

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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'Say it with Flowers' The Engelmann Nursery, Saffron Walden

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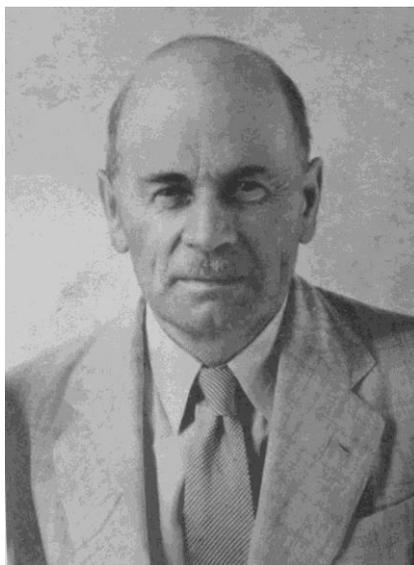
**A remarkable early photograph taken around the turn of the century inside the carnation house at Engelmann's. The little boy is believed to be Carl George Engelmann, known as 'Laddie'.
Illustration © Saffron Walden Historical Society archives. Copy by Gordon Ridgewell.**

In the same year as the national celebrations of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee were taking place during 1897, an earnest young man, recently arrived in Saffron Walden, was proposing to open a nursery on the Radwinter Road. His name was Carl Gustav Engelmann.

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He had left his homeland in Germany some years before and came to England to further his interest, and probably to receive further training and business experience in commercial horticulture. Carl Gustav was born in 1874 and was brought up in the Grand Duchy of Anhalt where his family owned long-established nurseries devoted mainly to the cultivation of flowers. At that time the Grand Duchy of Anhalt lay some 60 miles south-west of

Berlin between Brandenburg and Saxony. Before setting out for England, Carl had attended a horticulture college to receive formal training.¹ After arrival in Britain he worked possibly as a pupil at the Uzzell family nursery at Hampton near Richmond in south-west London. George Uzzell opened the nursery in 1866 so he was well-established by 1890. Uzzell was part of a community of nurserymen working in this general area of south-west London. These men were specialist growers of flowers who had established themselves to fulfill a market demand for flowers of many types from an expanding and prosperous middle class living in and around London. These were the people who could afford their own private flower gardens attached to their suburban villas and houses. They could also afford the luxury of cut flowers for household decoration. At the time this was an expanding market remarked upon in a paper delivered to the annual meeting of the Royal Horticultural Society in 1897.²



Carl Gustav Engelmann (1874-1941), founder of the firm. Photograph by permission Saffron Walden Town Library, from the H.C. Stacey Collection.

The difficulty of producing flowers throughout the year in the unfavourable British climate was finally solved by the development of the heated greenhouse. Coal-fired boilers had been developed between 1835 and 1839 which allowed piped hot water to circulate around a building. However, there remained the high price of glass as a disincentive to further development. Glass was very expensive and made more so as it was subject to a government tax introduced back in 1746. This remained in place until abolition in 1845. Six years later an associated window tax was abolished which led to an increase in demand and a reduction in price. Finally, with the invention of the glass roof to maximise sunlight, satisfactory commercial glasshouses could be constructed and profitable production commence.³

During Carl's period at Hampton with the Uzzell family or shortly after leaving, he married his employer's daughter, Charlotte Amelia, who had been born in 1879. The question of why Carl chose to set up his nursery in Saffron Walden is an interesting one. Apparently when asked by Stanley Wilson the same question, he replied that it may 'The Engelmann Nursery, Saffron Walden' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 21 (2011)

have been because the town was named after a flower. That may be so, but there may have been more practical reasons which influenced his thinking at the time. To have purchased land in south-west London would have been extremely expensive as the suburbs were expanding in all directions. Moving out to a rural area was an alternative where land would be cheaper. Agriculture was in depression and landlords were happy to find buyers. Again, around Saffron Walden he would have noticed that the land was chalky and light-textured and therefore well-suited for horticulture and, in particular, to carnations which preferred low rainfall and light-textured soil with a high *pH*. Communications with the London market were good and adequate supplies of coal for the boilers were available in Saffron Walden. Finally, there were established nurseries in the area – an encouraging sign – and some years earlier Chaters hollyhocks had been successfully grown and recognised nationally. One must assume that Carl had the financial resources to make a start and in 1897 at 23 years of age, confident that success lay ahead.

Development of the nursery on the Radwinter Road site can be traced on a series of O.S. maps commencing with the earliest dated 1877. This shows the five fields that were eventually to be covered in glasshouses, access roads and other service buildings. The 1919 Alan Godfrey edition⁴ shows the partial development of the glasshouses, and the final development with extensions into adjoining fields is shown on an aerial photograph.⁵

After the final stage of development there were approximately 10½ acres of glasshouses on the two sites north and south of the Radwinter Road. However, the total acreage under cultivation was much greater because additional land, now part of Shirehill and Turnip Hall, would also be used for hardy plants and shrubs including pansies, forsythia and flowering cherries in the hedges and a range of vegetable crops including Brussels sprouts and cabbages in the fields.⁶ World War Two enforced cultivation of salad and vegetable crops.

