

JIM PEARCE

When Jim left Braxted Park the question was where to move to. A post with Notcutts, one of the country's leading nurseries, came to his notice and he was appointed to the role of plants adviser at their garden centre at Ardleigh. This was far removed from a hands-on, getting your hands dirty job working in a garden and was not really Jim's cup of tea at all. However, he must have done an excellent job advising customers on suitable plants for their gardens so that by the time he was due to retire he had lots of folk wanting him to redesign their gardens, advise on the construction of ponds and even start a garden from scratch. This was his new life and Mr Palmer-Tomkinson will tell you about Jim's work at Little Bentley Hall over many years.

CPT (at this point Christopher Palmer-Tomkinson spoke)

On many occasions Jim told me how lucky he was to have the opportunity and the scope to design and develop the garden at Bentley. It was a life's ambition fulfilled and he loved every Monday when he would be able to live his dream.

In the meantime Marion and Jim had moved to Copford and the lovely cottage they shared. Here Jim was able to grow his daffodils - in fact he had planted his bulbs there even before they moved in! He had negotiated to have some extra land facing the cottage and was able to operate his Copford Bulbs business unhindered.

But there were other things coming into Jim's life. It wasn't long before they joined Copford Horticultural Society and Jim was able to share his vast knowledge of horticulture. He took on the job of Programme Secretary and was able to get wonderful speakers for the monthly meetings. It seemed as if there was nobody he didn't know and we were entertained to talks by famous names including Sue Phillips of Gardeners Question Time fame, and even Clay Jones. Needless to say, Jim was always ready to fill at least one slot a year himself - there was nothing he was not an expert on. I remember him doing a "Desert Island Plants" evening when I interviewed him on his life story and he talked about his favourite plants - no prizes as to his favourite.

Jim was never short of words – except on one occasion where he was speechless. My wife and I had invited Jim and Marion to spend an evening at our house and to save him driving I picked them up in my car. At the end of the evening it was time to go. They put on their coats and we showed them to the front door and said goodnight. I then went inside and put the dog on its lead for a walk and went out by the back door only to find Jim and Marion still in the porch! I had forgotten I should be taking them home. Yes, Jim was speechless!

The horticultural society grew from strength to strength, the Summer Show became one of the biggest in the region and Jim was invaluable in guiding us forward. One of his more memorable jobs was to act as auctioneer of the flowers and vegetables at the end of the 2 days. He had the ability to squeeze out the maximum bid for an item which you must have “for when the Jones’s visit”. He was amazing!

Like many societies we had the occasional Saturday trip to visit a garden not too far away. After a while Jim and I thought it would be a good idea to have a weekend away and so were born the *Gardeners Weekend Breaks*. I organised the trip after Jim had planned which gardens we should visit. His knowledge of gardens was amazing. Whilst I dealt with tickets etc Jim would give a run down on what to see at a particular garden and was usually on hand to tell you what a particular plant was called – if he couldn’t remember, there was always Marion to assist. The length of the trips increased as folk thought of the trip as their summer holiday. In all we did this for 15 years and included visits to Cornwall, Devon, Yorkshire and the Lake District amongst other destinations. Happy memories!

Jim served as Chairman over many years and has been President for even longer.

Jim was always out to help others. He was a regular broadcaster on Colchester Hospital Radio and also on the gardening slot of BBC Radio Suffolk. The sad thing is that when he was first in hospital he was asked for any request for the hospital radio one evening. When it came to tuning in to the programme he failed to handle the gyzmo and missed his request!

Having started his newspaper writing with the Birmingham Sunday Mercury he took over the weekly gardening column in the Essex County Standard and wrote every week for 22 years, never failing to deliver his article by hand on a Sunday evening.

In 1985 the Parish Council bought 10 acres of derelict woodland with the intention of restoring it and making it a desirable community feature. Jim was amongst a group who undertook to manage the wood. After about 5 years a charitable trust was established and Jim was one of the four founder trustees and was appointed as chairman. We have been working in the Wood for 27 years and until fairly recently Jim was an ever-present member of the working parties. Even when numbers of volunteers were few, Jim could be relied on to be there. He has over the years planted numerous trees and when he was forced to withdraw from active participation following problems with his legs, the village made a presentation of a book of memories. One short poem read:

There once was a fellow from Brum

Who took us out into the sun

To plant lots of trees with remarkable ease

He showed us just how it is done

Jim was always the best of friends and we got on so well, but on one occasion I knew I had overstepped the mark. Whilst working in the Wood I asked him if I could use his spade. He looked at me and said “ David, your spade is like your toothbrush. It is personal and you don’t let anyone else use it”. He then told me that he had had it all his working life – it had only had 2 new blades and 3 new handles

Yes, on many occasions he said how much he valued planting trees. Already the Trust has said it intends planting a tree as a fitting memorial. I know that if we ask Jim what variety of tree he would like, the answer will be “any variety, provided it is an English oak”. We will respect that wish.

Of course Jim was not one to move with the times. Computers?-forget them and all the gyzmos that go with them. He was no respecter of some

rules and regulations. Working with a chain saw brought him into conflict with authorities concerned with Health and Safety. He refused to wear ear protectors (they would impair his hearing), goggles were also ignored as they would impair his vision, boots with steel toecaps were refused as they would impair his movement. Somehow he survived without injury! Over 28 years the first trees he planted have matured and the native daffodils he planted have started to flower. What a legacy to leave behind.

That is not the only legacy. The daffodil society named two cultivars “Jim Pearce” and “Marion Pearce”. I understand that “Marion” is already a prize winner in the United States (I’m not sure about Jim).

He had always set his mind on publishing a book and he was so grateful that James and Wendy Akers, his friends from Wakefield and Reg Nicholl were able to assist him in the work that resulted in the publication in 2005 of his book *“Gilded Walls - A Guide to Climbers, Wall Shrubs and Fruit”*. I believe there may be a few copies left if you want something to remember Jim by.

Although in his working life Jim never had a day off due to illness and he had little time for doctors, he was forced into lots of use of the health service over the last couple of years and greatly valued the care given to him and to Marion. In spite of his obvious frustration as his walking became more and more difficult, he never once complained. He just gave thanks that he had been able to live an active life for so long and especially for the 67 years he shared with his dear wife.

I think it would be good now to do something different. Let’s give Jim a big round of applause for everything he has been and everything he has done. He is, and will remain a legend.