



The Flower Show

By Bill Youdale

Etchingham, until the comparatively recent arrival of 'the commuters', was a small working class village without a manor or squire to act as a benefactor and endow the village with amenities it could not afford, but desperately needed. As a result of this, the village hall, now happily magnificently replaced, was very inadequate, and offered few facilities. Despite all this, it was a community that supported a lively social life with very varied interests.

One of these was the annual Flower Show, one of the staples of village life. This was organised by the optimistically named Etchingham Improvements Committee, and had to be put on under very cramped conditions resulting in limited classes and rather half-hearted support. Through the fifties and sixties our farm, Athena Apple Farm on Fontridge Lane, had developed, and amongst other things, had acquired quite a large concrete covered barn in the farmyard which offered more than double the area of the village hall, and the Improvements Committee decided that we should try and hold the Flower Show on the farm.

As the day approached, a familiar ritual swung into action. Friday morning, clear out all the machinery and park it in distant parts of the farm well out of reach of curious and adventurous small children, Next, give the concrete floor of the barn its annual wash and sweep. In the afternoon it was down to the village hall with the tractor and trailer to extract from the shed at the back several enormous trestle tables which had to be manoeuvred with considerable difficulty and much exertion on to our trailer and brought back up to the farm. These were then set up to a tried and tested layout, and the only other item to be checked was the arrival of a hired portable loo to be parked in the orchard for the gents, leaving the flush toilet in the farm buildings for the convenience of the ladies. As I remember, we were always lucky with the weather, and the Saturday morning was one of the most enjoyable occasions of the whole year. Entries had to be in place by ten o'clock so that the judges had plenty of time to complete their task. Cars would start arriving about half past eight, and entries would start rolling in. The beauty of it was that, having located the correct section of trestle table to park their exhibits, no-one had anything further to do, so soon the farmyard would be full of groups of people standing around in the sun chatting. Many of the exhibitors would be older members of the village, who usually had grandchildren in tow. These had their eyes out on stalks to see what was going on in the unfamiliar setting of the farmyard, and would, hesitantly at first and then with increasing daring, start exploring the wide open spaces of the orchards. It was the village at its most relaxed and sociable.

Then came the serious business of judging. The judges and stewards would make their methodical way round their allotted exhibits, picking up a vegetable to examine its firmness, cutting a precise segment out of a sponge cake to assess its lightness, or viewing a flower arrangement from every angle to judge

its artistic merit. The judging was a fiercely protected ritual, with no-one allowed within earshot, and it was only the fact that our barn had open sides that let me even observe from afar the careful deliberation, the measured discussion and the complete absorption with which these experienced enthusiasts went about their task. Needless to say, all the judges had to be foreigners, i.e. from outside the village. Finally, all the prizewinners tickets were put in front of the winning entries, and peace descended until the show opened at two o'clock. The cars were parked out in the orchard, and the families wasted no time in homing in on their entries to see how they had fared, greeting success with delight, or carefully examining competing entries that had fared better to see if justice had been done. To one like myself, not brought up as a gardener, it was an absolute revelation to see the precision with which each entry in the vegetable and flowers had been presented, foot long runner beans straight and soft, scarlet tomatoes with diameters matching to a millimetre, potatoes with skins as smooth as a baby's bottom, and glistening green lettuces exuding crispness. The baking entries were equally outstanding, each cake or tart having a little segment cut out by the judges to assess the lightness of the sponge, intricate icing defying the afternoon heat, and gingerbread men ready to get up and walk away. When you see the creative artistry with which the flower arrangements were assembled, the imaginative ingenuity with which a given theme would be depicted with flowers, and the enthusiasm and imagination with which the youngsters had created monsters with potatoes for bodies, carrots for dangly bits and peas for eyes, you realise that you live in a community with a great fund of natural talent and a great appreciation of nature's gifts.

Fortunately there was an area of grass beside the farmyard which made an ideal arena for the Dog Show, and we were also able to run tractor and trailer rides round the orchards.

The standards of the show were way beyond my aspirations. But I did have one entry, when a cheeky little 'do and so' from the village went scrumping in my orchards and entered five apples in the fruit class which were clearly a modern variety and could not have come from anywhere but my orchards. I did not mind him 'cocking a snook', which was rather funny, but what really annoyed me was that he had not taken much trouble in his selection of fruits, and my apples did not even win a third prize!

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