The carnation (*dianthus caryophyllus*) was always the principle flower grown in the glasshouses, but there were others grown as well, namely orchids, *myosotis* (forgetmenots), stocks, *euphorbia fulgens* (scarlet plume), roses, gerberas (Barborton daisy), strelitzias (bird of paradise), echeverias, chrysanthemums and cacti. Carl tried out many plants and had some failures as well as many successes.⁷ He was always very aware of the commercial potential that this expanding market offered. The cut flower trade was constantly changing and, being a luxury product, was affected and influenced by current fashion and modishness. Fortunately for him and his successor, carnations remained a firm favourite with the buying public. The outstanding success of this business was largely derived by the adoption at an early date of the long straight stemmed perpetual flowering carnation; in fact, Engelmann's were probably the first nursery in the United Kingdom to grow them. This type was introduced from Boston USA around 1903 and was originally known as the American tree carnation. The varieties grown in the early years were 'Enchantress', 'Rex' and 'Winsor', all grown by Engelmann's before 1913. Techniques were developed to provide a year-round availability of blooms sold as cut flowers with the main season being spring and summer. Growing plants from cuttings to maturity was complicated and extremely labour-intensive.⁸

In the early days Carl and his wife worked as a team with much of the packing carried out by Mrs Engelmann. However, as the business expanded, a fully staffed packhouse was established. Small potted plants could be dispatched to any destination overseas with a 'guarantee of sound arrival of the plants to any part of the world within reach of a regular service of British steamers'. Shipping in this way was available from 1910. The home market could also be supplied with these potted plants in 1½ - 3½ inch pots. By 1930, 140 different varieties were grown, many having been bred by Carl himself. C. Engelmann Ltd were awarded the Sherwood Cup at the Chelsea Flower Show in 1925. In 'The Engelmann Nursery, Saffron Walden' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 21 (2011)

1930 'the largest single-span greenhouse this side of the Atlantic' was erected, measuring 72 x 300 feet (22 x 92 metres approximately). Another of Engelmann's firsts was the introduction in this country of a new service for customers, 'Flowers by Wire – which girdles the earth and knows no frontiers', the forerunner of Inter-Flora and the catch-phrase, 'Say it with flowers'. Carl was an early member of the British Telegraph Delivery Association, becoming its president in 1924-25.⁹



'Rab' Butler MP visiting the nursery in 1959 and talking to Eric Engelmann, inspecting boxes of carnations. Photograph by David Campbell, © Saffron Walden Town Library.

Over the years this highly successful business expanded and created its own wholesale company with a 'shop' in Covent Garden known as 'Multi-Flora', this name appearing on all packaging and boxes containing pre-packed cut flowers. The advantage of this enterprise was to cut out the middle-man or market agent who would charge for his services. This was a bold move to streamline production, presentation, transport and marketing, and bring them all within 'in-house' control. Motor transport had become quite possible and was used from an early date making nightly journeys to London in order to arrive early in the morning at Covent Garden. When extremely busy sometimes two journeys were completed in 24 hours.¹⁰

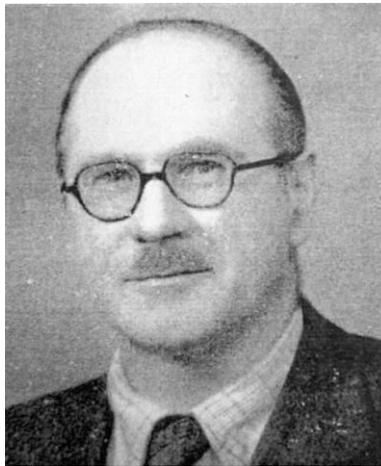
Apart from running the nursery, Carl had an active public life and took a great interest in local affairs in and around Saffron Walden, where he served as a borough councillor. He is credited with starting to grow daffodils on roadside verges and planting flowering cherries on new housing areas.¹¹ Around 1913-14 he was involved with the Boys British School who were organising a carnation competition and a window-box competition for adults.¹² He also served as a governor of Saffron Walden Grammar School and was instrumental in the revival of the Saffron Walden Horticultural Society in 1923 and presented a silver challenge cup. On show days he had his own stand of carnations and always opened his nursery as well.¹³ In 1919 he provided his staff with a social club at 22 Church Street, Saffron Walden, saying at the opening that 'a large business depends upon the comfort and contentment of the staff and a close relationship between employer and employed – workers need pleasure, recreation and rest'.¹⁴

In 1924 Carl played a leading role in the formation of the Rotary Club in Saffron Walden, which was one of the first to be formed in the UK. They held their early meetings at the Flora Club, mentioned above, and Engelmann became their first president in 1925, having previously been appointed their interim president.¹⁵

