

# HELENSBURGH AND GARELOCH HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

- A HISTORY -

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## INTRODUCTION

The existing minutes of Helensburgh and Gareloch Horticultural Society date from 1926: whatever records there were prior to that date have either been lost or destroyed. However, there is documentary evidence that Flower Shows were held in Helensburgh as early as 1850. The current enquiries have tried to identify the social and cultural changes that influenced the Society's development: also the people and events which provided the drive and direction to enable it to survive for almost 160 years, making it one of the oldest Societies in Scotland. This account draws largely on reports in the Glasgow Herald, in the Dumbarton Herald (forerunner to the Lennox Herald) which dates from 1851 and in the Helensburgh and Gareloch Times which began publication in 1880.

A further useful and interesting source has been a history of the Society compiled in 1951 by the then President J. Arnold Fleming to mark the centenary celebrations. He relied mostly on the reminiscences of some of the older professional gardeners who were still employed by local garden and estate owners and whose working lives must have started at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth.

## THE EARLY YEARS 1850 – 1880

Two pieces of documentary evidence record the existence of the Society, or its forerunner, in 1850 and probably before then.

Two silver medals, now in Helensburgh Library, dated 1850 and 1851 which belonged to the grandfather of the Misses Ramsay, were presented by them to the Society to mark the centenary celebrations. The Glasgow Herald of 6<sup>th</sup> September 1850 has a full report of the 'annual competition' held by Helensburgh Horticultural Society (Gareloch is absent in this first documented reference but could have been an omission on the part of the reporter) in the new School Room, Clyde Street. 'Visitors were more numerous than in any previous year'. The report also remarks on the 'excellence and extent' of the exhibits in relation to 'former years'. This strongly suggests that a flower show or annual competition was already established and

that there was sufficient interest in horticulture in the town to support such an event. According to the Herald, 'the establishment of this Society was to improve floral horticulture in the district and to reward members who communicate useful information on these subjects'. The report speaks of the 'liberality of the ladies and gentlemen of Helensburgh' and the presentation of 'three massive silver medals'. Presumably two of these medals were those in the keeping of the Misses Ramsay.

There follows a long prize list with separate classes for professional and amateur gardeners. A clear distinction exists between the two, with the professionals outnumbering the amateurs by three to one. The report has an archaic ring to it: professional gardeners were named but with no title and always in conjunction with their employer who is referred to as Esquire and followed by the name of the estate or garden. The day's proceedings finished in a convivial fashion when 'the judges along with a few other gentlemen and upwards of twenty members partook of a substantial dinner in the Glasgow Tavern, which was served in Mr. Liddell's usual style'.

Searches of the Glasgow Herald from 1845 -49 have not so far revealed anything further on Helensburgh, although there are reports of flower shows being held in other communities in the west of Scotland: Airdrie, Kirkintilloch and Campsie, Vale of Leven, Glasgow, Uddingston, Bothwell, Kintyre, Dunoon, New Kilpatrick and Strathblane all held shows during these years.

The next reference to be found (so far) comes from the Helensburgh Guide of 1865 in which the Helensburgh Horticultural Society had by then become the Helensburgh and *Gareloch* Horticultural Society. The twenty-eight Patrons of the Society appear to have been local landowners or owners of substantial properties in the area and are headed by Sir James Colquhoun of Luss. Some of the estate and house names mentioned still exist: Colgrain, Chapelacre, Lyleston and Geilston. One notable patron was Robert Napier Esq., widely regarded as the father of Clyde shipbuilding. Arnold Fleming's history notes that Napier (died 1876) was a friend of David Livingstone and that it was Livingstone who arranged for the transportation of the tropical plants found in Napier's garden at West Shandon House (latterly Shandon Hydropathic Hotel, demolished 1957). Provost Breignan was President of the Society and Mr. William Bryson was Treasurer. The Helensburgh Directories (publications similar to the 1865 Guide) of 1867, 1869 and 1875 show only minor changes. The list of Patrons, headed by Sir James Colquhoun of Luss, now included H. E. Crum-Ewing of Ardencaple Castle, Lord Lieutenant of Dumbartonshire (sic). Provost Breignan and Wm Bryson Esq. continued to act as Chairman and Secretary.

The Directory of 1877 is more informative and has an entry for the Society and also for Helensburgh Horticultural *Association*. The functions of the two organizations were distinct but

complementary. The Society's function was 'to hold Shows annually in Helensburgh' while the Association had a more practical role: 'to promote the acquisition and dissemination of horticultural knowledge and the sciences relating thereto'. Helensburgh was expanding during this period. The 1881 census records the population as 7693 persons, an increase from 4613 recorded in 1861. The development of a Horticultural Association with its emphasis on the practical and scientific aspects of horticulture would meet the needs of the increasing number of garden owners and their gardeners. In 1899 the trade section of the Directory lists twenty-six gardeners, twice the number who had been employed in the 1860s and 1870s.

