

HISTORY OF HORTICULTURAL SOCIETIES IN CAVERSHAM

By Ian Noble, September 2026

1860 - 1887

The very first Caversham Horticultural Society was founded in 1860 when Caversham was just a village of 362 houses. These houses were typically cottages for agricultural workers and their families (see photo). Away from the centre of the village were large houses of the wealthy residents, including Caversham Park, home to William Crawshay, his wife Isabella and their daughter Sarah. These wealthy people formed the society with the aim of encouraging the cottagers living in the centre of Caversham to cultivate their gardens. They believed that the wholesome pursuit of gardening was better for them than frequenting the pubs and playing skittles. Isabella Crawshay became the President of the Society and Sarah became the main organiser of the society's activities.



Built in the late 17th Century these were probably typical of the cottages at this time

To encourage and reward the cottagers in their gardening a Caversham Cottagers Horticultural Show was organised in August 1861 and was held in the new parish school room, which was roughly where the car park for Waitrose is today. Over 30 people entered in classes mainly of vegetables, but also a few flowers, and honey. There was also a competition for the “best cultivated garden”, which was judged the day before the show by Sarah Crawshay and the committee. The competition was only open to the cottagers/labourers, but the wealthy landowners displayed specimen vegetables from their gardens on a long table in the middle of the room and there was a display of the vegetables grown in the school allotment by the older boys. The prizes were money for the classes and tools for the best gardens. Some new tools for the cottagers would be well worth having. Mr Barkshire, a seedsman and “fruiterer”, based in the Reading marketplace acted as judge. The cottagers who were competing for the best cultivated garden were visited fortnightly to both encourage and advise the gardeners.

This show was successful and so it continued annually, held in the grounds of the larger houses in Caversham Hill and Caversham Rise (half-way to Emmer Green), and then found a permanent home in the Coach House at Caversham Park. The organisers were pleased that the cottagers' gardens became well-kept and therefore that their objective was being met.

These shows were grand Victorian affairs usually with a band, and speeches. In one year, the cottagers were told that some of them had been seen tending their gardens on a Sunday and that in future anyone seen doing this would be disqualified from the show. When the speeches were over and the prizes distributed there were “three-cheers” for the organisers and the treasurer and the national anthem was played.

One class in the early shows was for collections of wildflowers, gathered by children. How very different to today where picking of wildflowers is banned, but also that there obviously was an abundance of wildflowers, but sadly not so today.

Whilst the bulk of the classes at the shows were only open to the cottagers gradually a few classes were introduced that were open to all and some for boys (sadly in Victorian England not for the girls) and some for “Gentlemen Growers”. This meant the wealthier people, who probably employed gardeners, and was not just for men as Sarah Crawshay entered and won prizes.

In 1873 Sarah Crawshay, the main force behind the society and shows died, aged 44, but the shows continued into the 1880s. In 1884 the first handicraft classes were introduced with knitting, and needlework for adults and for girls.

However, after Isabella Crawshay dies in 1885 it seems that shows stop and the society disbands (William Crawshay died in 1869). Isabella was universally loved by the people of Caversham through her kindness and support for everyone living in Caversham.

1897 - 1914

In 1897 the Caversham Horticultural Society was re-formed, largely owing to the efforts of Mr J. C. Heather. A boom in house building since 1860 meant that Caversham had grown significantly with a population of over 6000.

The local MP, **Mr Robert Hermon-Hodge**, became the president of the society and was a fine-looking Victorian gentleman with a “handlebar moustache” (see photo).

Several people agreed to be Vice-Presidents, including Martin John Sutton. He was the grandson of John Sutton who started “House of Sutton”, in 1806, later to become Sutton Seeds. Martin John Sutton also worked in the business performing field trials of new seeds that were developed. After he retired, he lived in and around Caversham renting various large houses and lived for a while in the house at **Rosehill Park**, then called Kidmore Grange, in Emmer Green, almost opposite the water tower, and it is apartments today. He was also mayor of Reading in 1904.

A show was held in August 1897 at Balmore House, owned by Major General Robert Parker Radcliffe. Today the house is apartments and is at the end of Newlands

Avenue. General Radcliffe liked to host events for the community, such as a celebration of Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887. He also donated money to help build a new church, St. John’s, in lower Caversham.