On the national scene, Carl was very well-known at the Royal Horticultural Society headquarters in London, frequently attended meetings there and was a member of the Floral Committee and several other committees. He was a staunch supporter of the Carnation Society and in February 1923 entertained 40 members on a day-long visit to Saffron Walden with a luncheon at the *Rose & Crown*, the society chairman taking the chair. In the afternoon members paid a visit to the nursery before returning to London.¹⁶

The nursery continued to prosper, expanded and developed new products as opportunities arose. Giant pansy seed was exported to many countries including Australia, New Zealand and USA, the blooms from which grew to some four to five inches across. Carl travelled widely in the USA and Europe promoting his nursery and its products and continued to exhibit at the Chelsea Flower Show each year, winning many awards. During the Second World War a greater emphasis had to be directed towards production of vegetables and salad crops to help combat food shortages. This was a part of the Government war effort 'Dig for Victory' campaign.

Carl Engelmann died on 4 August 1941 after a short illness. His funeral, held in a packed St Mary's Parish Church, and fully reported in the local paper on Friday 8 August 1941, was followed by interment in the town cemetery very close to his nursery. After the death of Carl, the nursery was managed by his youngest son Eric who, having worked alongside his father, was fully competent and knowledgeable to take over. Eric's elder brother, Carl George was at the time fully committed to farming rather than the nursery, as he had Shirehill, Turnip Hall and Cole End farms under his wing. Parts of Shirehill and Turnip Hall continued to be used by the nursery for hardy plants and vegetables.



Eric Engelmann. Photograph by courtesy of Saffron Walden Town Library.

New coal-fired boilers were installed in 1947.¹⁷ Each of these appears to be fitted with a coal hopper which must have reduced the amount of hand stoking required. Later these boilers were either replaced or converted to oil burning. This fuel was heavy industrial oil which had to be pre-heated before use as it was so thick and non-flowable. The closure of the Saffron Walden branch railway line and coal yard between 1964 and 1968 meant that coal would have to be hauled by road from further afield, probably Newport or Audley End. This loss of a local coal supply may have influenced the decision to change from coal to oil.

The number of employees at the nursery was probably roughly 120-150, although some estimates suggest a figure approaching 200. In either case this would mean that the nursery was quite the largest local employer. Heading the list of employees was the manager who supervised all the work assisted by two foremen. Back in those times there were many more men and women about who had 'green fingers', having more recently had an agricultural background and very frequently worked on their own allotments and gardens, growing vegetables for reasons of economy rather than for any other reason. Much of the work, especially in the glasshouses required considerable skill and attention to detail. Standards were always high. The work of the five main departments, namely the general office, packing shed, retail shop on Radwinter Road, boiler houses, transport and two maintenance gangs maintaining the timber-framed greenhouses had always to be integrated. This was no place for amateurs!

In addition to carnations, for which this nursery became famous, the seed from giant pansies was always a feature of nursery publicity as the wording of the advertisement below demonstrates. It comes from *Gardening Illustrated* dated December 1950:

Engelmann's Giant Pansies are the world's best. Seed is only genuine in packets sealed with our registered Trade Mark. From all good seedsmen or in 1/3 and 2/6 packets post paid direct from C. Engelmann Ltd Saffron Walden.

Each packet of seed had exactly the same number of seeds having been carefully counted before sealing. The Engelmann Trade Mark can be seen in the 1946 Saffron Walden Guide.

In 1949-50 Engelmann's grew more than 15 acres of pansies. Apart from carnations and pansies many other species were grown normally with a specialised use in mind. The following list shows a few:

- Chrysanthemum – grown throughout the year but the Christmas trade was very large and important.
- Stephanotis – a scented flower popular for wedding bouquets.
- Strelitzia – Bird of paradise flower for cut flowers.
- Ferns- especially used for weddings.
- Bouquets and wreaths were made up, many being sold from the retail shop.
- Tomatoes and lettuce were important for both retail and trade customers.¹⁸

During the early 1970s, the whole UK glasshouse industry faced very difficult economic conditions, with spiralling inflation and an increase in oil costs of 400 per cent in one year.¹⁹ These events knocked out much of the Lea Valley glasshouse industry too, as there was also competition from the Dutch when the UK joined the Common Market.

When Eric Engelmann retired during the 1970s, the nursery business lost its principal director and, without his experience, drive and dedication, it was certain to close down. This occurred on 24 December 1975 when the staff were made redundant. It had been in business for a total of 78 years and prospered under the leadership of the two directors – Carl for 44 years and Eric for 34 years.

Regrettably, it is unlikely that any original records of this important business survived after the close-down. However, what can be said in conclusion is that this was a business of considerable magnitude, which not only provided local employment and training for its staff and apprentices, but also built up an international reputation for trading successfully across the world in numerous segments of the horticultural and specialist floral industries. After an auction sale of equipment and stock held on 6 March 1982, the photographs of the demolition of the boiler chimneys, which took place on 4 November that year, form a fitting but sad end for the once famous Engelmann Nursery of Saffron Walden.

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