

A Maresfield entrepreneur

WILLIAM WOOD AND WOODLANDS NURSERIES

by Barbara Abbs

William Wood, a native of Fletching, returned to Sussex after 30 years as an embassy servant and founded a nursery at Tyes Gate in Maresfield, on the edge of the Ashdown Forest, in 1826. The business was active, at first with great success, for almost a century, and was a major seasonal employer in the area. It took advantage of changes in horticultural and landscaping fashions and the rise of the 'gentleman gardener'. The second generation had none of William's resistance to the railway and used it to the full. Untimely deaths, changing fashions and post-war depression led to the decline of the business, and ultimately to its closure in 1922.

In a narrow lane just north of Maresfield a large robinia, a yew and clumps of raspberry canes are unusual occupants of a stretch of country hedgerow. On the other side of the lane, a large-leaved bamboo grows through the hedge surrounding a cottage garden. Further on, in a muddy field adjoining a farmyard, there is a close-set row of lime trees standing three or four feet inside the boundary hedge. A fine compact golden oak, *Quercus robur* 'Concordia', can be found standing in a meadow, again just inside the field boundary. One field division is marked by huge multi-stemmed sycamores with hundred-year-old pollards growing from six-hundred-year-old boles. The fields slope down to a wooded valley and at the edge of the woodland is a group of large old larches and a fallen, but still living, *Quercus coccinea*.

The cottage garden contains more interesting trees and shrubs, mostly well over fifty and often over a hundred years old, including many different hollies, *Thuya plicata* 'Zebrina', *Parrotia persica* and that strange chimera, the Laburno-cytisus cross which produces yellow and pink flowers on the same shrub. These are surprising plants to find in a cottage garden on the edge of the Ashdown forest, where the indigenous tree population is oak, birch and pine.

The garden of Woodlands, Nursery Lane, however, is no ordinary cottage garden. For almost a century it was the centre of one of England's largest nurseries. In 1892 the Earl of Sheffield held a grand fête for 2000 children from schools on his estate. Sheffield Park was decorated for the occasion by 21 men who worked for three days creating arches of

greenery, with the names of each school worked in dahlias above each one. They also made 900 feet of flowery festoons and arranged 150 pots of flowers on the tables. The firm which provided the men and the flowers was William Wood and Son of Woodlands Nurseries.¹

At that time, Woodlands must have seemed the most permanent of businesses. Already in existence for over sixty years, it covered 120 acres and employed nearly 30 men full-time and twice that number in the winter. Yet today, although many contemporary nurseries are prominent in horticultural history, Woodlands is almost unknown.² Although it lasted for nearly 100 years, extended over 200 acres at its height and advertised regularly in the local and gardening press from its foundation, it faded away with very few traces in 1922.

Almost as puzzling as its disappearance was the founding of the business in the first place. Why did William Wood, who spent 30 years on the continent as a trusted embassy servant, return to Sussex, to the difficult land on the edge of Ashdown Forest, and start a nursery?

WILLIAM WOOD

William Wood, the founder of Woodlands Nursery, was born in 1781, the third (but second legitimate) son of John Wood, a butcher of Northlands in Horsted Keynes, and Elizabeth Adarel of Fletching.³

His will, made shortly before his death in 1863, hints that his life had been no ordinary one. For a butcher's son from rural Sussex it contains many intriguing items:

A Russian Gold Cup and a Russian five Koupek coin ... the picture of Lord Stuart de Rothesay ... a blue and gold tea service ... which was presented by the late Napoleon Buonaparte to Maria Louisa Archduchess of Austria on the day of their marriage ... an antique Cabinet with Drawers presented to me by Lady Sheffield ... A Silver Egg Stand for boiling Eggs and also a Napoleon of 1812 presented to me by the duke [of] Arenburgh ... also a double barrelled Gun which belonged to Napoleon the first ...⁴

In 1796 his widowed father remarried and moved to North Northlands in Fletching, his wife's property; William Wood left home, carrying with him 'a half Guinea coin of this realm of the year 1762 given to me by my late revered Father ... and which has been in my possession ever since'. What he did next can only be guessed at, but in about 1800 he came 'raw from Fletching' as footboy, groom, postillion and odd-man to Lady Louisa Stuart, who had been widowed in the same year.⁵


In 1802, 'having got into a scrape with the parish on account of a damsel 10 years older than himself, he begged to go abroad' with Lady Louisa's son Sir Charles Stuart, as a means of escape. Wood joined Sir Charles and travelled with him to Vienna, St Petersburg, Madrid, Lisbon (where he married), The Hague and Paris, where his son Charles was born.⁶ He remained with Sir Charles, as his trusted confidential servant, until forced to resign his position 28 years later.

Sir Charles Stuart entered the diplomatic service on his father's death in 1801, having failed to be selected for his father's parliamentary seat of Poole. He seems to have been responsible for espionage in mainland Europe throughout the Napoleonic wars, an activity in which his father had also engaged during his military career. Lord Malmesbury referred to him as 'Wellington's right-hand man in the Peninsular War, ... managing the Spanish and Portuguese Juntas ... with great ability'.⁷ Family tradition, supported by the memoirs of Henry Walter of Nutley, a former nursery employee, suggests that William Wood acted as an undercover courier for Sir Charles, often in the guise of a trader of hardware goods. One account is as follows:

... it was when Napoleon escaped from St Helena. At that time [Wood] three times went through the French lines as a spy. Once, when selling ribbons and trinkets to the soldiers, he was suspected and taken before a tribunal to

be searched. Climbing on to the table, he threw down his cap, saying: 'Search me; I've nothing to conceal.' They cut his clothes to ribbons, tore off the buttons and linings — in fact, left him naked; and finding nothing, brought him more clothes. He dressed, picked up his cap and walked out — with despatches for the Duke of Wellington sewn underneath the button of his cap.'

There is a belief in the family that on that occasion Wood was carrying the text of the Treaty of Tilsit — how the 'secret articles' of that treaty reached the British with such speed is still a matter of speculation. William Wood was very dark, spoke French and



WOODLANDS NURSERY, MARESFIELD,
SUSSEX.

