

Walthamstow Building Society Gardens – p.2

Memories of Keith Nichols [[email](#)], April 2015

Now, where was I? Oh yes, I'd taken on a labourer to help me, and my obvious choice was my pal **Ian Williams**, who helped me when I did have a lot of work on, for he was reliable and very hard working, so he was the ideal chap to help me with this new project, and had always helped me with my fairground equipment, and had travelled miles with me, so he too wasn't afraid of hard graft!

Let's start with the autumn. We had firstly the task of taking out all the summer bedding, literally thousands of plants, and we'd leave them piled high in a prominent spot, with a notice "FREE PLEASE TAKE". Folk didn't need telling twice! **Pat O'Brien**, the manager, of course had given me permission to do this, so beforehand I told Pat to let all his staff know, and for them to come and see me for anything that they wanted - in other words: first choice! There was much to choose from, for Pat had given me a free hand, hence I could create a beautiful garden. There were Zonal Pelargoniums, standard Geraniums, standard Fuchias, and standard forms of Ricinus, Plumbago, Lantana, Perilla, Paulownia, the list was huge! I'd give my father in law loads of plants.

An extraordinary thing happened one morning. Ian and I sat on the far low wall to have a cuppa, for when we'd finished our tea, it was time to commence digging out all the now dead and dying summer bedding, but as we looked further along the path we saw a woman walk up to one of the raised beds, and quickly pull out all the plants, and shoved them in a bag! The strange thing is that she was totally oblivious to us sitting just a short distance away! When she loaded her bag she frantically looked all round to see if anyone was watching, and even then she still didn't spot us!

Anyhow, she rushed off and unbelievably went to the cafe opposite, sat down and we could see her casually drinking tea! ...The cheek of it.

To think that if those plants were to stay in a little longer, as there was still some colour, there would be an empty bed, and without a doubt, I and others would blame vandals.

So the daft thing about this, is that when we'd dug out all the thousands of plants, she could have had as many as she wanted.

Another time a different lady approached me and said: "I like these Daffs!", brazenly holding them in front of me. I could see they were not shop bought ones, so I asked where she got them from, and brazenly again said that she

picked bunches from one of the flowerbeds, pointing to the direction of the long bed that run down the side of Forest Road. I eventually planted a big row of Rosa 'Rugosa', I made a thick hedge of it plus planting more Daffs, hence making it harder for any other would-be-thief, plus making a sort of a barrier to stop people running across the lawn to other flowers in the other beds. On another occasion, Pat asked if I could returf the untidy area. That wasn't really to do with the Building Society, and possibly the Local Councils problem?

It was a small square area that a huge Plane Tree was growing in. I told Pat that I could get the best turf for it, and very good top quality screened top soil too. Pat once again gave me the *all go*. Once the finely graded soil arrived, Ian and me started all the preparation, we'd almost completed our levelling, when a woman came up to us and asked what we were doing. We told her: "The area is being tidied and returfed". Now the crazy part about this is all the while I was explaining to the woman, she was letting her dog walk all over our newly levelled soil. We told her to take the dog off, but she was making out that the dog was pulling hard as if having difficulty in holding the dog back, it was only a Pekinese type dog, she then had the audacity to say that she always took her dog here to do its business, so where was her dog supposed to go now? We knew then that our nice work was not going to stay nice for long!

Yobs do get the blame for a lot of things, but in my long experience, it certainly isn't always the case, I have written a bit about this in my Gardening Book that I have done, and it's true that there really isn't anything as queer as folk! So how about this then...

One autumn, Ian and I planted up thousands of plants and bulbs, and we were keen to see the results, the display was marvellous and was as we hoped it would be, but one morning when we came in we were horrified, for lots of the bulbs were gone! I asked Pat to come and have a look, it was then that I noticed something that didn't ring true, and that the bulbs hadn't been vandalised but actually stolen. How did I know that? - I hear you ask! Well, if they'd been vandalised the bulbs and other plants would be scattered everywhere, but no, someone it seems stole them to order? For it was then that I noticed it was just the one variety that had been stolen, that being a short variety called 'Red Riding Hood'. This variety had been taken from every single bed. How they were not seen beats me, for it must have been a task to lift that lot!

I notified the Walthamstow Guardian, and they printed it, but of course nothing came of it. I still have that press cutting, plus another press cutting with the manager (Pat O'Brien) posing for a photo when we won the "London In Bloom"

competition the first time. I should have been in the photo, but I was away on holiday, a rare thing for me - sadly I might add.

I was actually on holiday house hunting, and I had to tell Pat and all the other directors that I would have to give up the gardens, they were all devastated, but I was vetting very disillusioned, with the ongoing vandalism and thefts etc... Pat asked me if I could recommend any one. Yes, I knew gardeners, but nobody with proper horticultural experience. Anyhow I got talking to a lady gardener that I knew, albeit had never seen any of her work, or what sort of gardening knowledge that she had, the lady had heard all about the *London In Bloom*, and she felt confident to take on the task, but I had the feeling that she'd bitten off more than she could chew, but then who am I to doubt other people's capabilities?

I then moved to the east coast, to start all over again and build up a business from scratch. I must admit I was worried, 'cos nobody knew me here, or what my work was like. Oh, it normally takes a good 5 years to get established, and that was in London where I'd always lived, so a lot of folk knew what I did a living, plus a good many clients under my belt.