As Caversham was larger and more diverse, the show was divided into separate divisions. Division A for Cottagers (anyone earning 18 shillings or less a week), Division B for Amateurs not employing professional labour and Division C for Assistant Gardeners. There were 150 entries across the classes including vegetables, flowers, plants and fruit.



Mr Robert Hermon Hodge



Rosehill House Today

Again, the show was a success and so became an annual event, at Balmore House, and then later Queen Anne's School meadow. These were also grand affairs with bands, toasts to the Queen, the judges, the committee and so on.

The shows became more than just horticulture, with sports including popular children races introduced in 1900, and a tug-of-war in 1906, as well as some side-stalls with games.

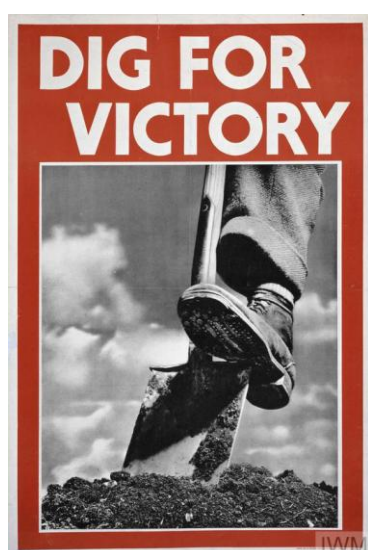
The shows continue into the 20th century, but as Britain entered WW1 in early August 1914 the show planned for later that month was abandoned. Then in November that year the society was wound-up and its remaining funds donated to relief charities connected with WW1.

1920s

After WW1 no Caversham Horticultural Society was re-formed, but there are records of an Emmer Green Horticultural Society holding shows from 1924. In 1928 the show was titled "The Emmer Green and Caversham Horticultural Society Show" which included mounted sports. However, that is all the information found and it is unclear exactly what happened.

1940s

During World War 2, the government launched the **Dig for Victory** campaign to help with food shortages, and people were encouraged to grow food on their gardens, allotments and any spare land. The Ministry of Agriculture produced films and guides for the population as many had never grown vegetables before.



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To help with and support Dig for Victory it was decided to form a new Caversham Horticultural Society and recruitment of members began in 1941. The aim was to support and inform Caversham gardeners about growing their own produce. Things really seem to get going in 1942 with organised talks and showings of Ministry of Agriculture films at the Club Room in the Travellers Rest on the Henley Road and at Caversham Senior School. The talks were educational and mainly advice on growing vegetables, which was important as many people lacked the knowledge needed.

For example, the very first talk, in February 1942, was titled “Manures and Fertilizers” and was given by Mr Healey Corporation Allotments Assistant, at Weston Mead, Church Street. (now **Church House**). Talks have continued every year since through to the present day.

“Victory Garden” shows were held across the country, including Reading, and a victory garden was just a wartime garden where food was grown. The shows were intended to encourage growers and to share best practice. Members of the Caversham Horticultural Society gave produce so that the society could enter the Reading Victory Garden Show in 1942, held in the Cattle Market. The show committee then selected the best produce for the society’s stand at the show, which enabled the society to win the Challenge Cup.



Church House, formerly Weston Mead

The society organised their own show in October that year in the **West Memorial Hall**, Gosbrook Road. This building was originally a church, then a school, and then extended to create rooms for “wholesome recreation” and was available for hire. The name comes from the Reverend Ebenezer West the vicar who originally funded its construction. It was converted into apartments in 2000 and is now called The Waterhouse after the architect.

Classes in the show included vegetables, fruit, flowers and “preserves” (bottled fruit, pickles, chutney and jam). The entrance fee was 3 old pence and, depending on the class the prizes were either 5 or 3 shillings for first, 3 or 2 shillings for second, and 2 or 1 shilling for third (a shilling equals 5 pence in today’s money).

These Autumn Shows have continued ever-since right through to the present day, with just one gap in 2020 due to covid.

During the 1940s the society had nearly 500 members, and the society continued to enter the shows in Reading, and in some years had success winning the Federation Challenge Cup and the Corporation Cup for the best display of vegetables.

In 1945 it was decided to encourage beekeeping by forming a sub-committee and affiliating with the Berkshire Society of Beekeepers.



The Waterhouse, formerly The West Memorial Hall

1950s & 60s

By the 1950s gardening continues to boom and people are growing more flowers as well as vegetables. In 1953 the society starts a summer flower show in June which grew in popularity. In the mid-50s the autumn show had over 262 entries, whilst the summer show had 94 exhibits and trophies start to be presented.

