

Rivers Nursery and the Rural Way of Life

The long history of Rivers Nursery, which began in 1725 with the establishment of a business at Bonks Hill House and eventually spread over 350 acres, offers a picture of a rural way of life in England over three centuries. The Nursery gained national and international renown as a premier developer of fruit species in particular and had more employees than any local industry other than Maltings. Its decline and eventual closure in 1987 marked the end of traditional agriculture in this area.

Agriculture in East Hertfordshire

The earliest traces of human activity locally indicate that the fertile and open character of the Stort Valley brought those who intended to cultivate land. There is evidence such as the earthwork boundary known to archaeologists as a 'causewayed enclosure' at the edge of Pishiobury park from 4000BC in the Neolithic period where people are thought to have gathered perhaps to celebrate harvests. A number of stone tools (see Figure 1) from that period and later that were useful for clearing land and digging, found in Sawbridgeworth, are gathered in the Bishops Stortford Museum. From then on farming and industries dependent on crops have been the major occupation of people in this area – until the mid-twentieth century.



Figure 1 Handaxe from Sawbridgeworth in the Bishops Stortford Museum

Brief history of Rivers Nursery

John Rivers from Berkshire came to Sawbridgeworth in 1725 and chose well-drained land of clay mixed with chalk, and a situation with access to the main road, useful for selling his crop of nursery plants. The enterprise set up in Bonks Hill house continued as a family business, headed by a number of sons named Thomas Rivers, and continued to expand, providing such stock as fruit trees, shrubs and plantation trees to great estate gardens – and cultivated arable crops as well. The workers filled traditional farm labouring roles, walking to work in the fields from neighbouring homes, following in these jobs from father to son, called by the big bell at the start of day and dismissed by the bell at the end. There was for the most part a limited range of hard work with poor wages and no security of employment. Until the start of mechanisation about the time of World War I, horses were used both for transport and power. In the early 19th century roses were a speciality of the nursery and trees such as weeping ash and purple beech, as still seen around Sawbridgeworth, and the newly introduced Wellingtonias.



Figure 2 Thomas Rivers, 1797-1877, fruit cultivar specialist and writer

By the 19th century the population of Hertfordshire like that of England as a whole had grown by two and a half times and people had begun to move from the country to towns. Sawbridgeworth, still a successful rural economy, grew more slowly. The third Thomas Rivers, 1797-1877, (Figure 2) the most famous of the family, maintained a very successful varied business but was creative in seeking to develop new fruit cultivars, writing many articles for the important horticultural magazines of the period and corresponding with some of the great thinkers of the time such as Charles Darwin. He also produced handbooks directed at the growing middle classes who were seeking to provide fruit for their own purposes in restricted grounds compared with the great country estates. Everyone in the absence of supermarkets sought to provide their own fruit to eat and cook. Later he with other horticulturalists met to find responses to the growing threat of competition from abroad by introducing better English stock.

Men's work and women's work

With relation to the growing and transporting of bare-root fruit trees, men did the soil preparation, the planting and staking, the cultivation, the digging and packing for sending to the customer, whether by road or later, after the coming of the railroad Sawbridgeworth in 1845, by train. There was little variation in the tasks of the agricultural year. Some by their own skill rose from the ranks and became foremen, with the owners taking the business forward in terms of innovations. Josh Brace, foreman, (Figure 3 below), is wearing a straw boater distinguishing him from the labouring crew.



Figure 3 Josh Brace, foreman, and crew

Women did different work – in the glasshouses that were built behind Bonks Hill house after the tax on glass was repealed in 1845, pollinating, tying in, picking and perhaps grafting and other technical tasks. Women (See Figure 4 below) worked in the office doing paperwork, handling orders, book-keeping and the like.



Figure 4 Kitty Church, coiffed office girl, posing in the glasshouse for an advertising feature

Another great Thomas Rivers, TF or Frank, succeeded his father as director in 1877, developing the still popular Conference pear. At this point in the late 19th century the company was at the height of its success and renown. In the photograph below (Figure 5) taken in the garden of Bonks Hill House we see the family, a prosperous Victorian group with Frank in the centre. His daughter May, who became an outstanding fruit identification painter for Rivers fruit and for other fruit texts, is with him. Change was coming – Frank's son Henry had joined the Royal Fusiliers and Thomas Alfred in cowboy gear had spent years ranching in Colorado, returning to work with his father in the family business in 1894.

A prosperous Victorian family: TF Rivers in the centre



Figure 5

The Twentieth Century: great change and the decline of the Nursery

During the two world wars, Rivers Nursery faced the challenges many companies met at the time. There was a shortage of labour as the young men were sent off to fight. The government required that much acreage was put into growing food crops rather than commercial fruit stock. There was a loss of the usual markets and some of the great estates the company used to supply failed. Communication and exchange with other fruit-growing areas around the world in Europe and elsewhere ceased. During World War II Bonks Hill House was requisitioned by the army. Although women came to play a vital and greater part in the work force through the land army scheme, and greater engine driven power began to appear, the business was in a decline from which it never recovered. The company carried on between the wars and afterward, but when the last Thomas Rivers died in 1978 after an abortive attempt to run a modern garden centre (see Figure 6) on the High Wych road, the Nursery was closed.



FRONT OF GARDEN CENTRE 1977-1978

Figure 6 Garden Centre with the old bell displayed

When the land was sold, growing fields became a private hospital and housing. Nostalgia governed the choice of names – so we have the Rivers hospital, the Nursery Fields housing estate and others but these names did not disguise the profound change that had come about. Sawbridgeworth was no longer a rural economy. Nowadays, the green fields that still are wonderfully within walking distance from every part of the town do not provide rural employment as they are farmed by huge machines and a minimum of working staff.

People commute to jobs in a London closely connected by train or road or work in the increasingly populated urban area of this region in service jobs such as beauty or restaurant work. The fields that form the protected green belt are increasingly under pressure to submit to more housing estates as people must have places to live. The millennia old rural way of life has shifted to something more closely similar to life in a metropolis, despite its setting in the midst of fresh air and green countryside.

New trends

However, when the Nursery closed there was a local outcry as people watched a key company that had meant so much to the town disappear and not long after a movement to restore the small remaining area of Rivers stock fruit trees began in 1995. This area has been maintained and developed over time and now exists as the 10-acre Rivers Heritage Site and Orchard. From the beginning of the restoration it joined a wider movement which sought to protect just such old orchards and to open them as community orchards, inviting local people, especially children, to participate in the country life they represent and to learn where the fruit they eat comes from and what it takes to grow and harvest crops. A lot of voluntary work over many years has gone into this quiet place where people come to walk and at times to participate in agricultural festivals such as Apple Day and Wassail. Long may Rivers Nursery and the memories of a rural way of life be preserved!

Elizabeth Waugh, 2018

Information in this text comes from research for the book, Rivers Nursery of Sawbridgeworth: the Art of Practical Pomology, 2009 This book, which contains interviews with members of the last generation of local people who worked at Rivers, is now being reprinted. If you would like a copy, write to rhs01725@gmail.com or contact the Sawbridgeworth Town Council info@sawbridgeworth-tc.gov.uk