

## The Heritage of John Woods Nurseries

In 1749 Thomas Wood started Woods Nursery by purchasing land in Woodbridge from the Carthew family. The nursery site was in a sheltered valley of sandy soil, fed by a small stream - **ideal conditions for raising young plants**. The nursery was laid out so plants requiring damp conditions were grown near the stream, whilst those which could tolerate drier soil were grown higher, on the south facing slope.



▲ Roger Crompton Notcutt

Thomas Wood passed the nursery to his sons, and eventually it came to John Wood and therefore **remaining within the Wood family for almost 150 years**. Business was conducted principally with the owners of large country estates and of larger town houses. The nursery supplied many different types and varieties of fruit and forestry trees, as relatively few ornamental plants (as we know them today) were then available.

John Wood's catalogue of Fruit Trees and Roses, published in October 1895, lists no fewer than 95 apples, 35 pears, 25 plums, 16 cherries, 20 trained peaches, 7 nectarines and 123 varieties of roses. He produced his last full catalogue in the autumn of 1896 and died without succession in 1897. The nursery with its fine, old Georgian house, was put up for auction on 11th February 1897.

The Broughton Road Nursery was purchased by Roger Crompton Notcutt (RCN) at the age of 23 where he began by growing vegetables. As the second son of the family, he decided to devote himself to the breeding and production of Chrysanthemums instead of the obligations of the family's legal practice. The nursery employed 45 staff in the 1890's and was composed mainly of glasshouses and frames, **RCN was able to produce plants as well as offer other services**, such as the hiring of specimens for decorating large houses for special occasions and floristry.

RCN was a well known exhibitor at local horticultural shows where he received a number of awards for his skills. In 1895 RCN was **awarded the Royal Horticulture Society's Award of Merit** for Chrysanthemum 'Edith Taylor', said to be "the best large yellow Chrysanthemum yet produced".



Nursery staff at Broughton Road Nursery in Ipswich, 1892 ▶



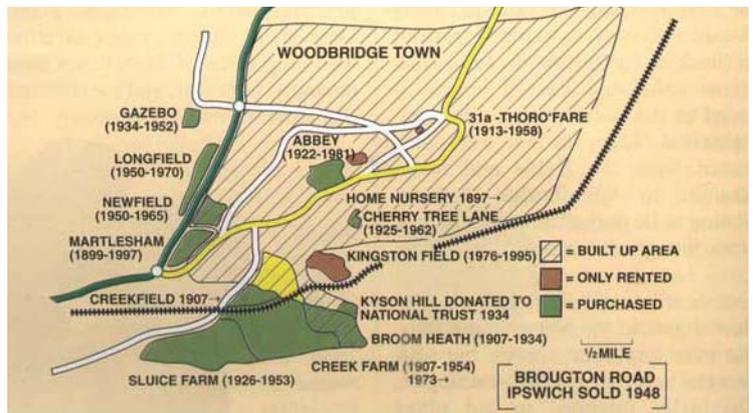
Catalogues were produced throughout the year for the nursery's stock. Two Chrysanthemum catalogues, as well as ones for hardy perennials and herbaceous plants were produced. However, as these lists grew RCN recognised that Broughton Road Nursery was no longer big enough for the increasing range.

**11 acres of nursery land**, with a Georgian house, were bought by RCN at the auction held at the Bull Hotel, Woodbridge on 11th February 1897



On 11th February 1897 RCN bought the **Woods Nursery in Woodbridge**. Originally part of Woodbridge Priory, Woods Nursery included eleven acres of nursery land and a Georgian house. The Woods family were a respected supplier of fruit trees, supplying local large town houses and estates since 1749.

RCN was soon able to establish his business in Woodbridge by moving into the Georgian house with his wife Maud. Recognising the need for land, RCN began by renting in nearby areas such as **Martlesham Field** (bought in 1931), **Creek Farm** (bought in 1925) and **Sluice Farm** (purchased in 1926). In 1927 RCN's son Roger **Fielding Notcutt (Tom)** joined the company. Tom had completed a Natural Science degree at Cambridge and then trained at the Edinburgh Royal Botanical Gardens. Tom's technical training became invaluable and in 1935, working with his father published "**Flowering Cherries**" in the Journal of the RHS.



▲ Map of Woodbridge town – land owned and rented

As was typical at the time, nurserymen worked by hand with the aid of their own tools, during a day that began at 6.30am and finished at 6pm, Monday to Friday, 1pm on Saturdays. Assisted by Suffolk Punches, nurserymen worked a basic fifty hour week with only two days holiday a year. Suffolk Punches were bred at Creek Farm and Sluice Farm with all foals born on the nursery registered with the Suffolk Horse Society and given the prefix 'Kyson'. Over the years, sixteen different Suffolk Punch horses worked for Notcutts, including most unusually twin foals, Polly and Dolly. Born in 1930 following in their mother's footsteps Polly and Dolly both worked on the nursery.

**Apprenticeships have been a recognised way of acquiring skills** throughout Notcutts' history and have filled both junior and senior positions on the nursery. RCN indentured his first apprentice in 1898 and by 1915 there were a total of 13 apprentices, including **Johnny Crane**. Johnny became an expert plantsman in charge of the Propagation Department. Regularly challenged by RCN to root new cuttings, he is said to have been able to root "a 10 year old walking stick." Johnny later went on to become Nursery Manager and then Director before retiring after 52 years service.