WILLIAM WOOD,
BECS leave to return his best thanks to his Friends and the Public for their many past favors, and respectfully informs them that he will engage to execute orders for his superb COLLECTION OF DAHLIAS, consisting of upwards of 150 sorts, at the very moderate charge of one guinea per dozen, to be delivered in May next, strong Plants in pots.

His unequalled collection of Standard and Dwarf ROSES, upwards of 1,000 sorts, at the following prices:—Standards 2s. 6d.—Half-standards 1s. 6d.—and Dwarfs 1s. per plant. He also begs leave to say his Stock of Forest and FRUIT TREES, Evergreen and Flowering Shrubs, greenhouse and herbaceous Plants, &c. is very extensive, and luxuriant, at very reduced prices. Gentlemen who are about to plant will find, at Wood's Nursery, some particularly strong transplanted Spanish Chestnuts, and Seedlings, Larch, Beech, Spruce and Scotch Fir, Ash, Alder, Birch, and Willow, of all sizes.

W. W. undertakes to lay out grounds on the most improved plans, and contracts to plant on the lowest possible terms.

Ladies and Gentlemen who have already favoured W. W. with their orders, will have them delivered at the above prices, and at the time stated—May next.

Fig. 1. Wood advertisement from *The Sussex Advertiser* 22 Oct. 1832, p. 1, col. 4.

possibly other languages, fluently. He was also adventurous and enterprising. Given these qualities, it is highly likely that the family tradition contains a strong element of truth.⁸

William continued to work for Sir Charles until 1830, when his career was overturned by a diplomatic row. In 1829 *The Times* had discovered that Wood, along with other embassy servants, had taken advantage of the exemption of the diplomatic bag from customs inspection. Shipments of net or tulle were sent from Nottingham to Calais, where the material was finished, and then returned to England in the diplomatic bag as French lace. In November of 1829 Wood returned with Lady Stuart to Highcliffe at Bure in Hampshire, the family home. She was puzzled by the regular disappearance of copies of *The Times*, but only when her husband wrote from Paris with orders for Wood's dismissal did the truth dawn upon her. Wood 'cried bitterly', saying that there could be no harm in helping 'our poor manufacturers', and threatening to throw himself over the cliff. The matter had been the subject of correspondence between the prime minister and the Duke of Wellington in 1828; Aberdeen regarded the size of Wood's cut — £100 or £200 at each crossing — as 'beyond the reasonable limit of indulgence and ought to be checked'. Whatever the actual details may have been, the suggestion that smuggling, rather than espionage, was the true source of William Wood's fortune cannot be discounted.⁹

THE NURSERY

Wood may not have expected the suddenness of the end of his service with Sir Charles Stuart, but four years earlier he had begun to make provision for an alternative occupation. The idea of starting a nursery garden was no sudden whim. In 1819 he had remained in England, overseeing the improvements to the gardens at Highcliffe.¹⁰ His letters to his employer in Paris show him to have been knowledgeable about the layout and planting of fruit trees; he had of course been in France while that country was experiencing an explosion in rose-growing and breeding, ignited by the enthusiasm of the Empress Josephine. On 10 December 1835 he wrote to *The Floricultural Cabinet* 'Having resided twelve years in France I can affirm that nothing can exceed the beauty of their Roses. It was this which first induced me to establish my Rose-gardens in England...'.¹¹

In 1826 he had purchased a cottage and 11 acres of rough land at Tyes Gate in Maresfield for £550 in the name of his son Charles.¹² This holding soon became known as Woodlands. Wood must have started work immediately; he later claimed to have introduced standard roses to Sussex in that same year.¹³ Charles Wood, who had been born at the Paris embassy on 15 January 1816 and had his father's master as his godfather, was only ten years old at the time. He was put under the guardianship of his uncle, John Pratt, who had an earlier association with the land, and was sent to school. Four years later, in 1830, he went to work with John Mackay at the well-known Clapton nurseries. He stayed for four months and then returned to Maresfield where he was to remain for the rest of his life — in contrast to the peripatetic youth of his father.¹⁴

William Wood wrote his last surviving letter from Paris in the March of 1830;¹⁵ in November the first advertisement for 'Wood's New Nursery' appeared in *The Sussex Advertiser*:

William Wood has, at a considerable expense, established a NURSERY situated on the edge of Ashdown Forest ... where he has formed a collection of the most rare and finest species of Foreign and British Plants, consisting of American plants, and flowering shrubs, greenhouse, hothouse and herbacious plants, fine collections of double dahlias and chrysanthemums, a great variety of orange trees, standard roses, daphnes, &c. of which W. Wood has had an opportunity of making the choicest collection from his long residence on the Continent; and having now formed an establishment near Paris, where either himself or one of his foremen will constantly reside, he will be able to keep up a constant supply at his Sussex and Paris nurseries ... Maresfield, 18th October 1830.¹⁶

The Paris branch of Woodlands was at Barrière du Roule in Faubourg St Honoré on the edge of the city, very close to the British Embassy, and an area of nurseries since at least 1773.¹⁷ It seems likely that Wood expected to be able to continue his Paris associations despite his dismissal from Stuart's service, and indeed the French outpost seems to have survived until 1837 at least. Advertising in the first edition of the *Sussex Express* on 4 February, Wood claimed personal acquaintance with 'all the principal Rose Growers on the Continent, ... with whom he at present carries on a communication, it therefore fully enables him to obtain every New Rose

as it is introduced better than any other Rose Grower in England'. In 1840 the Maresfield nursery still claimed to receive several consignments of roses from Paris every year.¹⁸

By 1832 William was well established in Maresfield; he was registered as an elector, was advertising regularly in the *Sussex Advertiser* (Figs 1 & 2) and was a subscriber to Horsfield's *History of Sussex*. The Great Age of Woodlands had begun.

Woodlands advertising must have been successful.


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Fig. 2. Wood advertisement from *The Sussex Advertiser* 30 Jan. 1832, p. 3, col. 2.