### 1880 - 1890

The Horticultural Association and the Society functioned as separate organizations throughout the 1880s and 1890s with Provost Breignan as President of both organizations. The Association seems to have been very active with a programme of meetings which lived up to its aim of promoting the scientific basis of horticulture. Meetings were held in the Alexandra Hall and were 'well attended'. At the October meeting in 1881, Mr. James Thomson read a prize-winning essay on 'Chemistry Applied to Horticulture'. The essayist 'spoke at some length on soils and recommended a yearly change of crops, as some plants extract lime, others potash, silica etc'. Other topics covered during the session were 'Vine Culture in Pots', 'The Potato' and a talk on the dangers of employing unqualified gardeners who were 'merely labourers and worked at a cheaper rate'!

The Association looked further than Helensburgh for its speakers. In March 1882 Mr. J Brown of The Nurseries, Ayr, gave a paper in which he extolled the value of nurseries and exhorted 'young gardeners to gain knowledge of their profession, as the eager lookout for more wages was too often the object of their study'. A competition for a handsome silver medal presented by the President, ex-Provost Breignan was won by Wm. Stuart, Letrault, 'for the best design of a kitchen garden and glass structure'. In March, Mr. J. G. Don, Ballimore Lodge Gardens read a paper on 'The Pine-Apple'. He recommended for its successful cultivation 'friable, turfy loam stacked for twelve months, to every barrowful of which an eight-pot of ground bones and the same quantity of soot should be added, weak guano water to be added when the pots were full of roots'.

The Annual Meeting of 1882 ended on a high note. The Secretary's report showed that twelve essays had been read and discussed throughout the year and several new members had joined. Mr. Stuart was presented with his medal for garden design. The Chrysanthemum Show had been a success and another was planned for December next year. There was a considerable

balance on hand after paying the accounts. The evening ended with humorous stories about gardeners and their ways, some recitations and an unrecorded number of toasts.

The annual Chrysanthemum Show was the high point of the year for the Horticultural Association. Held in December in the King Street Hall, the Show of 1882 got extensive coverage: 'the quality and number of the exhibits was a marked improvement on last year'. A new feature of the 1882 Show was the introduction of a cage bird section with no less than ten separate classes. The interior of the hall must have been quite a spectacle: one end was occupied by a display of flowering plants numbering between 300 and 400 shown by Mr. Bryson, Parkend Nursery. It was 'composed of chrysanthemums of various hues, dracaenas, ariases, tulips, poinsettias (sic), orange plants and fruit surmounted by tree ferns and palms and altogether was a remarkably fine exhibition considering the Arctic weather of last week'. As usual the day finished in convivial fashion with a dinner at Mr. Mc Donald's restaurant, East Princes Street. Numerous toasts were drunk and the only discordant note was struck when the judge of the cage bird section pointed out 'that there were some birds that they had to put out of competition as they were shown as hens when they were cock birds. They (the judges) were determined to have fair play and no favour'.

The meetings of the Society were few in number and were concerned solely with the organization of the Flower Show. The Patrons met in February 1882 in the Town Hall 'to arrange their 26<sup>th</sup> prize list'. They appealed for prizes to be donated. 'Ladies and Gentlemen desirous of having favourite plants, fruits or vegetables better represented at the forthcoming exhibition and would like to offer special prizes for same, notice of such intention will be gladly received by the treasurer, Mr. W. S. McCulloch, Princes Street'. This appeal must have had some effect as the Show of 1884 had a section for 'Extra Prizes' with thirty-five classes including native ferns, zonal geraniums, hollyhocks and lycopodiums. By comparison the fruit (ten classes) and vegetable (fourteen classes) sections were much smaller. There was still a clear distinction between professional and amateur gardeners with separate classes for each.

The last reference to the Association and its educational role appears in the Helensburgh directory of 1888, although it seems to have remained socially active when, in 1895, the newspaper reported the Annual Supper. In this same report appears the name of Dr. Ewing Hunter who was to become responsible for the tree planting in the streets of Helensburgh. By 1905 the name of the Secretary and Treasurer in the notices for the Society's August Flower Show and the Association's December Chrysanthemum Show is that of Daniel S. Campbell of Montrose Villa, which suggests that a merger of some kind may have taken place. No documentary evidence for this has so far been found. But this suggests that the Society as we

know it today responsible for the annual Flower Show and the programme of evening meetings, came into being at this time.

A third horticultural organization, the West of Scotland Rosarian Society, whose president was the Lord Lieutenant, H. E. Crum-Ewing, was also active in Helensburgh until it amalgamated with the Society in 1921. The Rose Show, held annually in June from 1874, usually in a marquee at Westwood Park, also got extensive coverage and 'drew interest from a much wider geographical area than either of the other two shows'. The exhibits of Dicksons and Sons of Belfast were particularly noteworthy. The Show of 1885 must have been a stunning event with 2074 blooms on display. There was a section open to 'Scotch Growers Only' and another for 'Lady Competitors'.

