

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - April 2025

Suttons Seeds - Dr Richard Marks

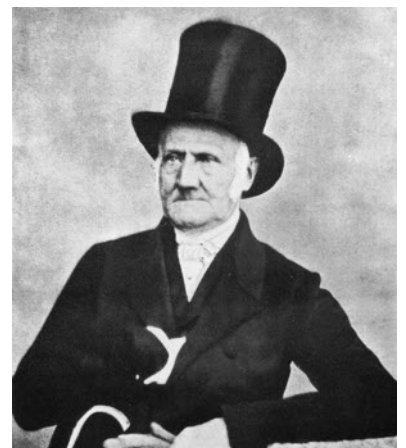
Suttons Seeds has been a household name in British horticulture and farming for 200 years, and at Wargrave Local History Society's April meeting Dr Richard Marks recounted its history from a small local family business to a company with an international customer base. Reading was for a long time associated with the "3B's" - biscuits, beer and bulbs - and Suttons was the last mentioned of those, the firm having been established in the town in 1806.

Richard began by describing the fraudulent way seeds were sold pre-19th century. Until that time, many people would grow their own food, leasing a small plot from the land owners for a relatively short period of time. This did not encourage them to invest in the land, and so the plots would often become run down and less productive. To improve on this, the owners decided to create bigger farms, and grant longer term leases - typically 12 years. In due course, the leaseholder would purchase the farm, which was used as a business to grow produce to sell at market, rather than just for their own consumption. With the demise of the strip system of farming when these larger fields were created, more scientific methods were adopted, such as crop rotation - one year would be a crop that trapped nitrogen into the soil, the next year a crop that needed nitrogen rich soil, and the third year of the cycle would see the land left fallow. A good use of it at that time was for sheep to graze on it - fertilizing it naturally in the process - and with the bonus of producing wool. The wool trade was a profitable one, but when mechanisation was increased, areas such as Berkshire and Suffolk lost out to areas where large mills could be operated, such as in Yorkshire. Meanwhile, Jethro Tull had invented the seed drill, which was a better way to sow seed than the broadcast method used beforehand, and the 4 blade plough had been introduced enabling the plants to be grown in lines. The effect of using both of these advances should have been to produce greater crops using less seeds, but that did not happen, as due to the seeds in use, there would be gaps where the plants did not grow as expected.

This arose because of the fraudulent way in which seeds were sold by the merchants. They would mix some new fresh seeds with older ones that were less likely to germinate, or they might include other seeds, such as oil seed rape with broccoli, that looked similar to the required variety, but had been killed off so they would be sterile (and so not reveal what was actually making up the weight supplied by the merchant). The merchants operated a cartel, so protecting their collective interests.

In Reading one of the corn merchants was John Sutton, who had set up in business in Reading's King Street in 1806 as The House of Sutton, dealing mainly in flour and corn. His sons Alfred Sutton and Martin Hope Sutton joined the firm in 1832 and 1836 respectively. Martin Hope Sutton had been scientifically trained, and had had an interest in plants from an early age, digging up the lawn of his father's garden to see how plants would grow, and trying to create hybrid plants at the age of 6!

The family firm moved to Reading's Market Place in 1836, and was renamed as John Sutton and Sons in 1843, when the two brothers became full partners in the business, and they managed to convince their father to diversify and deal in corn and wheat seed. Martin Hope Sutton set about scientific seed trials, and would spend his holiday talking to growers there, or would visit local nurseries. This was before the railways came to



