



Caldwell's Nurseries in Knutsford

by Kathleen Goodchild

Very little is known about the early plant nurseries. The first ones were in the London area and in a few cases can be traced back to the beginning of the 17th century. Outside London we know of only three substantial nurseries in the provinces before 1700. These were the garden of John Lea in Shropshire, the Paradise Gardens at Oxford and the Friars' Gardens at York. It seems that the earliest major nurseries supplying general stock outside the Metropolitan area were mainly in Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire. In NW England there is no trace of the trade before 1750.



In Cheshire, the Knutsford Nursery is the earliest known and was founded (or taken over) by John Nickson. Described as 'of Over Knutsford, Gardiner' on 27th September, 1759 when his son Joseph was baptised, John Nickson was probably the son of Joseph Nickson of Over Knutsford, Gardiner (sic) who was buried on 21st June, 1755 and Sarah, his wife buried on Sept 25th, 1759. Although the gardens may have gone back to this earlier generation, no evidence has so far come to light. However the nursery was well established by 1784 when Bailey's British Directory lists John Nixon as Botanist, Gardener and Seedsman.

Four years before the directory was published, the first of seven William Caldwells came to Knutsford. At 14 years of age in 1780, the first William was apprenticed to the nursery of Nickson and Carr.

We know a little about the early Caldwells – they were nurserymen who came to England from Newry in Northern Ireland. William's father was a nurseryman at Knowsley in Lancashire and also had a business in Liverpool for the sale of flour. William was born at Radshaw Nook near Knowsley in 1766 and it is this William who was apprenticed at Knutsford at the age of 14. At the age of 22 when he had completed his

apprenticeship he married Sarah Bradbury from Higher Town Farm. This was opposite the green on Chelford Road where an annual fair was held.

In 1788 Mr Nickson must have retired or died, because William became head of the firm in partnership with Mr Carr. He was at the same time running the nursery at Knowsley, probably inherited from his father. Anyway a few years later he sold the nursery at Knowsley to Thomas Caldwell of Wavertree for £100.



Meanwhile the Knutsford nursery was flourishing. Everywhere the nobility and gentry were building new houses with gardens and making ornamental parks and Caldwells Nurseries were supplying the trees and shrubs for wealthy people all over the country. The order book for

Caldwells at this time reads like a 'Who's Who'. The very first order in the book was place by Samuel Greg, Esq of Styal. In 1789 a 'parcel of trees and 3 large flower pots' were supplied, followed in February 1790 with a parcel of trees costing £5.17s.6d and 10,000 thorns costing £3. The following year, 700 green hollies were supplied for one guinea and 50 laurels for 12/6d. A year later he had 100 red, white and blackcurrants for 16/8d, followed by 33 gooseberry trees for 5/9d and 80 large filbert trees for 1s.

Other customers included William Egerton of Tatton, Samuel Wright, gent, of Knutsford, The Rev Archdeacon Leigh of Lymm, Peter Legh Esq of Booths, Henry Cornwall Legh, George John Legh, John Arden Esq of Ashley, Sir Henry Mainwaring, Lady Jane Stanley, George Leycester Esq of Toft, Sir Peter Warburton, John Egerton of Oulton Park, David Davenport of Capesthorne, Thomas Langford Brooke Esq and Josiah Wedgwood of Etruria. (The order for Josiah Wedgwood was placed through Dr Peter Holland of Knutsford).

There are lesser names sandwiched between the gentry such as Mr Joseph Starkey of the Angel Hotel, Mr Hudson, liquor merchant of Knutsford, Mr Jordan, glazier and Mr Davenport, barber of Knutsford.

(When the seeds were sold to Mr Davenport, the latter sold Wm. Caldwell a wig for 15/- and dressed it for 3/-.)

In 1816, the nurseries were valued at £980.15.9d most likely at the dissolution of the partnership between William and Mr Carr.

The nurseries comprised:

The Old Nursery, which was where the greenhouses were until recently on the Chelford Road and this area stretched down in a triangle to the Legh Arms.

Hilly Nursery, which sloped down to the Lily.

Lower Nursery, somewhere at the bottom of the slope adjoining Brook Cottage.

Shaw Heath, where the Parkgate bungalows are now.

Sparrow Lane and Cross Town.

The nurseries all lay near the offices and were within walking or riding distance.



