

Walthamstow Building Society Gardens – p.1

Memories of Keith Nichols [[email](#)], April 2015

One of my most favourite memories of my time in Walthamstow, was one that came out of the blue, and something that came from sheer hard work, and rewarded me in the end, so now I had better explain!

As a landscape Gardener and Plantsman, you have to battle against the elements, and all that goes with the great outdoors. Now, although London is a big place, you'd think that you'd never be out of work, I rarely advertised, as I mostly worked thankfully from recommendation, that's your best advert!

At this particular time we were up against recessions, high unemployment etc..., and I had no choice but to advertise. This too proved a waste of time, because of the times that we were in. I had the Walthamstow Guardian regularly, and spotted an advert. It was one put in by the Walthamstow Building Society. They were advertising for a gardener, and wanted someone 3 days every week, so I thought 3 days work was 3 more than I had already! I did no more than apply for the position. I was to meet the manager Pat O'Brien, the most likeable man you could ever wish to meet, and must know we would get along famously... and we certainly did!

Pat though, thought that I was far too qualified for the job that was on offer, for he told me that one of the jobs meant that at least one of the morning so was to pick up rubbish from around the grounds, for litter was a great problem in the area, for the building society cornered Forest Road, Fulbourne Road and Wood Street: a busy area indeed.

I told Pat that "*beggars can't be choosers*", and had done worse things in life, like cleaning out toilets drains etc...

Anyhow, I got the job straight away. The main job though was to look after the grounds, ie: the gardens. I use the term *gardens* very loosely, for there weren't any: it was all lawns, and they were in a bad state too.

The first few weeks meant just grass cutting and the picking up of litter. I then had a brainwave, and decided to approach Pat - for what it was worth - with an idea. I asked him if I could create flower beds. He thought it was a great idea. I said that we are on a very prime spot here with lots of eyes looking... O.K!

So my wage wasn't brilliant, but I was well used to hard graft and never shied away from it, and of course no other work had come in, so had to occupy myself somehow, so what did I have to lose?

I started off making circular beds all over the site, but to me something still didn't look right, so I asked Pat if I could buy ornamental trees to put in the centre of each bed, and he thought it a brilliant idea, and told me to buy whatever I liked.

Many of those trees are still there today I'm told ? ...like for instance "*Davidia Involucrata*", commonly known as the *Ghost Tree*, or *Handkerchief Tree* or even *Ghost Handkerchief Tree*. The other unusual pretty tree that I planted was right on the junction of all 3 roads, and is/was *Acacia 'Casque Rouge'*, which had beautiful blossom, but after a year or so later this nice tree was vandalised one night, and very severely damaged. It did however recover, and a lot more branches grew, and turned into a magnificent sight.

When those first beds were made, it was still early in the year. Now the correct time to plant bulbs is in the autumn, but if you don't get the chance to do it then, and if the ground is workable, I plant in January or February, and my bulbs flower beautifully! Hence had no qualms about planting up my new beds at the Building Society. Of course I planted wallflower plants first (I had to use box grown ones for that year as it was far too late to buy bare root ones, and not only that, but the garden centres had all sold out!). Other I put in were *Myosotis*, *Pansies*, *Violas*, *Polyanthus*, etc...

The spring display was outstanding, and got lots of feedback from the public, many who had taken a keen interest whilst I had been creating these new gardens more or less from day Noel asked Pat if it was O.K. to get some work done on the very neglected lawns, and once again he readily agreed, and told me to get whatever was needed.

As the gardens continued to improve, Pat told me that counter sales had gone up and folk started to go into the building society just to see the gardens! I was overjoyed at hearing this news. I was soon to meet some of the Directors and various other members of staff, and several stopped to chat to me on their way to and from their dinner and tea breaks.

Now to the big surprise! Someone put us up for the "London In Bloom" Competition, and... we won it! In fact win won 3-4 times during my stay there. All the certificates were displayed above the counters for all to see, and I have often wondered if anyone kept these when the Society closed? Now the gardens became my more or less a full time job, and had more money too! ...plus, I could still carry out my other work as well.

My biggest thrill was to see two lovely photos of the gardens on the front covers of the society's news letter, all in full colour, although by the time the

photos were taken, I had extended the beds a lot more, hence even more colour further down the line!

I'd certainly made a rod for my own back, for now I had to take on a labourer, and now the fun begins! (Part 2 to follow shortly).

Keith Nichols