

Captain J. H. ROBINSON of Eastergate,

born 1879

lived and worked in Eastergate 1901 to 1958.

Capt. Robinson – Hugh (JHR) – came to Eastergate in 1901, aged 22, to start his nursery, having worked for several years for The Worthing Growers. When eighteen he requested a man's wage and Saturday afternoons off for cricket; he got both. At Eastergate he dug the well, built the wind pump with engine shed and his first green houses were erected. The nursery was the field between Barrack Lane (the path which runs to the Blessed Phillip Howard school) and Church Lane down to the Main road by Hall Cottages. There were not many houses in 1901; two pairs of Manor Farm Cottages, one on the North (the families of Dennett the carter and Percy Reed) and another on the South (families of the Oliver's and Charlie Wade) and Jock's Lodge, now called West Lodge, which is opposite the Oliver's. On the corner of Barrack Lane and Church Lane were Nos. 1 and 2 The Cottages with the families of Frank Collins (with whom JHR lodged), and Leslie Diggins after the Leggatts. Later two pairs of cottages were built in the 1920s; in the first pair were the Walkers and Ernest and Lily Collins, and in the second the Goodwins and the Hamptons. Percy Reed snr. walked from Petworth in 1918 to ask JHR for a job.

Top fruit – apples, pears and plums – were planted followed by soft fruit – raspberries, strawberries, currants red, white and black, dessert and cooking gooseberries, and grapes in coke-fired greenhouses. Every available inch of wall space was covered with peaches, Victoria plums and cherries. On the west side of Church Lane, where "Robinsmead" now stands, was the Barn. This was a typical Sussex farm building with cattle yards, all with flint walls. Very early salad crops were grown on the South side, with William pears and Victoria plums on the walls. There was also a greenhouse. The Barn was the retail and wholesale outlet for the fruit and vegetables which supplied local shops in the surrounding villages and Bognor (no Regis at that time), and then Chichester and later Middleton and Arundel. From 1909 JHR bought vegetables for the wholesale market from Covent Garden, which came down by train to Barnham Station, and also from local farms; carrots onions, swedes, turnips, and cabbage. JHR grew the early spring cabbage crops.

In Frank Coe's charge were the forced daffodils followed by outside ones growing under the the orchard trees, which were sent daily to Covent Garden. Other market flowers were arum lilies, tulips, gladioli, iris and Parma violets in cold frames. It was a cold job bunching daffodils in a sunless packing shed in March and April with Frank Coe watching to see we were doing a proper job. All four of us girls were glad to earn pocket money; Gillian had to stand on a box until she grew a bit. In the early thirties JHR bought two or three of the new daffodil variety 'Fortune' for a very large sum (which we cannot recall). He planted these by Mother's washing line. When they bloomed Prudence picked one and gave it to him. We still have Fortune from these bulbs in our garden today.

In the greenhouses were early salad crops of lettuce and mustard and cress, which were followed during the summer with cucumbers and tomatoes and in the autumn with chrysanthemums up to Christmas. Frank Collins, Frank Coe and Cleaves stoked the boilers at weekends and on frosty nights. There was forced rhubarb in dark sheds; mushrooms on long raised beds covered in straw, and beside which were piles of steaming horse manure turned by hand for the next spawning. This was Percy Reed's domain. Potatoes were bought

from local growers for the wholesale and potato crisp trades. Seed potatoes were bought from Scotland and Norfolk.

By the early twenties JHR had nurseries at Westergate run by Amos Sandford and at Woodgate by Harold Betsworth. Amos had been a sergeant-major and his nursery was always spick and span. Harold had a large family and JHR provided him with two cottages close to Fallick's bakery near Aldingbourne church to accommodate them all. Most of the produce went on the lorries to local shops. Towards the end of the Second World War JHR rented a small field by the railway line between Manor Farm and Woodgate nursery. Here he planted apple maidens which were sold on two or three years later. Greta Langmead bought some for Furzey Cottage at Pennington in The New Forest as did Arthur Langmead for Westgrounds (JHR's sister-in-law and brother-in law).