I got a brilliant reference from Pat, along with other good references from a good few clients, plus able to show potential clients places where I'd worked in the past and when I was Head Groundsman for the Orient F.C, also looking after their training ground at Clapton.

Not long after moving to Suffolk, a local magazine started up and they asked if I'd do a gardening column for them, and I readily agreed, with just on small stipulation, and that there was to be no editing and what I write, I want printed for I wasn't prepared to do hours of hand writing for half of it to be scrapped, so they agreed to that, and we had 24 happy years together, until the print company folded without warning to anyone: it just simply stopped.

I've kept each and every one of these for they are good to show potential clients when showing these in a folder.

My column was called "**Let Keith lead you down the garden path**". I had a short stint too, working for the Haringey Parks Dept, training lads to build a small parks for "The Job Creation Scheme". The gardens were opened by Councillor **Vic Garwood** in 1975. I also worked for The Royal Parks Dept, but that is another story!

I was to get an unexpected call from Pat, he asked if I could come and do the gardens again, as the lady couldn't cope, and standards were slipping. He knew that it would be a long way for me to come, but he said I could name my price, and pay for Lodgings for me and Ian, who had also moved to Suffolk, to help me with my landscape and fairground work.

I asked my wife on what I should do, and she agreed that the money would be good. I then told Pat that I'd do it, but not to worry about lodgings for me and Ian, 'cos my in laws would put me up at their house in Queenswood Avenue E17, and Ian would stop with his sister in Hale End Road.

Our first port of call was to see **Gordon Barker** at his Chapelfield Nursery in Sewardstone Road, and to order hundreds of boxes of bedding plants, and Gordon delivered them for us. We had the use of the large boiler room to store the plants/bulbs etc... Ian and I worked from 8 in the morning until 10 at night in Summer, relying on street lighting as it got later, and only up to dark in the autumn when it was time to set in all the thousands of bedding plants, and of course the laborious job of planting of the many thousands of bulbs. We were now back in the running for the "London In Bloom" competition again... and we did it! We weren't the only ones, of course: a factory on the north circular, near Hall Lane, won it too, as did a pub on the junction of Oak Hill and Hale End Road. And must not forget my dear friend and very close neighbour **Daniel Doyle**, a much older chap than me, and he was the Head gardener for the Walthamstow Town Hall, he and his staff did some wonderful displays there.

One other nice old chap was **Bill Day**. He lived just off MacDonald Road E17. He had the best kept allotment that I've ever seen in my life, and Bill was ever grateful to me, when I unexpectedly turned up at his house with a full barrowload of plants. In return, I asked if I could make use of a lot of thin rope to use on any of my landscape projects, he said that his son was a lorry driver and had lots to spare!

In fact I used it straight away making more new beds at the Building Society. I have also won the "Lowestoft In Bloom" competition, creating probably what I thought was an enchanting garden (not like it now!) for a B&B.

It was just a large grassed area... a difficult one this... for did I win this as the designer/landscaper of this project? Or was it the owners who had all the financial outlay? For although this was a one off for me, each year after the owners won the competition for another few years, but as others said to me, it didn't seem fair on me, for all the garden was doing was maturing on its own because me and my second eldest son put so much stuff in!

One last story that I simply must tell you about, and that was when I took a few days off from the Walthamstow Building Society Gardens to commence a landscaping project in Monkham Lane, Woodford Green. On my way there I had to drive past Woodford Green police station, a police car was driving out and Ian said: "Keith, that copper is staring at you!"

I said that I could see, and told him that I'd been not only stared at by them over many years, but pulled up and searched many times. I said: "He's bound to pull me up in a minute to make his first Nick of the day for whatever he thought fit"...

He did follow me, and did so until I pulled up outside my clients house. The copper pulled up behind me, then came the usual: "Is this your van sir?"

My name was sign written all over the van, he asked to see inside the van, which of course was full of my equipment, he remarked on all the boxes of bulbs that were next on the list for planting at the Societies gardens, I then showed him a sign that I'd had made, cos Pat had given me permission to have one made to help boost my work, it clearly read "THESE GARDENS WERE DESIGNED AND LANDSCAPED BY KEITH NICHOLS, (GARDENS NOW PLANTED UP AND MAINTAINED BY KEITH NICHOLS)" this of course had my telephone number on the board too.

Whilst the copper was searching my van, I had questions for him too: "Why did you follow me so far before pulling me up?", "Where were you when the Societies gardens were vandalised?", "Where were you when bulbs were stolen?", "How come you were never about when a lady told me that she picks bunches of Daffs every year from the gardens?"...

I didn't hold back in telling him about everything that had gone on their over the last few years, yet there's me going about my work and you pull ME up, I can hold my head way up in the works DEPT can you?

Then the crunch: "If you're so keen to see if I'm legit or not, have a word with my client!". The copper was taken aback, the client (thankfully) came to the door, I said can I introduce you to Judge Alan Hitching! The copper didn't know what to say, I told Alan how I'd been followed and my van searched, and the copper drove off!

I'd known him and his lovely wife Hilda for many years, she was a teacher, and taught my own children, they both gave me a glowing reference for my new clients to see in Suffolk.

Being at the Building Society and creating those ONCE great gardens, is the perfect WALTHAMSTOW MEMORY for me!

Keith Nichols