John Sutton



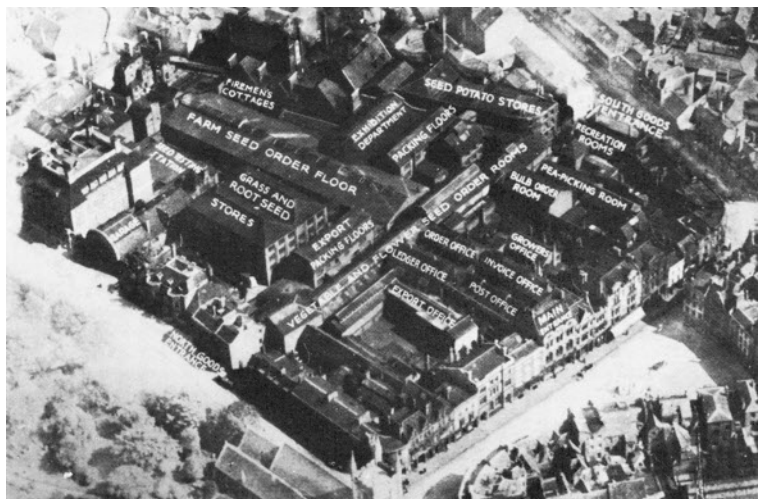
The Market Place shop in the 1830s

grown according to the instructions, the purchaser would get their money back - the only firm who could do this - the packets being marked as “unadulterated seeds”. To ensure the seeds arrived in good condition, especially when sent by ship to customers abroad, they could be packed in hermetically sealed boxes - which were made by the Reading firm of Huntley Boorne & Stevens, just as they made biscuit tins for Huntley & Palmers.

Prince Albert was interested in horticulture, and so Suttons were asked to supply all the seeds and plants needed at Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, and in due course Suttons became by Royal Appointment to Queen Victoria - and also supplied various other European royal households. At around this time, gardening magazines, which could be distributed using the railways, became popular, especially with those who had a work pattern that allowed some leisure time. Every Victorian home wanted to have a garden that was a miniature version of what Capability Brown had designed for the large mansions, and so Suttons began to offer ornamental plant seeds to meet the demand - an opportunity that other firms had not seen.

Suttons were not only advanced in their thinking about growing and testing their seeds, but also in how they could take and fulfil customers’ orders. The availability of the penny post and money orders meant that a buyer could safely send their payment by post, and the goods could be taken by train - and the parcel could include a catalogue of what Suttons could offer the purchaser - it was a mail order operation. In addition, the railways had a telegraphic system for sending messages across their network. They found that they could make money from this system by accepting messages for transmission in between the railway’s own communications. A gardener could go to the station, send an order by telegraph, and when it reached Reading it would be written on a form to be delivered by a “boy” or a “girl” (that was their job title) probably aged about 10 - 14 to Sutton’s office, and a reply could be sent by the same method (about as quick as by email) to say if the items required were in stock. The customer could then

Reading, so he would walk to Brown’s nursery at Slough, or to others at Brentford, Woking or Bagshot - and back in time to start work at 7 am - whilst Suttons also bought the business of Mrs Conning, Reading’s other seed merchant. The seed trials enabled the firm to know which seed varieties grew well in which conditions, and they became able to guarantee that their seeds would grow in a particular location. Land for the business was acquired near to the Market Place premises, where seed and potato stores were set up. In 1842, sales of seeds accounted for about 2% of the company’s trade - but the following year it had risen to 42%. The farmers who grew seed for the members of the cartel had been poorly rewarded for their work. Martin Hope Sutton did not think this was a good idea, and visited some working in Essex (by this time, able to travel by train). He had concluded that taking on the cartel directly would not work, but by offering the farmers a fair price, they would grow for Suttons, and not the old established firms - who, losing their supply, soon ceased trading. Suttons could also print a guarantee on the packets containing the seeds - if they did not germinate when

