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CIRCULATING IN EDGBASTON, THE WEST END SUBURB OF BIRMINGHAM.

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EDGBASTONIANS PAST AND PRESENT.

MR. ROBERT SYDENHAM.

To every dweller in Edgbaston who takes an intelligent interest in his or her garden—whether it consists of “lordly acres” or is a mere strip so small that there is barely room in it for the neighbours’ cats to frolic comfortably—the name at the head of this biographical sketch is very familiar; and to no one is it better known than to the young beginner who is anxious to cultivate his little patch to its utmost capacity, but has little knowledge of what plants can be best induced to grow under the smoke-tainted skies of Birmingham. A careful study of Mr. Sydenham’s annual catalogues, which contain just the advice most needed, has saved

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many a would-be horticulturalist those bitter pangs of disappointment resulting from attempts to attain the impossible with herbs or flowers that *will not* bloom in the kind of spring which is usual in a great manufacturing centre such as ours. Under his advice they can obtain their little stock of crocus, hyacinth, tulip, daffodil, or iris, with the certainty that they will see good results in return for their outlay and trouble—something which will come forth at the appointed time when, according to Reginald Heber, “Spring unlocks the flowers to paint the laughing soil,” and, with masses of colour—golden, purple, scarlet, or brightest blue, make beautiful even the scantiest enclosure surrounded by high brick walls and overshadowed by neighbouring houses.

Mr. Robert Sydenham's name as a most successful bulb grower and importer is, however, known far beyond the confines of Birmingham. Throughout the length and breadth of the British Islands there can be hardly anyone who loves gardening who has not heard of him, and profited by his advice. The writer of this sketch had a visit a few years ago from an artist-friend who is a dweller in the uttermost ends of Cornwall, where he has a small garden on the top of a wind-swept hill. Almost the first thing he said when he got out of the train was, “Where is Tenby Street?” To one, who at that time regarded a garden as merely a suitable spot for practising golf drives and approach shots, this question appeared somewhat mysterious, and ignorance of the locality was confessed without a blush. “Well, we shall have to find it,” continued the painter, “for I'm not going home without some of Sydenham's bulbs. I've tried a good many in my time, and his are not to be beaten.” This is only one instance out of many which show how his reputation has spread throughout the land.

Mr. Sydenham is not a Birmingham man by birth. He was born at Salisbury, and received his first education under the shadow of that magnificent cathedral, and later on studied for four years at Christchurch, near Bournemouth. In those days that now fashionable watering-place was little more than a hamlet of some twenty houses. However, when still in his teens, in 1862, he became “one of us,” by taking up his residence in our midst, and since then, with that pluck, pertinacity, and capability for hard work which characterizes him, he has worked his way up the ladder of success to a position of which he has every reason to be proud. Indeed, it is doubtful if the commercial history of Birmingham, rich as it is in records of self-made men, contains a parallel to the striking example of the particular business now under notice, built up by Mr. Robert Sydenham from such small beginnings.

He served his apprenticeship to a firm of general merchants, and his duties were for a time of a varied character, while his hours of work were long ones, being from nine in the morning

until nine or ten at night on every day in the week. In those hard-working days there were no Saturday half-holidays, and Bank Holidays had not been invented, while such a thing as an "eight hours day" was undreamt of by those who were anxious to get on in the world. The young apprentice had to assist in lighting the office fires, in delivering goods, "passing" goods coming from the manufacturers, and to help in the packing and forwarding department. He soon proved his fitness for more responsible work than this, and before he was twenty he was entrusted with the management of his firm's shipping department. In this post he was responsible for the safe and accurate despatch and shipment of consignments to all parts of the world, and it was his pride to say that not a single packet ever went wrong. Further promotion came in due course, and he was sent to represent his firm in the United States, over the greater part of which he travelled while successfully extending the business, which consisted of general English merchandise and hardware, including such things as guns, powder and shot, paints, wall papers, and clothing.

He speaks of his life and travels in the United States with much pleasure, having always been well received wherever he went, and he left America with regret when, in 1872, in accordance with the wishes of his parents and friends, he returned to join his elder brother, George, in business, a partnership in the firm to whom our subject had been apprenticed having been offered the two brothers if they would open a wholesale jewellery business in connection with it—another striking testimonial to their high business capabilities and their integrity. The younger brother, William, became a partner some years later. Mr. George Sydenham travelled in the North, and Mr. Robert, for a time, superintended at home, but the acquisition of another jewellery business led the latter, who was then about twenty-four years of age, to again take the road, and he travelled the Southern half of the country. He had everything to learn and many old-fashioned prejudices to overcome, for when he started he knew nothing whatever of the trade or the customers, yet he prides himself that in five years he was not only master of his trade but had increased fivefold his predecessor's greatest turnover.