These three events continued during the 1880s and 90s with lengthy and vivid descriptions of the exhibits and full prize lists followed by the inevitable dinner, speeches and toasts now held in the Queen's Hotel. The Flower Show and the Chrysanthemum Show took place mostly in the newly-built Victoria Hall where music by a string quartet or similar ensemble was always provided throughout the day. The lengthy, detailed reports in the Helensburgh and Gareloch Times provide the only record of the Society's activities during this period, including the classes being exhibited and the prizewinners.

Prior to the building of the Victoria Hall, the Shows were held in the King Street Hall and were usually on a Thursday. Admission from 12.30pm – 2.00pm was 2/6 (12.5p), from 2.00pm – 6.00pm was 1/- (5p) and from 6.00pm cost only 6 old pence. In her address at the opening of the Centenary Show in 1951 Mrs. Arnold Fleming refers to the earliest Flower Shows 'which were held in a marquee on the skating pond where the tennis courts now are'.

The Society held a business meeting in the Court Hall in September to pay out the prize money which in 1883 amounted to £53, equal to £3, 825 at today's value. The cash prizes must have represented a considerable perk at a time when a gardener's wage was about £90 per year.

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The First World War must have had an impact on the Society's activities. Arnold Fleming describes the situation after 1918 when 'supported by a band of enthusiasts they bravely resolved to revive the Show after the First World War'. This would indicate that no Show had taken place for some of the wartime period. Money was scarce but with the help of the Glasgow Sweet Pea, Rose and Carnation Society a schedule was issued and the Show took

place. Although he referred to the event as 'an act of faith', it was well supported by the town, marking the re-launch of the Show.

What follows is based on the existing Minutes from 1926. There was now a separate Ladies' Committee whose function was to organize the Arts and Craft section of the Show and also the baking, jams, chutneys and so on, collectively known as the Industrial Section. At this time the Society seems to have returned to its original function of organizing the Flower Show. The minutes of the General Committee and the Ladies' Committee are concerned only with Show matters, such as preparing the schedule, appointing judges and setting prize money, arranging a meal for judges (in McLaughlin's tearoom), vases, staging for exhibits, an orchestra to play and sometimes the pipe band to parade the town. But the educational function which was carried out by the Horticultural Association seems to have disappeared or was certainly not worth recording in the minutes. At the AGM, usually held in early October, prize money was distributed to the winners and the date of the Show was set for the following year. The duties of Secretary and Treasurer were by now combined and an honorarium was paid which in 1929 was raised to 15 guineas per year and to £25 by 1938. The practice of having a paid secretary and treasurer lasted well into the 1970s.

The Show was still an important event in the area and was becoming bigger during this pre-war era. In 1926, there were 497 entries of flowers, fruit and vegetables and 164 entries in the industrial section. In 1931 there was a record entry of 1045 exhibits and 900 people attended. It was widely advertised in the west of Scotland. In 1936 the Secretary was instructed to place adverts in the local paper and the Glasgow Herald and to ask the Automobile Association to put up signs to direct visitors to the Helensburgh Flower Show.

In 1928 a Helensburgh Allotment Holders' Association, which still exists, was formed and the Helensburgh Directories have entries for this until 1939. A section in the Show was dedicated to allotment holders and in 1933 a special prize of one hundredweight (50kg) of fertilizer was awarded to a class for the unemployed. In 1938 a sub-committee was set up to arrange a competition for gardens in local authority housing areas with medals obtained from the Daily Record and from Dobbies.

In 1936 an attempt was made to revive the educational input. The minutes note that 'a course of winter lectures on horticulture would be given and asked for the support of the committee' but no details appear and there is nothing to indicate that the lectures took place.

## THE WAR YEARS

The start of war in 1939 inevitably brought changes. The Show took place in August just before the outbreak of war. In October a small committee was appointed to assist the Town Council in promoting the use of allotments for growing vegetables as part of the war effort. No Shows were held in 1940 and 1941. The next recorded committee meeting was not until 24th January 1942 when it was decided to proceed with a Flower Show, but on a more modest scale, and a "Free Gift Sale" to be held on 22<sup>nd</sup> August. A small committee of three men and five women under the leadership of Mr. Frank Dunbar was set up to organize the event. Admission was 1/- (5p) and there were no cash prizes. Proceeds were to be donated to the County Prisoners of War Fund which was under the auspices of the Red Cross. The distinction between amateur and professional gardeners disappeared. A new class was created for allotment holders who were competing for the first time. There was a separate section for produce grown from seed that had been donated to allotment holders by the American Red Cross. The resulting schedule had a much more practical focus than in the past, with the emphasis on vegetables rather than decorative plants. The Ladies' Committee arranged a grand raffle with children's outfits for prizes.