A small retail shop in the Barn was run by Reuben Ruff. This sold a little of everything grown on the nurseries, including jams (made from surplus or unsold fruit) and marmalade made by Mother at Manor Farm and comb honey from the bees; this was stored in big biscuit tins. JHR's sister Margaret supplied eggs from her hens in Barrack Lane. We children took our lettuces, in ones and twos and parsley and radishes over to Reuben; if he thought them acceptable we were paid in halfpennies. Sadly, they were not always acceptable. Next to the shop was a small office with a "standing desk" under the South window. Sacks of nuts in the office, monkey nuts and coconuts; brazils and walnuts for Christmas together with figs, dates and pomegranates.

Behind the shop was a labyrinth of working areas for loading and unloading lorries, riddling and grading potatoes, trimming cabbages etc., with bushel boxes stacked up high, and potato sacks and cabbage pokes (ie nets) in piles. Here too was the banana ripening room with a warm damp strawed floor. A gas pipe with jets one foot off the floor circled the room to ripen the huge heavy hands of bananas hanging from the ceiling. This was a smell you never forgot; later I imagined it as a ballet with the flickering jets, the shadows of the working men. Really big tropical spiders and sometimes snakes came out of the hands; Percy Reed was at the ready with a shovel. In the yard there was a hand operated petrol pump and a large boiler for cooking beetroot and pig swill. Beside it were pigsties; the pigs had a varied seasonal diet of vegetable trimmings, damaged fruit, boiled potatoes and barley meal. Next to the pigsties was a stable for one horse with Bert Hibbs in charge. In 1948 the horse was replaced by a Ferguson tractor driven by Harry White.

Just beyond the pigsties and west of St. George's Walk was another nursery – Mr. Hubert Andrews who produced peaches for the luxury market, including Buckingham Palace and the Cunard Line. He was not a well man, and employed Jim Adams as foreman who was a good grower and manager. During the war a Ministry of Agriculture inspector found a few pots of strawberries on a top shelf in a greenhouse designated for tomatoes. Despite pleading that these were only a few stock plants for after the war and in no way interfering with the tomatoes no mercy was shown and he was fined. Next to Mr. Andrews on the North was the Hall Field, where JHR grew more vegetables of all kinds and always more strawberries. This was ploughed by Bert Hibbs and his horse using a single furrow plough. He also harrowed, rolled, and seeded, some by shandy barrow in drills and some by hand. In 1938 the dairy herd at Hyams with the cowman Burch was dispersed to Northfields. Various crops were grown on the field between Hyams and Old Farm Cottage, where Frank and Nadia Robinson lived. Cattle were still being reared in the Hyams buildings in 1951. Janet remembers at least one crop of potatoes where Westergate Community College now stands, and Ann recalls rotavating there in 1951. The weeding and harvesting were tedious and backbreaking.

In 1918 JHR took Manor Farm, Eastergate as a tenant of the Ecclesiastical Commissioners; there were 325 acres which stretched to the South side of the railway line. His parents and sisters moved in with him, and his Father died in 1919. Manor Farm was a mixed farm with arable, pigs, a dairy herd and Southdown sheep. In 1925 he married Joyce Langmead, daughter of John Langmead of Northwood, Yapton. His Mother and sisters then moved to a rented farm at Northfields, where they stayed until the death of his Mother aged 91 in 1937. Agriculture was then in deep depression. JHR realised he could make a living from the nursery and wholesale business whereas the Manor Farm was losing money fast. He and Joyce moved with their four daughters to Northfields, where they lived until 1946, when they purchased Denmans.

On Mondays JHR went to Covent Garden to see his produce sold and be aware of what the buyers thought of it. At one time his railway ticket was brought up from Bognor by the engine driver, because it was cheaper to have an excursion ticket. On Saturday evenings JHR went round some, if not all, the shops to collect payment.

In 1939 JHR bought, amongst other provisions, 1cwt. of sugar, a case of safety matches, a quantity of candles and a box of sardines before rationing was imposed (Olaf's Father did the same in Bristol). Two land mines fell in the early hours of Good Friday 14th April 1941. One landed about fifty yards from the Barn in a freshly dug onion bed, and went to some depth before exploding, and the other fell into the pond on Manor Farm beside Margaret Robinson's chickens. This was thought to have saved houses from the blast. No one was killed. The three Walker children, Buster Popeye and Molly, came to Northfields for two nights because of damage to their own house. There was also severe damage to the house in Church Lane of Stanley Bennett, a local builder (who built our bungalow in 1955). Part of a ceiling fell onto his son Roger in his cot, whose response was "Mummy, please take me where this isn't". Stanley's teeth were blown out of the glass of water, but the water remained behind. The green houses lost all their glass and the crops could not be eaten nor the flowers sold. Frank Collins and Fred Porter reglazed them all, and we do not remember any outside help being used. The secretary left because she could not bear to work in the dust and muddle, and Nadia Robinson (sister-in-law of JHR) stepped in, combining this with being secretary to Eastergate Primary School. It was a daunting job to clear up and start again, but JHR accomplished this. The blast passed over Hubert Andrew's peachery but took all the glass from Frank Knight's greenhouses in Fontwell Avenue and his other nursery in Barnham Road.

