



©Mick Dunstan

## Chelsea 2017

Mick Dunstan

We're sitting in the kitchen at John and Vivienne McGhee's home, near Evesham, drinking coffee. Outside, the half-acre garden has been receiving some overdue attention in the lull after the excitement of Chelsea Flower Show and the Society's revolutionary rotating display in the Grand Pavilion.

It's two years since the first thoughts of representing the Hardy Plant Society at the world's most prestigious flower show and, suddenly, shockingly,

it's all over. Time to take stock.

John, former Worcestershire and national treasurer, led the Chelsea team. "We'd had a stand at Malvern Spring Festival for four years, winning gold medals along the way, and had built up a strong team, so Chelsea seemed like the natural next step."

Worcestershire member Linda Marsh agreed to be part of the team and design the stand. The idea emerged of doing something radically different, not just the

standard Chelsea square or rectangular format.

John said "I had a word with Ed Brown, from nearby Just Must and Cotswold Garden Flowers nurseries, and his Dad, Bob. They agreed to support us, and it would be hard to exaggerate how important that was to our success.

"The Worcestershire Group committee then gave us the go-ahead and we bought 150 plug plants from Just Must. They were potted up and kept at the Offenham site right from the start, plumbed into the nursery's irrigation system. Our members donated other plants – alliums, hostas, geraniums and other perennials.

"Two months later we got the approval of the RHS that our stand concept would be acceptable. We put forward a paper to the Society about our plans, and then it was all systems go. We booked overnight accommodation about 14 months ahead of Chelsea."



©Mick Dunstan

Some of the team

As if putting on a Chelsea display was not quite enough pressure, the entire stand was to be the first in the history of Chelsea to revolve throughout the six days, the QR code to allow visitors to download details of the plants had to be created, and of course the stand had to reflect the Society's diamond jubilee.

Linda takes up the story. "We decided to use 60 different plant cultivars to reflect the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary. We wanted to use strong colours, which is quite a big ask for plants flowering naturally at the end of May. I was inspired by the late, great Christopher Lloyd from Great Dixter – the garden I used to visit almost every month when I lived near".

The Group bought plug plants, which after two years' growth provided three quarters of those used at Chelsea.

"Some of them I had never heard of – the stunning *Salvia* 'Nachtvlinder' and *Beschomeria septentrionalis*, for example. Some people were worried that the *Beschomeria* wasn't truly hardy but this cultivar is. It was my favourite and I even bought one for my own garden!

"About a year before Chelsea, I agreed with Ed and Bob a separate list of plants that we could borrow from them."

Worcestershire members made up most of the 30-strong Chelsea team – helped by members from around the country. A rota was created for plant maintenance, a task that intensified in the three months leading up to the show.



©Mick Dunstan



©Mick Dunstan



©Mick Dunstan



Ready for the judges

Another key team member was freelance engineer Caleb Whitcombe, whose workshop is near Pershore. “We found Caleb through Ed Brown,” said John. “It was due to his efforts that the turntable stand worked so well and so reliably. We couldn’t have done it without him.”

Then came a raft of efforts to publicise the stand and the Society – including the successful bid for BBC coverage during Chelsea week programmes.

John said “We were immediately picked up as a runner after we spoke to the BBC at an RHS day held in February. We wanted to raise the profile of the Society and to tell the story of our members as keen gardeners, knowledgeable gardeners. We did not want to be seen as horticultural professionals, just as what we are – people who love plants.”

The film clip they produced – all 7 minutes and 15 seconds of it – was shown on BBC2 on the Thursday evening of the show, to an audience of 1.83 million people. “The effect the next day – the Friday – was simply staggering,” said John. “We dealt with huge numbers of people at our stand and handed out around 1,200 leaflets to people who were interested.

“We signed up 46 new members at the show and with other, online applications, we recruited well over 100 new members. We’re pleased with that. It was one of the main reasons we wanted to be at Chelsea.

“After taking into account about £800 in direct and indirect sponsorship, the project cost the Society just over £4,000. Although that’s a huge chunk of money, it was

a trifling amount compared with the spend on other stands. I hope our membership will consider it a worthy investment”.

And the award of the Silver Gilt Medal? Here’s John. “We decided early on that if we got a Silver and recruited 30 or 40 new members, we’d have done well. Our main objective from the start was the recruitment of new members. In the end, we exceeded both.

