

PERCY THROWER (1913 - 1988)

SHOW BOOK PHOTO

If ever there was a Shropshire Icon worthy of appearing on a banknote, it is this man....well for today's audience we could lose the pipe but maybe replace it with Percy's trademark trilby and maybe a companion gundog! *Nearly all celebrity gardeners show their dogs on camera. But Percy was the first.* Percy was the last and one of the relatively few Salopians, whether by birth or adoption, to have become a household name, following on from Darwin, Lord Hill and Clive of India.

Whilst Darwin was Shropshire born - his achievements were attained outside the county and with little regard for his birth county and he still achieved banknote commemoration!

Percy was not a native Salopian but his achievements were not only acquired whilst living at his adopted home but shared with the local community. What more do you need to be considered the principle 'Shropshire Icon'.

Percy was born in Buckinghamshire in 1913. Son of the head gardener at Horwood House, which lies 2.5 miles from Winslow and may be familiar to many of you as it now functions as a Warners Leisure Hotel. Percy's dad, Harry, was a Suffolk man. The surname, Thrower, derives from an East Anglian term that means someone who twists fibre into thread or yarn. Harry was attracted to Bucks in his late '20's by new money. Frederick Denny was a pork and bacon magnate who had completed the building of Horwood a couple of years before Percy was born and needed someone to build a garden to match the house which functioned as a family weekend retreat.

So you could say that Percy enjoyed a rural childhood, learned respect for his elders and betters (which he maintained even in his celebrity years) and was used to a 365 day work regime. He was schooled at the local village school with no more than 40

attendees. In such an environment it wasn't a surprise that Percy left school at 14 to become 'crock boy' (the lowest rank in the garden hierarchy) at Horwood House. Here he learned about gardening fundamentals and how to work with people. He even learned flower arrangement, considered a man's job in those days, to prepare the hall for weekend visitors. So watching, asking and trying was the way that Percy learned his trade - not possible to do in today's world!

At 16, the depression hit the UK, and new money was not exempt from its effects. Through his many connections Harry Thrower found his son employment at the Royal Garden in Windsor under Charles Cooke, which was thought to be a more secure environment! The now dapper Percy, who took great pride in his appearance, was employed as an 'improver'. Still a lowly position.

In fact, it was prudent that he left his father's employ because by 1931 the workforce at Horwood had been reduced from about 50 to 7 and indeed would cease to be in the Denny family much after Harry died at the age of 57, in 1939.

Percy made steady progress at Windsor and became a journeyman gardener - he also formed a relationship with the boss's daughter, Constance, but was in too lowly a position to court a Royal Head Gardener's daughter. However, things were not so rosy in the royal garden with the arrival of Edward and Mrs Simpson. Gardener numbers were much depleted but with the help of the dowager Queen Mary, Charles Cooke was moved to Sandringham, where he spent the rest of his life.

Just before Constance left for Sandringham, in 1935, Percy, through his seed merchant contacts, heard and was successful in obtaining a job in Leeds. So he became journeyman gardener at the City of Leeds Municipal Parks department. Imagine the culture shock of leaving stately homes for the back/back! At least he

managed to pass his RHS General Examination during his time in Leeds. He experienced a different type of gardening, arboretum work and propagating plants for public space displays to that in the great houses he had started at.

In 1937, he moved to Derby with a promotion to foreman before becoming assistant Parks superintendent. He also, joined the Freemasons, which couldn't help but assist his employability! These promotions gave Percy confidence to renew his courtship of Constance and the couple became engaged in 1938 and married on the Sandringham Estate during the phoney war of 1939. There was no honeymoon, all leave cancelled. Percy and his wife were back at work on the Monday morning.

Percy was considered to be in a reserved occupation and was rejected the 2x he volunteered for service. Instead, he became a fire-watchman, special constable and did something which would support his future career when he was trained (thanks to Boots Co. Research Centre public speaking course) to support the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. He quickly realised how popular leisure gardening could be and realised that both vegetable and flower gardening were important to many.

During his time at Derby, Percy worked on his RHS National Diploma in Horticulture, which he passed at the second attempt! At 32, at the start of 1946, he attained the superintendent's job in Shrewsbury. He knew the area quite well, and had often accompanied his father to Shrewsbury Show (considered the 2nd most important Horticultural show after Chelsea) when his father was a judge there.

