

Preserving Plant History

Joy Uings on the Cheshire Gardens

Trust's project rediscovering the people and plants of a historic Cheshire Family Nursery



In 1780 William Caldwell was just 14 years old when he began his horticultural training at John Nickson's nursery in Knutsford.

Less than 20 years later he returned to join the business as a partner. He was the first of six generations of the Caldwell family to run the nurseries until they closed in 1992.

Being in the same family for so long should give Caldwell's a mention in any history of the nursery trade, but what makes them special – perhaps unique – is that they have left behind more than a dozen business ledgers – from the 1790s, the 1830s and the 1910s. These include day books and order books which provide a fascinating insight into our forebears' plant-purchasing habits. Those from the 1790s are from both Caldwell's Knowsley and Nickson's Knutsford nurseries.

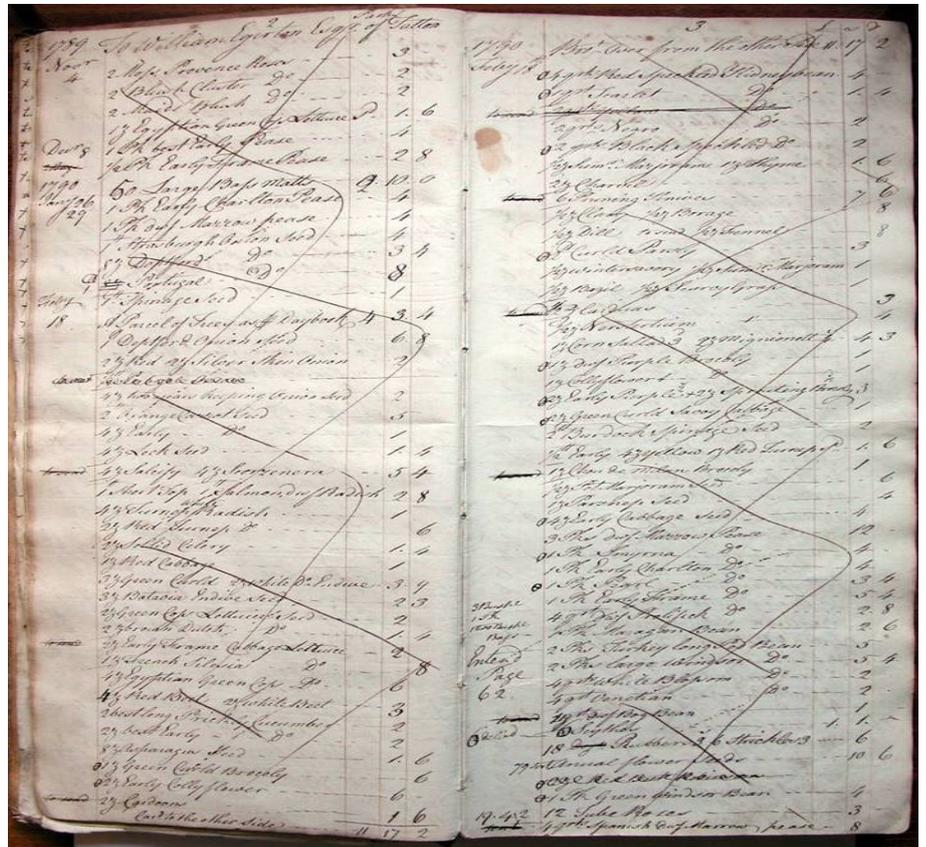
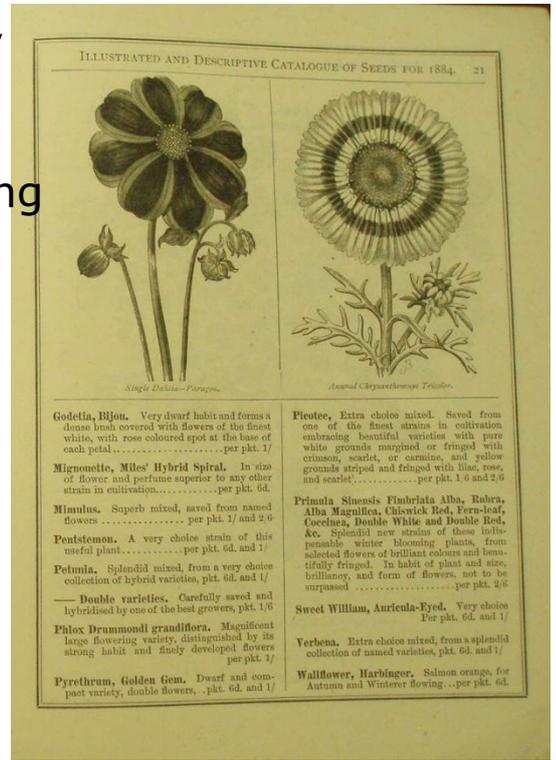
In 1794, a gentleman named John Thomas was living at Mount Pleasant in Liverpool. Judging from his purchases from the Knowsley nursery, he seems to have been both wealthy and a plantsman. In March, he

purchased 41 fruit trees, 16 roses, two primulas and 10,000 thorns. In late November he took delivery of an unspecified number of orange trees which had been ordered from elsewhere.

