



Tunbridge Wells in bloom through the ages

Long before the days of formal national competitions, Tunbridge Wells people have been running schemes to promote high quality gardens. For over a hundred years, local government has played its part in creating floral displays to beautify the town centre and sites like the historic Pantiles, as well as maintaining our splendid heritage of public parks.

Tunbridge Wells had an enthusiastic Horticultural Society which was founded as early as 1832. The society ran a best garden competition, as well as offering the regular prizes for flowers and produce exhibited at their annual show. The society was proud to claim as its patron the Duchess of Kent, who brought her daughter the future Queen Victoria on a number of holidays to Tunbridge Wells. When the Duchess and the Princess visited the society's show on a memorable occasion in 1834, some 1200 people attended.

A certificate has survived, dated August 1843, recording the award of the Duchess of Kent's cottage garden prize of £5 – a large sum of money in those early Victorian days.

The Horticultural Society was launched at a significant time in the story of Tunbridge Wells – when Decimus Burton's Calverley Estate development was beginning to transform it from a seasonal resort to a residential town.



Many of the new houses springing up around Mount Pleasant hill had substantial gardens, and the design and servicing of these became a significant local industry.

The Old Gardens, established in 1837 and still commemorated by a street name, was the earliest of several such businesses which flourished through the 1800s and beyond.



MOUNT PLEASANT.

Up to the 1880s, Tunbridge Wells had no public open spaces beyond the Common, the Grove, Woodbury Park Cemetery and Trinity Cemetery. But this began to change in 1885, when the Town Commissioners, Tunbridge Wells' first local government, accepted an offer of land from their philanthropic chairman John Stone-Wigg. Stone-Wigg's gift was the land on which Grosvenor Recreation Ground was created, its formal plantings and water features designed by Robert Marnock in 1887.



When the first Borough Council was established in 1889, public parks were high on the agenda.

The Council took over the management of the Grove on Mount Sion, making various improvements including the layout of flower beds. St John's Recreation Ground was opened in 1900.



Prolonged efforts to provide a town centre park finally achieved success in 1921 with the purchase of what we know as Calverley Grounds. Robert Wallace of the Old Gardens provided the original designs.



The current Civic Centre site was acquired by the Council 1895. Although the new civic complex was not actually built until the 1930s, the maintenance of flower beds along the raised lawn fronting Mount Pleasant began much earlier. They feature prominently in early 20th century views of the town centre. By the early 1950s, the corner plot at the junction with Monson Road boasted a fully functioning floral clock which was replanted every year.



Another elaborate floral display from the same period was the raised bank at the entrance to Calverley Grounds – where Lord Dowding’s memorial now stands. In 1951 it was planted up to create a rendering in flowers and foliage of the Festival of Britain emblem. This became an annual tradition, with the Parks Committee deciding every year what topical motif would be displayed there.

Postcards from the early 1900s show many examples of floral displays enhancing the town’s shopping streets. Views of the Pantiles show a prominent planting in Bath Square in front of the Chalybeate Spring, along with a variety of troughs on balconies along the Upper Walk.





Photographs of the High Street, Mount Pleasant hill and Monson Road show similar features of floral displays.

In the aftermath of World War II, the Borough Council addressed the shortage of housing by embarking on an ambitious council house building programme. New estates began springing up, with work starting with Powdermill Lane in 1946, Ramslye in 1948, and Sherwood in 1952. Councillors were concerned that these new developments should provide an attractive environment for people to live, and there was an early emphasis on encouraging people to take good care of their gardens. Prizes were offered for the best street within an estate, as well as for the quality of individual gardens. Over the years, beginning in 1949, a variety of trophies were presented, and these continued in use as late as the 1980s.

More recently, the annual Tunbridge Wells in Bloom competitions, last held in 2003, assumed the role of promoting floral beauty, extending it to the whole town and including businesses and the overall streetscape.

This year's revival of Royal Tunbridge Wells in Bloom is the latest manifestation of a great local tradition.

Ian Beavis.

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Postcards provided by the publishers/producers of
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