By 1837 the nursery covered 40 acres; Tyes Gate itself covered 11³/₄ acres, and an additional 13 acres known as 'Goldsmiths' was leased from Sir John Shelley of Maresfield Park. The remainder was either leased from other landowners, or was the product of Wood's hyperbole. In later years the nursery was to grow considerably; acreages of between 120 and 200 are referred to between 1871 and 1910, and the neighbouring farms of Spring Gardens and Copthall were at times included in the enterprise. Apart from the original purchase, the rest of the land was always leased, and it was the original holding of 11 acres, 2 rods and 32 perches which went under the hammer in 1919.¹⁹

By 1841, when William Wood was already 60

years old but the nursery was still young, a new house had been built at Woodlands for the owner and his family; a 35-year-old propagator, Benjamin Hayerstone, moved into the old house. This pattern of family, servants and nursery staff living side by side continued through the years. In 1851, Wood had 40 employees, and a £1200 mortgage, taken out in that year, was stated to be on the security of the two houses, greenhouses, propagating houses and other buildings which had been built on the original piece of rough ground.²⁰

By 1861 Woodlands Old House was home to Joseph Curd, a plant propagator and his wife and son. In another house called Woodlands Rocks, there were two families: Albert Burrell, his wife and three children and a lodger called James Walker (who was also a nursery employee) and Henry Burrell and his lodger William Attree, who also worked there. In 1871 the community was even larger. In Woodlands Cottage were Joseph Curd, his wife Mary, their son Joseph and Walter Povey, a lodger of 18 years; James Shingsland, his wife Martha, a grandson Walter and two boarders, Edwin Pollard and John Maxton, are also recorded at the same address. All the males, except the youngest boy, who was at school, worked in the nursery. At Woodlands House, Charles Wood, an employer of 51 men and 6 boys, lived with his wife, four children and three servants; at the same address were Walter Burrell, nursery labourer, his wife, their 18-year-old son Charles and five younger children. The nursery's standing can be gauged by the fact that the lodgers came from as far as Scotland and Cheshire.²¹

Henry Walter of Nutley gives a picture of how the day-to-day work at Woodlands was organized:

... Mr Charles Wood ... used to employ at least 60–70 men and boys in the winter months during the planting and taking up period. The nursery contained many thousands of young fruit trees of every sort and kind; all known species of conifers and bush and standard roses, acres of them; besides greenhouse plants, heathers, and flowering shrubs, rhododendrons etc.

Men from Fairwarp, Maresfield and other places used to find work there in the winter months; in the summer the staff was reduced to about 25–30 of the leading men who did the budding and grafting. In the late summer they trained the Peach, Nectarine, Plum and

Cherry trees some time before it was time to begin taking up for sale. The orders were lifted, carefully packed and sent by waggon to Uckfield Station and the waggons generally came home loaded with London manure from the railway.

Most of the digging and trenching was piecework. A good part of the digging was done for 2¹/₂d. a rod and the trenching for 9d to 1s a rod. Very hard work for little money. The pay for day work for men was 13 shillings in winter for 54 hours and 14 shillings in the summer for 63 hours work. What would men think of that pay now?

At the age of 19 I started work at the Woodlands Nursery and when I asked for the job Mr Wood told me to bring my working clothes with me. That was what they told everyone in those days, 1891. I worked there till I was married for 11 shillings a week for 54 hours. When I was married in 1892, they raised my pay to 13 shillings in the winter and in the summer to 14 shillings for a week of 63 hours ... The shops were kept open till 10 o'clock on Saturday nights as we did not get our wages till Saturday night in those days.²²

The importance of Woodlands as an employer, particularly in the winter, is emphasized in the obituary of Charles Wood:

Oftimes in his busy season, that being a very dull time in the country, 40 or 50 men were employed. To Woodlands Nursery in the winter months, all the unemployed in the locality looked for work and very many labourers unfit for work requiring practical knowledge of any sort were indebted for healthy employment.²³

The wages paid at Wood's compared unfavourably with those enjoyed by the staff at Cheal's nursery at Crawley, where in the 1870s labourers were paid £1 a week, and by 1887 a foreman could command 5s. a day and a labourer 3s. 6d.²⁴ The family was also capable of taking a strict line with its employees, as the case brought against John Hobbs in 1887 for the theft of 6d. worth of wood illustrates.²⁵ The incident seems to have been an exception to the generally good and close relationships that William, Charles and later Frederick and Frederick's widow Blanche had with their staff. All the employees attended Blanche's funeral in 1919 and among the pallbearers were Albert and Henry

Burrell, whose family had been at Woodlands since before 1861, and the sons of Henry Dadswell, nursery foreman in 1880.²⁶

HORTICULTURE

Wood could not have started his business at a more opportune time. From the end of the 18th century, the fashion for landscape parks had gradually given way to a new taste for ornamental flower-gardens, as well as for the 'picturesque'. Exciting plants were being discovered abroad, and their arrival in Europe added another impetus towards a different style of garden in which they could be displayed. Any illustration of a Victorian garden, with its bedded-out parterres, rock-work and water features, shows the result of all three trends.

At the same time, improved communications enabled prosperous tradesmen to buy country estates and aspire to join the landed gentry; at a humbler level, the proprietors of suburban villas also had their smaller plots to care for. The fashion for gardening, particularly ornamental flower-gardening, spread to nearly all levels of society, as is evidenced by the plethora of gardening magazines founded during the period.

In 1834 *The Floricultural Cabinet* carried the first of several contributions by William Wood and his son Charles that continued until 1841, as well as a series of articles by 'St Patrick' listing 1000 species and varieties of rose that were cultivated at Woodlands.²⁷ Most of their roses were imported from France but they may have already been breeding roses themselves for the list contains 'Superb Wood's' — a fine, purple semi-double, 'Wood's Superb Globe', a fine red, and a pink Noisette called 'Belle of Woodlands'.

