

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - February 2006

### Wargrave Gardens and Gardeners

Maurice had come to Wargrave in 1948 from Hemel Hempstead, when his father, Bob, was appointed as Head Gardener at Wargrave Manor. As they came up Wargrave Hill - on October 25th - the gardeners poked their heads out past the gate, to see who their new leader would be! The Owens moved into Royal Hill House, which had been built as a dower house for Sir William Cain. There was no electricity available, so they had to use a range to cook by. Bob Owen lived in the house until he died, in 1972.

To become a Head Gardener needed suitable qualifications. A man would begin as a journeyman, and starting in the bothy, would work through every department, so that they knew the job thoroughly. They would not be able to get a job unless their present Head Gardener gave them a good reference. It was the Head Gardener's job to organise those under him - Bob Owen had eight men under him at the Manor. Their main task was to produce the fruit, flowers and vegetables needed for use in the house, and the Head gardener would therefore have to consult daily with the cook as to what was required. At the weekend, duties would include looking after the greenhouses, and stoking the boilers. The 9 greenhouses on the range were not heated, but the rest were, with gravity fed 4" pipework to carry the heat. The Head Gardener had also to order the seeds, fertilizers, sprays etc. They tended to live in a tied house - and the conditions were similar at the other main houses in the village.

At Wargrave Manor, the gardens were split to have about 6 acres of pleasure gardens, including a large rose garden, lawns, tennis courts and a croquet lawn etc. Staff, apart from Bob Owen, included Alf Champion, Ronnie May (who looked after the greenhouses, and lived in Henley), Arthur Martin, Gordon Stanton, Freddie Pocock (the estate carpenter), Bill Watts (the carter and farm bailiff), and Messrs Edney, Middleton and Mundy - the last named had retired, but would sit in the warm of the greenhouse to clean the pots and labels!

At Bear Place, the Head Gardener for Lord Remnant was Charles Harmer, who lived in a lodge near Bear Ash. There was a large walled garden and a fruit garden there. Charles Harmer was very 'show orientated', and would tie stones to his runner beans to help them grow well ! He would select the seeds to create prize winning exhibits, and grew onions 'like footballs', as well as flowers and strawberries for show - in London as well as locally. He said that 'he had the prize money, and Lord Remnant had the honour', so both were happy ! Freddie Grace helped him at Bear Place, although he ended up as Head Gardener at Hare Hatch House.

Ouseleys, in School Lane, belonging to the Hannen family, had Mr Squibbs, and later Frank Silver as Head Gardener - Frank having begun there as a boy of 14 in 1923. There were also a number of self-employed gardeners in the village - Peter Dover, who looked after Mumberry Hill, Dr Paton's, Judge Murchie's etc; Harold Tester, who looked after Binlands, as well as being keeper at the cemetery ( and it was noted that it has never looked as good as when Harold cared for it); Fred Smith worked for Dolly Cain at Wargrave House etc -- and there were 'jobbing gardeners', who did a bit of gardening as well as another job - Sid Eaton who tended Mr Fryer's garden, Bunny Bailey at Fox Steep, or Mr Langford, the postman.

Sadly, much of the garden lands has been sold off - for economic reasons - the Hannens sold the Orchard opposite their house for Autumn Walk, and parts of the kitchen garden became Spring Walk; at Wargrave Manor, the greenhouses for the vines were sold for the houses of the Vinery, and the land opposite for the Walled Garden houses development.

The Manor also had a forcing house (in the dark) to bring on rhubarb and mushrooms. There was also an office, from which to do the 'selling', as to help subsidise the wage and heating costs, 'surplus' produce was sold to local greengrocers (strawberries and peaches from Ouseleys, for example) or to the public. The cultivation and care was done with little or no mechanisation - Bob Owen and Alf Champion digging out the ground to 3 spades depth to clear ground elder!! And when a new owner wanted rhododendrons and azaleas, he was told 'you can't, you're on chalk' -- the response was to have the chalk dug out and replaced by a suitable soil for the desired bushes !

After a brief AGM, the next meeting on Tuesday, March 14th will be a chance for people to bring along an 'interesting item or photograph' to talk about - something maybe to search out on a dark evening! Then on Tuesday, April 11th John Chapman will talk about the Postal History of the Reading area, whilst on Tuesday May 9th, Paul Lacey will return to talk about the Thames Valley Traction Co - the local bus company - in the 1920s and 30s.

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