



The Laxton Connection



THE LAXTON FAMILY

Thomas Laxton (1830 - 1893)

- born in Tinwell, Rutland; became a solicitor
- developed interest in hybridation of plants
- by 1858- started plant breeding
- by 1879- moved to Bedford
- 1885- earliest know entry for him in Kelly's Directory as "seed grower and merchant", listed at 1 Harpur Place (now 41 Harpur St)
- 1890- in retirement at 78 Tavistock Street
- twice married: 3 daughters by first wife
4 sons by second wife

He understood the mechanisms of plant breeding; knew Charles Darwin and conducted experiments for him, specifically on peas.

1860s-1870s the period in which he raised all his best culinary peas, also potatoes, zonal pelargoniums, roses, sweet pea & strawberries.

Many of his studies and observations were made in parallel with Gregor Mendel but has not been widely recognised for his achievements outside of the academic world.

William Hudson Laxton (1830 - 1923)

- 1888- formed partnership with brother Edward
- also joint owner of brickworks in Kempston Hardwick
- 1923- died at 28 The Embankment

Edward Augustine Lowe Laxton (1868 - 1951)

- The driving force behind the nursery
- 1888- went into partnership with brother William to form "Laxton Bros"
- 1890- Laxton Bros were at 4-6 Bromham Rd, opened shop at 63a High Street
- 1951- MBE in New Year Honours died at 73 Bushmead Avenue same year

The brothers concentrated their attention on crossing the best varieties of apples, pears, plums and small fruits.

Modern use of the former Nursery:

- Polhill Avenue now marks the western boundary
- 41 acres went to the County Council College of Education (now University of Bedfordshire) and Goldington Middle School.
- Central & Eastern parts became Brookfields Estate in the late 1950s
- Area between Polhill Ave, Haylands Way and Putnoe Lane became the Haylands Estate in 1961 with a small open space off Chiltern Avenue

Edward William Henry Laxton (1894 - 1942)

- Known as Ted
- Inherited horticultural talents and enthusiasm of his father
- 1923- became partner in nursery business shortly before Uncle William died
- 1942- killed in air raid by direct hit on his home at 176 Kimbolton Road

Was involved in the production of new varieties of fruits, roses and garden peas

John Edward Laxton

- 1951- became head of the firm
- 1956- Sold all the land
- 1957- sold nursery & shop went into voluntary liquidation

Laxton Varieties:

- 47 Peas
- 2 Beans
- 3 Potatoes
- 51 Strawberries
- 27 Apples
- 3 Pears
- 10 Zonal Pelargoniums
- 9 Plums
- 6 Gooseberries
- 4 Raspberries
- 7 Currants
- 11 Roses
- 2 Sweet Peas

(research continues to find forgotten varieties so there may be more)

THE LAXTON NURSERIES

- 1893- trial & experimental grounds at Girtford in Sandy and off the Kimbolton and London Roads in Bedford
- 1903- sometime before this date the Tollgate Nurseries were opened along Goldington Road opposite the junction with Newnham Avenue (then Newnham Lane)
- 140 acres of land:
20 acres of farmland; 120 acres of nursery
- Use of glasshouses to grow fruit in pots and protect cross-pollination from disruption by



Entrance to Laxton's Nursery on Goldington Road

- 1937- limited company formed, Laxton Bros. (Bedford) Ltd which took on the lease of the nursery
- 1942- Edward bought the whole estate and sold it to the company
- 1956- the whole estate was sold to the Goldington Estate Company for development
- 1957- March: nursery and shop closed, July: went into voluntary liquidation

Source: Bedfordshire Magazine, 1992. Vol: 23, No.182. Articles by Richard Wildman & Sue Readman

More detailed information can be found in a number of articles held in the Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service including those noted above. Richard Wildman has also published a number of books on local history and architecture.

