

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2011

Suttons Seeds

The May Wargrave Local History Meeting was a presentation by Gerry Westall of two films made about Suttons Seeds. Gerry had been a long time employee of the firm, and so was able to add a personal commentary and explanation to what was shown. The firm had been established in 1806 in Reading, and for a long time was one of the "3B's" for which the town was famed (bulbs - the others being beer and biscuits).

In 1931, in order to help unemployed allotment holders, the Society of Friends (Quakers) had placed an order for 14 tons of vegetable seeds, and the first film was made to record the despatch of this special order. It was very much characteristic of its period - silent, black and white, and with captions, but showed a whole variety of processes. Suttons were a firm who supplied the users of their seeds, and so keeping account of the many orders, invoices and payments provided work for many ledger clerks - each entry being hand written into large bound volumes. There were mechanical aids for some office processes - a Roneo duplicator and a manually fed folding machine, whilst mechanical comptometers were available for some of the calculations needing to be done.

Whilst mechanical methods were, used for some of the cleaning, sorting and bagging processes, many tasks were still labour intensive - the trained eyes of the lady pea pickers spotting the anything that needed to be removed before the seeds were packed. The work was quite dusty, whilst the working parts of the equipment would be considered a safety hazard by today's standards.

The seed rooms were large - the Farm Seed Order Room was the biggest room in Reading without any supporting pillars, and so was cleared for use as a banqueting hall for the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1890 to the town. The vegetable seed room, for example, would hold about 2 million packets of seeds in January - most being sent out in the next 2 or 3 months, whilst there were other seed rooms for flowers and potatoes, and a separate bulb department - and further large stock rooms to keep larger quantities of seeds. Other departments included a laboratory - which looked quite modern for its time - where samples of every batch of seeds would be tested. Eventually, the complete order of seeds was packed into large wooden crates, and packed onto solid tyred lorries for despatch.

The second film was made in 1971, in colour and with a sound commentary, to show what went on in the production of seeds, and to tell some of the history of the firm. Founded in Reading in 1806 by John Sutton, one of a family of millers from Newbury, he had premises in King Street as a corn dealer, later moving to Market Place. In due course his sons, Martin Hope and Alfred joined the firm. In the 1830s, they set about trying to test and find the best types of seed for each type of plant - revolutionary at the time, and Reading became the centre for all that was new in garden seed, as Paris was for fashion. Careful records would be kept of the cross breeding by which new varieties were produced - the pollen from one flower being carefully removed before manually being pollinated by that from another. The plants would then be grown on the extensive trial grounds - not only in Reading, but also in Slough and Cornwall, and when near to flowering, would be brought into the glass houses for closer control. There were concerns, however, that some seed growers were selling seeds that were a mixture of new and old seed. Martin Hope Sutton wanted to rid the trade of the practice, and eventually the Seed Adulteration Act was passed in 1869, Suttons being one of just five firms who lobbied for the introduction of proper testing methods like they already used. By the 1850s and 1860s, Suttons was doing a large amount of business - possibly the first 'mail order' concern in the country. They were the first seedsmen to help growers by providing cultivation notes with their products (in 1856), and gained Royal patronage 2 years

later, being awarded their first Royal Warrant in 1871. The growing of such vast quantities of seed involved specialist farmers - not only in Britain, but abroad, from as early as 1883. To ensure that these seeds then reached the customer in as good a condition as possible, the company developed processes to 'put the seed to sleep' and seal them into foil packets, so they would be as virile as possible once sown. Selling such a wide range and quantity world-wide meant they had to send a million catalogues out each autumn.

In due course, the town centre site was wanted by the Council for a road scheme, and so Suttons moved to a new purpose built premises on part of the Seed Trial Grounds, at Earley, in 1965. Here they stayed until 1976, when they moved to Devon - the firm remaining a family run business until the late 1970s.

A 'Wargrave connection' exists with the Sutton family - Martin Hope Sutton's son, Martin John, - a partner in the firm from 1871, and its head from 1887, lived for a while at Wargrave Manor, whilst in 1903 his daughter, Emily Kathleen, married the Revd Basil Staunton Batty - Vicar of Wargrave from 1911-14.

The Illustrated Book of
WARGRAVE



Historical images of a Berkshire village

In June the Society will be taking part in the Wargrave Village Festival, with Historic Village Walks (now sold out). The Society's new book, The Illustrated Book of Wargrave, will also be published during the Village Festival.

Then on Tuesday, July 5th, the Society will visit Stonor House, the home of the Camoys family for 850 years, which is a fascinating collection of medieval buildings behind a Georgian facade.

The next formal meeting takes place on Tuesday, September 13th, when Peter Smith will tell us about the Royal State Coaches - using his detailed scale models to illustrate his talk. The location of this meeting will be confirmed in due course.