

The 'King Alfred' Daffodil Story

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For many, 1999 will probably be remembered as the year of the millennium dome or perhaps when they witnessed the total eclipse of the sun. But for the inhabitants of the small Devon village of Newton Poppleford, it will undoubtedly be the year they celebrated the centenary of their very own 'King Alfred' daffodil, named after the millenary of one of England's greatest kings. For it was this popular large trumpet variety of daffodil which, after years of continued popularity, attracted a great deal of local and media attention to the village in March on the day it was officially recognised 100 years ago by the Royal Horticultural Society in London.

But despite its distinguished title, the 'King Alfred' daffodil boasts no royal patronage. It comes instead from very humble beginnings - having been bred by a small group of market gardeners in the heart of Devon.

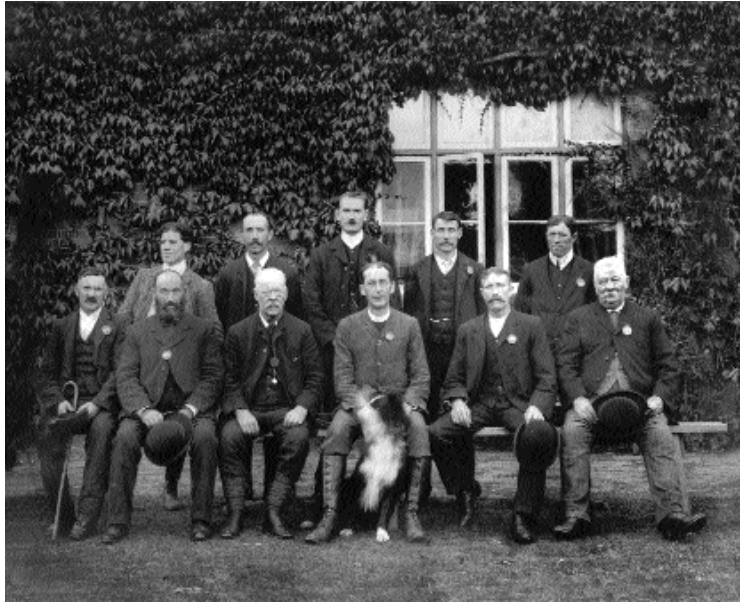
John Kendall, a former London solicitor, was living in Newton Poppleford, when he was credited with successfully cross-pollinating the 'Emperor' and 'Maximus' varieties of daffodil, shortly before his death in 1890.

Yet the actual selection of the seedling and its development was carried out by a native of the village, Walter Hill (see below), who worked for John Kendall's son, Percy, the owner of both a market garden in the village and a florist shop in Sidmouth, some three miles away.

In those days, Newton (village) Poppleford (ford over the pebbles) was a very small village with a population of no more than 200, living in mainly thatched roofed cottages, straddling the long high street which forded the River Otter on its way to the sea at Budleigh Salterton.

Being a predominantly agricultural district, most of the villagers were employed by local farmers or market gardeners on a very menial wage. At the time, nurseryman Walter Hill, rented 'The Garden', a large cottage in the centre of the village from his employer, and it was here, in a draughty outhouse at the back of the premises, that he painstakingly bred one of the world's favourite daffodils.

It was said that bulb raisers "got the shock of their lives" when Percy Kendall came up to London in 1899 to put the King Alfred before the Narcissus Committee of the Royal Horticultural Society. For at its first showing, it was awarded the top award of a First Class Certificate, in instant recognition of "by far the best large yellow trumpet." At the time, it was registered in Kendall's name, and during 1900, the first year of its commercial distribution by the well known nurserymen, Barr & Sons, almost 100 'parent' bulbs were sold, at the then princely sum of six guineas each.



A meeting of the Newton Poppleford Garden Club in 1906.
Walter Hill is on the front row, second from the right.

Breeding any bulb is a very lengthy process, requiring great skill and patience. This involves cross-pollinating two existing species to produce the initial new seed. Once the chosen seed is selected, the first bulb has to be grown from it before waiting from five to seven years for the new bulb to ‘settle’ and multiply, until it produces true flowers every year.

In those days (long before tissue culture), the bulbs only multiplied naturally at the rate of perhaps four to one each year, which meant that it took several years before the breeder could produce sufficient bulbs to make a living.

When Percy Kendall died in 1910, Walter took over the rights to the daffodil he had bred so lovingly and successfully, and from then until his own death in 1935, he continued to live in ‘The Garden’, and became one of the village’s biggest employers, selling ‘King Alfred’ daffodil bulbs the length and breadth of the UK, and sending hundreds of blooms each day to London’s Covent Garden during the brief flowering season.

