

# 30th anniversary musings

*Pat Taylor*

As one of the early members of The Cottage Garden Society, I was asked in 2007 to give a talk about its history at our 25th Anniversary AGM; the text of this talk can be found on our website. This year, Julia asked me to write an article celebrating our 30th Anniversary and I began to consider how the Society still adheres to its original aims and how much it has moved on.

Nine people attended the very first meeting of the Society held on the 20 June, 1982. Cottage gardening was at a low ebb, yet the first members felt that a love of old-fashioned flowers and the idea of having an informal, cottage style garden still persisted. The new Society wanted to engage people who loved gardens filled with the scent of old-fashioned flowers and shrubs; pinks and old roses, philadelphus, lilac or flowering quince, with herbs such as thyme and rosemary. It wanted to source old species and varieties of plants and help people living in a modern environment to make a modern cottage garden. Thanks to their enthusiasm plus publicity from Pat Collison, a very popular gardening correspondent, and Geoff Hamilton, then a young garden writer, our numbers had grown to 233 by the time of our first AGM on the 25th of September, 1982.

In the early years we produced a cyclostyled newsletter. Volunteers packed it and addressed envelopes over tea and cake. Our AGMs were held in village halls and our events consisted of visits to each other's gardens, or to wonderful nurseries

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run by specialist plantsmen and women. At our meetings, we swapped old fashioned garden plants, which we grew from seeds or cuttings, drank Anne Hamblin's elderflower wine and made new friends. Micro-propagation didn't exist then and you would have given your arm for a double hellebore! There were even a few remaining genuine cottage gardens to visit, with their mixture of vegetables, flowers and fruit trees. As a new member I loved it all.

In 1984, the Society grew up. We were approached to create a cottage garden for the second National Garden Festival at Stoke in 1986. With Stephen Crisp as the designer and Clive Lane as the organiser, we scooped Gold Awards for the best garden and theme garden in the Show. Cottage gardening was

suddenly in the limelight. Article after article appeared in newspapers and magazines in this country and abroad, particularly in America, and propelled cottage gardening to almost dizzy heights for nearly a decade. At the time of the Festival we had around 800 members. That number tripled within a year and continued to rise until it had reached a high tide of over 8,000 members in 1993-4. Since then it has fallen and has now stabilized at around 5000.

Our newsletter grew, too. I became editor and gradually managed to add more pages. My neighbour, Elisabeth Froom, an amateur artist with a knack of drawing witty, cartoon-like pictures agreed to illustrate each article and so successful was the new magazine that Anna Pavord in *The Telegraph* named the magazine as one that was often mentioned by readers as their favourite reading! The 10th Anniversary Newsletter, with a coloured photograph showing a needlework picture of an old cottage garden on its cover, and with specially commissioned drawings, was a landmark issue. Shortly after, we decided our magazine was no longer a newsletter and 'The Cottage Gardener' was born. Elisabeth and I were volunteers and eventually we retired. Jill Bennett succeeded me very ably for a number of years until Julia became editor and we now have a journal which includes around 35 group reports with fine illustrations. The magazine is the glue which holds the Society together as it is often the only contact members have with the Society.

A generous legacy from Kenneth Black, a cottage garden member living in North London, has left us nearly a quarter of a million pounds richer; a welcome gift but an added responsibility which has made the Committee very aware of the need to spend it wisely for the benefit of the Society.

The tides of cottage gardening roll in and out, but I don't think they will ever completely disappear. Our membership is showing signs of growing again. Our original aim to encourage a type of gardening that reduces the area of hard landscaping and allows water to soak into the soil, together with planting which brings birds, butterflies and helpful insects into our gardens puts us bang in the middle of the eco-friendly world we need to save our natural resources.

*Pat Taylor gardens in Chester.*