William Wood was a regular and enthusiastic advertiser, both in the local press and in specialist magazines with a national readership. *The Sussex Agricultural Express* began publication in 1837; on Saturday, 4th February, he advertised on page 5:

Wm. Wood and Son embrace this new medium of respectfully returning their grateful thanks to the Nobility, Gentry, and Planters in general, for their extensive support and kind patronage with which they have hitherto been so liberally favoured, of which they sincerely hope to merit a continuance, and at the same time beg to state that their extensive Nurseries, amounting to upwards of 40 acres, are well stocked with every article in the line.

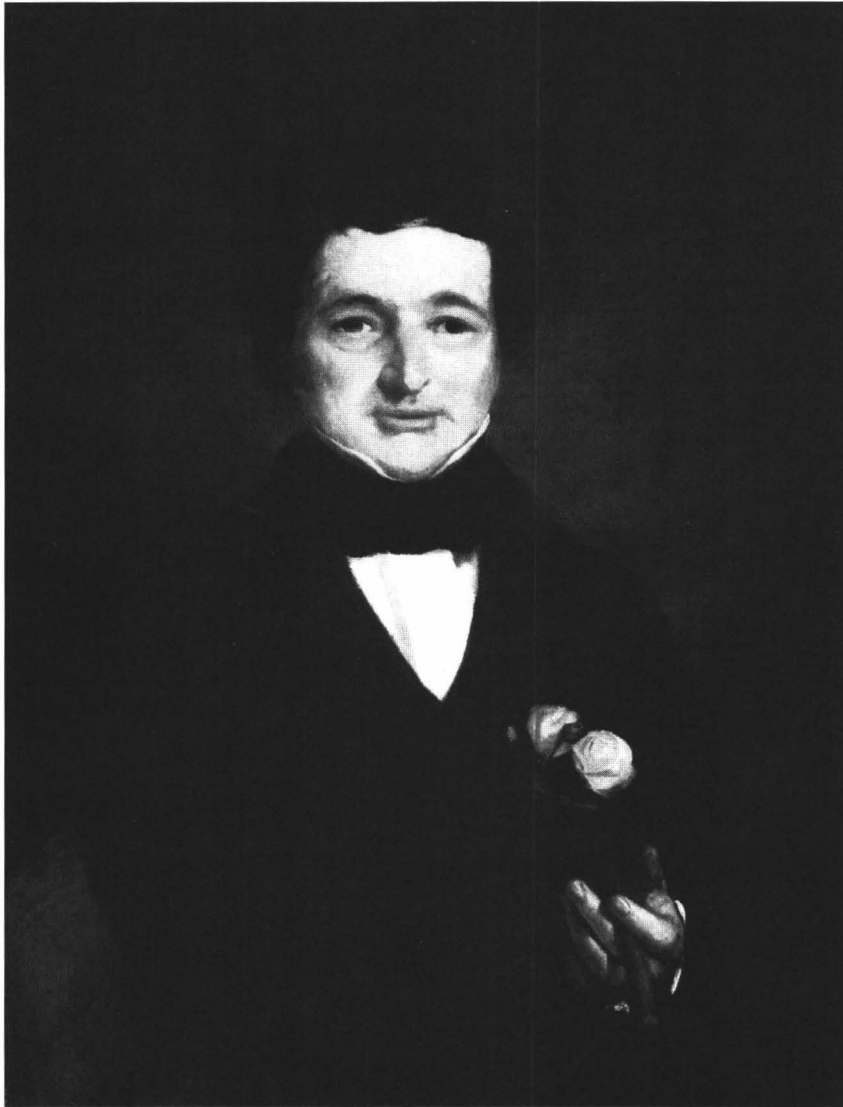


Fig. 3. Portrait thought to be of William Wood, c. 1830.

W W and Son beg particularly to attract the attention of the lovers of the Queen of Flowers, 'The Rose', to their most extensive, superb, and unequalled collection of that most beautiful flower, but more especially to their perpetual and autumnal flowering varieties, and of which upwards of 300 sorts have been introduced by them within the last two years, and which they can with the greatest confidence recommend to the amateur as being highly beautiful and very desirable on account of their luxuriance of growth, perpetual blooming until

Christmas, the very great variety of colours, and their most delicious perfume. They beg under, to enumerate a few of the most remarkable classes of the perpetual blooming Roses, viz:- Portland or Perpetual - Bengal or China - Odorata or Tea-scented - Macartney or Bracteata - Noisettes - New Musk Roses, and the Isle de Bourbon; this last class, which until the last two years only consisted of the old semi-double variety, and now amounting to upwards of forty sorts, is more peculiarly desirable than the rest, on account of the

richness and brilliancy of colour, profusion of blooming, luxuriant habit, and splendid green foliage, and lastly their extreme novelty.

Catalogues of general Nursery Stock, Rose Lists, &c may be had on application. Agent in London, Mr Henry Nixon, 123 Great Portland Street.

The advertisement in *The Sussex Agricultural Express* was repeated twice more; Woodlands did not advertise until November when they offered 'Their new and well arranged catalogues of Roses and Dahlias ... just published.' The following November they had 'forest trees in great abundance, which owing to the late, very favourable season are of the most luxuriant'. Another rose catalogue was in the press, offering an 'unrivalled collection of roses consisting of upwards of 2,000 different varieties ...'²⁸

The *General Catalogue* of 1842–43 is the only one to survive,²⁹ and it gives a more detailed picture of the scope and quality of the enterprise. It is a list that makes a gardener's mouth water and it has to be said that no nursery today, not even the most famous, offers anything like the range that William Wood offered — and that does not include the 'upward of 2,000 varieties' which appeared in a parallel *Rose Catalogue*, now lost. The catalogue offers several plants said not to have been in cultivation until much later — always supposing that the stock was correctly named. Wood's naming is not absolutely reliable however; he occasionally offered the same plant under two different names — *Alnus incisa* and *A. oxycanthifolia*, and *Oenothera missouriensis* and *O. macrocarpa*.

The catalogue brings the whole notion of the early Victorian garden vividly to life. It has a sumptuous collection of greenhouse plants with four achimenes species, three of which had been introduced from Mexico since 1840. There are named varieties of petunias, calceolarias and cinerarias, 28 different verbenas and 76 different geraniums (strictly speaking pelargoniums).