In the early part of the war after Portsmouth was bombed Edie Sherwood came to Eastergate in 1942 and ran the shop. Reuben Ruff retired and died soon afterwards. Edie married Leslie Diggins before he joined up in 1943. When Edie's baby was born Ivy Collins (now Green) came down from the nursery and ran the shop until her own daughter, Christine, was born. Then Brenda Denzy came. Fox came as lorry driver for about one year, and about this time Dickie Wingham left Frank Knight and joined JHR as a lorry driver.

Janet, aged 15, left school in the summer of 1941 and went to Haltwhistle College, Bognor Regis for a two year mornings-only secretarial course. In the afternoons she worked in the Barn with Nadia Robinson doing the books, wages and sorting sacks etc.. From 1943 Janet worked full time and JHR gave her a lot of responsibility including giving orders to the men in the mornings and buying from Covent Garden. Janet clearly remembers the day that she and Dickie took produce to Barnham station and the steering broke. After unloading Janet drove the lorry back to the Barn with Dickie kicking the wheels straight.

In 1944, during the build-up for D-Day, there were troops and equipment for the Normandy invasion all along the South Downs through Halnaker, Goodwood and Eartham. They were in all the available farm buildings in the area, including those at Northfields Farm. They all

needed food. Just before D-Day the Barn was piled high with root vegetables which went to Normandy.

After the second war electricity replaced gas for ripening the bananas and straw was no longer required. At the same time another office was built upstairs over the existing one. Here JHR had his knee-hole desk and swivel chair just inside the door. When David Riggs was demobbed he joined JHR as accountant and secretary. JHR continued to grow fruit flowers and vegetables until he was 73 in 1952, when he sold the business to his brother-in-law Jack Langmead.

In 1914 at the outbreak of the Great War Frank Collins, who was a Territorial, went to France. JHR was in camp at Arundel with the Royal Sussex Regiment. He was sent to Windsor Great Park to train recruits and it was 1915 before he went to France with the 13th Battalion. He put Frank Coe in charge of the nursery and Reuben Ruff of the shop and Barn. JHR was given leave for the corn harvest at least once. Both JHR and Frank Collins came back safely from the War. In the Second World War JHR served in the Home Guard and these duties together with the nursery, wholesale business and farming at Northfields must have been very tiring. Home Guard personnel met regularly at Northfields making defence plans and recording minefields along the beaches at Elmer, Middleton and Clymping.

JHR was a man of many parts, essentially an optimist who saw the best in people. He was a major employer in the village. He was a farmer, grower and nurseryman who kept the soil in good heart, who never forgot he was only a steward of the land and seldom grumbled about the weather. He was an all round sportsman, including cricket, tennis which he played all his life, fly fishing and enjoyed chess, a hand of bridge and in his latter years bowls. An excellent shot JHR enjoyed a Saturday afternoon with his ferrets and was a natural with dogs and horses. He gave time and thought to the National Farmers Union, and as Chairman of the Sugar Beet committee chivvied our Member of Parliament, Mr. Joynton-Hicks, for a sugar beet factory in this area. He served on the County and Rural District Councils, and was Chairman of the Parish Council and School Managers for many years. JHR was Peoples' Church Warden for twenty-two years, and he read and knew his Bible. He helped many people to get a start in life such as Frank Terry at Eastergate Post Office and Cecil Walling with his 'Silver Queen' bus service between Slindon and Bognor in 1919.

Compiled in February 2000 by his daughter Ann Swarbrick with help from her sister Janet Langmead, her cousin Shirley Renton-Rose (daughter of Frank and Nadia Robinson), and Ivy Green (nee Collins) and other friends in Eastergate village who knew and worked for JHR before 1952.