He held this post for the next 28 years until he retired in 1974. His employers were very helpful in providing time off for later broadcasting duties. Seeing Percy has an asset for both tourism and local morale. But all did not go well to start with!? His first task was to remove a popular avenue of Lime trees in Quarry Park

which had been planted too close together over 150 years earlier! He didn't make many friends over this action. But eventually, a genetically dissimilar variety of Lime was sourced to form the planting that we see today.

Percy is best known as the face of gardening broadcasting - which kicked off in 1948 when Godfrey Baseley, presenter of the radio series 'Beyond The Back Door', visited the Dingle and sought out our Percy as Head Gardener. After discussions, a 10 minute slot on the subject of 'planting shrubs' was commissioned. It was clear that Percy possessed expertise as a broadcaster which included love of the subject, modesty and that singular mongrel accent (part Bucks/part Midlands) so much remembered. This initial broadcast spawned a regular contribution to the show which later ran under the title of 'In Your Garden'.

TV work started in 1951, with a piece about the 'English Garden' in Berlin (a garden that Percy had collaborated on since 1949- both designing and sourcing plants and shrubs - showing that, for Percy, the power of horticulture outshone nationalistic post-war bias).

Further TV work followed, first presenting gardening items on 'Country Calender' then 'Out and About' followed by 'Gardening Club'. The studio garden used for Gardening Club didn't really work for colour TV - so this ushered in the current show, 'Gardener's World'.

Around 1960 a tranche of land became available in Bomere Heath. Thinking of his retirement, Percy who was provided with Quarry Lodge as part of his job (situated near the blue gates at the entrance to Quarry Park), built a 4 bed bungalow on the site. The property was named via an 'Amateur Gardener' magazine competition- Magnolias! Today it would be called Planty mcPlantface! Much more sophisticated back then.

At Magnolias, 1.5 acres of garden land was available to start to develop in 1963 (with an 8 year window planned for completion). Thus started the trend still used today on Gardener's World for a home garden designed for TV cameras (which in the day were huge compared to today's apparatus) and viewer interaction. The design was based on the look on camera and individual sections of planting aimed to make the garden appear huge for the TV viewer.

From 1966, this garden was opened for public inspection. Another trend used today in the form of charity 'Public Garden Open Days'. At the time, a boon to the local economy when thousands of visitors passed through the door each open day.

I mentioned the magazine, 'Amateur Gardener'. Percy, had written articles since his arrival in Shrewsbury, both for local and national newspapers and magazines like Amateur Gardener. For his books, his editor devised a method whereby he spoke into a tape recorder and so kept his verbal style of delivery transferred onto the written page. He wrote at least 11 best sellers of which Everyday Gardening in Colour published in 1969 was reprinted for nearly 20 years and sold 1.5 million copies!

It's not surprising that Percy became known as 'Britain's Head Gardener' and accolades followed. TV - This is Your Life (1976) and the Morecombe And Wise well before Angela Rippon's legs! RHS - Associate of Honour for distinguished service. Victoria Medal of Honour (only ever awarded to 63 living people - 1 for every year of Q.Victoria's reign. An award not won by either his father or father-in-law).

1984 saw him awarded a MBE.

He had a Madam Tussaud's wax work - which he never visited and no longer exists!

He was one of the earliest hosts for celebrity cruises - for gardening enthusiasts.

Whilst working with the BBC in the early '60s, Percy had been allowed to sign a contract with the Plant Protection Limited, a division of ICI, to perform at corporate events and lecture tours, as long as he didn't advertise products on air. As he reached retirement age, he succumbed to make TV commercials for ICI and so retired from the BBC, which never were generous employers. This advertising income provided the bulk of the £600k he would leave in his will. Although, he did remain working with BBC, the gardening expert for children's Blue Peter programme.

Probably his most lasting local act, was to part invest to purchase Murrells of Shrewsbury's old rose production site, off of the A5 just outside Shrewsbury. This became the PT Garden Centre and was eventually run as a family business with the help of his 3 daughters and himself. He was always on hand when time allowed to help the public and show off his beloved Fuschia collection. Today, the name remains if little else of the original Garden Centre.

In 1985, Percy was diagnosed with Hodkin's disease and died 18th March 1988. 'And so Percy goes from us to be replanted in the hereafter' so said the vicar of Bomere Heath.

A Shropshire Icon often copied but never surpassed and worthy of being glorified as the most treasured national Shropshire Icon since Darwin!