**THE WAY THINGS WERE**

It occurred to me in an idle moment the other day that a lot of our younger members might not know how and where many of the machines in our collections were originally used. The category “Horticultural Machinery” implies the use of rotavators etc. in a garden setting, but of course many of our machines were bought for use on market gardens. Anyone under the age of 50 is unlikely to have seen a market garden in full production, and those not much younger might well have no idea what they were.

Now, I was lucky enough to be brought up next to one, my late father worked most of his life for his neighbour, Arthur (“Jack”) Fisk, who had a market garden of around 10 acres. Jack was a lifelong batchelor, having been brought up on the market garden, which was originally worked by his parents. As a kid in the 1960’s I witnessed some of the last years of this type of business still being a profitable concern, and horticultural machinery was an important part of the operation.

Jack’s market garden had a comprehensive output of flowers, fruit and vegetables. A couple of acres were an historic plum orchard, this was in a long narrow strip on the edge of the holding running parallel to a country lane. I imagine the trees must have been planted by Jack’s parents, so in the 60’s were probably 70 or so years old, and beginning to be past their best, although capable of producing a crop worth collecting. I can remember as a youngster that the orchard was subdivided into 8 or 9 chicken runs, all in use, each with a chicken hut on wheels, and the hens produced a large number of eggs, collected at least once a day. By the early/mid 60’s the cost of corn compared with the price obtainable for eggs, meant that hens were no longer viable, and thereon the redundant hen runs were cut three or four times a year with an Allen Scythe. By the time I was big enough to use it, the old 2-stroke had been replaced with a new 4-stroke Allen, which was a great machine to use, but didn’t half make your back ache! For some reason it ran rich, which Jack never got sorted out, so it drank petrol like a fish and covered you in black fumes – a bath and hair wash were essential at the end of the day.

At the other end of the garden was an apple orchard, again with trees 70 odd years old. These were still in quite good health, and produced fruit both for immediate sale and storing. There was one large shed (known as the Apple Shud – this is Norfolk after all) lined with shelves where each apple was individually wrapped in paper for storage. The idea, of course, was that whilst you could sell your apples in the autumn as soon as you had picked them, you got a much better price in the winter and spring when there were not so many around (long before foreign imports were readily available, and much tastier than Golden Delicious!). Also, certain varieties of apple had to be stored before they were ready to eat. There are lots of insect pests that like apples, and the trees needed spraying. Jack had a large electric sprayer, comprising a sizeable motor joined by a belt to a large single piston pump, the whole mounted on a wooden frame and 4 iron wheels. I can’t remember the maker, but this was a heavy old piece of kit, needing 2 people to pull it into place over the rough ground. The intake hose was connected into a metal drum (large water butt size) in which the chemicals were mixed and diluted. The only precautions were a sou’wester to stop my father getting too wet, and gloves. One year these precautions let him down, and in the evening after a day’s spraying he felt faint, and started to say funny things, then went completely off his rocker. The doctor was called, chemical poisoning diagnosed, and bed rest advised. By the morning he was OK and back to work, but a close call, and one which perhaps reminds us that not necessarily all Health and Safety is a waste of time!

The grass under the trees was more like a lawn, and this needed regular cutting with a large ride on Allen rotary mower – one of my favourite tasks as an early teenager!

The area between the apple orchard and the road was sheltered both by the trees and the roadside hedge, but was surprisingly fertile, and here grew Peonies, and other cut flowers, as well as gooseberry, red , yellow and black currant bushes. This area was known by all as “The Pikle” (to rhyme with cycle). Obviously Jack’s Norfolk corruption of “Pightle”, which in any event is a Norfolk term for an odd shaped piece of land.

But, the bulk of the land was in the middle of the plot, and mainly for vegetable and flower production. This must have been 6 acres or so. Jack employed only my father on a permanent basis, mother would help out on “part time” hours (she took an extra hour off at lunch to prepare the meal, do housework, feed her own hens etc). And Jack’s housekeeper also helped. There was no tractor or plough, on first sight this might seem a little odd, but the idea was that there is relatively little to do on a market garden in the late autumn/winter, and to keep them employed permanently they were set to digging. So for several months the day’s work would be barrowing muck (deliveries of cow manure were made from a nearby farm and the muck left in a big heap to rot and age before it could be safely used on the land), muck spreading by fork, and hand digging 6 acres – father had quite big muscles!.

