



1725 - 1975

250 years of Thomas Rivers and Son Ltd. of Sawbridgeworth

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1. John Rivers from Basildon, Berks 1725

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2. Thomas Rivers 1706-1780 John Rivers

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3. John Rivers—nephew 1744-1814 (Retired 1792)

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4. Thomas Rivers 1770-1844

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5. Thomas Rivers 1797-1877

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Thomas Francis Rivers 1830-1899

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Thomas Alfred Rivers
1863-1915

Henry Somers Rivers
1872-1935

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Thomas H. Rivers
Managing Director 1938—
1901—

M. D. Rivers—Managing Director 1935
1908 Went abroad 1938

|

N. H. Rivers

John Rivers from Basildon, Berks started the Nursery in Sawbridge-worth in 1725 and not only is the firm the Oldest Nursery in Great Britain, but it is the only one which has stayed in the same Family for the whole of its existence.

At that time most nurseries were in the outskirts of London and they have all been swallowed up by the spread of the Town. While it may be good fortune that brought the family as far out as Sawbridge-worth, the founder obviously looked for and found an area very suitable for Nursery work—reasonably level but with land sloping to North, East and South. Some light sandy soil, some medium and some heavy clay.

Early records are not extensive as they seem to have been destroyed after the writing of the books, referred to below, which incorporated the results of the early work, but fruit trees, roses, shrubs, forest trees and conifers were all grown in considerable numbers and some research was carried out on these and on grasses.

Thomas Rivers (4) was particularly interested in Roses and he published in 1837 "Rivers Rose Amateurs Guide". He stated the book is the result of 20 years' experience of the culture of roses on a larger scale than anywhere in Europe, with five to six acres (about 100,000 roses) devoted to them. Small numbers these days but large then.

He found much confusion in the ^{naming} making of Roses in France and one object of the book and the annual catalogue was to try to clear up the confusion and have only the true names.

The growing of standard roses was introduced into England by him and some experiments were conducted on stocks.

Rivers was one of the Nurseries backing the first National Rose Show under Dean Hole.

Thomas Rivers (5) carried on the interest in Roses, but his great love was fruit, and some of his experiences were published in "The Miniature Fruit Garden" published about 1850 which went to twenty editions by 1891.

When he started work on fruit the great majority of trees in this country were the large standard type and in his book he states that as a young man in 1810 he noted how much better the fruit was on transplanted trees—too small or weak for sale and put into what he called the "hospital quarter".

This led to experiments on root pruning and visits to the Continent where pyramid trees were grown led to experiments with dwarf root stocks which were used on the Continent to some extent.

After tests on the various types available and trials on new ones, Rivers Broadleaved Paradise stock and Nonsuch Paradise were introduced about 1820, and these gave smaller trees suitable for Pyramids and Bushes.

When the East Malling Research Station classified available stocks these were numbered Malling 1 and Malling V1. They are superseded now and in fact classified as "vigorous", thanks to increased knowledge of soils, but they were important in fruit growing for a century.

Travelling on the Continent and correspondence with American and Continental growers resulted in many varieties being brought over to

Sawbridgeworth for trial under English conditions, most of this work being between 1840 and 1860.

Jefferson Gage and Dennistons Superb Gage, Mother (American Mother) apple from America, Transparent Gage and Oullins Golden Gage from France were introduced about then.

Early Rivers (Rivers Early Prolific) plum was found in 1834 among a batch of seedlings and was the first new plum introduced. No doubt it provided the incentive to further breeding and also the cash to enable the work to be undertaken and from then on experimental work on fruit, manures, root pruning, double grafting, stocks, etc., must have been continuous.

References in Continental and American literature on fruit to Thomas Rivers show the respect he earned for his work and he collaborated with Charles Darwin on some aspects of fruit for Darwin's work on Botany—we still have some of the letters.

For both varieties introduced from abroad and those bred at Sawbridgeworth, it seems trials were fairly extensive to ensure they were suitable before they were offered for sale, and usually they were simply added to the catalogue without any publicity other than the description in the catalogue.

It takes a long time to prove a new fruit variety and when a tax was taken off glass, making the cost of glasshouses reasonable, various types were built and the trees grown in pots in the houses, which protects the blossom from frost and the fruit from birds. This, with the dwarfing effect of pot growing enabled results to be obtained much more quickly.

Some of the experiences found in using pot trees under glass were given in a book published in 1852, "The Orchard House or the Cultivation of Fruit Trees in Pots under Glass".

This was originally published for the profits to go to Sawbridgeworth Church and it went into several editions, being one of the first books to give designs for glasshouses and heating.

The list of varieties introduced, attached to these notes, shows the extent of the work done and naturally some of the earlier varieties were superseded by later ones which proved better, but the number of fruits still considered to be among the best of their type indicates how valuable the work was to the industry. Early Rivers plum, Early Rivers cherry, Conference pear, Peregrine peach, Early Rivers nectarine being outstanding examples.

An International Horticultural Exhibition and Botanical Congress was held in 1866 and Thomas Rivers gave lectures on his work on raising fruits from seed and Growing under Glass and a third paper on Dessert Orange Culture.

A considerable range of orange varieties was grown here at the time and when Florida oranges proved unsatisfactory in California a number of trees from Sawbridgeworth were sent to Californian growers in 1876, one of which "Valencia Late" proved very satisfactory and started the industry there.

Some are still grown here but the number of varieties had to be cut drastically under war time heating regulations.

Thomas Rivers (5) was succeeded by his son Thomas Francis Rivers who continued the breeding programme, "Conference" pear being introduced shortly before he died. He kept his father's books up to date and did a considerable amount of work writing and lecturing with the Royal Horticultural Society.