But it is the 4 visits between September and early November that are particularly interesting. The number of new plants being introduced into the country was increasing. American plants were already popular, but

Francis Masson had been sending back previously unknown flowers from places like South Africa for twenty years.

These plants either needed or were thought to need



Customer ledger 1789—1796

shelter from the English climate, so enthusiasts erected greenhouses and hothouses to protect them. Annoyingly, we don't have details of all the plants that Mr. Thomas purchased, because 127 of them were included in the orders simply as "greenhouse plants" at varying prices from 6d to 2s 6d each, a total expenditure of £7 16s 6d. (The 41 fruit trees had cost £3.)

However, a further 27 items are recorded by name. Some are easy to read and understand – like rhododendrons, hyacinths, tulips, etc. Others are a little more confusing. What was the Umbrella Tree? A search in books from the period suggests it was *Magnolia tripetala*. Then there was the Arabian Jasmine. Was this *Jasminum arabicum*, as described by Philip Miller? In that case it was probably a variety of *Nyctanthes*.

Antholyza meriana is now called *Watsonia meriana*. *Glycine apios* is a synonym for *Apios Americana*, whereas *Glycine sinensis* is a synonym for *Wisteria sinensis*.

Four of the plants purchased by Thomas seem to have been given the correct names. These were four varieties of *Erica* from South Africa – *E. caffra*, *E. imbricata*, *E. cerinthoides* and *E. baccans*. The coming years would see a big demand for South African *Ericas* and by the



Order on 19 March, 1794 includes 14 peach, 6 nectarine, 2 apricot, 6 cherry and 10 apple trees

1830s there were ten times as many varieties being sold by Caldwell at his new nursery in Knutsford than appear in the earlier ledger.

In fact by that time the number of ornamental shrubs and flowers had increased enormously and it is fascinating to decipher the records. The first challenge is the handwriting; the second to

'translate' the plant name. Spelling was often phonetic and rarely consistent, Latin endings were confused and names have since been declared synonyms. This has required some detective work. Consider *Ferraria conchiflora*. This was listed in many books of the period but is not a currently recognised name. However, a little searching shows that the plant must have been *Tigridia pavonia* incorrectly listed by Sweet as *Tigridia pavonia* var. *conchiflora*.

Some plants were giving rise to many different cultivars. Dahlias had followed *Ericas* as the plant in vogue and those sold included two of Caldwell's own raising: *Gloria Mundi* and *Purple Globe*. New varieties of rose led to a burst of hybridisation. Elsewhere the number of varieties of a particular genus were the precursor to the hybridisation and cultivars that would



Purchases on 8 November 1794 include 4 varieties of South African *Ericas*



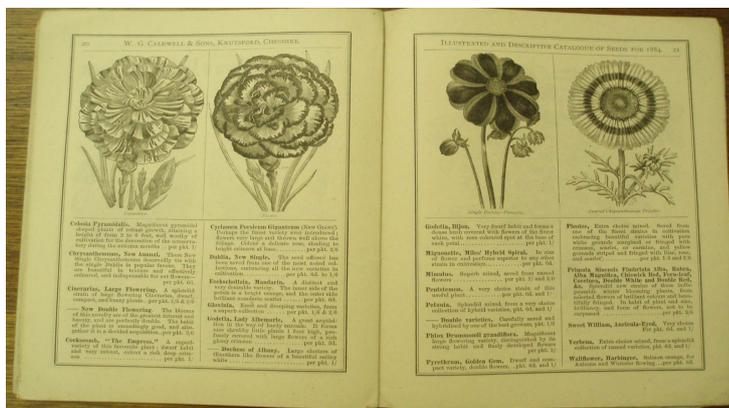
come within the next few years – like *Calceolaria*. But cultivars create their own problem as it can be difficult to be sure that the names have been recorded correctly.

All the ledgers have been photographed and a team of volunteers has been working for more than 3 years on transcribing information into a database. Two ledgers (from the 1790s) have been completed and we are working on one from the 1830s. All this – and much more, including recorded memories of owners, staff and customers from the latter half of the 20th century – can be found at www.caldwellarchives.org.uk. There you can look through the ledgers, review catalogues and search by customer or by plant. More plants are on the database

than currently show up in the reports, so if you decide to look for a particular plant and don't find it, remember to try again a few weeks later when it may have been entered in an order.

For anyone interested in plants the website is a source of enormous pleasure. We haven't always got it right, so if you spot a mistake, do tell us!

The Caldwell Project is the result of the efforts of volunteers from



1884 seed catalogue with some familiar and some long-lost plant varieties

the Cheshire Gardens Trust and has been made possible by financial assistance from the Royal Botanic Gardens of Manchester and the Northern Counties and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The website continues to be developed.

STOP PRESS: A fascinating book has been published titled: *Caldwells: Nurserymen of Knutsford for two centuries*. Price: £7.95. Order form available on the website www.cheshire-gardens-trust.org.uk

The archive is available online at www.caldwellarchives.org.uk

The Cheshire Gardens Trust promotes the enjoyment and conservation of Cheshire's garden heritage. You can find out about membership and activities on www.cheshire-gardens-trust.org.uk