

Founders and descendants: 60 years on, the people who made the Hardy Plant Society

Pamela Clark

As part of its planning for the Annual Lecture Day in March 2017, to celebrate the founding of the Society in 1957 the Norfolk & Suffolk Group decided to try and trace the descendants of 'the Founding Four' and Miss Pole, and invite them to the event. I took on this task and, while some aspects were more difficult than others, the result was joyous.

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Alan Bloom

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Will Ingwersen

When we're asked to describe the purpose of The Hardy Plant Society we might say that it's all about plants, but I believe it's also about people. It's about the people who grow plants, the people who propagate them, and the people who buy them.

It's also about the people who had the idea that bringing together lovers of hardy plants would spread information, share ideas, and improve growing and breeding skills.

It is to those people that I paid tribute as part of the 2017 Annual Lecture Day – to the four horticultural friends who got together at ALG Hellyer's home in Sussex in December 1956 and decided that the Hardy Plant Society should be formed (or re-formed, following its earlier 20th century formation and demise¹).

Some of those four friends went on to serve on the first committees, some did not. From 1957 many individuals

were instrumental in setting up the Society and in ensuring its management and continuance. That passion and energy continue today in our national organisation, and in our local and specialist Groups. It is **people** who made and continue to make the Society happen.

But, in our 60th year, I would like to enumerate some achievements of the Founding Four in the world of horticulture. The Society could not have had a better foundation.

Alan Bloom, instigator of the Society's formation, was a great plantsman and bred over 170 plant varieties. He was also a lover of steam engines and, when the gardens at Bressingham were opened to the public, he preferred driving trains round the garden to dealing with visitors. His awards include the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour, the RHS Veitch Memorial Medal and MBE.

¹ The original society – the National Hardy Plant Society – was founded in 1910 but didn't survive WWI. Its first chairman was AJ MacSelf, a renowned expert and author of a number of books, in particular *Hardy Perennials* (1922), whose title page proclaims him to be the Founder and First Chairman of the National Hardy Plant Society.

Will Ingwersen was a nurseryman and, to many, best known for his work on alpinists. He was President of the Horticultural Trades Association, and Vice President of both the Alpine Garden Society and the RHS. He also had steam trains running next to the nursery. (This seems to be an interest shared by many hardy planters, including our current President, Roy Lancaster.)

Arthur Hellyer was a horticulturalist and editor of *Amateur Gardening* magazine. His practical gardening books became the *vade mecum* of many a fledgling gardener. He was an RHS judge, a founder member of the Garden History Society, Fellow of The Linnean Society, RHS Associate of Honour, holder of the RHS Victoria Medal of Honour, and MBE. Mr Hellyer had an interesting link back to Mr MacSelf: MacSelf first introduced Arthur Hellyer to horticultural journalism and then handed on to him the editorship of *Amateur Gardening*. An interesting local snippet for us in the Norfolk & Suffolk Group is that Arthur's maternal grandfather came from a Huguenot family in West Walton, near Wisbech.

John Sambrook served on the RHS Floral A (Herbaceous Plant) committee from 1977 to 1993, became an RHS Associate of Honour in 1986, and was editor of *Nurseryman* and *Garden Centre* magazine.

It wouldn't be appropriate when discussing the creation and continuation of the Society

to omit the role played by Miss Pole. She was the lady who 'saved' the Society in 1961 when it was in danger of closing down. Not only that, she also organised the local scout troop from her home, ran the family nursery and was a breeder of plants. She was invaluable: in 1964 during a discussion on plant nomenclature for an HPS pamphlet, Will Ingwersen wrote to her that 'Mr Bloom is not very botanically minded'.

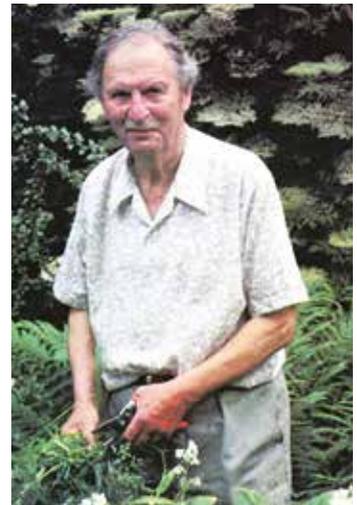
Sixty years on, as you might expect, none of them are still around. But as part of the 2017 anniversary the Norfolk & Suffolk Group thought it would be a good idea to find their descendants and invite them to the Annual Lecture Day. Would this be a daunting task? The job fell to me – somehow, I think I volunteered. I am pleased to say that, in the end, I succeeded. Some I found very quickly, while others took a little more time...

We'd decided to limit the invitation to one 'descendant' per founding family. In Norfolk we have plenty of Blooms, so the difficulty might have been deciding who to invite. At the start of my search, Penny Hellyer, daughter of Arthur Hellyer, was living in Italy, having previously worked as a gardener and nurserywoman at Hellyer's Garden Plants. Having traced members of two of the five families I had an early feeling of confidence.

The Ingwersens had had their well-known nursery, regrettably sold in 2008. Sadly, Mrs Will Ingwersen and Mr Paul Ingwersen had died in

the recent past, so I did not want to intrude upon the family. But in the early months of 2017 as the deadline approached, a gardening friend found Will's daughter, Karen Baker, who now lives in Yorkshire. So I had three of my five 'targets'. But the family of John Sambrook...

This proved the most challenging task of all until an HPS friend who



Arthur Hellyer

©Penelope Hellyer



John Sambrook

©Fabian Sambrook



Miss Pole

researches local families casually mentioned that he could try to find something on the genealogy websites to which he subscribes. He found a Sambrook relation, who pointed us in the direction of Fabian, John Sambrook's son. A pleasing outcome was that Fabian became aware of his father's past connection with the Society.

But what of Miss Pole? By chance her great-niece, Helen Martin, got in touch about her great aunt's involvement in the HPS and her work as a horticulturalist. Helen is now



The 2017 Annual Lecture day, hosted by the Norfolk & Suffolk Group. Left to right: Chris Davies, Group Chairman; Flora Bloom, Alan Bloom's wife and first secretary of the HPS; Fabian Sambrook, son of John Sambrook; Penelope Hellyer, daughter of Arthur Hellyer. Sadly, Flora Bloom died in September 2017.

trying to trace some her aunt's plants, many of which were named 'Lye End'.

Invitations were given to members of each family, as guests of the Society. Unfortunately, neither Helen Martin nor Karen Baker (née Ingwersen) were able to come, instead sending messages of goodwill and congratulations on our diamond anniversary.

The others were pleased to accept our invitation, and at the Annual Lecture Day I had the great privilege of introducing to the audience

Fabian Sambrook, son of John; Penny Hellyer, daughter of Arthur; and Flora, second wife of Alan Bloom and one of the original officers of the Society.

Later, Flora wrote 'I was delighted to be at the Diamond Anniversary of the HPS. I remember the early days very well with Alan carrying us all along with his enthusiastic drive. How very pleased he would be to know how well the Society is doing now.

Thank you all very much for your friendliness & welcome...' 🌸

Pamela Clark is currently redesigning her Norfolk garden, originally planted in the 1970s. In this she is often accompanied by Ben, a springer spaniel with a gourmet taste in plant leaves and an uncanny knack for finding the sunniest spot in the borders, irrespective of what is planted there.

Many people offered help and advice in the tracing of the HPS founders. I thank them all. Particular thanks are due to Brian Ellis of the Norfolk & Suffolk Group for his genealogical expertise, and to Jennifer Harmer, HPS historian.