In the spring the machinery came out of hibernation. The first task was to prepare beds for the flower and vegetable seeds, and the first large machine Jack bought for this was the SIMAR 56 (this is the machine I still have, dating from 1949). The dug beds were rotavated at half depth (too deep and you would bring up the remains of the muck to the top, spoiling your attempt to get a smooth bed), until you had a good tilth which, if necessary, could be lightly raked level with a large old wooden rake. I suppose before he had rotavators the beds were prepared by back breaking rolling and raking level. The seeds were sown in straight drills by a hand pushed Planet drill, which had a wooden box for the seeds, front balance wheel, hoes to open up the drill, a shaft at the bottom of the seed box to distribute the seed, and rear rollers to close up and firm the land over the seeds. The drill had internal wheels of different sizes to deal with different size seeds and adjust the rate of sowing. A vast array of crops were grown, cabbage, sprouts, cauliflower, turnips and other root veg, salad vegetables, in fact if you could grow it and sell it for a profit, it was grown.

As the seeds germinated and grew, the rows would be weeded by hand hoeing, and fertiliser hoed in to keep them growing. Many of the seed drills would be covered over with glass cloches, there were hundreds of them to put out and carefully pack away when the crops were ready for harvest. The SIMAR was too wide to cultivate up the rows. Sometimes we would get out an old Planet push hoe, which gave you quite a good work out! The other day I saw you could get a plough for the hand hoe, but how you would have managed to push that through the ground defeats me! With good luck, good weather and good management, time would come for harvesting the crops, all done by hand and packed into wooden trays or wicker baskets or skips.

The growing crops needed protection from birds. We had several bird scarers, operated from calcium carbide, which was placed in the sealed container as dry pieces, and water allowed to drip slowly on to it from a receptacle above. This produced a chemical reaction making an inflammable gas (acetylene) which collected in a small bellows arrangement. When the bellows chamber was full, a trip switch released the gas under the pressure of a spring and struck a flint which ignited the gas with a big bang through the funnel at the end. Very frightening for this small kid! The rate of bang was controlled by adjusting the number of water drips per minute. Sometimes these devices went wrong, there would be a huge bang and the bird scarer would explode in flames.

Shotguns were also used, 12 bore mainly. I recall neither Jack nor father were much good at shooting. In later years I went to visit father to be told: “I tried to shoot some of those damn rabbits today boy”. “Did you get any?” I asked. “No, but I shot me bloody greenhouse” he replied, and indeed there was a mass of broken glass and splinters where the greenhouse once stood.

Potatoes were grown in abundance, the main crop being lifted and stored in a clamp (a hollow dug out of the ground, lined with straw and topped off with straw covered with soil). The price for spuds in the winter was a lot higher than the summer, when everyone had them for sale!

When the SIMAR went out of service it was replaced with a Hirth diesel Howard 700. Jack’s bright idea was to get the narrowest model possible so that it could weed up the rows of crops as well as prepare the seed beds, but it didn’t half take a lot of time to prepare a piece of land compared to the SIMAR! The other problem was that being narrow it wasn’t very stable, resulting in youthful yours truly turning it over; the sound of a Hirth 2-stroke revving its guts out running on the lubricating oil is something I hope never to hear again! The 700 became quite difficult to start (can’t think why) and I was the only person around who could start it. When she was needed, I had to start her up before going to school and they would keep her running all day, chugging away in neutral when they stopped for lunch.

Not long after this the 700 was replaced! (Unfortunately, she was traded in so she’s not around now). It was about 1970 the Howard Gem Hatz diesel was delivered (this is in my collection). This is a much wider machine, the 4-stroke diesel lazily turns over relatively quietly and with ample power in reserve. Of all the machines I have used, this in my opinion is the best suited to continuous hours of work, and although she is heavy, if you use her steadily and sensibly you can get to the end of the day not feeling like you’ve done an iron man marathon.

As the Gem was wide, it was also decided to buy a Howard 200 for cultivating between the rows of plants. The little machine saw a great deal of work, showing up weak points like the worm drive to the wheels and rotors, and needing new drive belts at least once a year. New replacement 200’s followed on when the older ones became unreliable. Possibly the worst of the bunch was a later model with an Aspera engine, which from memory only lasted a couple of years before it packed up completely.

