

Seeds of Success

by Doug Bradbrook

In the early 1960s, Bill Hannah and I were both farm workers looking to make a bit of extra cash. So we built a small, lean-to greenhouse on the side of my tied cottage, growing tomatoes to sell at the roadside. Quite how we managed to turn that into one of Yorkshire's best-known nurseries still surprises me. This is the story of how we did it and also the tale of my boyhood, to show you where this spirit of enterprise took root.

*This book is dedicated to my wife
Janet and to my business partner
Bill Hannah and his wife June,
who is my sister. And to my children
Jonathan, Matthew and Julia, my
niece Fiona and all the staff, past and
present, who have helped to make
Ravensworth Nurseries a success.*

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Chapter One

Germination

YOUNG people who want to start their own business often ask Bill and I, “How did you start a place like this from nothing?” The truth is, I don’t really know how we managed it. But I do know that a lot of sweat and determination went into it, plus a bit of luck, the most lucky thing perhaps being that we both have wives who have been prepared to put up with us working long hours and refusing to retire, though they are very proud of what we’ve achieved. I run Ravensworth Nurseries near Richmond, North Yorkshire, with Bill Hannah, who married my sister June. Lots of people still call it Bradbrook and Hannah, which was the original name. My sons Jonathan and Matthew and Bill’s daughter Fiona are all partners. Today’s customers see a vast expanse of glasshouses glinting in the sunshine, sheltering millions of plants. Computers

control the temperature, opening and closing windows, rolling out thermal screens, doing the watering and triggering alarms at the slightest problem. Heat comes from an environmentally friendly biomass boiler which burns waste wood. It looks, and indeed is, big business. So it is difficult even for me to believe that it all started in a tiny lean-to greenhouse propped up against the side of a tied cottage four miles away where my wife Janet and I started our married life and when I was still a farm labourer.

But let me take you back first to my early life. Like so many other babies of the Thirties, I was born into a family who were existing on very little money but somehow my father and mother always managed to keep me and my sister June warm, well fed and reasonably well dressed. I was born on November 27th 1934 in the little village of Whorlton, which was then in Yorkshire and has since been shifted into County Durham but I still consider myself a Yorkshireman. Barnard Castle is the nearest large town. My father worked as a groom at a big house nearby called Wycliffe Hall and was later promoted to head groom. After I arrived, my parents lived in various different places but all close enough for my dad to either walk or bike to his work and I have memories going right back to that time, though I must have been extremely young. When I was only about 18 months old, we were living in the village of Hutton Magna in a house with the grand name of Sparrow Castle. There's a Catho-



Me aged about two

lic church there and in 1936 the end of it blew down in a severe gale, even though it was made of stone. People were salvaging what they could and my mother took me in the pushchair to collect some of the splintered timber and pews for the fire. So I got a ride on the way there but I had to walk the half mile back because the pushchair was full of wood. According to my mother, I was an early walker and got on my feet at about nine months - I wanted to get on, you see. Around the same time I can remember my dad making a snowman after it snowed very heavily and he put a carrot on for the nose, then coal for the eyes. That was probably the winter of 1936. I also remember walking round a table in the kitchen and I was reaching my hands up to the table top, so I can't have been very old, and I fell and twisted my ankle.

Very few people had cars in those days and there wasn't much public transport, so some of these small villages and hamlets were very isolated in the Thirties. Today they're just a couple of minutes drive from the A66. My mother came from the village of Staindrop about seven miles to the north and although it was hardly a steaming metropolis, it was quite big and had better connections to the towns. There were street lights and electric lights in the houses - my grandmother always called it gas, "Put the gas on" she'd say, because before electricity, the lights had been gas. I couldn't understand why she was "putting the gas on" with

the electric switch. I think my mother found it difficult in the tiny communities in which she lived with my dad and she must have got so fed up that for a while we ended up at Staindrop in a cottage just down the road from her parents. She was only young, in her early twenties, and loved dancing and seeing her friends, so it was understandable but this move must have been rather tough on my father who now faced a long cycle ride to work and back on top of long hours. My grandparents had a little two-roomed single storey house where space was so limited that my grandfather slept in a bed in the kitchen which pulled down from the wall from what looked like a wardrobe.