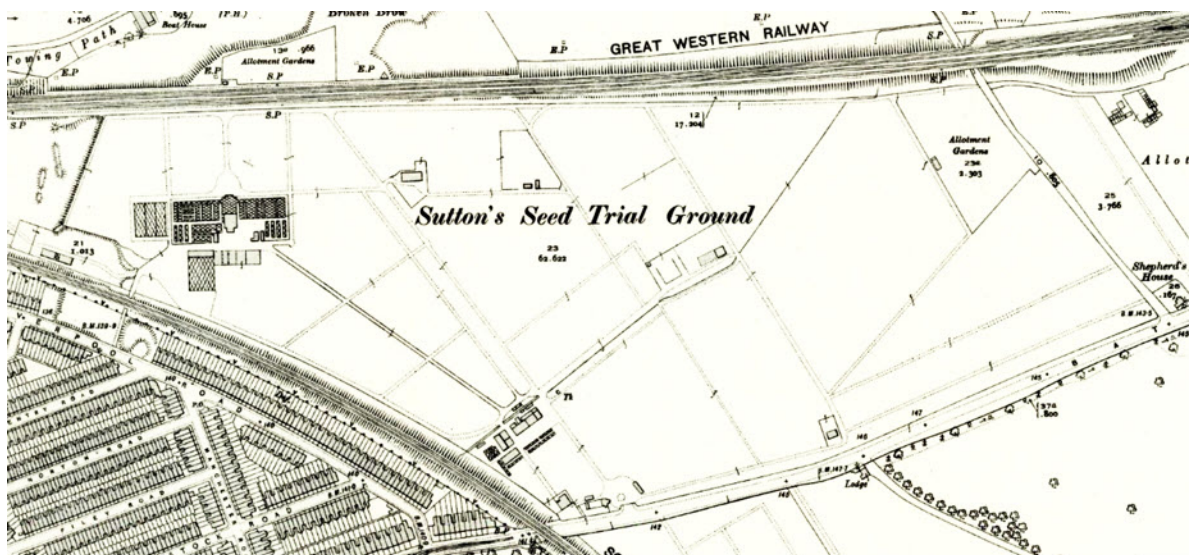


The office and seed packing complex in the 1920s

confirm the order, and the goods were sent by the next fast train. It was a 'same day' delivery service, long before such companies as Amazon existed.

Having a quality product, and good customer service, Suttons grew and became known worldwide, also selling seed potatoes and gardening tools. Although the offices fronted the Market Place, some buildings were on the other side of Abbey Square, and so a bridge was added over the road to link them to the rest of the site. So much was being sent by post that there was actually a post office, with uniformed postal staff, created within the Suttons complex close to the Market Place entrance, much being sent by the overnight train. This part of Sutton's operations remained in the Market Place until 1962, when all but Suttons' Garden Shop moved to a site at Earley.

The other important aspect of Suttons' business was the testing of the seeds, for which they had several trial grounds. To create the variety of conditions needed, some of these were in areas such as Devon and Cornwall, but the company acquired extensive grounds alongside the London Road to the east of the town centre. Some of this was sold in 1883 so that Huntley and Palmers could build the housing at Newtown for their workers. The main seed trial ground then became the area just south of the Reading to Paddington railway, and east of the Reading to Wokingham line, so the large glass houses and seed beds were clearly visible from the train. As some of the company's workforce had to travel further than the Market Place location, Suttons paid their extra fare to the tram terminus (by the railway bridge over the London Road).



In the 1960s, a modern office block and seed packing rooms were built on the London Road frontage of the seed trial grounds, leaving only the garden shop in the Market Place.

Other changes were taking place, however, as Douglas Collins, a business consultant, bought a 51% share of the company. He introduced mechanisation to the seed packing rooms, but as the seed business was seasonal, the firm also took on other packing - of anything that was 'put in a box'. Suttons also decided to stop supplying farmers with seeds, and concentrate on the parks and gardens and hobbyist gardener market. The company had outgrown the Earley site, and so planned to move to take over land around the Piggott School at Wargrave, and Government grants were available to firms setting up outside of the London area, but this site was a mile out of the required distance! Douglas Collins died in 1972, when the company passed to his family, who decided to sell it. Slough Estates wanted the land at Earley (subsequently creating the Suttons Business Park there) and the Suttons business then moved to Torquay in 1976, where the local council was keen to encourage businesses. The work at Suttons was seasonal, and a good fit to the summer holiday trade, so people could get year round employment in the area, and there were Government grants for firms moving west. In addition, the council provided the land for Suttons, at a cost of £1, whilst Sutton's paid the re-location costs of vital staff who needed to move from Reading.

At that stage, the Collins family still owned the Suttons company, but it was to then have a variety of owners. Firstly, in 1978 it was sold to Weibull A B - a Swedish seed company. At the time an investment company, A B Cardo, held 25% of the shares in Weibull AB, but then bought the Weibull family shares, before A B Cardo itself was bought by another Swedish company - Volvo. A seed company was not an obvious business for a motor vehicle to be involved with, and in due course Volvo sold its non- engineering subsidiaries - Sutton Seeds passing to Vilmorin, a French agricultural concern, in 1994.

Meanwhile, in 1986 Reckitt and Coleman decided to sell the seed companies that it owned, and so Suttons acquired the Carter's Seeds, Cuthberts (who had an exclusive contract to supply seeds to Woolworths) and Dobie and Son (who operated a similar mail order business to Suttons) brands.

Vilmorin was mainly interested in supplying agricultural customers, rather than in supplying horticultural and gardening ones, and they decided to sell to Thomson and Morgan, a long-established competitor to Suttons, who still exist as part of the Thompson and Morgan group. It has almost gone back to its Victorian heritage, as the seeds are grown on farms in various parts of the country, and Suttons supply their customers by mail order offering a same day delivery service - but no longer based in Reading.

For more information about the society, visit the website at www.wargravehistory.org.uk
