



## Alan Down ~ Brymore School 1962-1966

On leaving Brymore, there was never any doubt that my future lay in horticulture. In fact my career choice was made long before going to this school and the fact that I grew up on a [then] small dairy farm was incidental.

I have four brothers, three of whom also went to Brymore [Michael Mearns and twins Nigel and Nicholas Down]. Father made it very clear from the outset that the farm could not support us all so we had to look for careers elsewhere. Ironically, the only brother **not** to go to Brymore now runs the family farms!

On leaving, I spent two years getting experience with nurseries close to home in the Bristol area. This varied from the very traditional growing to the, then, cutting edge of all year round production of Chrysanthemums. The very traditional included carrying heavy 10" clay pots filled with soil based compost in and out of glasshouses, stoking coke boilers and, the most dreaded job of all, steam sterilising glasshouse soils by digging in Hoddesdon pipes! Use of growth controlling hormones and day length control to manipulate growth of Chrysanthemums was far preferable!

I also gained valuable experience at a fledgling garden centre at Burrington Combe when there simply were no other garden centres around! These couple of years were to pay dividends when moving on to further education and it seems to me to have been a retrograde step that colleges were forced into by the waving of this pre college practical experience requirement.

I returned to Cannington (68-69), this time to the College, to study Commercial Horticulture. Following this one year course, I went to Pershore College of Horticulture (69-70) to study for the intermediate stage of the Royal Horticultural Societies' National Diploma in Horticulture [now known as The Master of Horticulture (RHS)].

The following year, I was fortunate to be able to join the staff of Pershore College and effectively get paid to study the final stage of this M. Hort (RHS) exam as a technician assisting the fruit lecturer. Of the handful of successful students that year, I achieved the highest national pass for commercial horticulture but realised that further practical experience was needed.



Alan and Felicity Down

In the autumn of 1971 I left for Schleswig Holstein in north Germany to work in what was then possibly the greatest concentration of tree and shrub nurseries in the world. I had teamed up with another Brymore old boy Paul Meredith (63-67 I think). Thrown in the deep end without any real knowledge of any foreign language (how I regret staring out of the window in French lessons at Brymore!) we had to sink or swim. We landed on our feet with a go-ahead company specialising in growing and supplying bare root, root balled and container grown hardy nursery stock throughout Europe. After a short while we each ended up with responsibilities that included supervising Spanish workers with an even poorer grasp of German than we had!



Ben Clifton of BBC Radio Bristol, Felicity and Alan Down putting the first plants in the new can at their roadside of Cleeve Nursery..

After a year, thoughts of returning to England fought with the fun we were having in the notorious St Pauli district of Hamburg! The German ethic was, and probably still is, to work hard and then play hard!

An approach by Hillier Nurseries of Winchester was tempting and was soon followed by an interview in Germany by two of the directors of this world renowned company. They were then interested in starting a unit to grow trees and shrubs in containers and I had the opportunity to be in at the start. Joining them in 1972 I set about building what was then the largest unit in the UK growing plants for mail order, garden centre, local authority's amenity planting (especially new towns) and export of rare plants to most of the countries of the world. I

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was then growing 9,000 different species and varieties out of a range of no less than 14,000 in production by Hilliers! The container unit started at 0.25 acres and ended up covering 25 acres and producing over 2 million plants per annum when I left. I spent 10 very happy years in Hampshire with this large company and met and married Felicity my wife there (she was a florist in Hillier's high street floristry shop in Winchester). However, success led inevitably to promotion and a more desk based job which did not suit me.



Cleeve Nursery

In 1980 I applied for and was awarded one of the coveted Nuffield Farming Scholarship Awards to study and travel. This was a turning point in my career. These awards are much sought after and are open to a wide range of agricultural and

associated industries. I chose to travel and study Container Plant Production and Marketing in the USA and Canada. This nine week trip encompassed all of the major production areas of North America and many of the major markets. To fund Felicity joining me there, I tutored a week's course in plant propagation at McHenry County College in Illinois. This trip was a real eye opener and I can not recommend the opportunity that travel brings, and Nuffield Scholarships in particular, highly enough.



Alan's wife Felicity with her delightful Christmas decorations at The Royal Horticultural Society partnership event.

On returning to the UK, we started to make plans to start our own business in some way. Eventually we ended up at Cleeve Nursery on a busy main road near Bristol. The nursery was a 'going concern' but going downhill rapidly! Felicity and I set to and together we have built a medium sized garden centre with a very strong emphasis on plants and core garden products. Recently we have added a smallholding nearby and, from being largely retailers; we have now gone back into growing a very high percentage of our own plants.

We have been fortunate to have been able to grasp promotional opportunities that have come our way from the local media. For six years I presented, with Felicity and Sue King, a half hour TV programme from our garden called HTV Garden Calendar. This was highly successful and ran for an unexpected six years. It was networked throughout much of the south of the country and almost 150 half hour programmes were produced.

This was preceded by live phone-ins as Radio West's gardening expert and I still occasionally do slots for BBC Radio Bristol.

Seeing that the Western Daily Press had no gardening correspondent, I offered my services and have been their regular gardening features writer for the lifestyle magazine in Saturday's edition.

Links with Cannington village have been strong although not always with Brymore. For ten years I was a member and chairman of the College's horticultural advisory body and for most of that time I also sat on the governing body. A spell as Chairman of the Corporation of the College during a time of immense change there was particularly challenging and rewarding.

What the future holds is hard to predict but it probably will include a lot more travel, some more writing and hopefully more time to pursue my passion for deer stalking and other country sports. An opportunity to combine all three would be nice but perhaps that is asking too much!



Some of the parent plants in Cleeve Nursery owner Alan Down's garden regularly produce 20-30 blooms at once. Some have even produced over fifty at once!

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**Useful links for web pages featuring Alan:**

<http://www.westerndailynews.co.uk/displayNode.jsp?nodeId=213027&command=displayContent&sourceNo=213018&contentPK=19881347&folderPk=99994&pNodeid=228786>

[http://www.cleevenursery.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=0](http://www.cleevenursery.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=57&Itemid=0)

[http://www.cleevenursery.co.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=0](http://www.cleevenursery.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=46&Itemid=0)