

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his series of occupational histories with three generations of Harrisons – gardeners, nurserymen and seed merchants.

I haven't inherited green fingers. I wouldn't know a begonia from a petunia. But I've successfully managed to unearth a flourishing crop of gardeners – the Harrisons – from amongst my family history.

My interest in the Harrisons was re-captured about a year ago as I flicked through 'History in Leicester' by Colin Ellis. I happened to pause at the 1828 town map printed on the inside front cover, depicting Leicester before the impact of Victorian industrial expansion. Out on a limb, some distance along Belgrave Gate, I spot a tract of land marked 'Harrisons Nursery'. The cartographer has freckled it with trees. A brook wiggles its way along the northern edge and a small building stands on the main road. Close by there are other enterprises – the gas works, Cort's foundry, lime kilns and an isolated hose factory – with the Leicester Navigation flowing to the west.



A closer study of the map reveals a second, smaller 'Harrisons Nursery', fronting onto Barkby Lane. Harrison is a relatively common surname, but could there be a link with the gardeners in my family tree? Intrigued, I decide to investigate.

The Harrisons prove to be an extensive family, rather tricky to piece together. A trawl through parish registers gives me a basic outline but with many of the same forenames repeated through the generations, I was grateful for

Hartopp's 'Register of the Freeman of Leicester' – an invaluable family history resource – to help distinguish one branch from another.

The rules for admission as a Freeman have changed over the centuries, but until 1835 freedom could be granted in one of four ways: by being the son of a Freeman; by serving a seven-year apprenticeship to a master who was a Freeman; by purchasing your freedom as a 'foreigner' conducting business in the town; or by invitation.

I decide to focus on three generations, all described as gardeners: John Harrison (1719-1788), his son George (1752-1808) and grandson John (1776-1839). As I study the Register I find myself imagining 21-year old George at the Guildhall, swearing his Freeman's oath before his father and the mayor, as the registrar jots down the details:

"George Harrison, 4 s of John, gardener, 27 August 1773"

I'm able to track each of George's brothers and their offspring in turn. As the family expands, a complex story unfolds. Rather like a magpie, I find myself flitting about, drawn to whatever sparkling treasure catches my eye. One such gem I discover online is the 'Autobiographic Memoirs' of distant cousin Frederic Harrison, the historian and jurist. "I cannot say that my family in Leicestershire has ever concerned me an instant," he says rather disparagingly, "There are thousands of Harrisons in those northern counties; and I am supremely indifferent as to which of them I belong to." How irritating, especially from an historian, but at least he provides one or two glimpses of the family:

"John Harrison, my grandfather [and George's brother] was a younger son of a large family of yeoman farmers near Leicester... I gather that they were a sturdy, energetic race, of strong Biblical spirit and hard nature... John Harrison, my great-grandfather, came to own and to farm a not inconsiderable estate... he was renowned as the best farmer of his day that the county of Leicester could boast."

The estate in question was the Stocking Farm. Now it has all but disappeared, subsumed into the housing estates of Beaumont Leys, but the reference helps place the family a mile or two north of Leicester, close to Belgrave.

Frederic refers also in his memoirs to another of George's brothers, Henry Harrison – "a thriving and old-fashioned yeoman farmer of considerable estate round Leicester" – who enjoyed his later years living at Belgrave House. Henry's landholding at Gilroes was later reshaped as the cemetery, and his Newfoundpool estate, bequeathed to his nephew Isaac Harrison, was later redeveloped into a grid of Victorian streets whose initials form the acrostic 'I HARRISON'. But I digress, that's another story.

Instead, I bring myself back to George Harrison, the gardener. What became of him? He doesn't get a mention in the memoirs, apparently lost amongst "our respectable but modest clan". But then the Leicestershire Record Office

comes up trumps; amongst their company records I find a skinny booklet entitled 'Harrison & Sons Bicentenary, 1764-1964'. It starts with a somewhat romanticised tale:

"Somewhere around the year 1760... John Harrison rode off to market on his father's horse, lost everything he had, horse and all, in a disastrous gambling bout, and decamped to join George III's Navy, at that time at war with the French. By 1764, peace had been signed, sailor John had saved enough himself to buy himself out so he returned to Leicester to set up shop in East Bond Street as a nurseryman, greengrocer etc."

From these beginnings, the booklet traces the development of Harrison's nursery and seed business over the next 200 years. Following the founder John's death in 1788, his son George took over the reins. In turn, he was superseded in 1808 by his own son, also John.

"In 1810, John Harrison... was trading from premises very close to the site of the firm's present headquarters off Belgrave Gate... [The 1828 Leicester map shows] Harrisons Nursery together with another (a recent purchase) on the town side of Willow Brook where the Belgrave Gate railway station now stands. The family home, called 'The Willows' can still be found in the middle of the goods yard."

This snippet is just the confirmation I need to link my Harrisons to the map segment that had first captured my interest. Now, could I get a sense of the working life of a nurseryman in Georgian times? No early trading records for the firm seem to survive, so I head for books on gardening history.

I consider what they might have grown. Eighteenth century orchards would have included apple, pear and plum trees as standard, but perhaps the Harrisons experimented with more exotic fruits too; by the 1760s, country house gardeners were growing oranges, figs, grapes and peaches.



From 'Every Man His Own Gardener' by Mawe and Abercrombie (1792 edition)

An increasingly wide variety of early and late sprouting vegetables – coupled with the use of hot beds and glass frames – made it possible to extend the harvest throughout the year. To maximize the yield, broad beans and early potatoes might be planted in the same row; radishes and lettuces could be sown on the bank thrown up by trenches made for celery; and onions and strawberries were often grown side by side.

“The rising interest in gardening stimulated the seed and nursery trades,” writes gardening historian Anne Wilson “and by 1760 at least thirty firms of London nurserymen operated, with about forty in the provinces.” At Harrison’s you might also have found flowers; by 1790 there were eight species being regularly grown for exhibition: hyacinths, tulips, ranunculus, anemones, auriculas, carnations, pinks and polyanthus.

The three trades of gardener, nurseryman and seedsman were distinct, but closely linked. In the case of the Harrisons – with such an extended family network – it’s likely to have been an integrated operation:

“In 1833, the business was further extended by John’s son Thomas Harrison, with the purchase of a shop at the other end of town in King Street. Here he traded increasingly in first class seeds of which the range was rapidly increasing as international trade opened up again after twenty years of war and blockade.”

In Victorian times, a shop was added at 33 Market Place and ultimately the business grew to occupy the Royal Midland Seed Warehouse on Welford Road. But for now, we'll finish with the Georgians.



These days, only a faint footprint of the gardening Harrisons remains. On Welford Road, the former seed warehouse still stands, now converted into student apartments. And Harrison Road runs across lands once owned by the family, heading north to Rushey Fields recreation ground. However, if you set out with the 1828 map in search of the Willows Nursery you'll find yourself at a sprawling Sainsbury's superstore; as the shoppers inside stock up on plums and pears, radishes and tomatoes, little do they realise that the Harrisons – gardeners, nurserymen and seed merchants – were tending their fruit and vegetables on this very site almost 200 years earlier.