In 1962 the **Trading Shed** opened, selling gardening supplies to members, to generate funds for the two shows, and it is still open on Saturday mornings (February to October) today. In the first year the shed was open every Saturday and Sunday from January all the way through to December. The total takings in the first year were just over £1,348. In December 2025 that £1,348 would be worth £25,000.



This may seem high but with a membership over 700 it is about £2 per member in old money or £36 per member in today's money, and of course there were fewer places to buy supplies back then with Garden Centres only starting in a few places around the country and none in and around Reading. In 1965 the shed reduced opening to Saturdays only from January to the end of November.

The Summer show becomes the Rose and Sweet Pea show, held in Church House or Balmore Hall. At the Autumn Show of 1963 the prizes presented by the Reading Show Queen (Miss Julia Salter). That's very much a sign of the times, but also interesting that Reading must have had so many shows that it was worthwhile having a Show Queen.

In the late 60s there was a threat to wind-up the society as despite a membership of 700 the roles of Treasurer and Secretary remained vacant after the AGM. After this ultimatum two people then came forwards and the society continued. Subscriptions were 5 shillings (25p) at this time.

1970s & 80s

In the 1970s the Summer Show/Rose and Sweet Pea show attracted gardeners from as far away as Bracknell and Newbury resulting in over 200 entries in some years, and prizes were sometimes presented by the Mayor of Reading.

Balmore Hall, where many shows were held, was demolished in 1984, to build the GP surgery, and the shows moved to St. Andrews Hall, and the Arthur Legg Centre, Wolsey Road, now demolished.

The shed reduced opening to Saturdays from February to November.

In the late 70s and 80s making homemade wines and beer became a popular hobby (you could buy kits from Boots), and homemade wine was added to the class list for the Autumn Show. By the mid-1980s the membership was 676.

1990s to Present Day

Shows continued at the Arthur Legg Centre, and Mapledurham Pavillion in 1999 (as well as talks). The Rose and Sweet Pea Show now includes handicraft with 4 knitting classes and any other handicraft, and

at the 1997 Summer Show local MP Tony Durrant displays his cactus which had flowered for the first time in eight years.

The Trading Shed opening sometimes alternated between Saturdays and Sundays, and a Bring and Buy Plant Sale was held at Oakley Road allotments.

Membership is between 620 and 730 and to entice members to the AGM a free glass of wine was included!

Talk topics are now very wide-ranging included gardens and plants from around the world for example China, Crete, Rhodes and India.

The Summer Show in 2000 was held at Mapledurham Pavillion, with sections for roses and sweet peas, flowers (including Sweet Williams, Fuchsias, Pinks and Delphiniums), fruit and vegetables, novice, floral art; cookery and children, but unfortunately this turned out to be the last.

At that time the costs for running two shows kept increasing and despite some funds generated by the Trading Shed two shows were no longer viable. The committee decided to only hold one show, the autumn show, and to cancel the summer show, but as a result the autumn show grew.

In the 2000s the autumn show was held in a marquee as part of the Caversham Festival and in 2007 included "Gardeners Question Time"; and amongst the classes were 3 sticks of Rhubarb; and in Domestic 3 meringues, Apple pie and a loaf of bread. In 2008 Caversham Festival disbanded through the lack of people coming forwards to organise it.

The 2009 Autumn Show was held at Caversham Primary School, with 220 entries. Around this time Jim McCartney was winning most classes and trophies every year and won the Jubilee Shield 25 times. He was well known for having many tricks and techniques for growing the biggest and best vegetables.

In the 2000s the number of members was in the 700s but then starts to decline into the 400s in the 2010s.

Marking 100 years since the boundary change amalgamated Caversham into Reading in 1911, the [Caversham 100 Years On Project](#) in 2011 brought people and organisations together to celebrate Caversham's rich local heritage. This included a Grand Caversham Garden Party September 2011 in **Caversham Court Gardens** at which everyone was encouraged to wear a hat. As part of this event Caversham Horticultural Society held the Autumn Show in a large marquee.



More recently the Autumn Show has been held at Emmer Green Primary School, with talks and the AGM moved to Caversham Baptist Church, and a Spring Show was started in 2024 and is becoming popular.