The price of the plants also gives an indication of the horticultural fashion of the time. The catalogue lists standard trained peach, apricot and nectarine trees for 7s. 6d. and 10s. 6d. Magnolias could be obtained for between 1s. 6d. and 10s. 6d. while the top price for some of the 37 different camellias was 10s. 6d.. The very rare *Pinus gerardiana*, still only stocked by two nurseries in this country, was priced at 10s. 6d.. Many of the geraniums however cost a guinea each and the most expensive

items in the catalogue are Geranium 'Gem of the West' and *Lilium speciosum rubrum* at 31s. 6d..

In January 1841 a new national gardening paper appeared: the weekly *Gardeners' Chronicle*. The first three editions had very few advertisements for nurseries, but by the fourth edition Woodlands Nurseries appears on the front page.³⁰ They offer 'Plants added to the order GRATIS to compensate for carriage and packing' and roses are available as standards, half standards, dwarfs and climbers offered by the dozen or by the hundred, to the trade as well as to the gardening public. The *Chronicle* sent a correspondent to Maresfield on 5 July, and a detailed description of the nursery and its stock appeared a week later. Perhaps the editor's attention had been drawn to Wood's operation by a letter from Joseph Wells of Redleaf near Tunbridge Wells, which attempted to clarify the confusion caused by the renaming of some of his hybrid roses. Mr James Young of Epsom had applied the name 'Madame D'Arblay' to the rather pedestrian 'Wells Large Clustered White', and William Wood had been guilty of the same offence — by a horticultural sleight of hand 'Wells' Garland' had become 'Wood's Garland'.³¹

The business appeared to be going extremely well with an 1842 advertisement declaring that 'in consequence of the unceasing demand for Roses, Messrs William Wood and Son find it absolutely necessary immediately to clear on several large quarters of land in order to make room for an entire, new and very extensive plantation of Rose Stocks'. In order to achieve it, the firm 'sacrifice' 600,000 transplanted ash trees from 2 to 6 feet tall, as well as many other forest trees. It could well have been the national advertising in the new *Gardeners' Chronicle* which led to this 'unceasing demand'.³²

By November 1843 Woodlands had 14 acres of roses out of their total of just 40 acres. The planting season was upon them and they were hoping to clear many of the transplanted forest trees, which they had in hundreds of thousands. By 1859 they had larch seedlings by the million, for sale to 'Gentleman Planters' for their estates.³³

Although the site chosen for the nursery was relatively isolated, it lay at the hub of the local network of turnpike roads.³⁴ Wood's catalogues were obtainable from addresses in London, Brighton, Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone where orders could also be received. The surviving catalogue gives details of how to reach the nursery by coach — the London to Lewes and Eastbourne coach passed

through Maresfield daily — and recommends The Chequers, the ‘most excellent Posting Inn at Maresfield, conducted by James Bourner, replete with every accommodation, and where the best Horses are kept’.³⁵ Nevertheless, distance from London seems to have been perceived as a problem; William Wood and Son’s 1842 catalogue offered one, two or more plants free to the purchaser, to defray the expense of carriage and packing.

Although there had been a daily railway service from Lewes to Uckfield since 1858, William Wood, whose transport costs amounted to between £700 and £800 a year, had refused to use it from the outset. Indeed, his refusal was alluded to by Col. Francis Vernon Harcourt, the owner of the Buxted Park estate, in his speech at the railway’s inauguration banquet at Uckfield, and drew cheers and laughter from his audience.³⁶ It is clear that William Wood, as he approached his eightieth year, was still very much in command.

An opportunity to re-assess the operation of the business came with William’s death on 3 December 1863. Nursery advertisements appeared on the 5th, 12th and 19th, without mentioning the founder’s demise. However, for the first time the pieces do not have their customary positive tone:

Since issuing their new Rose catalogue for the autumn of 1863 and the spring of 1864, William Wood and Son have ascertained that other houses in the trade are offering the same kind of roses at a lower rate than themselves and as they are fully determined NOT TO BE UNDERSOLD by any RESPECTABLE HOUSE they have prepared a R E V I S E D L I S T of R O S E S at reduced prices and will have much pleasure in forwarding copies of the same Gratis and post free to all applicants.³⁷

Perhaps William’s final decline caused a lack of concentration on business affairs, or perhaps his conservative approach to marketing had caused friction with his son Charles Wood, his partner since at least 1851 and the property’s nominal owner since the nursery’s establishment.

Charles Wood did not share his father’s prejudice against the ‘fiery courser’. In 1868 the connecting line from Uckfield to Tunbridge Wells, which had formed part of the original scheme, eventually opened. It allowed direct access to customers in London, brought metropolitan manure to Maresfield in the returning waggons, and seems to have opened a new era in the development of Woodlands.³⁸ In 1869 Charles advertised that seeds at least could be

sent in a hamper, carriage free, to any station on the London, Brighton & South Coast and South Eastern lines. For a large order, he promised delivery to any station in Great Britain. The business was sufficiently profitable to enable the 1851 mortgage to be paid off in 1874.³⁹ By 1883 payment could be made by Postal Order and all orders over 10s. would be delivered carriage-free to any railway station in Sussex, Surrey or Kent.

It is difficult to gain an impression of the range of Wood’s customers. Lord Gage at Firlé bought trees from William Wood in 1840 at a cost of £33 6s. 6d.; Mitchells of Piltdown, the other local firm, supplied nursery plants in the same year.⁴⁰ The poet Coventry Patmore estimated that he had planted 120,000 trees when developing his estate at Herons Ghyll in the 1860s; he paid Wood £180 for ornamental shrubs in one year.⁴¹ John Cheal of Crawley visited Woods in the February and October of 1869 to buy stock for what was soon to become his own nursery business — Cheal’s of Lowfield Heath.⁴²

We get far more information about the day-to-day working of the nursery in the last 20 years of the century. In the absence of catalogues it is impossible to be sure, but there does seem to be a change of emphasis to a larger scale but simpler nursery operation, supplying seeds in quantity and stock to the trade in hundreds. An advertisement of 1883 offers the sort of ‘cut price, our choice’ roses one finds today in cheaper nurseries and describes Woodlands as ‘The South of England Seed Warehouse’.⁴³

In 1890 there was an eyewitness account of Woodlands Nursery by a correspondent in *The Sussex Express*:

We had the pleasure last week of a delightful walk with Mr Wood junior among the beautiful specimen plants which surround one on every side as soon as the outer boundaries are passed and most difficult it was to decide which we admired most.