“We got the judges’ comments and they were flattering – we very nearly got gold. We had an excellent rating – five out of five – for endeavour, a category that included the levels of difficulty involved in creating the display and its originality. In the other two sections – plants, and overall impression – we got very good ratings, four out of five.”

Linda said that when the stand was finally completed – around 5pm on the Sunday – she was delighted with it. “I thought it looked fabulous. We had given everything we had. I was even more thrilled with the Silver Gilt. We could hardly have done better.”

Everyone involved talked about how much hard work it had meant. Linda again. “I was on the stand for three full days and I was shattered. There were the physical demands of standing for 11 or 12 hours a day, of course, but there was the mental thing as well, all the effort that went into getting things right.”

So, any advice for any other group thinking of taking on the Chelsea mantle in future? Linda first. “Just don’t be put off. It’s very easy to go to Chelsea, see the exhibits, how beautiful they are, and say ‘Gosh, how can we come anywhere near that?’ But you can. You have to start early – two years I’d say – and you have to have a good team of enthusiastic people, which we certainly had.”

The last word goes to John. “We had a detailed plan and it worked. There were one or two minor hiccups, let us say, but the only thing that surprised me was how congested the site became once breakdown began on the Saturday. We’d hoped to get our vans on site by 6pm – but it was nearly half eight, which meant a late night.

“We sold more than £600 worth of plants at the Saturday afternoon sell-off and the unsold plants were then



©Mick Dunstan

Media interest throughout – designer Linda Marsh and John McGhee



©Mick Dunstan

Joe Swift interviewing John on BBC *Gardeners World*

included in Worcestershire’s annual plant sale a fortnight later. They helped raise a very healthy record surplus of more than £1,500.

“Would I do it again? Probably not. I don’t think you can put a time on just how much work we all did. Just one small element – building

the two curved screens we used on the stand – took more than 40 hours, and that didn’t include the time it took for our member Pippa Hilton to paint them with sky scenes.

“But that was the standard we had to produce, the standard demanded of an entry at Chelsea Flower Show.”

## Views from the sidelines

Here are a few backward glances from some of the 30 people who helped along the way with the Chelsea adventure...

- **Jayne Savage:**

The biggest thing for me was the reminder of the power of television. So many people sought out the stand after seeing us on TV – and watching John McGhee being cajoled into signing an autograph was a particular highlight!

- **Beverley Powlesland:**

*Zantedeschia aethiopica* made a terrific statement on the stand. We could have sold at least 100 in the last-minute sell-off. One visitor to the stand just HAD to have one. No, they were not for sale, I said, but I had seedlings at home. She was ecstatic. I sent a package and a delighted recipient notified me of their safe arrival. Might she join the HPS?

- **Jane Stanley:**

I was surprised how many people wanted to talk and not just about plants – the Manchester disaster had just happened. John had a remarkable ability to grab celebrities – Joe Swift, Carol Klein, Roy Lancaster and, last but not least, young Carl Rice, the former Mayor of Birmingham. In temperatures of 30-plus, it was a test of endurance – but happy, happy times!

- **Jan Vaughan:**

Being part of this was even better than I'd imagined, including a mad dash across London to find extra large pots for specimen plants and carrying them back by bus and train! I spent a whole day stuffing newspaper around pots on the rotating table to keep them in place. HPS President Roy Lancaster came to wish us well, as did Carol Klein. The public interest was almost overwhelming and made me proud to be there.

- **Judy Templeton:**

I think I got the best role. I just turned up at the nursery and fiddled about, looking after the plants as they were growing. It wasn't anything like work, just pleasure. There were rows and rows of scrumptious plants. I had to avert my eyes from lusting after their delights.

- **Sue Arnold:**

I found being on the stand uplifting. The display was calming with a perfect mixture of movement and colours. Looking up the plant names and information on the QR app was great fun and a new experience. Being there was a fantastic experience. I'll never forget it.

- **Mick Dunstan:**

I spoke to a woman from Kazakhstan – through her English-speaking daughter – about her love of plants and, immediately afterwards, an American from the Hardy Plant Society of Oregon, who joined as a member, bless her. Being part of this fantastic team has genuinely been, for me, a happy highlight of the last decade.

Below, on behalf of the Worcestershire Group, Mick proudly displays the medal. 🌿

©Mick Dunstan