▲ Johnny Crane

During the war years there was a reduction in nursery staff and many fields changed production to vegetables. During the Second World War, five of the seven greenhouses grew tomatoes and the frames were full of cucumbers. In only two of the greenhouses Johnny Crane, then propagator, was able to save precious stock of many plants. Unfortunately many of RCN own introductions were lost and by 1947 only 989 varieties were being grown.



▲ Maud Notcutt



Syringa 'Maud Notcutt' was launched in 1956 as a mark of respect and won a RHS Award of Garden Merit in 1957.

After the death of RCN in 1938, the nursery traded as the "Executors of R C Notcutt". Unfortunately Tom also died in 1938, and so it was left to Maud to continue the business. In 1946 the executors were advised that they should form a limited company with **Maud as Chairman** and two external directors, **Stephen Abbott Notcutt (IV) (SAN (IV))** and **Gareth Salisbury. Frank Knight** became the Managing Director and **Ernest Bilney**, succeeded by George Green after the first year, was the Company Secretary. This was the team that Maud Notcutt had with her to face the post war years. Remembering her late husband's management style, Maud received regular updates on the activities of the nursery and would welcome older members of staff to come and have a chat. Maud became affectionately known as "The Old Lady" and despite increasing blindness continued to guide the nursery.

Maud died aged 81 in 1955, but she had the satisfaction in her final years of knowing that her grandson, **Charles Notcutt (CN)**, had started his horticultural training which followed his National Service where he was an officer in the Royal Artillery, with the intention of joining the business. Maud was replaced by SAN (IV) as Chairman and he began to oversee Charles' training. Charles joined the company in 1958 and initially assisted Johnny Crane tackling the never ending task of stock control. In 1964 he became Managing Director. In 1974 Charles succeeded SAN (IV) as Chairman. Charles has always maintained his interest in the horticulture, involved in many organisations including, but not limited to, the Garden Centres Association, The Horticultural Trade Association, the Institute of Horticulture, the Royal Horticultural Society, the International Dendrological Society. Over time he has received many awards, including the **Pearson Gold Medal** from the HTA, the **Victoria Medal of Honour** from the RHS and an **OBE for services to Horticulture**.



▲ Pettistree and surrounding land

During the 1970's container grown plants had become more freely available for planting throughout the year. Customers moved away from the mail order service offered by Notcutts and the garden centres demand grew. During the 1960's demand for rootstock had fallen and as the standing lifting time for a tree took 4-6 years, prior anticipation meant that there was stock no longer in demand. However, fortunately the need for trees in the public sector grew as new housing estates took off. Notcutts became one of the major suppliers of trees and other plants to public authorities, peaking in the year of "**Plant a Tree in 1973**" when almost two thirds of Notcutts plants were supplied to the public

authorities. However, focus also turned to supplying plants to the new garden centre industry and other nurserymen.

Just as RCN had recognised the need for fresh land in 1897, the new management team recognised it was essential to move on to heavier but workable soil. Land such as Creek and Sluice Farm were sold. Gone were the days of the Suffolk Punches as they were replaced over time by little grey Ferguson tractors, which proved invaluable. However, Suffolk Punches, were retained for rotovating amongst the tree crops, allowing Polly and Dolly to see their time out on the nursery. Despite the spade and hoe being superseded, the knife has not been and the craftsman's skills of budding, grafting and pruning continue today, just as they did one hundred years ago.



▲ Notcutts bought its first tractor in 1944, a grey Ferguson

In 1973 Notcutts bought back Creek Farm and found that irrigation bores were the way forward, enabling them to grow nursery stock on light soil in Suffolk. This also proved invaluable during the droughts in 1975 and 1976. With no further land suitable around Woodbridge, fields in **Hacheston** were purchased. However, as the public sector demand for trees decreased the company expanded its container production firstly at **Melton**, then at **Pettistree**. The acquisition of **Waterers Nurseries in 1982** brought not only additional container plant production, but also the valued custom of many garden centres. **Round Pond Nursery** brought further production capacity and Pettistree expanded onto nearby **Loudham**.



▲ Pettistree container and dispatch unit.

In 2005 **John Lord** (JRL) became Nursery Managing Director and under his mindful eye the nursery began to prepare for the future. During the early 2000's the business adopted a new **integrated computer system** in order to maintain tighter control over the production and sales, distribution and finance process. **Each plant production cycle can be tracked** starting from a plug to a liner right up to the container grown plant being delivered to the customer. This visibility has allowed **accurate analysis of sales and production** in order to produce the stock required for the coming seasons.



▲ L:R **John Lord** - Managing Director & **John Kirkham** - Finance Director

In August 2007 JRL was part of a management 'buy out' along with **John Kirkham**, Nursery Finance Director. With the guiding hand of **Charles Notcutt** as Honorary President John Woods Nurseries Ltd purchased the business of Notcutts Nurseries. Building on the heritage **John Woods offers over 1,700 plant varieties** across a wide number of product groups. With an ability to supply an excellent A-Z range throughout the seasons, with many promotional and topical plants seasonally available. Backed by an **impressive service element**, John Woods are well placed for the future.

**If you would like to see the range offered by John Woods Nurseries please click on the link below.**