There are hardy trees, from six inches to 60 feet high, bearing all the colours of the rainbow, from the black Austrian pine to the silver *Cedrus atlantica*; within the line of sight are various tints of gold, silver, blue and white which are represented on the labels as *aurea*, *argentea*, *glauca* and *alba*. We asked Mr Wood the secret of his shrubs being in such perfection. His reply was ‘We have no secret; we grow all our plants in exposed situations, so that they

shall improve after leaving our nurseries.' Having spent an interesting hour amongst the lovely conifers and evergreens, we most unwillingly left them to inspect large quarters planted with deciduous trees, such as chestnuts, limes, acacias, maples, poplars &c. which are recommended for avenue and park planting. We then inspected a very *recherché* collection of hardy flowering shrubs such as altheas, deutzias, rhus, ribes, sambucas, spireas, lilacs, &c. &c. which are, of course, at present leafless, but will by and by put forth foliage and masses of flowers of every hue. Among the large assortment of evergreen and flowering plants we noticed besides laurustinus, arbutus &c., a very beautiful scarlet rhododendron, now in flower. We then examined a fine collection of fruit trees, some trained as standards, some as pyramids, others as bushes — they consisted of the best varieties of apples, pears, plums and cherries besides bush fruit. Complimenting Mr Wood on the appearance of his fruit trees, he said 'They are just the sort for landlords to plant their farms with, and in five years time they will double in value.' We were then invited to look into 'the cradles' which consisted of pits and frames, sheltered borders and beds filled as thick with baby plants as a sieve is full of holes. There they stood until bedded out and given elbow room, the lovely relatives of the specimens we had been admiring for the last two hours. Some were cuttings, others seedlings and some had been grafted in order to keep a young face on an old friend who had proved good and true. We were informed they require good nursing during their infancy, and hearing that most of them are natives of Japan, China, North America, Mexico, California and other regions we quite agreed that they not only wanted a nursery but a good nurse. They certainly have both at Woodlands.⁴⁴

At the end of April 1883, Messrs Wood supplied the Earl of Sheffield with shrubs to decorate his new cricket pavilion. The school fête of 1892 produced an enthusiastic report in the *Sussex Express*:

A particular pleasing feature of the decorations was the skilful manner in which the names of the various schools were worked out upon the arches. The following are the flowers and the colours of which the names were composed:- Newhaven, dahlia Constance (white); Newick,

dahlia Juarezii (crimson); Chailey, dahlia Lady E Dyke (yellow); Fletching Helianthus multiflora (golden yellow); Danehill, dahlia Mrs Hawkins (sulphur, edged with pink). Altogether Messrs Wood and Son are to be heartily congratulated on the splendid result of their onerous labours.⁴⁵

This, in retrospect, may have been the high point of Woodlands Nursery — established, highly regarded, well connected, seemingly permanent.

THE DECLINE

Charles Wood died on 16th January 1900, on the day after his 84th birthday. His second wife, Emma Elizabeth, died six days later in the same influenza epidemic. On 22 January a brief obituary in *The Gardeners' Chronicle* described Charles Wood as 'one of the oldest and most respected of our nurserymen'.⁴⁶ *The Sussex Express* carried a much longer item on 30 January, including more personal details:

Mr Wood was born in the English Embassy in Paris... and ... came to Maresfield when he was 10 years old. He never forgot the place of his birth and to the day of his death he spoke French like a Frenchman. He never lost the courtly demeanour he learned at the Embassy. . . . In his middle age he associated himself fully with parish matters — Guardian of the Poor, School Manager, Rector's Churchwarden and he kept at hard work in his office until ten days before. A neighbour says 'There are few who could equal and scarcely any who could excel him for the gentleness of his nature and the personal charm and grace of his manners as well as for his good disposition. He will be a severe loss to the Parish such a gentleman is not easily replaced ... Mr and Mrs Wood are buried side by side near their old friend, Lady Louisa Shelley, in the Maresfield cemetery.'⁴⁷

Woodlands Nursery would undoubtedly have continued for many more years under the competent management of the next generation. Further capital of £1000 had been raised by mortgage in 1898, perhaps at their initiative.⁴⁸ But with Frederick's untimely death on Groombridge Station in October 1907, a mere seven years after his father and in the same year as his older brother William, the nursery began its decline.⁴⁹ Henry Walter noted that 'His son Mr Charles Wood took over but the business was gradually fading out and the remaining stocks of

trees and plants were sold by auction.' Mrs Blanche Wood must have struggled to keep the nursery going in spite of being an invalid for some years. Three months after her death in August 1919, Woodlands Nursery, described as 'one of the best known properties in Maresfield', was sold by auction at Uckfield. The purchaser was Mr Barnard of Southend on Sea, who 'declined to purchase the remaining stock for £300'.⁵⁰

Harry Barnard was a fellow of the Royal Horticultural Society and his unwillingness to buy the stock is a sad comment on the nursery's state. William and Charles Wood might have been more distressed to read that, than to be told of the sale of their once great enterprise.

Barnard did not remain in business at Woodlands for long; perhaps he lacked sufficient local connections to make a success of the business at a difficult time. Three years later, he sold off his entire stock 'at considerably reduced prices', because of illness. His tenure of Woodlands could not have been without stress. In 1920, the price of agricultural produce slumped dramatically, and continued to fall during subsequent years. In 1921 there had been a severe drought. *The Sussex Express* carried statements from the National Farmers Union about the fall in farmers' incomes and reported proposals to lower the wages of agricultural labourers. There were also complaints from gardeners and growers, many of them ex-soldiers who had been persuaded to take up market gardening on their return from the Great War.