Sometimes machines could be used for purposes other than those for which they were designed. Strawberries were a good reliable profitable crop, and the market garden grew several varieties. The proper way is, of course, to lay straw under the developing fruits to stop soil splashes and encourage ripening by reflecting the sun’s rays. At the end of the cropping some beds would be selected for disposal (constant replacement of plants being necessary to keep up vigour, propogated from runners ). Then out would come the Allen scythe, keeping the cutter bar low to the ground and under the straw you could cut off the plants at ground level, then easily rake up the straw and plant remains for burning. The roots could then be rotavated in or retained for next year.

Although stuff like cow manure was used, there is no way any market garden of this time could be described as organic. DDT, Pyrethryn, and various other chemicals were used, as well as fish meal and other artificial fertilisers. In addition to the large sprayer, we had several knapsack sprayers and a powder sprayer which had a hand crank with a high speed fan inside blowing powder insecticide though a long spout. All done without a mask or other protection! Many such items can now be seen in various member’s collections.

Greenhouse produce was also a big part of the operation. Smaller greenhouses were used for raising tomatoes and cucumbers. A very old large brick and timber greenhouse contained a grape vine, which must have been planted by Jack’s father, which was carefully pruned and produced scores of bunches of grapes. Thinning out the individual bunches (removing a few of the smallest immature grapes from each bunch) was very time consuming, but was done to ensure a good even spread of equal size fruit in the bunch. Once a year, the plant itself (rooted as they often were outside the greenhouse and trained inside through a hole in the brickwork) was given a good mulch of well-rotted manure. In the sheltered area adjoining the outside of the greenhouse were planted marrows, which did well here.

Anyway, the point of all this activity is to sell crops for profit. Once a week in winter and twice a week in summer the lorry would be loaded up and the produce taken to the local horticultural market at Harford Bridges, in Norwich. Here local wholesalers, shopkeepers and stall holders from Norwich City Centre market would buy the crops in bulk by the tray for selling on. This entailed an early start, father getting up at 3.00am to be at the market by 4.00am (the lorry being loaded up the evening before). The earlier the better, to get pole position in the market. By 8.00am the lorries would be empty and Jack’s pockets bulging with notes (hopefully!) Back home, breakfast then start the day’s work, which in summer probably wouldn’t end until 8.00pm (with one hour for lunch and a half hour for tea). Those were the days when people really did work for a living!

There were certain practices which were observed to get the best price for your crops. The fruit or vegetables would be carefully placed in the trays, as evenly as possible, and of course the best of the crop was placed on the top of the trays. Sometimes, buyers would not be happy to find that the quality of the crop at the bottom didn’t match that at the top. One local shopkeeper was known in our house as “Dicey”. He once bought a tray of strawberries and the next week Jack saw him he said: “Those strawberries you sold me last week were a bit dicey, Jack”. But, of course, you couldn’t get away with that sort of thing on a regular basis, and overall our quality was probably as good as or better than anyone else’s.

The first lorry I remember was a Morris Commercial from the just post war period (probably an LC type). This was replaced in 1967 by a petrol Morris FG350, a lovely old drop-side truck with the “three-penny bit” cab. They only ever did the four mile trip from the market garden to the market, so were very low mileage when sold on. No heaters, of course, so in winter several layers of clothing were necessary. Mind you, even in the height of summer, Jack would never be seen without collarless shirt, waistcoat, and heavy wool suit and a hat, even when working in the garden!

In 1967, the Eastern Daily Press had a feature article on the produce market, and I have attached the press cutting and photographs which I think make an interesting record of the last years of the market garden. Jack, you will see, is smiling away – these are the only photographs I have of him, he was camera shy and normally your photo of him would be of the top of his hat, with his face pointing to the ground, so I imagine he must have had a successful trip to the market!

Eventually, Jack passed away, and father took over the market garden for a few years. Spades were replaced in the late 1970’s by a Honda F80 plough (also in my collection). But the profitable days were over, market gardens had all but died out, the labour intensive cultivation necessary making them unable to compete with supermarkets being able to source in bulk from all over the world as well as from industrial scale horticultural operations, such as those in Lincolnshire. And now, they are a mere memory, their land either having been given over to pasture or sold off for building. But look in any Kelly’s directory from the early part of the 20th century and you will get some idea of the number of market gardens which used to be supported in local communities, most villages had more than a handful. They will, of course, never come back, but they are as much part of our history as the industrial revolution and the mines, and shouldn’t be forgotten.

My aerial photograph shows the last days of this type of cultivation, in spring with the young plants growing strong in rows. It’s not Jack’s, it’s the area of land my father used to cultivate for growing his own crops for home consumption and sale – all after his day’s work for Jack!