At that time, the village of Newton Poppleford was very much smaller, nestling at the base of a valley, surrounded by farms and market gardens. Walter Hill and his team planted 15 to 20 acres of daffodils nearby, taking care not to plant in the same field two years running, because of the ever-present threat of eelworm and daffodil fly. The men used to do the picking the day before they were sent off to market, and then the buds were left overnight in what was fondly known as the “glory hole” at the back of Walter’s cottage, where a wood burning stove provided a gentle heat to bring them out in flower in time for packing the next day.

“The ‘King Alfred’ came out just after the Cornish crop had finished, and we used to pack them in blue tissue paper, three dozen to the box,” recalled Ada Gigg, 96, who worked for Walter Hill as a teenager. Mrs Gigg, who still lives in the village, said that in those days, there was very little road transport and the routine was that, after the

flowers had been packed, the men would load them on to a horse and cart and take them down to the village railway station to catch the late afternoon train to London. It was hard work while it lasted - some six weeks in all. Starting at 8 o'clock on an often cold Spring morning, Ada and her two girl companions could each pack 60 bunches of a dozen blooms every hour, at sixpence an hour. Which meant that a four hour working day could produce an impressive total of some 2,880 daffodils for distribution all over the country. Mrs. Gigg also remembers the horses ploughing up the daffodil bulbs in July, and then, as part of her job, having to go and stand the bulbs up and turn them regularly to dry out thoroughly, before the larger ones were sold and the smaller ones replanted for the following year's crop. Over the years, daffodils tend to be affected by viruses, but the 'King Alfred' has successfully survived to the present day, thanks to the stock being constantly "cleaned up" to prevent disease.



'King Alfred'

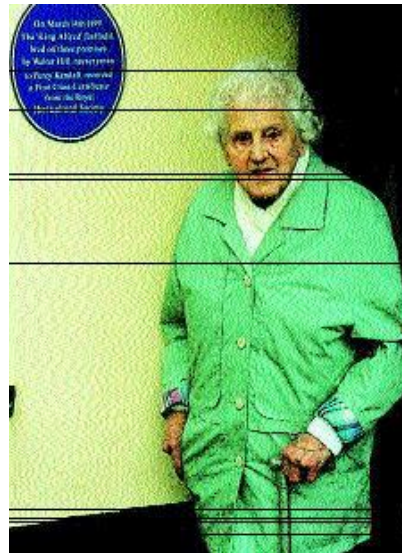
In fact, both John Kendall and his brother, the Reverend Walter Kendall of Lulworth, were credited with raising a number of well-known daffodils, but none with the universal appeal of 'King Alfred'. Regrettably, Walter Hill's sons, Harry, Sidney and Percy and daughter Sophie, did not retain an interest in their father's successful business in the village, and subsequently, Newton Poppleford became well known as a market garden area, specialising in flowers, peas and rhubarb.

Even so, it can safely be said that whatever developments have been made over the intervening years in the breeding methods and marketing techniques of daffodils, it is unlikely that any large trumpet narcissus of the future could ever exceed the wonderful achievement of John and Percy Kendall and Walter Hill, in creating such a great horticultural legend. In recognition of this, more than 1,000 'King Alfred' bulbs were planted in and around Newton Poppleford, to bloom in time for the centenary year and dozens more were sent to France to grace the gardens of the town house at Crevecoeur-en-Auge in Normandy, which is twinned with Newton Poppleford.

And on Tuesday, March 9th at a small ceremony to mark the occasion, former flower packer, Ada Gigg was called upon to unveil a commemorative plaque on the wall of 'The Garden' (see Fig. 1), in High Street, before a small gathering of village elders and interested parties including Sally Kington, daffodil registrar of the RHS. Expressing her delight at being invited to attend, Sally said the 'King Alfred'

celebrations had provided some very valuable information for her records. The plaque reads “On March 14th 1899 the King Alfred Daffodil which was bred on these premises by Walter Hill, nurseryman to Percy Kendall, received a First Class Certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society.”

But for Mrs. Gigg, the highlights of her day were undoubtedly meeting her favourite television personality, Dennis Cornish who came to interview her and to accepting a bouquet of flowers from the children in the orchard of Newton Poppleford Primary School surrounded by hosts of dancing daffodils — ‘King Alfred’s’ of course.



Ms. Ada Gigg, former flower packer.