't very smart. It was a very ancient Rolls Royce. This old man got out, who I assumed was a gardener. He shuffled into the shop. He'd got an old cloth cap that had got bits of stuff in it. It had got torn on some briars. He shuffled into the shop. Good morning young man" he said. I could tell he was some quality as soon as he spoke. "I require a pruning knife". I said "Yes, certainly sir, I'll show you what we've got. So I showed him the array of stuff we'd got. 'Oh, that's excellent, yes I'll take that young man, thank you very much". He was most charming. He mentioned the weather, he was chatting away to me, he gave me the cash and he was about to leave when the old man (Mr Caldwell)

	returned. He came out from the back and nearly fell on the floor, “Good morning my lord, good morning my lord”. I thought, what on earth’s going on here. I just didn’t understand. I hadn’t met him before. “Nice to see you” (said Mr Caldwell). “Good morning Caldwell”. Anyway, out he went. He treated me with more respect than he did Mr Caldwell. He got into his Rolls Royce, and this was Lord Egerton of Tatton, Maurice Egerton. “Young man, (this was Mr Caldwell) do you know who you were talking to?” I said I’d no idea. “That was Lord Egerton”. I said thank you for telling g me, but I didn’t know. “Well, you’ll remember him in future won’t you. You’re to give him some respect”. I said I wasn’t rude to him. I saw him again and he was always very pleasant.”
00.44.05	Story of local MP, Lt. Col. Bromley Davenport, Capesthorpe Hall (MP for Knutsford from 1945 – 1970) who complained of Ken whistling classical music. Some local people expected all Caldwell staff to vote Tory.
00. 48.36	Description of work at other nurseries (herbaceous, shrubs, trees). Trees, shrubs and other plants were not containerised, so customers selected their tree/shrub, and it was then dug up in Oct/Nov, labelled and dispatched. Description of process including packing shed, trees/shrubs taken to station by horse drawn or motor truck. Describes how Caldwell’s was dealing with customers all over the country, even in 1800s, trade increasing with the introduction of the railways. Describes how orders dealt with, with 5/6 men employed in packing Description of office, with Mr Neild in charge and 8/9 staff, including Frank Passant, with a very strict hierarchy.
00. 56.33	Description of Ken’s role as ‘general dogsbody’. Worked with Eric Webb, herbaceous foreman, digging up plants to meet orders, working in packing shed. Description of preparing seed for sale. Description of taking cuttings and greenhouse foreman Tom Cash.
01.00.09	Collecting rose hips and standards from the hedgerows “I mentioned that the Dutch supplied briars for budding, but there was never enough, they couldn’t import enough during the war. At the end of the war it was slow to start again. The idea was to get stocks to bud the roses on. They never seemed to strike roses from cuttings which I do myself quite easily now; it was far quicker to produce a big bush budded on to a dog rose, which was a wild rose, than it was to start from a cutting, which would take a few years before it got to a decent size. So, that was the idea of budding. I remember one of the early jobs, when Mr Caldwell came out of the forces. He’d been injured actually. I think he’d been a prisoner, I’m not sure. Anyway, he was sent by his father to collect hips. Actually they used to pay school children at a later date to do this, to collect rose hips from the hedgerows. Because there were far more hedges in those days, and dog rose hedges. What we’d do, we’d collect all these rose hips in the autumn and they would be put in boxes of sand in layers . They used heavy ammunition boxes from the war. Layers of sand, probably 3 or 4 layers of berries in each box and they were watered and

	then put outside to freeze during the winter. The following spring that mixture of berries and sand, the berries would have disintegrated. So, all the little seeds would be mixed. We'd then mix them all up, put them in a barrow, and then they'd be sown in a seed-bed. These little dog rose seedlings would come up and when they were 12 months old they could be planted and the following year they could be budded. But it was a slow business in those days. As far as standards were concerned, later they would import specially grown standards, <i>Rosa rugosa</i>, from Holland, or Belgium or France in some cases. But to produce a standard when you've got nothing to bud on to.... I'd go with young Bill Caldwell in his little Ford car round the lanes of Cheshire. We had to be sure that the farmer hadn't really seen us and we'd dig out from the hedge a nice (stem) "Oh that's a good stem, Ken, we'll have that one". We'd get the spade out and we'd dig those stems out of the hedge. He'd chop the roots off. They'd always root. They were tough things. We'd take those back to the nursery and these would produce a standards. You didn't get very many of those available, of course. They could charge quite a lot of money for a standard rose and that was the reason. But that was the only way you could get them and that was done by the biggest rose nursery in the area and the oldest nursery in the country."
01:04:41	Description of making holly wreaths and collecting moss and holly from countryside. Description of planting out cuttings in early spring.
01:09:25	Description of how staff were treated by old Mr Caldwell; they were not allowed to purchase plants at discount and the unfortunate outcome.
01:11:54	A description of the family. A description of old Mr Caldwell, in charge when Ken worked at the nursery. Describes an autocratic attitude to staff before WW2, which couldn't continue after WW2 when there were staff shortages. Describes his son 'young William', who came out of the army and married Mavis. Also mentions old Mr Caldwell's wife. Describes developing good relationship with young William Caldwell.
01:19:05	Describes how he decided to move elsewhere for more money. Describes working for himself, developing a small-scale nursery, importing from Holland and laying out other peoples' gardens. He was also able to develop a small market garden and sell to local shops and in Altrincham Market.
01:24:29	Describes setting up a florist shop in Knutsford with his wife. The business flourished but eventually Ken had to give this up because of the effect of flowers on his wife's asthma
01:26:06	Describes how he was offered a job as an agent for a bulb company and Thompson and Morgan, which was the start of a 30 year career in selling horticultural products and how he was in at the birth of garden centres
01:33:50	Going back to the beginning, Ken describes taking RHS exams at Stockport College. His original intention was to go into parks and gardens, but was advised that commercial horticulture might be more profitable.
01:38:00	Description of staff at Caldwells. None had any education. Ken had a little bit and was called 'poshy'.

	Description of living in Poynton from age 7-20. Description of POW camp at Mobberley. Germans, Italians and Latvians from there worked on local nurseries and farms, including Caldwell's. According to his daughter Margaret's biography 'My Father' E F Schumacher (who wrote 'Small is Beautiful'), was one of these. Ken describes an occasion on which he met a German abroad, who had been captured and then worked at Caldwell's during the war, but this resulted in antagonism from a neighbouring Dutch family on the campsite.
01:52:40	Refers to list of people he remembers from Caldwell's, staff and customers. These included Bill Burgess and Jo Jones, travellers/ reps for Caldwell's and Mr Boardman, a rep from the 1920s and 30s. Following retirement he bred delphiniums at his garden near Jodrell Bank. Ken recalls travelling with Mr Boardman and Frank Yarwood, previously a landscape gardener, both old chaps, to a garden near Buxton. They were so busy chatting that Mr Boardman drove the whole way in top gear and stalled near the Cat and Fiddle. Ken also recalls 2 drivers Arthur Chorlton and John Chapman. Describes how men all used to smoke (not approved of by Mr Caldwell), partly to keep away flies and midges, sometimes something called 'twiss'. Travelling to Poynton Show with Arthur, Ken was urged to try twiss and subsequently felt very ill. The final story of Arthur was of him driving home on the motorway. He pulled over on to the hard standing, stopped the car, gave his wife the keys and promptly died.