Hard work suited him to perfection, and he constantly journeyed about the country for from twelve to sixteen weeks at a stretch. In 1882 he married, and then gave up regular travelling for the firm. It is not the place here to speak of the success which has attended Mr. Sydenham and his two brothers in their business, but it must not be imagined because he is engaged so largely in horticultural pursuits that he has relaxed his interest in the former. He still takes the management of the financial part of the concern, a position which entails plenty of work. By the way, it is to the credit of Sydenham Brothers, as much as to anyone, that the

process of hall-marking became general, thereby putting an end to many questionable practices indulged in by unscrupulous members of the trade. Another detrimental custom, which Mr. Robert Sydenham, who never believed in asking for or granting long credit, has done much to break down, was the system of long credit which prevailed in the jewellery trade more than any other.

All the brothers are equally keen lovers of flowers, but Mr. George Sydenham, who for many years past has devoted himself to the selection of the precious stones—the diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and sapphires—so largely used in their jewellery business, has had to restrain his tastes in that direction, on account of the necessity of keeping his eyes perfectly clear and free from any strain that may affect the keenness of vision so necessary in the selection of choice gems. Mr. William Sydenham, however, who resides at Tamworth, and for the greater part of his time travels for the firm, has emulated his brother Robert to such purpose that he, too, has taken a place in the very front rank of the horticulturalists of the time by his phenomenal success as a grower and exhibitor of pansies and violas, by which he has attained the very highest honours, and developed an immense business, as may be imagined when it is known that he yearly grows about five acres of these delightful flowers.

It is probably owing to the fact that he has always been an early riser that Mr. Robert Sydenham is able to accomplish so much. He is rarely in bed after six a.m., sometimes rising at five, and even earlier, and yet possesses so much energy that he gets through the longest day without tiring. One of his friends says of this habit of his that, "Sydenham often takes a week's holiday among his flowers before breakfast." These earliest hours of the day he almost always spends in his garden, and then leaves home soon after eight for Tenby Street, where both the jewellery business and his ever-growing seed and bulb trade keep him busily employed for the remainder of the day.

It was about the time of his marriage that he first became interested in the culture of flowers, but when, in 1883, he disposed of a few surplus bulbs amongst his friends, the cultivation of which he had taken purely as a hobby—a relaxation from the cares of his regular business—he little thought that he was creating the nucleus of an undertaking which was destined to develop into one of the largest businesses of the kind in the country. By 1885 his sales had jumped up to nearly eight tons in weight, and in the following year this quantity was nearly doubled. His commissions increased so rapidly that he was induced to visit Holland periodically, and in that land of bulbs and canals he is now well-known. This hobby had now grown so enormously that, as already stated, it has developed into a large and lucrative business. In 1896 Mr. Sydenham sent out no less than 5,000 packages, containing more than one million and a half of bulbs; and since that date the

business had continually expanded, until it became necessary to erect the spacious corner block of warehouses and offices shown in the accompanying photographic illustration, and which are built on land adjoining the premises in Tenby Street. At the present time something like 15,000 orders are despatched every season to about 10,000 separate customers



MR. ROBERT SYDENHAM'S NEW BULB AND SEED WAREHOUSE.

(The portion beyond the Entrance on the left is the Jewellery Warehouse of Messrs. Sydenham Brothers.)

throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, as well as abroad.

Of course it will be understood that Mr. Robert Sydenham is not the grower of the whole of the enormous quantity of bulbs which passes through his hands every year. It would be impossible to do this. The growing of the different varieties of bulbs and seeds is left in the hands of specialists located where

the soils and climatic conditions conduce to the most perfect results. He obtains his stock from the choicest produce of the best growers in the world, so that his selections come from flower farms in England, France, Holland, Bermuda, Japan, California, Asia Minor, and other countries; and his success with them arises from his acumen and judgment in knowing what will thrive best in the English climate, a knowledge which has gone on increasing year by year, and is the result of constant experimenting in his own garden.

Passionately fond of gardening himself, his aim has always been to foster this love in others. He approached the subject of bulb-growing and exporting with the true enthusiasm of the amateur rather than with the foresight of the keen man of business. No one has been more surprised at the success of his efforts than Mr. Sydenham himself; and here we may quote a few words written by Mr. John Wright in the "Journal of Horticulture" in 1895, after a visit paid to Birmingham:—"A wonderful trade has, so to speak, sprung up and surprised even its originator, nor does it follow at all that he has taken the trade from others; he has made hundreds and thousands of persons ardent lovers and growers who, but for him, would never have been fascinated with the pursuit, and thus added an army of recruits in the service of horticulture." Many of those of whom Mr. Wright speaks first became ardent growers through reading Mr. Sydenham's well-known pamphlet, "How I came to grow Bulbs," which is an acknowledged guide to the best varieties, and how to grow them; and his seed lists and bulb lists, the former sent out in January and the latter in August, literally by the cart-load, have been studied with real affection by many an amateur. This entails an enormous amount of work, but it is a labour of love in the first instance, and the fact that it has become profitable as well as pleasurable is splendid testimony to Mr. Sydenham's judgment and skill.