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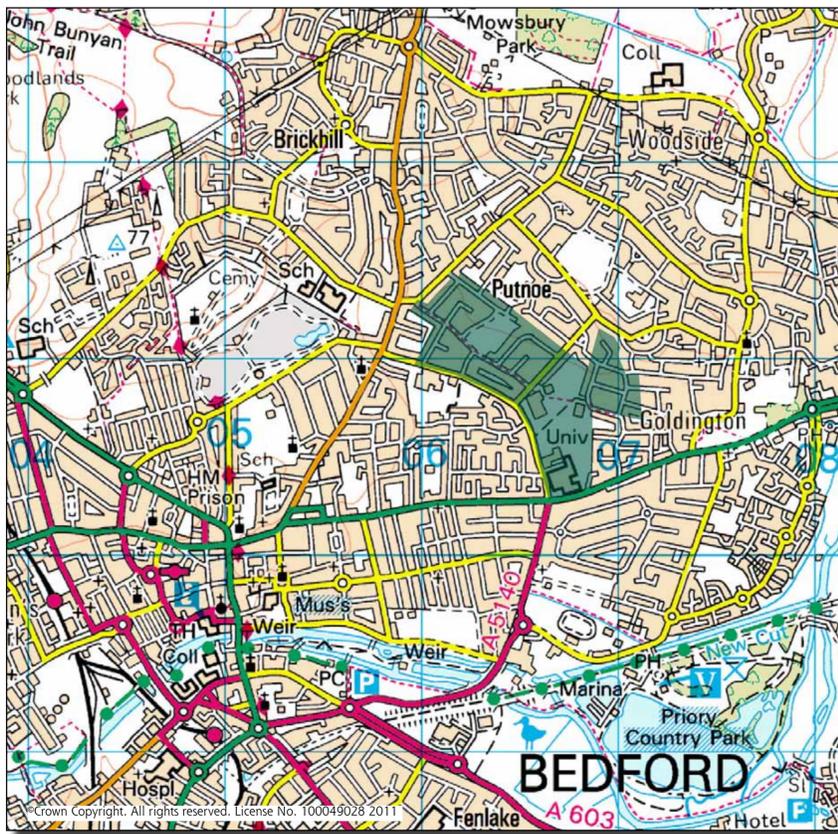
Above: Laxton's shop on Bedford High Street circa 1955

Right: the shop interior with the manager Albert Elliott, shortly before it closed



What made the Laxtons so special?

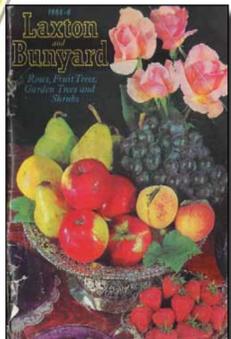
- Thomas was one of the earliest nurserymen to use scientific methods in plant breeding
- Thomas selected parent plants from close observations of their desirable characteristics rather than simply from well-known varieties as was common at that time
- Thomas's trials and observations aided the work of Charles Darwin and was referred to in Darwin's published works
- Over 100 years and 3 generations of horticultural work raising at least 182 new varieties of plants
- Thomas's aim was to improve the quality of plants, rather than make money
- Thomas believed that seed from all commercially produced plants should be saved
- He is Bedford's Heritage Hero



Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service



Laxton's were one of the earliest companies to realise that better information was needed than just a list of available products. Their descriptive catalogues and manuals helped to educate and improve their customers' growing skills.



The Laxton name continued at Brampton Nurseries for a few more years having amalgamated with Bunyard's, another famous fruit growing firm.

The Laxton and Bunyard 1965 catalogue features their apples, pears, plums, currants and strawberries.

The East of England Apples and Orchards Project have local information on Bedfordshire apples and orchards. To find out more, visit www.applesandorchards.org.uk

The University of Reading maintains the National Fruit Database from which these images were sourced with their kind permission.

For more information go to www.nationalfruitcollection.org.uk



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