

## **A Brief History of Leigh Village Horticultural Society (formerly Leigh Village Produce Association: LVPA)**

The Leigh Village Horticultural Society was established in 1944\*. In the Kent & Sussex Courier on 22 September 1944 an article appeared entitled "Leigh's First Flower Show, Lord Hollenden Presents Prizes"

The article continues, 'although Leigh Village Produce Association has only been in existence for a short time, its first Flower and Vegetable Show in the Village Hall on Saturday lacked little in the way of choice produce and attractive exhibits' ... 'only six months ago it was decided that Leigh should form a Produce Association with Lord Hollenden as President'. By August 1944 the Association had a membership of 80 and entries at that first Show totalled 180. On presenting the prizes at the show Lord Hollenden 'reminded the gathering that it was the first occasion on which a flower and vegetable show had been held in Leigh. He hoped it would prove to be the forerunner of many and larger shows'.

Even at this first show, there was an auction of produce where the proceeds were shared between the British Red Cross and the LVPA.

The third annual show was held 1946; there was over 300 entries displayed in the Village Hall. Lord Hollenden, when presenting the prizes, said that '1,500 village produce associations formed in the past years had contributed in no small measure to the national larder during the war years. Food was still urgently needed and gardeners should continue to work as they had during the past six years'. In the Kent & Sussex report there is a first mention of cups: the H. E. Brown Cup was awarded for the best cottager's collection; the Lord Hollenden Cup for the highest number of points. Again the Show produce was auctioned and the proceeds shared between the Tonbridge Cottage Hospital, the Kent and Sussex Hospital and the LVPA itself.

In 1948, the LVPA held its Show on the village green for the first time: the Kent & Sussex Courier reported on 28 January 1949 on the Association's annual meeting where the members agreed 'the venture had been most successful and should be repeated'. Lord Hollenden presided at the meeting and Mr Houghton reported 'that holding the Show on the Green had inevitably meant more expense, but even so, five guineas had been donated to the Leigh War Memorial Fund and the Queen Victoria Cottage Hospital, East Grinstead'. Mr Houghton also reported 'that membership of the association had now exceeded the century mark for the first time'.

The report on 8 September 1950, refers to a lower number of entries at the Show, but that it was one of the most attractive shows 'held on the village green, against the background of the Parish Church and the village itself'. Even then it appeared that the Committee looked for ways to enhance the afternoon for visitors because there was a band and rides on Mr R H Procter's model railway\*\*. Lord Hollenden, as President, said that 'we have now held the Show seven times. There have been small improvements every time and I think you will agree that the show organisation now is perfect. But we must continue to improve its size and scope whenever possible'. The article mentions three Cups: the Lord Hollenden Cup, H.E. Brown Cup and Preston Perpetual Cup. And there is the first mention of the RHS Banksian Medal.

In these early days, the Show classes were divided between Professional Gardeners (or gardeners employing professional aid) and cottagers; there was a Ladies' Section, an Open Section and a Children's section. And children's classes – depending on the type of class – were again divided between boys and girls. In the main, however, the classes were dominated by produce – vegetables – to appeal to the professional gardeners and the cottagers: there were three flower classes – cut flowers, annuals, perennials – in each of the Professional Gardeners' and Cottagers' sections –

making six in total. But the Open Section had a few more flower classes – cut flowers for effect (i.e. an arrangement), decorative dahlias, medium cactus dahlias and single dahlias.

*The above Kent & Sussex articles are the only available at the moment to view on-line. Perhaps over time more will be released.*

At some point the Association moved away from the grouping of Professional Gardeners' and Cottagers' classifications: these categories would evolve into members' and non-members' sections which was again changed in 2004, when the idea seemed somehow outdated as nearly everyone who entered the Summer Show were members and the two vegetable/fruit sections meant a lot of duplication. Members entered the non-member classes anyway. It was decided to change this for the 2005 Show and make all classes open to everyone – member or non-member – and to introduce a novice section for produce. It means that those experienced exhibitors can concentrate their efforts in Section 1 of the Summer Show, and it allows novices to enter on a level playing field with other novices. This has proved popular and even today we get a good number of entries in the Novice section as new members join and established members decide to have a go.

The earliest Summer Show Schedule we have in our records is that of 1986, when there were 97 classes, which included the duplicated vegetable classes in the member and non-member vegetable classes. Today we have 117 classes, and have reduced the duplication. With the increasing interest in the Summer Show we have gradually introduced more children's classes, more flower arrangements and more flowers. Although the flowers are dominated by dahlias, being the main late summer flower, there is still a wide selection of floral classes to appeal to everyone.

In about 1982, the Association introduced a Spring Show – the Spring Show Schedule of 1987 refers to 'the 5th Spring Show': there were 21 daffodil/other flower classes and 2 children's classes. By 1991 there were flower arrangements in the spring show; in 2000 we introduced cookery classes due to their popularity at the Summer Show. We also gradually increased the number of children's classes with any age categories, trying to broaden the appeal for the children in the village – our future exhibitors.

Moving on, the Leigh Village Produce Association has continued to thrive, and in recent years there has been a renewed enthusiasm for both our Shows, evidenced by the consistent number of exhibits and exhibitors. An interest in allotment growing, in baking, in sewing, all helped by a new range of popular television programmes, has inspired more and more people to have and go and enter.

In 1991, the Association held its 50th Summer Show in a marquee at Hall Place; in 2011, the 70th Annual Summer Show took place on the village green with over 600 exhibits and at which the Association reintroduced the idea of using some of our funds for charitable causes. This is something we also did in 2012 and 2015.

The costs of running the Shows are always a problem, particularly due to the cost of hiring the marquee. We have been fortunate over the years to be able to rent the marquee on the Saturday night to help offset our costs: we also receive contributions from the WI and more recently from Leigh Superstars whose event now also takes place on the Green alongside the Summer Show. This has proved very popular and the benefit to the Association has been welcomed.

Over the years, as the Association's membership increased, it started to introduce talks and outings and other events. Although in recent years the talks have declined in popularity, we still hold two a year, along with local outings, by car, which is particularly popular with our older members who might not have transport. We also have an annual garden party for our members and in recent years we have provided refreshments at the Penshurst Farmers' Market.

In 2015, the Association changed its name to the Leigh Village Horticultural Society, to reflect the changed emphasis towards flowers alongside produce, as well as handicrafts. A new logo was devised and a website opened.

As the Leigh Village Horticultural Society goes from strength to strength we hope we have and will continue to fulfil Lord Hollenden's wish at that inaugural Show in 1944, that 'it would prove to be the forerunner of many and larger shows'.

\* It might well be observed that if the first Show was in 1944, how could we have been holding our 70th in 2011? That is a conundrum. We have only records of handbooks back to 1986. The 1986 handbook refers to its 45th annual show. Perhaps in the early days there might have been more than one Show a year, or perhaps someone mis-counted along the way? Who knows? But if anyone does know, or even has some earlier handbooks, we would be interested to know.

\*\* there is a picture in the Kent & Sussex on 8 September 1950: I wonder if anyone would recognize the people in it. If you wish to view the picture, please let us know.

Joyce Field, February 2015