Also living there was a little boy called Laurence, known as Laurie, who was my mother's son from a previous relationship. My dad would have been happy for him to join us when he married my mother but I suppose my half brother was settled with my grandparents and he remained with them. He had one of those toy cars that you pedal, which my mother had bought from the stamp store – that's the name we gave to the Co-Op opposite our house in Staindrop. You got stamps for shopping there which you could then use to buy more things. Anyway, my mother decided to get one of these pedal cars for me as well and that was wonderful. In 1936 there was the Abdication, when Edward VIII gave up the throne to marry an American called Wallis Simpson. He couldn't remain King and marry her because



Left: My parents, Ruby and Alf, outside the gates to Wycliffe Hall. The Lodge, the second of the houses on the estate in which we lived, is just inside the gates. Below: my father on one of the Wycliffe horses



she had been divorced and British Kings aren't allowed to marry divorcees. It was a huge crisis and opinion was split down the country between those who thought he should be allowed to be with the woman he loved and those who felt duty came first. My grandmother thought that Wallis Simpson was a troublemaker and I clearly remember her saying, "Oh son, that wicked, wicked woman!"

My half-brother and I both had mumps at Staindrop and my grandparents looked after us because it got too much for my parents. My dad wasn't a young man when he got married, about 42 – he told my mother he was 32 but by the time she found out the truth she was pregnant! They were married in the June and I arrived in the November. Today we don't see people in their forties as old but in those days people had much harder lives, food wasn't as plentiful, medical care was very basic and my dad was finding things a bit tough. He had to bike back to his job at Wycliffe and in the hunting season he had to go very early in the morning to get the horses ready. Sometimes he'd come back at lunchtime and then return to sort out the horses again and he was really too old to be biking that distance.

My sister June was named after the month in which she was born, on the 26th to be exact, and that was in 1939 just before war broke out. I don't know where I'd picked up a swearword but I used it when I rushed round to my grand-

parents' house to tell them my mother was starting to have the baby. My grandfather, who was about 60 then, opened the door and said, "What is it son?" But I just rushed past him into the bedroom where my grandmother was and said, "Oh, it's only the bloody belly in her back." I suppose after that they decided I must be growing up fast because shortly after, my mother took away my dummy, to which I was still very attached. I was sitting on the stairs quite happily with this little comforter in my mouth when my mother said, "You won't need that, you have a sister now" and she threw the dummy into the fire.

Not long before the war broke out on September 3rd 1939, when June was only a couple of months old, we moved to Wycliffe Hall to a coach house in the stable yard, so my dad was living right next to his job and today I live right on top of my job too. Wycliffe Hall is a very beautiful old building, medieval at its heart but mainly 18th century, in a lovely spot on the River Tees and now Grade II listed. Although our home in the coach house was far more humble, it was a marvellous area for a young boy to grow up in.

All the horses in my father's care were hunters because the work horses were down at the Home Farm nearby. There was a quadrangle with stables, coach houses, a blacksmith's shop and a modern garage for the cars. These were under dust sheets for the duration of the war because there was

no petrol for private use and I remember an 8-litre Bentley being taken away to be made into an ambulance. The big house itself was very large, with rooms stretching off for ever, as it seemed to a small boy. It was the home of Charles Peat, an accountant by profession who at the time was also Conservative MP for Darlington, his wife Ruth and their children. I was very good friends with David Peat, one of the sons, who was a year and a half older than me. I often went into the house with him but I wouldn't have dreamt of going in uninvited because they were a class apart. He had four older sisters and a brother.

I knew he had a lot more toys than I did but he was generous and brought me books and things and I just accepted that's the way it was, I never resented it. Mr Peat was very generous and I wouldn't have been able to go to agricultural college later on if he hadn't given me ten shillings a week to live on (50p but of course worth a great deal more then). So I was very grateful for that. I could never have afforded it and my parents couldn't afford to give me anything and the grants weren't like they are now.

We had quite a decent house with a big kitchen, a bathroom along from there, a sitting room that we used only on high days and holidays because having a fire in there all the time would have been too expensive, and then two bedrooms upstairs. My sister and I shared a room, with her in

her cot and me in a little bed. The toilet was outside but it was a flush toilet, so it was all quite modern really for a rural home at that time. You had to go across the yard to the toilet and I remember the damn rats in the yard who came scurrying out of the stables but I didn't mind because I was so used to them. Our first winter was a very bad one and the water pipes froze because they weren't lagged as they are today. The stable yard got full of snow which had to be cleared and they had a hell of a job to exercise the horses.