The Duke of Montrose was asked to open the Show but was unable to do so: the Countess of Murray fulfilled the task. The organizers faced huge difficulties as there was a petrol shortage and little available transport to bring produce to the Victoria Hall. The army was asked to help. Volunteers were sought to collect donations from local farms including those in Glen Fruin. To publicize the event, a short paragraph appeared in the daily paper, "The Bulletin", the local cinemas agreed to screen an advert and posters were put on local buses and trains. The effort and organization were well rewarded as the final sum raised for the war effort, once expenses had been deducted, amounted to £830.5.2 equal to a staggering £27,735.74 at today's values.

The minutes of the post-Show meeting on 23rd September speak of the Society's 'hibernation for two years' after which 'the Society blossomed once more into activity and the past year has seen the inception, organization and fruition of an event unique in form and successful far beyond our highest expectations'. A reference was made to the unsparing efforts of Mr. Dunbar who now became Chairman of the Society and 'whose inspiring leadership and infectious zeal were the foundations of such a wonderful success'.

The success of the Show and Sale in 1942 seems to have revitalized the Society. At the committee meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> November it was decided to resume the educational activities by organizing a series of evening lectures, demonstrations and exhibits from February to May to which members of the Helensburgh Allotment Holders' Association were welcomed.

Similar Shows and Free Gift Sales took place in 1943 and 1944, but the minutes lack detail as to how much was raised, referring only to 'a splendid effort on behalf of the Prisoner of War Fund'. The programme of evening lectures continued and was now advertised in the Helensburgh and Gareloch Times. Nineteen forty-five seemed to be a troubled year for the Society and on 7<sup>th</sup> June a very short minute, which did not give any detail, recorded the decision to abandon the Show. In that year also the indefatigable Mr. Dunbar retired as Chairman and was replaced by Mr. Hood. Perhaps by that time towards the end of the war, energy and enthusiasm as well as many other commodities were in short supply.

#### POST WAR TO THE PRESENT DAY

After the difficulties of the war years, the Show of 1946 was judged to be 'excellent'. Allotment holders competed and were complimented on the quality of their exhibits. Financially, the Society was in a good position with a surplus of £30. On the other hand, support for the winter lectures had been very disappointing. Consequently, it was agreed to cut the number to three to be held in February, March and April. This pattern was maintained throughout the 40s and 50s with a series of successful Shows and an increasing number of entries. In 1949 membership of the Society stood at 135, despite the membership fee being raised to 3/6d (17.5p).

The Centenary Show was held on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1951. The Helensburgh and Gareloch Times gave extensive coverage. Special Centenary prizes were awarded and featuring prominently on the prize list was Wm. Cleland, a future President of the Society. The Centenary celebrations also seem to have marked the beginning of a very active and more social period. An edition of the BBC's Gardeners' Forum was recorded in Helensburgh on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1952. The Bulb Competitions, which have again become an annual feature, were held in March and April. A Chrysanthemum Show, last held in the early years of the century, took place each November between 1957 and 1961, when it was decided to discontinue it due to lack of entrants. The evening lectures and demonstrations were well supported. A Social Committee was set up and the programme of events for autumn and winter included a bus run to Melville Castle Nurseries, visits to local Helensburgh gardens, a whist drive in the Granary Restaurant, a dance in the Victoria Halls and a Committee Dinner. Two other names that would feature prominently in the future events of the Society appeared in 1958: Mr. Tom McColl, who succeeded Mr. Hugh McSkimming as Chairman, and Mr. Archie Leitch who was co-opted as a committee member.

The yearly pattern of a Spring Bulb Show and late Summer Flower Show, evening meetings with some excellent speakers on a great variety of horticultural topics, outings and tours to visit gardens all over Scotland and further afield, has been maintained. This has now taken the



Society past its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Since the 1960s the Society has become more streamlined. The cumbersome system whereby committee members did a door-to-door collection for subscriptions to fund the Flower Show was replaced in the 1970s by a Spring Sale which has developed into the Annual Plant Sale and Coffee Morning - an excellent fundraiser and an important feature in the town diary. The Ladies' Committee which had a separate life of its own became part of the general committee in 1987.

The minutes reveal what prompted the changes that have happened over the last 160 years and how these changes have been brought about. What they do not reveal is the horticultural detail. Carrying out this research prompts the suggestion to add to the material already collected from newspaper sources, and for an archive to be collated which would add colour and substance to the minuted reports. Syllabuses, schedules, pictures and newspaper reports could be held on file so that in the future members would know what was grown and who was best at growing it, who spoke on what topic and where we visited in our pursuit and enjoyment of horticulture.

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