When William took over the business and until the 1890s, the Caldwells were also farmers. Behind the farmhouse on the Chelford road the yard was flagged and contained the well, which was the only source of water. In the shippon behind the house were stalls for 3 cows and stables for 2 heavy horses and a loose box for a light horse. The shippon and stable were built entirely of wood with strong rough-hewn timbers and uprights. These over the years became so thickly coated with tar that for the coronation of George VI they were demolished and the wood used to build a great celebratory bonfire on the Heath.

The first William Caldwell died aged 78 in 1844 and is buried in the Unitarian churchyard. He was said to be an honest man and a stickler for punctuality. Every year on Boxing Day the local head gardeners of importance were invited to mid-day dinner, which was served promptly at 12 noon in the farm kitchen.

The second William Caldwell was born in 1789 and sent to school at Great Budworth at an early age. He was twice married; his first wife Mary, bore him a son, William and two daughters, Sarah and Mary Jane. When Sarah grew up she married a printer called Siddeley who had

premises on King Street. Mary Jane married a John Walkden and she was grandmother to the late Alderman Thomas Beswick.

William's second wife was his housekeeper, Mary Jackson. When he married her, William, Sarah and Mary Jane promptly left to live with their grandfather. Of the children by his second wife, one of them, Louise, was a gifted musician who studied music under Liszt. In her short life she had a school and was the organist at the new Wesleyan Chapel. She died aged only 27 in 1875. For the dedication of the new organ in the Chapel, in 1875, the programme of music was given in memory of the late W.G. Caldwell and Miss Louise Caldwell.

William died in 1852 and is also buried in the Unitarian churchyard. Both Williams used to hold a party with friends and cronies to celebrate Waterloo, alternating between the Angel Hotel and the Royal George!



The third William was sent to learn Latin from the Rev. Henry Green whose house was where Mellor Crescent is now, and where he had to present himself by 6 am every day. This William built a fine house called 'The Hollies' on Legh Road before dying of a stroke in 1873.

The fourth William was only 18 years old and his brother, Alfred, was 21 when they inherited the business, which came to be called W.G. Caldwell and Sons, and became partners. However, Alfred was extravagant and got heavily in debt so William bought him out and became head of the firm. He married Helen Mary Watson, daughter of the grocer on King Street. William had to borrow money to buy the business premises and nurseries and this combined with the debts incurred in the firm's name (dishonestly) by Alfred crippled them and the ensuing years were very difficult.

Caldwells' Order book for the 1790s.

A study of the order books shows what a large firm it was. At that time it was fashionable to grow fruit trees and from the number of peaches, apricots, figs and nectarines grown and supplied for walled gardens and glasshouses we assume that the summers must have been warmer and sunnier than now.

The emphasis on the seed side was for vegetable seed. The very large kitchen gardens were of prime importance to the grand new houses with their large staffs to feed. For example the order from William Egerton of Tatton in 1790 is for onion seeds (several varieties), carrots, leek, salsify, scorzonera, radish, turnip, celery, red cabbage, endive, lettuce (5 varieties), red and white beet, prickly cucumber, asparagus (8 ozs), curled broccoli, cauliflower, cardoon, kidney beans, scarlet beans, negro beans, purple broccoli, parsnips, yellow and red turnip, bog beans, spinach, white blossom beans and several varieties of peas. In addition to the 2, 3 and 4 oz packets of seeds, the order included marjoram, thyme, chervil, clary, borage, fennel, parsley and nasturtium, and always among the vegetable seeds was included mignonette.

By comparison, flower seeds were not so important. In the orders placed with the named vegetable seeds would be the request for 25 different flower seeds. Sir Peter Warburton wanted 79 sorts of seeds and these cost 10/6d; Sir Henry Mainwaring had a page of



vegetable seeds ordered and also 6/- worth of assorted flower seeds; Lady Jane Stanley had a large named order for vegetable seeds and a collection of flower seeds for 5/-.

Thomas Langford Brooke of Mere Hall placed an interesting order in 1790/1792 for canary, hemp, rape and maw seed annually for three years while he got his ground into shape. Then he had 400 walnut trees. Perhaps he was going to grow them for furniture timber, which was popular at the time. (Shortly afterwards there were two bitter winters which killed most of the walnut in Europe.)