My dad was a small chap, about 5ft 3in tall, weighing eight stone, and had been a jockey but he was very strong and did heavy work. He was very quiet and calm as anything, which was why he was so good with the horses. We used to get on well together and sometimes I helped him in the stables. My dad worked every day with no time off except holidays and did very long hours. He was up by 5.30am to feed the horses – there were 18 of them - because if he didn't feed them early they were too blown up to go out. In winter, Mr Peat would often hunt all day and in the middle of it my father would take a fresh horse out to him and bring the other back.

(end of first extract)



My father in the stable yard at Wycliffe Hall

(beginning of next extract - by now Doug is married)

It was in that winter of 1963, when temperatures plummeted and many places were cut off by snow, that Bill and I (Bill is his business partner at Ravensworth Nurseries) decided to build our first greenhouse in the field behind the cottage. It was so cold we had to put the sections together in an outbuilding. In March, when spring was on the way, we put down the foundations and up it went. It was a little lean-to, just 12ft wide and 20ft long (3.6m x 6m). You might ask from where this dream of greenhouses came, a tiny project which grew into the big business that Bill and I run today. Well, we had the bright idea that if we could grow a few tomatoes, we could sell them at the roadside to people passing by, especially those on their way to Whorlton Lido, the swimming place on the River Tees.

Neither Bill nor I had been married very long but were both working increasingly long hours and our wives were left on their own a lot to cope. They helped as well when they could. When we built that first greenhouse, which we did entirely by ourselves with basic tools, Bill and I were still both full time farm workers. At 6 o'clock he and June would come over from The Lodge, where they were living with my parents, and June would stay with Janet in the house while we worked until 9 o'clock every night. Then we'd work all day Sunday. The first winter we grew chrysan-

themums, then built a propagating house. Over the next few years we added more glasshouses until we were running quite a large enterprise, growing about 800 tomato plants and cucumbers inside and strawberries out in the field. We got our seed from Pine Tree Nurseries in Cornwall, who used to advertise in *The Grower* magazine. A lot of those early tomatoes we grew, like Moneymaker and Ailsa Craig, weren't F1 hybrids which meant they weren't virus-resistant. Moneymaker is still popular today because people know them but it's not an F1. Shirley was one of the first F1s that we had, and that was a big advance. That's probably my favourite and we still sell them as plants. The Ailsa Craig has a lovely flavour but doesn't look as good, so it isn't attractive to sell, which is a shame.

You might be asking how we acquired all these skills with little formal training but Bill and I were fellows of the land. His father had had a smallholding and I had studied horticulture at college as part of my agriculture course. There was a lot of trial and error but I read as much as I could about it - reading's a great thing - and we tried to find out about all the latest innovations. At that time there were no great specialists in the way there are today so it was more feasible to get started in a general way. The first electric heater we had was a little one with three bars which we'd seen advertised. It gave out hardly any heat and was expensive to run. Later we progressed to boilers and the

first little one cost about £100 and heated pipes round the propagator house. At Wycliffe in those early days, we had only an acre of land and that belonged to the farm, not us, and we could see that there wasn't much point in going on because we couldn't expand enough to be viable. Other horticultural businesses were expanding and glasshouses were getting bigger and bigger and we knew we'd have to move elsewhere to be able to compete. So we began to make plans but never expected the nursery to grow to this size. Things just grew and grew.

Meanwhile the hens were still demanding attention and in 1964 we got rid of them completely because it wasn't worth carrying on in competition to the huge battery farms which were emerging across the country, making the price nothing. There was another change around this time, which was that David Peat, who had been a sleeping partner in our greenhouse venture, decided to opt out, not being able to see a lot of future in our horticultural business (he was wrong there, of course, but there were no hard feelings, it was just business) and we were able to pay what he was due from selling the hens.