He was Chairman of an International Fruit Conference at the time his new pear was ready and named it in honour of that meeting.

He was also one of the original holders of the Victoria Medal of Honour when it was instituted by the Royal Horticultural Society.

During his period the pattern of the industry started changing in that several large new Nurseries were started and the old friendly rivalry between about three firms (for fruit) was overtaken by the new conditions.

There was no patenting or royalty system so our new varieties could be reproduced by anyone quite quickly. This meant cutting down on the expensive breeding work and on production.

Thomas Francis Rivers was succeeded by his eldest son Thomas Alfred and his youngest son Henry Somers, who managed the Nursery jointly until T. A. Rivers died in 1915. Henry Somers was then Managing Director until his death in 1935.

Reorganisation was working well till the First War in 1914 which of course upset everything and after the war our main customers, the old houses with large gardens, started to disappear. The pattern changed to something similar to the present retail business with smaller orders for the smaller new houses.

Some breeding work was done and the cherries Peggy Rivers and Ursula Rivers, named after H. S. Rivers' daughters, were introduced and the nectarine John Rivers—similar but earlier than Early Rivers.

H. S. Rivers was joined in 1931 by M. D. Rivers, younger son of Thomas Alfred Rivers and he took over as Managing Director in 1935 with A. N. Rawes from the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley, to help him.

M. D. Rivers left for South Africa in 1938 and was succeeded by Thomas H. Rivers, his elder brother, with Mr. A. N. Rawes as Manager. On the latter's death in 1948 Thomas H. Rivers took over as Managing Director.

The second World War disrupted nursery work even more than the First as over half the land was devoted to food crops and heating was strictly controlled, resulting in most of our Citrus fruit being lost. After the war there was a complete revolution in that hand workers largely disappeared in favour of machinery for digging and hoeing.

The older men with the traditional skills and knowledge could rarely handle the machines so the change over had to be gradual.

Research work became the province of Stations like East Malling Research Station and Long Ashton at Bristol and scientific in place of the old observation and experiments of one or two dedicated men.

We were one of the Founder Members of East Malling and have always watched the Research work and tried to take advantage of it, replacing

our fruit stocks with new virus free types as they became available and taking the necessary steps to keep production up to date.

Thomas H. Rivers was on the Advisory Committee of the National Fruit Trials for many years, and the Firm's old catalogues and illustrations of fruits were used by the National Fruit Trials in their classification of fruits.

The illustrations were largely done by T. F. Rivers and his eldest daughter Miss May Rivers, consisting of accurate water colour paintings of the ripe fruit and the blossom together with a section of the fruit.

Some of these were used to illustrate "The Fruit Growers Guide" by John Wright published in 1892.

The Nursery carries on as a Retail Nursery for Fruit Trees, Roses, Shrubs, etc., and produces vines and figs for wholesale trade as well.

Again changes are necessary as transport and packing costs are now about six times those of twenty years ago and gardens are a fraction of the size. Obviously this makes small orders uneconomic and the emphasis is on Garden Centres where people can collect their trees—in containers during the summer—without the extra cost of packing and carriage.

We started our Garden Centre five years ago and this is managed by Nigel Rivers, son of Thomas H. Rivers.

For the new EMLA (East Malling Long Ashton) virus free fruit trees, which are grown under stringent conditions including some isolation from any plant which could cause infection, we have joined a wholesale Nursery in Worcestershire as we have neither the right conditions or space available at Sawbridgeworth, but we do want to be able to offer the trees grown under the scheme, which are the healthiest obtainable anywhere in the world.

The scheme is new and the first few trees are just becoming available.

Fruits Produced by
THOMAS RIVERS & SON LIMITED
SAWBRIDGEWORTH, HERTS

Apples

Early Rivers (superseded by Early Victoria)
Rivers Early Peach
Prince Edward
Thomas Rivers

Cherries

Early Rivers
Peggy Rivers
Ursula Rivers

Pears

Conference
Fertility
Parrot

Red Currant

Rivers Late Red

Raspberry

Hornet

Strawberry

Royal Hautbois

Plums

Admiral
Archduke
Autumn Compote
Blue Prolific
Blue Rock
Bittern
Curlew
Czar
Early Cluster
Early Favourite
Grand Duke
Heron
Late Prolific
Late Rivers
Late Orange

Mallard
Monarch
President
Primate
Rivers Early Damson
Rivers Early Prolific
(Early Rivers)

Stint
Sultan
Swan
Early Transparent
Golden Transparent
Late Transparent

Peaches

Albatross
Alexandra Noblesse
Condor
Crimson Galande

Falcon
Gladstone
Golden Eagle
Goshawk

Dagmar
Doctor Hogg
Duchess of Cornwall
Duke of York
Early Albert
Early Alfred
Early Beatrice
Early Louise
Early Rivers
Early Silver
Early Victoria

Kestrel
Lady Palmerston
Lord Palmerston
Magdola
Merlin
Nectarine Peach
Osprey
Peregrine
Prince of Wales
Princess of Wales
Rivers Early York
Sea Eagle
Thomas Rivers

Nectarines

Advance
Albert Victor
Byron
Cardinal
Chaucer
Darwin
Dryden
Early Rivers
Goldoni
Humboldt
Improved Downtown

Lord Napier
Milton
Newton
Pineapple
Prince of Wales
Rivers Orange
Spenser
Stanwick Elruge
Victoria
White Nectarine

Apricot

New Large Early

Copper Beech

Fagus Purpurea Riversii