Maresfield and the Ashdown Forest had both changed radically in the century which separated the foundation of Woodlands from its end. The great Ashdown Forest case of 1881 had polarized attitudes in the area.⁵¹ Both William and Charles Wood had been on friendly terms with the second Lord Sheffield, who died in 1876, and with the Shelley family at Maresfield Park. By Charles Wood's death in 1900 his friend Lady Louisa Shelley was dead, and the estate had been acquired in the previous year by Count Alexander Munster, the German ambassador in Paris. His son inherited the estate on his death in 1902, but left the country on the outbreak of war; the estate vested in the Public Trustee in 1915, was requisitioned by the army and a large barracks established. It was sold in 1924 to William Henry Abbey, a Brighton brewer, who broke it up into smaller lots for sale.⁵²

William Wood's request in his will that his

tombstone 'shall be inscribed that I was the first person who in the year 1826 introduced standard Roses into this part of the County ...' was not carried out, neither was his desire that the 'Coin and other articles be preserved as mementoes of my successful establishment at Woodlands ... and that they may pass to posterity'. Under Charles' will 36 years later, his personal possessions were left to his second wife, the estate, which was mortgaged, sold and the proceeds divided into three. No individual items were mentioned.

Woodlands Nursery was the tangible expression of the enterprise and personality of William Wood and his son Charles. William's extraordinary early life, the mystery of his French and aristocratic connections, his energy and flair and his probable wealth combined to create a business which immediately flourished. His constant advertising kept his name before the gardening public, and the success of the enterprise soon made him a major employer of local labour. His son Charles Wood, whose upbringing at the Paris Embassy may have given him a social polish not enjoyed by his father, was able to consolidate the firm's position as 'growers to the gentry', and to make personal contacts among them. He had none of his father's suspicion of the railway, and seems to have used it to great effect. The early deaths of William's grandchildren soon left Woodlands in the hands of a stranger to whom its history meant nothing, and who had not been brought up with its legends. So when Woodlands Nursery finally ceased trading, no one really noticed.

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NOTES

- ¹ *Sussex Express* (hereafter *Express*), 10 Sep. 1892, p. 5.
- ² John Harvey, *Early Nurserymen* (London, 1974), 8–9 and n.19, citing James Mangles RN, *The Floral Calendar* (London, 1839), which lists nurserymen celebrated for particular classes of plants: Wood & Son is noted for roses.
- ³ On 25 Jan. 1775 Elizabeth Adarel from Fletching baptized a base-born son at Horsted Keynes whom she named John Wood. On 4 May 1778 John Wood of Horsted Keynes married Elizabeth Atherel of Fletching and in Sep. they had a daughter, Elizabeth. A son, Thomas, was baptized on 1 Jan. 1781 and another son, William, on 26 Dec. 1781: East Sussex Record Office (hereafter E.S.R.O.) parish register transcripts.
- ⁴ Proved at the Lewes district probate registry, 4 Jan. 1864.
- ⁵ *Danehill Parish History Society Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1983), 9–12 describes the descent of North Northlands and the subsequent history of the Fletching branch of the Wood family; probate of the will of William Wood, 4 Jan. 1864; J. A. Home (ed.), *Letters of Lady Louisa Stuart to Miss Louisa Clinton* 2 (Edinburgh, 1903), 181, 187; G[eorge] E[dward] C[lockayne], *The Complete Peerage* 12 (1953), 409–10.
- ⁶ Home 2, 187; for Stuart's diplomatic career see *British Diplomatic Representatives, 1789–1852* (Royal Historical Society, 1934); *Express*, 30 Jan. 1900 (obituary of Charles Wood).
- ⁷ James Howard, 3rd earl of Malmesbury, *Memoirs of an Ex-Minister* 1 (1884), 161–2.
- ⁸ Copies of documents preserved by Wood's descendants, including 'A link with the Past', a brief account of William Wood's life by his great-grandson Guy Turner, are E.S.R.O. AMS 6297; for Stuart's retainer of *un Anglais qui habite la France depuis longtemps* at a salary of £40 a month, who brought him intercepted letters to the French king from his ministers in the field, see Ernest Daudet, *La Police Politique: ... d'après les Rapports des Agents secrets et les Papiers du Cabinet Noir, 1815–1820* (Librairie Plon, Paris, 1912), 75; for Stuart's reference, in letters to Lord Castlereagh, to 'an agent I habitually employ', see Public Record Office FO 97/161, 162.
- ⁹ 'Smuggling in the name of the English Ambassador' in *The Times*, 2 Oct. 1829; Home 2, 178–88; Southampton University Library, Wellington papers, WP 1/971/8 (Aberdeen to Wellington, 9 Dec. 1828).
- ¹⁰ National Library of Scotland MS 21281, ff. 111–12, 128–9, MS 21282, ff. 17–18, MS 21297, ff. 48–9, MS 21298, ff. 74, 77–8, 85–6, MS 21306, f. 37, MS 21303, ff. 108–9, 110–11 (letters from William Wood to Sir Charles Stuart).
- ¹¹ *Floricultural Cabinet* 4 (1835), 70, consulted at the library of the Royal Horticultural Society, Vincent Square, Westminster; I should like to thank the staff for their help.
- ¹² This property, a copyhold of Maresfield manor called Catslands, consisted of a cottage and 11 acres of rough land, and was held by a quitrent of 2s. 2d. and a hen: the purchase was by an out-of-court surrender on 27 Oct. 1826, when William Wood was described as 'of Berkeley Square ... gentleman': E.S.R.O. SAS/G 903, f. 154.
- ¹³ Probate of the will of William Wood, 4 Jan. 1864.
- ¹⁴ Obituary of Charles Wood, *Express*, 30 Jan. 1900; Pratt was shown as owner of the land on a plan of a neighbouring estate drawn in 1820 — E.S.R.O. PAR 420 26/1.
- ¹⁵ National Library of Scotland MS 21306, f. 37.
- ¹⁶ *Sussex Advertiser or Lewes and Brightelmston Journal* (hereafter *Advertiser*), 15 Nov. 1830, p. 1.
- ¹⁷ Marie Blanche D'Arneville, *Parcs et Jardins sous le Premier Empire* (Paris, 1981), 128, 238n.
- ¹⁸ *Express*, 4 Feb. 1837, 25 Jan. 1840.
- ¹⁹ The extent of land occupied by William Wood & Son at any one time is very difficult to determine since much of it was rented from Sir John Shelley and his successors; Henry Walter (see n.22) said 'He hired many acres of land from Sir John Shelley and at one time it was the largest nursery in England with the outlying farms of Spring Gardens and Cophthall as well.' In 1873, the first edition of the Ordnance Survey shows part of Spring Garden as nursery while the second edition of 1899 shows Cophthall as being Nursery. Pike's *East of Sussex Directory* of 1886 describes Messrs Wood as occupying about 150 acres of land, and 'long celebrated for their roses, fruit trees and American plants.' *Kelly's Directory* of 1889 claims that Woodlands 'with its extensive nurseries and flower gardens, roses, fruit and forest trees and American plants' occupied only 120 acres. In 1910 the estate covered 89½ acres, most of which was leased from the Maresfield Park estate: E.S.R.O. IRV 1/96. The land tax returns (E.S.R.O. LLT) do not appear to reflect these fluctuations. The sale was reported in the *Express* on 5 Dec. 1919.
- ²⁰ P.R.O. HO 107/1118, 1641 (microfilm E.S.R.O. XA 19/6, XA 9/14); ESRO SAS/G/ACC 904, f. 235; repaid on 11 Dec. 1874: 905 f. 138.
- ²¹ P.R.O. RG 9/577, RG 10/1054 (microfilm E.S.R.O. XA 2/7, XA 17/13).
- ²² E.S.R.O. A5640 (copy in searchroom library).
- ²³ *Express*, 30 Jan. 1900.
- ²⁴ West Sussex Record Office MP 3617 (Alison Benton, 'Two Great-Grandfathers: John Cheal of Crawley, 1800–1896 ...' (1981), 33).
- ²⁵ Reported in *Express*, 27 Mar. 1887, under the headline *Uckfield: A Caution to Hedgecutters*. Hobbs thought he was allowed to take 'short ends' home, but the piece he was accused of stealing was large enough for an axehandle. Hobbs was of good character and had been employed for several years but the Woods brought the proceedings as a caution, having recently been the subject of petty thefts.
- ²⁶ *Express*, 8 Aug. 1919.
- ²⁷ *The Floricultural Cabinet* 2 (1833) 1–2, 8–11, 34–7, 60, 87–88, 107–8, 133–4, 154–6, 181–2, 230, 253–5, 276–9; 3 (1834) 91, 191, 284; 5 (1836) 66; 6 (1837) 224–30; 8 (1839) 210–13; 9 (1840) 30–31, 163, 194–7.
- ²⁸ *Express*, 11 Nov. 1837, 3 Nov. 1838.
- ²⁹ It is preserved in the Liberty Hyde Bailey Hortorium at Cornell University, NY, USA.
- ³⁰ *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 23 Jan. 1841.
- ³¹ *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 10 July 1841 (456), 27 Mar. 1841 (198).
- ³² *Express*, 19 Feb. 1842, p. 1.
- ³³ One such gentleman planter, Coventry Patmore of the Herons Ghyll estate in Buxted, remembered that an active man was able to plant between 700 and 1000 trees in a day: *How I managed and improved my estate* (1886), 23–4.
- ³⁴ The turnpike roads in Sussex and their condition are usefully summarized in *Appendix to the Report of the Commissioners for inquiring into the State of the Roads in England and Wales* (1840), 421–47.