Being a young man, I loved my fast cars but realised they didn't fit in with having a young family and trying to expand a business but I did own a couple of other Jaguars before I decided finally that the money would be bet-

ter spent elsewhere. In one of the cars I bought, I found a blood-stained flick knife under the seat, so I got rid of that pretty quick. I ended up with a 3.4-litre Mark II which cost £750 and that's the one I swapped for a field and a Ford Anglia. That field was the beginning of the nursery as it is now and the Ford Anglia became our family car. Our first piece of land covered 2.24 acres on the edge of the village of Ravensworth, just a few miles away from where I was living. Bill and I paid £700 for it at auction in 1966 and that was the very beginning of Ravensworth Nurseries, or Bradbrook and Hannah as it was then. The plot was in the middle of the current nursery, on the right hand side if you approach us from the village. There was no planning permission for development but we were hopeful we'd get it, which we did.

Looking back, if Bill and I had had any sense we'd have moved elsewhere to a better climate and flatter land but we couldn't because we didn't have masses of capital to live on while we built up a new place. We had to choose somewhere local because we were both continuing to work in our full time jobs plus we were still growing produce in the original greenhouses behind my home at Waterside Cottages. It was a terrific juggling job, trying to establish a new business which could pay its way and making plans for where Janet and I and June and Bill would live. The only good thing about all this struggle was that we hardly borrowed any

money, so didn't start with a lot of debt round our necks, though later we had an overdraft and a mortgage. It has always been our policy to be careful about borrowing money and even though we borrowed quite significant sums later on to invest in new technology, it was only over short periods because no-one knows how the economic climate is to change, as has been demonstrated painfully in 2008.

We bought the field in November 1966 and then got planning permission to build glasshouses and I have to say that Richmondshire District Council have always been very supportive of the business in this respect, though obviously regulations have tightened up over the years. We also got permission for Janet and I to build our own house, which is by the entrance to the bedding plant areas.

Things were very hand-to-mouth. Living in a tied cottage, I couldn't even consider leaving my farm job for the new business until we had somewhere else to live. My uncle died and left £600 each to my sister June and I and that was enough to begin building the first house. Janet had a friend in Somerset whose husband was an architect and he designed a three-bedroom dormer bungalow for us and we had just enough money to have it built up to the first level. Gradually the new house began to take shape, with Bill and I putting down the foundations and then builders taking over. But we all pitched in where we could to save money

and I can remember even Janet carrying bricks. In those days, once you'd got a house to that first level, you could get a mortgage and that provided the money to complete the work. In 1967 Janet and I packed up our things at Water-side Cottages and moved into our new home, which was a big step up from what we had been used to.

Those early days were very tough both for me and for Janet, who was on her own a lot. I couldn't have had the home and family I enjoyed if she hadn't been there to manage it all. I was working full time on the farm and then each evening came over to Ravensworth building glasshouses and later on opening windows, checking the boiler and doing watering. Bill was also working full time, later at Glaxo in Barnard Castle. It took about five months to build the first glasshouse at Ravensworth and it was a hell of a job. I had help from a lad to hold beams up and so on. There were about 180 windows for which I had to make frames and then glaze. I didn't even have an electric drill, just a hand-propelled one.

The gutters were heavy galvanized steel which were such good quality that, even though the glasshouse no longer exists, we're still using the gutters for other things. The cross beams were points from the railway bought at a scrap sale at Crook in County Durham which must have been from when Beeching axed so many country railway

lines. They were very heavy steel and took some drilling, I can tell you, and they're still in use as glasshouse benches. Once we'd built that first glasshouse, we had to rotavate the soil inside and put in heating pipes which were ex-Army steel – great heavy things, you can't get steel like that today. We got the first crop of tomatoes in there in March 1967 and that was quite a feat in such a short time.

During this intensely busy period our second child, Jonathan, arrived on July 27th 1966. Bill's daughter Fiona was born in the April of 1966, so it was a tremendous time for both of us, very joyful with the arrival of the children but incredibly long working hours. Looking back to the early days, we were working ourselves to death but we were young and fit and just got on with it. I'd be up early in the morning and then working through until 10pm. One night there was a beautiful moon shining and I could hear the farmer on his tractor in the next field singing, not thinking anyone else would be out working at that hour.

Our wives Janet and June thought we were doing too much but nothing's changed there in 40 years. I am completely focused on my work and some people call me a workaholic and I plead guilty to that but I always knew that if I didn't work for something, nobody was going to give it to me. (end of extracts)



Me with Bill



Bill and I in the early Seventies