He does not confine his attention to daffodil or tulip, but has also made a special study of the growing of carnations. In this direction, too, his efforts have been crowned with success. He has taken numerous prizes in London, Manchester, and at all the big shows, while in Birmingham itself he won outright the first Challenge Cup offered by the Midland Carnation and Picotee Society, and for seven years in succession has taken the Champion Medal for the highest points in the Exhibition Classes. His collection of these lovely flowers is one of the choicest in existence. He has also devoted much attention to the cultivation of that beautiful climber, the sweet pea, whose colour and scent add so much charm to many a small suburban garden; and he has been so successful with these that last season he sent out more than 100,000 packets of the seed, weighing about a ton.

It is always a keen pleasure to him to show his own garden to

any enthusiast. It is situated at the back of his house, Roseleigh, in the Bristol Road, and every available inch of it is carefully cultivated, and every corner utilized. It is a model of neatness and order, from which every weed and dead leaf is most carefully removed. Want of space prevents any attempt to give a detailed description of its contents either in the open or in the glass-houses; suffice it to say that Mr. Sydenham is thoroughly in sympathy with the sentiment of Saadi, the Persian poet, who declared a garden to be "a delight to the eye, and a solace to the soul." And it is a well-acknowledged fact that the development of gardening and the culture of all that is best in the floral and vegetable world owes infinitely more to enthusiastic amateurs, such as Mr. Sydenham was, than to the "trade" itself.

He was the active factor in the foundation of the Midland Carnation and Picotee Society, in 1891, and has been its chairman and treasurer ever since; and to show how this association has grown it may be mentioned that in its first year of existence its total outlay was less than £90, and the prizes it offered, £56, while last year the corresponding amounts were £250 and £170 respectively. The shows of this Society, held at the Edgbaston Botanical Gardens, have always been a great success, the large area of glass offering facilities not to be found elsewhere, and the show has been popular not only among exhibitors but as a society event, and each year has proved a record as to attendance. In the spring of 1893, the first of a series of Daffodil shows, devoted to the various forms of narcissus, was held at the Botanical Gardens. A few years later, difficulties of finance, which have always hampered the developments of these Gardens, led to the suspension of this exhibition; but Mr. Sydenham at once stepped into the breach, in the first instance by holding a private show of his own there, and afterwards by helping in the establishment of the Midland Daffodil Society, of which he is treasurer, the object of which is to hold that highly attractive annual exhibition which takes place every April. It is a thousand pities that more public support is not given to our Botanical Gardens. The name of every man who loves flowers should be included among the list of subscribers, which is far from being the case, and the Council is greatly hampered in its efforts to make them in all respects worthy of the great city whose western outskirt they beautify and whose citizens they teach and delight.

Mr. Sydenham has always been an enthusiastic supporter of the Gardens, giving both time and money freely towards their support and extension. When Professor Hillhouse first took over their responsible control, part of his proposal for developing the horticultural side of their utility was the holding of a series of special shows, each one concerned into a particular plant or group of plants, the successful cultivation of which was practicable even to those of limited means in a district such as ours. The chrysan-



themum has for a number of years past been fostered by the large and flourishing Chrysanthemum Society, whose annual exhibition, of which Mr. Sydenham has been a most active supporter, is *the* chief horticultural event of the autumn. And, in the words of a gentleman who has been much associated with Mr. Sydenham in his exhibition work, "Although it may be true that his efforts in the cause of horticulture have proved a source of profit to himself, it is the man's own nature to be liberal, and the profit has been a mere accident."

Some years ago he was asked to become a member of the Botanical Gardens Committee, but he was obliged to decline through want of the necessary time, as even his superabundant energy—his chief characteristic—was unable to include any further addition to his already fully-occupied day. He still remains, however, one of their most enthusiastic supporters.

In concluding this slight sketch of a real lover of gardens, his own words may be quoted as to whether bulb growing is likely to prove a remunerative industry for British cultivators. "The Hollanders," he says, "have got hold of the bulb trade, and the reason why is probably the same that brought the cutlery trade to Sheffield, cotton and woollens to Manchester, the general hardware trade to Birmingham, and watches to Coventry. In each case the people interested have seen the chance for business, taken it before others have had their eyes opened, and kept it. Of course the bulb growers of Holland have taken full advantage of their fine soil and climate, and have, moreover, paid a great deal of attention to the art of scientific cultivation. I believe it will prove a remunerative pursuit in England. There are vast tracts of land in this country, such for instance as those at Spalding, in Lincolnshire, where the soil is eminently suitable. I know several men who have taken up the business, and all of them have done well. One in particular was a schoolmaster in receipt of a salary of between £200 and £300 a year. He left school, took up bulbs, and is now making a great deal more out of them than he ever did in teaching the young idea how to shoot."

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