- ³⁵ *Pigot and Co.'s Directory* (1839), 655 allows the identification.
- ³⁶ *Express*, 16 Oct. 1858, p. 2.
- ³⁷ *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 5, 12 and 19 Dec. 1863.
- ³⁸ S. A. Pierce, 'The Impact of the railway on Uckfield in the 19th century' in *Sussex Archaeol. Collect.* **122** (1984), 193–206; reminiscences of Henry Walter: see n. 22.
- ³⁹ E.S.R.O. SAS/G/ACC 906 f. 138.
- ⁴⁰ E.S.R.O. SAS/G ACC 1161.
- ⁴¹ *Patmore*, 23–4, 64.
- ⁴² West Sussex Record Office MP 3617 (Alison Benton, 'Two Great-Grandfathers: John Cheal of Crawley, 1800–1896 ...' (1981), 27, 28).
- ⁴³ *Express*, 28 Apr. 1883, p. 7.
- ⁴⁴ *Express*, 15 Feb. 1890, p. 7.
- ⁴⁵ *Express*, 10 Sep. 1892, p. 5 under the heading 'Maresfield — the children's fête at Sheffield Park'. The story is reported at much greater length, but without the horticultural detail, on page 7, and it seems likely that the Maresfield story was supplied by Charles Wood to the local correspondent.
- ⁴⁶ *The Gardeners' Chronicle*, 22 Jan. 1900.
- ⁴⁷ *Express*, 30 Jan. 1900.
- ⁴⁸ E.S.R.O. SAS/G ACC 906 f. 140.
- ⁴⁹ *East Sussex News*, 4 Oct. 1907.
- ⁵⁰ *Express*, 5 Dec. 1919.
- ⁵¹ Raymond Cocks, 'The Great Ashdown Forest Case' in T. G. Watkins (ed.), *The Legal Record and Historical Reality* (1989), 175–97.
- ⁵² For Count Alexander Munster (1820–1902), created Prince Munster of Durneburg in 1899, who had been German ambassador in London until 1885, see *Who was Who ... 1897–1916* (1920), 514 and *The Times*, 31 Mar. 1902; for his son, see W. T. Pike (ed.), *Sussex in the Twentieth Century* (Brighton, 1910), 199, which includes a portrait; for the descent of the estate, see E.S.R.O. AMS 6282.